



# Migration & gender

Migration dynamics,  
patterns and impacts  
from the CHIME  
research project

Meiktila, Mandalay Region. © Ko Oo 2017

## Highlights

- ▶ Women are more likely to access stable employment than men through migration.
- ▶ There are culturally determined gender differences in the wages that men and women receive for equivalent jobs – some female respondents noted that they receive lower pay than men in both origin and destination.
- ▶ For women, having families and relatives in destination is the most important factor in migration decisions.
- ▶ There is little evidence that women are less likely to remit than men are, although women generally send smaller remittance amounts than men.
- ▶ Gender norms in migrant-sending households appear to be shifting due to migration, as well as changes in the wider society.

## About the CHIME project

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

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

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

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

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

## Background

Today, women account for almost half the world's international migrants.<sup>1</sup> Global labour migration trends show that more women are migrating independently for economic reasons and not only as the dependants of men. Migration decisions and strategies are different among men and women and migration affects men and women in different ways – whether they are migrants or not. Women migrants tend to work in different sectors of the labour market from men, often with different levels of job security and wages, and different remittance patterns.<sup>2</sup> Given these differences, it is important to consider how gender shapes who migrates, where, when and how, as well as the different impacts of men and women's migration.

This briefing paper presents findings from the CHIME study relating to gender and migration in four regions of Myanmar. It outlines differences and similarities between men and women's patterns of migration. This is followed by sections on drivers and strategies of migration, remittance amounts and incidence, and the impact of migration on gender roles. Finally, it outlines considerations for future action.

## Gendered patterns of migration

Approximately 40 per cent of migrants identified by the CHIME study were women. Gender breakdown varied across the study regions: in Mandalay and Rakhine, there was a

strong correlation between being young and male and the decision to migrate, in Shan and Ayeyarwady female migrants outnumbered male.

### **Of the 1,155 migrants included in the study approximately 40 per cent were women.**

Among internal migrants, 48 percent were women and 52 per cent were men. Of those migrants leaving for international destinations, 21 per cent were women and 79 per cent were men. The low percentage of women migrating internationally is not consistent with data that covers Myanmar as a whole where women and men are more evenly balanced (UNDESA 2017). This can be partially explained by the fact that CHIME's target areas did not include the highly internationally mobile populations of the southeast states and regions and was not representative of Shan State.

### **Male and female migrants tend to work in different sectors and the types of sectors also differ by destination.**

Manufacturing is the third most common employment sector for international male migrants, but it is not a significant employment sector among internal male migrants, probably because the types of manufacturing jobs currently available in Myanmar (e.g. garment work) are more likely to be occupied by female migrants. Among Rakhine men, construction (23%) and accommodation (19%) are the principal sectors of employment in international destinations while internal Rakhine male migrants are most actively occupied in mining and quarry work (24%). Male migrants engage in more physical labour, such as



Nyaung U, Mandalay Region (L) and Ho Pong, Shan State (R). © Ko Oo 2017

<sup>1</sup> <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/gender>

<sup>2</sup> [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/iom\\_and\\_remittances.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/iom_and_remittances.pdf)



construction, agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Women migrant workers tend to work in services and manufacturing, in both internal and international destinations.

**Yangon's industrial zones are creating attractive job opportunities for women.** CHIME data show growing numbers of young women migrating for non-farm work, breaking tradition and leaving older women in the community to handle care duties. Many young female migrants from Ayeyarwady in particular are working in Yangon's garment and textile industries in jobs regarded as more decent and safer by their families. Women and girls who have found work in cities may then recruit sisters or friends from their villages to work at the same factories so that gradually, through their social networks, increasing numbers of young females migrate from their villages to the cities.

**Some female respondents noted that they receive lower wages than men.** Men are much more likely than women to be employed in jobs with unstable incomes at destination. Of migrants with unstable income, 81 per cent are men. Yet, consistent with employment in many countries, some female respondents noted that they receive lower wages than men. This reflects the fact that, in Myanmar, as elsewhere, there are sharp culturally determined gender differences in remuneration of male and female labour for equivalent jobs. These are based on stereotypes of what women and girls are capable of, and what it is socially acceptable for them to be doing. "Women's work" is typically regarded as lighter by employers (who are often men) and therefore deserving of lower wages, even if it is equally, or more, physically demanding and

highly skilled. These inequalities are seen in labour markets at origin and destination.

