



Myanmar Hotspot Annual Report

2020



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1. Operating Context

The launch of the Myanmar hotspot in 2020 was significantly shaped by the start of the covid-19 pandemic. While total infection numbers in Myanmar remained comparatively low initially, domestic strategies to prevent the spread of the virus impacted the operations of institutions and movement of people across the country. In March, the government began its efforts to contain the spread of the virus with the closure of the country's borders by air and land, localised stay-at-home orders, movement restrictions and limits on public gatherings. The pandemic also triggered the mass return of Myanmar migrants from abroad. It is estimated that more than 44,000 migrants returned from China alone,¹ all of whom were required to go through a 14 to 21 days quarantine process before they were allowed to return to their home communities.

The local lockdowns and social distancing measures greatly increased economic vulnerability across all segments of society, with particularly devastating effects on the poorest communities. Those who were already living hand to mouth were left struggling to survive without opportunities to earn an income. Families who were once better off suddenly became economically desperate. The returnee population suffered from acute lack of food and basic supplies during their mandatory 2-week stay in quarantine shelters. Once returned to their communities of origin, their presence put additional pressure on scarce local resources and limited government services.

The Myanmar government lacked the resources to adequately address the crisis. Much of the government's covid-19 response had to be funded by domestic donations, and through mandatory flat rate contributions required from all government ministries. As all ministries, irrespective of budget size, had to contribute the same amount, this was particularly debilitating for smaller departments, including the already underfunded Ministry of Social welfare, which holds primary responsibility for community support services. Amid the general re-direction of government attention to the pandemic response, the township level anti-trafficking task force (ATTF) was recruited to join local covid-19 response efforts to give priority to emergency support to returning migrants and the quarantine shelters.

From July, some of the lockdown restrictions began to lift with some travel to project communities within Kachin and northern Shan states, whilst restricted, once again possible. While Rakhine and Yangon saw a new spike in covid infections from August and September onwards, the Freedom Fund partners' program areas were thankfully not as severely affected by this second wave.

The programmatic impact of covid-19 was further diverted by national elections in November 2020. Community outreach was once again restricted due to ongoing election campaign activities.

¹ IOM Myanmar COVID-19 Response Situation Report 10, dated 20 July 2020.

2. Hotspots outputs & outcomes

2.1 Headline results

- **77 community groups were established, and 399 group members trained and supported.** Despite limited access to communities throughout 2020, partners were able to establish community groups, which will serve as critical entry points to empower communities to better understand their rights and the available options to protect themselves against exploitation. Partners provided support to establish the groups, select members and establish governance structures, which was quickly followed by trainings covering a wide range of topics, including human trafficking, labour laws, relevant referral mechanisms and effective and safe use of social media. The groups also brought their members together to discuss the impact of covid-19 on their communities and explored potential ways to address this.
- **16 legal cases assisted, 8 of which resulted in convictions.** Through our partners, the hotspot program has supported survivors of trafficking to pursue legal cases against perpetrators, usually the brokers or individuals responsible for recruiting and delivering the women into the situations of exploitation. All eight convictions, five of which were cases of forced marriage specifically, resulted in ten-year prison sentences. These legal cases do not only provide survivors with a legal remedy on their path to recovery and reintegration, but they are a key contribution to establishing a deterrent and sending a message to other would-be perpetrators.
- **31,000 individuals received emergency support to address needs resulting from the covid-19 pandemic.** With the help of three rounds of Emergency Relief Grants, Freedom Fund partners in Myanmar contributed to an extensive response and relief effort, distributing food, hygiene and sanitation materials, clothes and covid-related prevention supplies to vulnerable communities and returning migrants in quarantine centres. These materials came at a critical time for a vulnerable population and would have made an important contribution to the resilience of these communities to exploitation in general, including human trafficking.

2.2 Progress towards hotspot objectives

The launch of the hotspot was severely affected by the covid-19 pandemic, with Freedom Fund partners, who had just joined the program, immediately having to put their planned activities on pause. Between April and June, all four partners followed the Freedom Fund's restricted spending policy under their main Freedom Fund projects, only providing critical recovery support to survivors of trafficking while suspending other activities. Recognising the growing humanitarian needs on the ground, partners shifted their main effort toward emergency relief funded by the Freedom Fund's Emergency Response Fund (see section below), which continued through September. However, as some of the most serious restrictions began to lift in the project areas around July, partners were able to once again focus on their main anti-trafficking projects, continuing their essential support services to survivors of trafficking and forced marriage while also strengthening their community outreach and empowerment activities.

