



# MYANMAR

## Hotspot report

September 2024





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During 2023, intensifying armed conflict and economic hardship fuelled widespread protection and trafficking risks for the people of Myanmar. Young people, women and girls, and migrant workers faced heightened risks of sex trafficking, forced marriage, and forced labour.

In 2023, the Freedom Fund worked with four women-led civil society partners in Myanmar to address extreme forms of exploitation and human trafficking across vulnerable communities in Kachin and Northern Shan states, as well as around Yangon. Our partners supported community groups to help victims to escape and reintegrate, and help prevent forced marriage and trafficking. In doing so, the hotspot built further evidence for the powerful and scalable role of communities, with local NGO support, taking the lead in identifying trafficking victims and people at risk, and providing or linking them with assistance and support.

During 2023, our partners provided training and support to 100 local action teams, community watch groups and self-help groups (with a total of 583 individual members) so they could share anti-trafficking information and support victims to get to safety. Despite a slow-down in outreach activities after an escalation in violence in October, the program still directly reached 2,233 individuals in vulnerable communities and settlements of internally displaced people during the year.

Our partners also directly facilitated the liberation of 43 survivors of trafficking; assisted 159 survivors of forced marriage, forced labour and sexual exploitation, including providing food, safe houses, and medical and psychosocial care; and provided livelihood support to 69 individuals – including survivors and internally displaced persons, particularly women and girls.

*Mali Kha River, Kachin State*  
Photo credit: © Adobe Stock



## OPERATING CONTEXT

In 2023 the overall context in Myanmar remained challenging. The political crisis was prolonged by ongoing conflict among the military and various armed groups, the introduction of restrictive laws, and the dissolution of opposition parties. According to the UN, by the end of 2023 more than 2.6 million people were internally displaced in Myanmar – an increase over the year of 1.1 million – and more than 18 million people across the country were in need of humanitarian aid.<sup>1</sup> Myanmar's economy reached rock bottom with no signs of recovery.

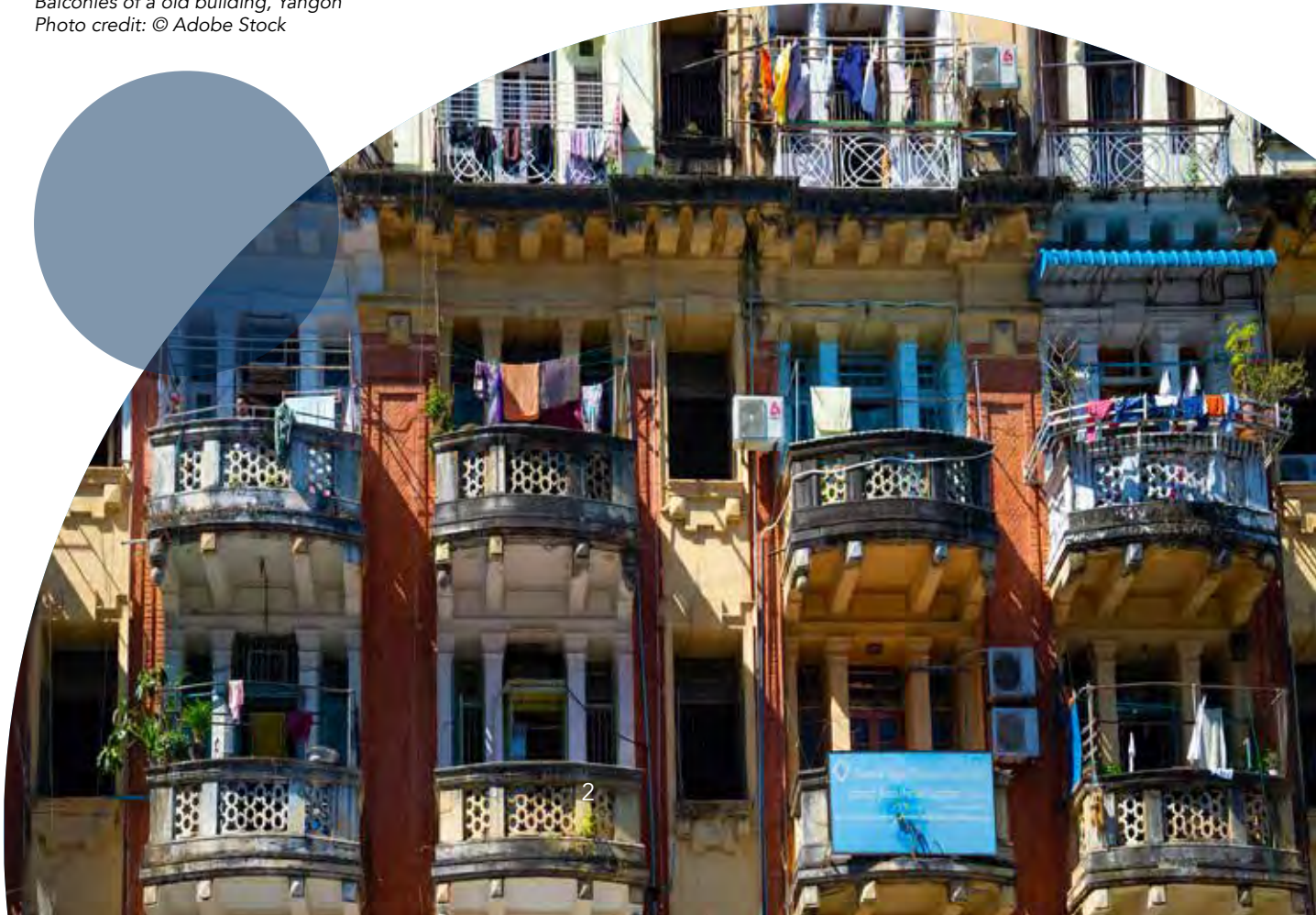
Continued hardship is fuelling widespread protection and trafficking risks for the people of Myanmar. A UN survey in 2022 found that women in Myanmar face a disproportionate share of negative consequences in this environment.<sup>2</sup> The threat of political persecution, fears around sporadic violence, and the economic crisis are leaving people newly displaced and desperate, with many migrating abroad through irregular means or migrating internally to the border states and regions of the country. Young people, women and girls, and migrant workers are facing heightened risks of sex trafficking, forced marriage, and forced labour. Exploitation taking place in scamming compounds in Myanmar's autonomous zones is receiving increased regional and international attention, but little attention has been given to the sexual exploitation faced by women and girls in these compounds. The state apparatus is not cracking down on such operations.