**Migrants tended to be in their twenties, leaving parents behind, and less likely to have started a family.** Migrants came from households with a lower child dependency ratio but a higher elderly dependency ratio. They are more likely to be the sons, daughters or younger relatives (e.g. grandchildren) of heads, than heads of households themselves. These patterns are consistent across the research areas.

## Drivers and strategies

The main driver of migration for both men and women was work, although education and family reasons were also common. Family reasons given were typically joining a family member at destination, followed by marriage – this was the case for both male and female migrants in similar numbers. This form of 'chain migration' is used by migrants to help reduce the risks of migration, and in the CHIME study was more common among internal migrants.

**Migrants themselves were not always the ones who made the decision to migrate.** 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. CHIME data revealed a tendency for mothers to get more involved in cases of daughters migrating and fathers in cases of sons migrating.



CHIME interview, Kyaukse, Mandalay Region. © Ko Oo 2017

**Having families and relatives in destination was more important among internal migrants and women.** Both male and female migrants considered security at destination e.g. finding a place to live and being able to fall back on someone for help, as important considerations. Knowing brokers who could arrange migration was more important among international migrants and was the most important factor for male international migrants. Of those that migrate internationally, men were more likely to use brokers (43% compared to 28% of women). Female migrants cite families/relatives at origin as key sources of information about migration (31% of female international and 22% of male international migrants, 46% of female internal migrants and 39% of male internal migrants).

## Remittances

**Overall, remittance incidence is higher among international migrants than among internal migrants.**<sup>3</sup> Of the economically active migrants surveyed, 69 per cent of international and 66 per cent of internal migrants had sent remittances home in the previous 12 months, with as many as 83 per cent of male and 77 per cent of female migrant workers remitting.

**There is little evidence to suggest that women are less likely to remit than men.** Although the maximum remittance incidence is higher for men than women, across all the different categories of migrant, we find that one gender is no more likely to remit than the other. In fact, data from Mandalay and Rakhine show that internal migrant women actually have higher remittance incidence than their male counterparts. As a group, Rakhine migrant men's remittance incidences are particularly low (32%), almost half the average (66%).

The similar rates of remittance incidence for men and women is perhaps not surprising given that the data shows that migration is, for men and women, motivated by the desire to find work, or better work, and that a large proportion of female migrants are single daughters of the head of the household. However, our findings show that migrant women generally send smaller amounts of money home than men from the same region and in comparable destinations, although there are exceptions where women migrants send similar or even higher amounts.

**International migrants remit larger amounts than internal migrants from the same place and of the same gender.** The exception is male migrants from Rakhine State whose average remittance amounts are the same for international and internal migrants. In contrast, women from Rakhine increase their remittances, on average at least, when they become international migrants. This may suggest that Rakhine women are moving into more stable and/or better-paid occupations in international destinations or, alternatively, that Rakhine men are moving into high paying internal migration jobs albeit in precarious and dangerous working conditions and with a risk of not being able to remit at all.

**Women have a slightly higher probability of sending goods home, either in place of, or as well as, money.**<sup>4</sup> Thus, while generally we see that internal migrant women send smaller amounts of money home than men from the same region and in comparable destinations, women's greater propensity to send goods (as well as or instead of cash) means that the data likely underestimate the value of remittances from women and their contribution to their households.

## Impacts on gender roles

**Gender norms appear to be shifting due to migration, as well as wider changes in society.** While it is difficult to say whether migration has resulted in a transformation in gender roles or the division of labour and assets within households, it is clear that migration has opened up new opportunities for women. Young female migrants' opportunities are not only work-related. Younger generations of women migrating to the cities have new opportunities for employment in factories and services, albeit opportunities that often require migrants to tolerate precarious and/or dangerous working conditions. However, through migration, women have had to take responsibility for day-to-day tasks previously done by men.

A 39-year-old Ayeyarwady woman – mother of six and wife of a fisherman who is often away for three months at a time – described how, in her husband's absence, she controlled the household finances, sometimes pawning jewellery to pay workers. She described her responsibilities:

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of Rakhine migrant women.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the sample size is too small to reliably estimate the value of in-kind remittances.