Hotspot Objective 1: Strengthen prevention mechanisms and structures through effective women and girls' empowerment, community strengthening, and promotion of safer migration

While engagement of communities was hampered as a result of limited travel and caps on group gatherings due to covid-19 restrictions, partners were still able to begin critical relationship building and outreach in their project communities.

Establishment of community groups:

In 2020, Freedom Fund partners were able to establish 77 community groups. While the exact functioning and purpose of the groups will vary by partner, they aim to facilitate continued dialogue around priority issues for each community, including human trafficking and safe migration, while also facilitating active information sharing not only among their members but the wider community.

Our partner's support included establishment of *self-help groups (SHGs)* with a dual function: they will act as savings groups for their members while also creating a safe space to discuss relevant issues in their communities. Members take responsibility to disseminate the information from the training and meetings to their respective communities and act as reference for community members.

After initial support to establish the groups, select the members and establish the governance structures, group members received several rounds of training on a number of topics, such as:

- Human trafficking, including clear guidance on reporting procedures for cases and referral pathways in the form of referral handbooks, outlining the process and listing the phone numbers of the key service providers.
- Labour law and labour rights, including reporting procedures in case of violations of these rights.
- Guidelines on use of social media for promotion of safe migration and anti-trafficking activities.

The groups also held regular dialogue sessions, which centred around the economic and social impact of the pandemic and potential ways to support their communities. The meetings allowed our partners to learn about emerging issues from these communities, exchange information about covid-19, and to think about better response measures.

The role of social media in Myanmar. Myanmar's internet revolution came quickly when in 2014, telecommunication firms were invited into the country after decades of no access. A large part of the population quickly gained access to the internet via the introduction of a 3G network. Notably, from the beginning, Facebook became available to anyone who owned a smart phone at no cost, as internet providers did not charge any data while using the app. Today, it is estimated that half of Myanmar's population is connected to Facebook, many of whom use the app as their main source of information and communication (by using its messenger function). The role of social media in facilitating migration and exposing people to risk of human trafficking cannot be underestimated.

Similarly, partners also established *community support groups (CSGs)*, which function similarly to the SHGs described above but without the micro savings function. They aim to facilitate community empowerment and development. A range of trainings were offered to the groups' members. Training topics included: Community Development, Human-Trafficking, Gender Based-Violence and Paralegal Skills. The above trainings increased confidence of CSG members in speaking about the issues publicly and sharing their knowledge with other community members. This, in turn, has created interest in the issue among community administrators and local government as they closely follow the progress of the project.

Livelihoods support to address vulnerability and build trust:



Community Outreach in Gat Shang Yang

As poverty remains a key driver of high-risk migration patterns and human trafficking, one of our partners is providing targeted livelihoods support to the most vulnerable members of their self-help groups. This intervention does not only address the immediate needs of these women, but it helps build trust between the communities and the partners, acknowledging that lack of economic options is many community members' main concern. In this vein, our partners arranged vocational training, where requested, as well as micro-enterprise trainings to help 150 SHG members to set up more sustainable and profitable businesses.

Community outreach and awareness raising:

The model of community champions taking on the role of educating their own communities is a common approach across all of our partners' interventions, as they are not only trusted but are also able to respond if any trafficking cases or risk of trafficking situations arise. In addition to the community support groups, our partners work with *regional teams*, which are responsible for leading community outreach, awareness and response efforts across the project areas. The regional teams consist of representatives from multiple villages, including religious leaders, local woman representatives, traditional leaders, youth leaders and village heads. Regional teams facilitate our partners' access to the grassroots across their project areas. Regional teams facilitate our partners' outreach activities and community feedback mechanism to improve our partners' activities. Notably, throughout the covid-19 pandemic, regional team members also assisted in data collection from households and providing covid emergency response supplies. Similarly, our partners identified and intensively trained 29 community mobilisers, who are tasked with disseminating information and facilitating dialogue in their respective communities, as well as acting as a first point for referral. In 2020, our partners reach 536 community members with their anti-trafficking messages.