In October 2023, an ethnic armed alliance (Three Brotherhood Alliance) initiated a coordinated offensive called Operation 1027 in Northern Shan state. The offensive resulted in significant territorial gains for the alliance until it eventually ended in January 2024 with a Chinese-brokered ceasefire. Operation 1027 claimed to have eliminated the widespread online gambling and scamming centres in Myanmar and along the China-Myanmar border, and suppressed the groups involved in these illicit businesses. However, the validity of this claim is as yet unknown.

<sup>1</sup> <https://myanmar.un.org/en/260769-unicef-myanmar-humanitarian-situation-report-no-11-end-year-2023>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.undp.org/myanmar/publications/regressing-gender-equality-myanmar-women-living-under-pandemic-and-military-rule>

Balconies of a old building, Yangon  
Photo credit: © Adobe Stock



# PROGRESS TOWARDS HOTSPOT OBJECTIVES

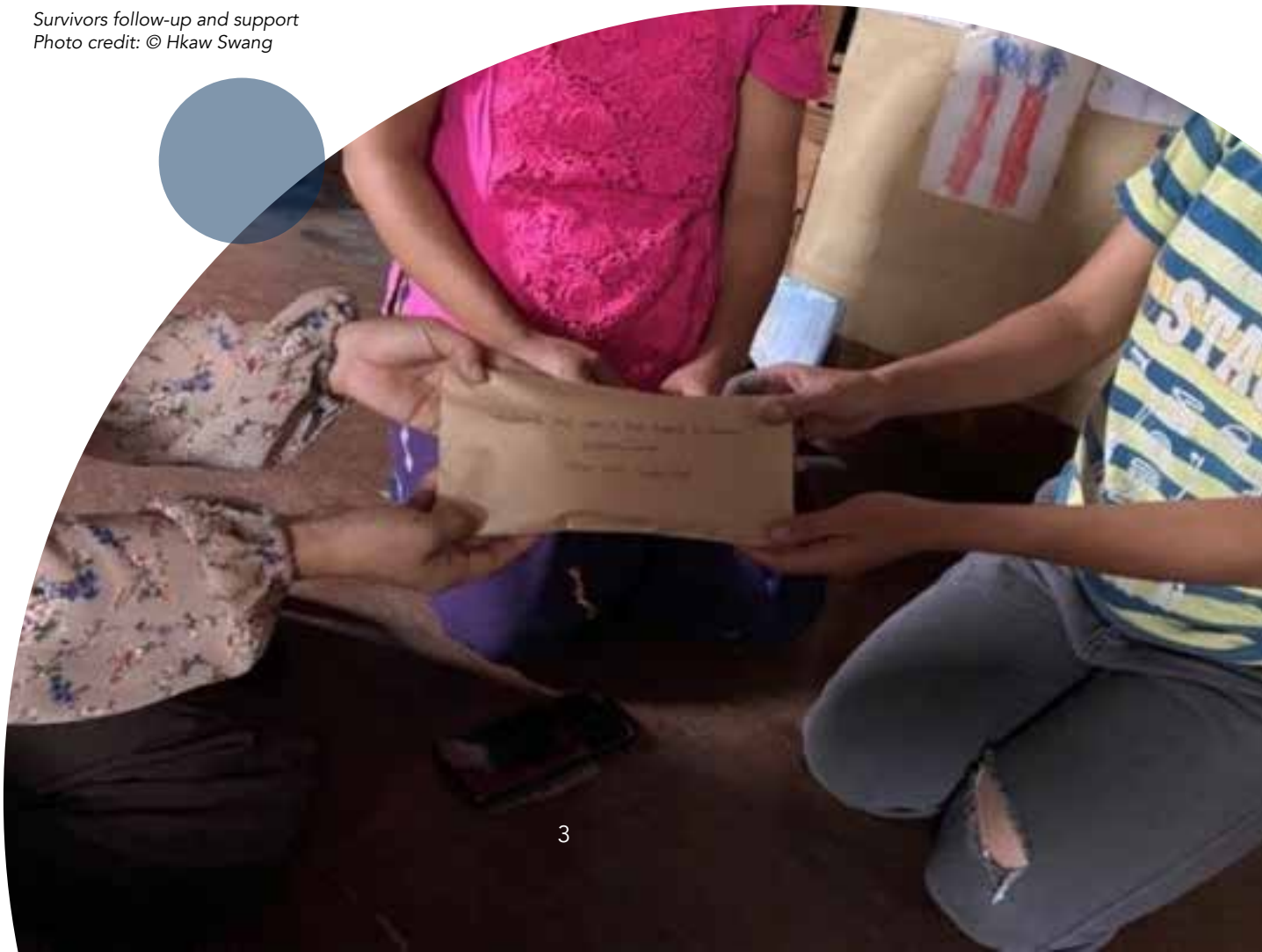
In response to the ever-growing needs on the ground, our partners have focused on protecting survivors of extreme exploitation, supporting community-level mechanisms to prevent and respond to human trafficking, and ensuring that trafficking risks are monitored, reported, and integrated into crisis responses.

Importantly, by establishing community-level networks and mechanisms, our partners have been able to maintain a local presence even when security concerns have prevented regular access. By doing this, they are strengthening a vital frontline response to human trafficking – showing what community groups are able to do, even in a crisis, to protect their own residents, if they have some outside support and training.

## 2023 impact data

| Indicator                                       |       |
|---|-------|
| Lives directly impacted                         | 1,018 |
| Victims liberated                               | 43    |
| Individuals accessing social and legal services | 987   |
| Community freedom groups supported              | 100   |
| Members of community freedom groups             | 583   |