*It all depends on me. I decide everything by myself. I tell him my decisions when he comes back. He agrees with my decision because I do not make wrong decisions. When he is away I am the head. I can withdraw the money from the account holder as much as I need. He lets me do that because I am not going to waste it [...]*

*[...] The invitations for social events come with his name and I go to them on his behalf. I tell him how much I have contributed to the social matters when he comes back. I always keep transparency between us.*

The woman seemed to gain a degree of autonomy through the practices of decision-making, being in charge of the financial affairs in the household and participating in social events as the head of the household. Similar accounts were heard in other cases; however, it is not possible to say whether there is any permanent shift in gender norms. In this case, for example, these changes in gender roles may be temporary and revert to the conventional relations when the husband returns.

There were sometimes tensions accompanying changes in the appearance and dress of migrants where the changes pushed traditional gender norms. These tensions were almost exclusively articulated in relation to female migrants and were especially common among fathers, many of whom did not approve of short or dyed hair, short skirts and fancy shirts. Thus, while such changes in appearance convey modern social values and lifestyle – and help to show a successful migratory story to other villagers – they are often received with shock and/or disapproval by more conservative villagers. Although the CHIME study suggests

that there is often an acceptance of change (see box below), it is clear that any change in gender norms will take time as there are strong culturally-determined stereotypes about what Myanmar women can and should be.

### Tension and acceptance of change

Mothers of female migrants from Ayeyarwady Region reflect on the changes they have observed in their daughters' appearance since they migrated:

*The elder daughter used to have long hair. Now she has short hair around her neck and she has straightened it. Also, the way she dresses has changed. Before she used to wear clothes very simply but now she wears short skirts [...]. My younger daughter is a student so she has already been modernised. She always wears pants. Their top dressing is also different now that they put some fancy [patterns of] fruits on it [...] they wear something like that in Yangon. (Thandar\*, a 50-year-old female respondent and mother of two migrant sisters from, Ayeyarwady Region).*

*A Burmese lady must be Burmese. She must wear hta-main (Burmese traditional dress). Her hairstyle must be Burmese. Look at how I keep my hairstyle [...] Our daughter wanted to get highlights in her hair this summer. I told her "Your father will not tolerate that". She said "just two streaks, could you ask Dad's permission to do that?" so I risked to ask the father's permission and said "Your daughter is asking you to let her dye just two streaks of her hair." [...] It was like red, yellow or gold colour. Just one or two streaks. Not many. Not that visible. One may not notice at first glance. I took a quick look just for the sake of seeing it. There was nothing wrong. She did not dye like others I've seen who made their whole head really red. It was just one or two streaks and I had to understand it from the view point of modern youngsters. (Theint Theint, female, Ayeyarwady Region.)*

\*All names in this brief have been changed to protect protect respondents' identities.



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

1. Women are just as likely to send remittances, but send less than men. This is partly because they are more likely to be internal migrants and earn less than international migrants. It is also because women are remunerated at a lower rate than men. 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.

2. Future interventions should foster women's empowerment throughout the entire migration cycle. Activities that provide opportunities for upskilling, life skills, financial literacy and business start-up can empower women at origin and destination and facilitate women's structural participation in community affairs and activities during the entire cycle of migration. 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.

3. CHIME research shows that women are overwhelmingly internal migrants. This is important given the dominance of international migration in the policy discourse on migration in South East Asia. It is crucial that future interventions consider internal migration and its developmental role on migrants and their families; otherwise, female migrants may fall through gaps in policy.

4. CHIME quantitative research surveyed families of migrants and was therefore not a suitable tool to gather evidence on incidence of gender-based violence, exploitation and trafficking. Other research indicates that the likelihood of female migrants experiencing gender-based violence is much higher than men, likewise the number of female victims of trafficking. Special efforts need to be made to support women vulnerable to gender-based violence and trafficking, both before and during migration. It is also important to acknowledge that women and girls who are left in villages may face greater vulnerabilities owing to the migration of male family members.



Taung Tha, Mandalay Region. © Ko Oo 2017

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

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

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

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