Supporting referrals: A regional team in Maw Han facilitated the rescue of a woman who had been trafficked to China. The case was brought to the team members by her community, who then referred the case to our partner organization for further assistance. In collaboration with the Anti-Trafficking Task Force, the woman was advised via online communication on how she might be able

Furthermore, Freedom Fund partners led community consultations in an effort to improve the response to human trafficking in project areas. During these consultations, 217 local leaders discussed strategies to address human trafficking and conducted trafficking related situational assessments in their respective locations. They established a local referral pathway for survivors and each regional team identified three focal points for the community and referral network. These initial consultation meetings are beginning to shift norms at the grassroots level and establish a community-led model to change practices, such as screening of cross-border marriages as well as providing more guidance to families on how such arrangements might be made safer.

By organising wider community outreach events, partners have reached a total of 863 participants and allowed them an opportunity to discuss gender-related aspects of domestic violence and safer migration and reflect on



Anti-Human Trafficking Training in Alam Village

the current trafficking situation in their villages. These events not only provide a better understanding of human trafficking but also create a communication channel should case of trafficking arise, or traffickers be identified. Participants are empowered to influence their families and peers in their decisions to migrate or marry.

When covid-19 cases surged in December 2020, our partners had to adjust their planned activities and replaced them with responsible measures such as organizing virtual events and/or organizing events with minimum gatherings, for examples, a virtual Panel Discussion about “Human Trafficking, Migration and Trafficking in honour of “International Migrant Day on 18 December 2020” reaching 53

participants and a scaled-down celebration on Children’s Day by distributing pamphlets about trafficking of children.

[Hotspot Objective 2: Support trafficking survivors to leave situations of exploitation, recover, and reintegrate.](#)

Emergency support for survivors:

Due to covid-19, international borders were closed much of 2020. Cross-border migration was mainly into one direction (returnees from China to Myanmar), but the number of reported survivors of human trafficking/forced marriage was low. This may be due to the fact that lockdowns in China and the general increase in population control made it even more difficult for Myanmar women stuck in forced marriages to escape. Nevertheless, partners were able to provide critical support to 119 survivors of trafficking during a time of great distress. Immediate support included accommodation, food, medical care, and psycho-social counselling. This care was especially critical during a time when communities were going through additional hardship and restrictions.

Ensuring access to justice:

Many survivors seek legal recourse for the exploitation they have endured. This year, our partners supported 16 survivors of trafficking to pursue legal cases against their perpetrators, usually the brokers or individuals responsible for recruiting and delivering the women into the situations of exploitation. Successful legal cases depend on close coordination and trust between our partners and local authorities, especially the Anti-Trafficking Task Forces, to ensure smooth filing of the cases, preparation and witness protection. Partners counselled survivors on their legal options, prepared them to give their witness statements, provided court representation to those who needed it, and offered psycho-social counselling throughout court process. Eight cases completed their legal proceedings with our partners’ support and the court convicted the traffickers for ten years in prison.

Providing livelihood options:

To support a sustainable reintegration process, where possible, our partners provide direct livelihood support to survivors or connect them to other agencies who are better placed to do so. In 2020, partners provided 12 survivors with Financial Management and Marketing Trainings. Survivors who completed training received

start-up grants to pursue livelihood of their choice, which varied widely from running a small shop or restaurant to rearing poultry and pigs or engaging in agricultural activities.

Reintegration challenges due to covid-19:

Unfortunately, travel restrictions meant that partners were not always able to accompany all survivors who wished to return to their communities from partner or government safe houses and shelters. However, they were still provided with transport and food before traveling on their own – when it was possible to travel. Follow-up was conducted via telephone when this was not possible to do in person.



Home visit with a trafficking survivor

Reunification after 25 years: Staff members of a Freedom Fund partner assisted an elderly woman who was trafficked at the age of 40 and survived and returned home at 65 years old. Because she could not remember her home address, staff of the government-run rehabilitation centre approached one of our partners for assistance to help her return home. With the support of our partner organization, they were finally able to locate her husband's address and the two were reunited after 25 years.