| Micro-enterprises started                       | 30    |

Survivors follow-up and support  
Photo credit: © Hkaw Swang



## **Objective 1: Provide critical support services to survivors of extreme exploitation, including human trafficking, forced marriage, forced childbearing, domestic servitude, forced sex work and child labour**

In Myanmar, support services to survivors of any kind of violence are severely restricted. In the past, government offices, such as the Department of Rehabilitation and the Anti-Trafficking Task Force, would have worked with civil society organisations to respond, but now these agencies face severe resource constraints and have lost territorial control in many parts of the country. In 2023 our partners and their communities played a critical role in identifying survivors of trafficking and assisting them directly or referring them to other services. Survivors are identified and referred in several ways: by community volunteers, through a hotline run by one of the partners, through other organisations, or, in some cases, through local authorities.

### **Direct service provision**

Despite the challenging dynamics, in 2023 our partners directly facilitated the liberation of 43 survivors of trafficking. This work was extremely complex due to the absence of a reliable government system as well as restricted access to survivors in China and/or internal boundaries between areas within Myanmar controlled by armed groups or the security forces. Our partners' efforts usually entailed providing remote advice to survivors on how to escape and then closely coordinating with community groups or other individuals near to the survivor's location to be ready to receive the survivor.

During the year, our partners also provided direct assistance such as food, shelter, medical and psychosocial support to 159 survivors of a wide range of exploitation experiences, including forced marriage, forced labour and sexual exploitation. Partners supported survivors' reintegration through family tracing and by providing targeted livelihood support.

One partner's phone hotline received 42 calls. Callers reported a range of abuses and exploitation, including trafficking for forced marriage, sexual exploitation and forced labour, as well as rape. The partner was able to give emergency support through their own safe houses when needed. In addition, through informal cross-border cooperation mechanisms, they directly assisted women who have suffered forced marriage in China.

Arranging the liberation and repatriation of survivors of trafficking who are in China relies on strong networks between the countries, so survivors of forced marriage and other types of human trafficking can be supported to leave situations of exploitation and return to Myanmar. These mechanisms and social networks are critical to making our program effective.

With the addition of a partner based in Yangon (alongside partners in the conflict-affected border states of Kachin and Northern Shan), the hotspot's reach has further expanded. The advantage of this new geographic reach is highlighted when partners join their efforts, benefiting from their respective connections and networks.

**A powerful network to assist an escaped survivor:** In April 2023, our partner in the Yangon region was alerted about a woman desperately trying to escape forced marriage in China. The woman had originally been living in an IDP (internally displaced people) camp in Myanmar but she could not earn enough to support her two children and alcoholic husband. A broker approached her at the IDP camp and recruited her to work at a non-existent factory and then sold her for marriage into China – first to one man, then to another. When she escaped, our partner in Yangon passed information to another hotspot partner in Kachin state, and they contacted a youth group from the same ethnicity based in China to arrange safe travel. The case was especially complicated because the survivor only spoke a local dialect, so the partners arranged for translation through a women's organisation from the same community. Once the survivor was safely home, our partner provided livelihood support.



Photo credit: © Hkaw Swang

Notably, one of our partners successfully facilitated the liberation of 20 survivors of sexual exploitation and forced marriage from two Autonomous Regions. Myanmar's Autonomous Regions have become notorious for hosting industries known for their high prevalence of exploitation, including casinos, brothels and scamming compounds. Impressively, the partner's volunteers were able to facilitate the release of the survivors. The partner then provided the survivors with assistance for recovery and reintegration.

When survivors return home, they are faced with limited economic opportunities which hampers their recovery. Our partners have provided livelihood support to survivors and vulnerable populations. This includes reintegration assistance, livelihood skills training, and the organisation of survivor groups for mutual support and leadership development. During the year, 69 individuals – including survivors and internally displaced persons, particularly women and girls – benefited from this support. Among them, 30 individuals are now earning a new income through livelihood assistance provided by our partners.

### ***Strengthening local authorities' systems***

Our partners undertake informal liaison with local authorities on all sides of the conflict for the sole purpose of supporting survivors of human trafficking, forced marriage, and gender-based violence, and raising awareness about the protection needs of women and girls. This often leads to practical actions and referrals for assistance. Significant achievements by our two partners in Northern Shan and Kachin states include enabling stakeholder consultations and workshops to enhance the rules and regulations used by local authorities to counter trafficking in persons. In addition, our grant funds enabled our Yangon-based partner to advise international and national trafficking agencies in Myanmar on survivor protection and assistance, as well as the prosecution of traffickers.

**Objective 2: Support communities, families, and individuals at risk of extreme exploitation to protect themselves and make informed decisions**

Due to the breakdown of the state’s ability to lead efforts to prevent human trafficking, our partners’ work in Myanmar has focused on supporting grassroots efforts. Over the past few years, Freedom Fund partners have invested in community-level groups that can take a leading role in identifying victims and making referrals. In addition, partners support community efforts to raise awareness about risks and help community members in their decision-making.

In 2023, one partner supported 11 Local Action Teams with a total of 55 members so that they could share anti-trafficking information within their areas and ensure timely survivor assistance. Another partner supported 81 self-help groups, with a total of 405 members. Similarly, a third partner maintains a close and strong relationship with nine community volunteers who effectively provided survivor assistance and supported rescues across Kachin and Northern Shan states. In Yangon, our partner established eight community watch groups, with a total of 123 members, which assist with identification of and providing support to survivors, as well as acting as a critical community-level resource for information about human trafficking.

Based on these experiences, our partner provided feedback to the Department of Rehabilitation regarding draft guidance on the community-based committees that are planned under the amended 2022 anti-trafficking law. Despite the present crisis, our partners’ combined efforts in different regions are laying the groundwork for a future system that will ensure that community structures play a vital role in responding to human trafficking.

Awareness-raising events, trainings and dialogues at the community level are an integral part of our program’s efforts to provide at-risk communities with accurate information to support safer decision-making and to know where to go for support. This is vital because rumours and misinformation online and in person about economic opportunities have led individuals to pursue jobs in areas and industries that are known to have a high prevalence of exploitation. Despite a slow-down in outreach activities after an escalation in violence due to Operation 1027 in October, the program still directly reached 2,233 individuals in vulnerable communities and IDP settlements during 2023. Activities included large awareness-raising events, such as on Violence Against Women Day, as well as small group psychosocial counselling sessions. These awareness-raising activities enabled survivors to seek assistance within their communities. Most of the cases reported and referred to our partners for assistance in 2023 originated from communities that received awareness-raising and information sessions.

Myitkyina City, Kachin State  
Photo credit: © Adobe Stock





Such awareness-raising activities also have an impact beyond the communities where our partners and their networks operate directly. For example, partners reported that the only way for survivors of exploitation to escape in certain regions is to risk their lives by breaking away from traffickers. Our partners' efforts to raise awareness about trafficking in communities near these regions and to build networks with other local organisations have aided escaped survivors to access help from our partners through these organisations and nearby communities.

In light of the dire security situation, we have incorporated humanitarian and social protection components into our current strategy. This includes increased support for livelihood and emergency health assistance, primarily targeting women-led households and women and girls both inside and outside of IDP settings. The aim is to support their livelihoods and mental health, address emergency needs, alleviate heightened household stress, and prevent forced marriage, sex trafficking, illegal border crossing, and violence and discrimination against women and girls.

For instance, one of our partners provided livelihood assistance to 15 women and adolescent girls in IDP camps, in coordination with local women's groups. This assistance was provided through a Livelihood and Vulnerability Assessment process, which involved agreeing upon vulnerability factors, assessing community livelihood options, identifying assets and capability needs, identifying training providers, and evaluating the quality of training. To date, 13 of the 15 participants in this livelihood skills training have become self-employed and are earning incomes.

### **Objective 3: Support the integration of anti-human trafficking/extreme exploitation efforts into the local humanitarian response**

As a result of the ongoing crisis, the Freedom Fund is one of the last funders specifically working to address human trafficking in Myanmar, especially in Kachin and Northern Shan states. Our program, with partners having roots in affected communities, holds a unique space in this environment, with the opportunity to inform humanitarian actors who are less connected to the realities faced by survivors of trafficking. For example, two of our partners take part in the UN Protection Cluster's gender-based violence group for Kachin and Northern Shan, which ensures they are connected to relevant actors working on protection more broadly. This also facilitates a potential referral pathway for trafficking cases with humanitarian and other protection agencies. Within the group, our partners look for opportunities to advocate for trafficking-focused activities and share trafficking trends to ensure better responses.

In 2023, our partners worked diligently to map, convene and coordinate local humanitarian, gender-based violence and anti-trafficking efforts in the two states. Our partner in Kachin state participated in and helped organise Kachin State Anti-Trafficking Networking meetings where organisations shared information on their services and on community conditions, and discussed updates in trafficking laws. They also explored ways to streamline the case referral process. In Northern Shan state, our partner conducted consultation meetings in the target area with 82 participants, including Local Action Team members, church and village leaders, and community members. At these meetings, our partner shared their project plan, safehouse information, and helpline details, and gathered valuable local insights and suggestions. Prior to this, there was no anti-trafficking networking in Northern Shan state. However, as a result of these efforts, our partner is now able to receive as well as refer survivors needing urgent assistance with other networking organisations in Northern Shan.

## SUPPORTING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Despite limited in-person access to our partners in Myanmar, the Freedom Fund supported our partners through capacity-building opportunities and facilitating a virtual Community of Practice. This has included:

- regular Community of Practice meetings to facilitate sharing, learning and coordination among partners, including the use of an online Signal group for informal information-sharing
- a series of facilitated thematic discussions covering conceptual clarity on trafficking in persons, forced marriage and forced labour, and victim identification, protection, and assistance
- training on the amended anti-trafficking laws in Myanmar
- tailored safeguarding training and mentoring support to strengthen partners' capacity to operate safely within communities
- connecting partners to other networks with geographical presence in China to facilitate rescue, repatriation and reintegration efforts
- developing an idea for a regional Greater Mekong civil society meeting on forced marriage and violence against women and girls, to be initiated in 2024.

# VISION

Our vision is a world free of slavery.

# MISSION

Our mission is to mobilise the knowledge, capital and will needed to end slavery.

## **The Freedom Fund (UK)**

Lower Ground  
Caledonia House  
223 Pentonville Rd  
London, N1 9NG  
+44 20 3777 2200

## **The Freedom Fund (US)**

315 Flatbush Avenue  
#406  
Brooklyn, NY 11217  
USA  
+1 929 224 2448

 [www.freedomfund.org](http://www.freedomfund.org)

 [info@freedomfund.org](mailto:info@freedomfund.org)

 [@Freedom\\_Fund](https://twitter.com/Freedom_Fund)

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