Hotspot Objective 3: Influence policy and practice relevant to safer migration and trafficking for forced marriage.

In the program's first year, partners focused on building closer relationships with the relevant local authorities to more effectively address human trafficking and unsafe migration in Kachin and Northern Shan State. Collaboration with the Anti-Trafficking Task Force (ATTF), the Department of Social Welfare (DSW), and the Department of Rehabilitation (DoR) are critical in supporting a more successful local referral network. Partners had cases referred to them by these actors, and in turn, partners referred cases to the government departments. Partners' expertise on this issue were increasingly recognised by government officials. This was helped by partners' ability to directly support the response efforts to covid-19, which strengthened those relationships further.

3. Emergency Response Fund



Anti-trafficking billboard in Myitkyina in coordination with the ATTF

Freedom Fund partners in Myanmar were eager to respond to the urgent needs on the ground emerging from the pandemic and the measures taken by the government to reduce transmission rates. Further deepening the severity of the situation, from March 2020 onward, Burmese migrants started returning from China due to fears about covid-19 and job losses. A large portion of returnees were only paid partially or not paid at all when they left their employers in China. Many returned empty-handed. Once they arrived in Myanmar, they had to go through a strict quarantine process, requiring them to stay at official quarantine centres, many of which were in very poor condition. The centres mostly relied on charitable contributions to be able to feed and house all of the returnees. Our partners were able to support this process through the ERF.

More broadly, the government response relied on public donations to be able to support the most vulnerable. Many communities in project locations were unable to access official relief supplies either because of underfunded services or logistic issue. The ERF was able to address gaps that would have otherwise been left unfilled. Providing relief grants to grassroots organisations has allowed levels of access to these communities that would otherwise have not been possible.

Over the course of three rounds of emergency response grants between April and October 2020, Freedom Fund partners were able to reach over 31,000 individuals in need of support. Their interventions targeted three main groups: 1. Returning migrants, who had to go through a 14-21 day quarantine process upon return to Myanmar. 2. Vulnerable communities that did not receive relief support from the government or other agencies; and 3. Survivors of trafficking and other types of abuse/exploitation currently being supported by our partners.

Activities focused on providing essential food and water as well virus protection materials, including masks, soap and wash basins to returning migrants in quarantine centres as well as to vulnerable communities/ households who did not receive any support from government or distributions by the World Food Programme. Other items included hygiene kits for



Covid-19 prevention messages



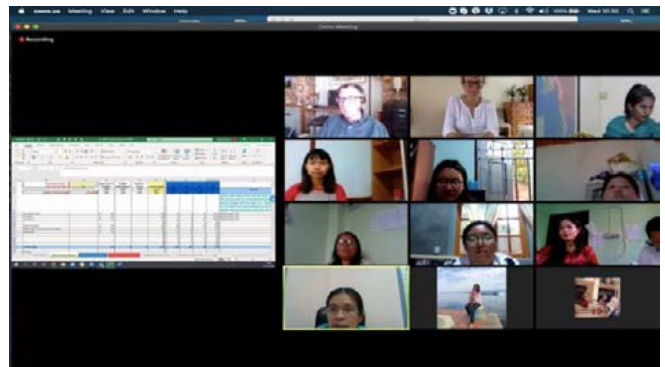
Distribution of emergency supplies in Ying Hkaw

women (sanitary napkins, underwear, toothbrush, toothpaste, soap) and men, as well as clothes. Critically, partners provided basic materials and equipment to quarantine centres, which were severely underfunded. Partners also contributed to local efforts to disseminate covid prevention messages in these communities. Where possible, partners also integrate messages around gender-based violence and human trafficking during their covid-19 awareness raising efforts.

4. Supporting a Community of Practice

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, efforts to build a cohesive and strong community of practice among our civil society partners were severely hampered. Since the hotspot's launch, we have been unable to hold in-person partner meetings. However, as partners quickly adjusted their own operations, virtual partner meetings and trainings provided an opportunity to facilitate some initial information sharing and more regular coordination. During meetings over Zoom, partners were able to present their project plans, raise challenges as a result of the pandemic, coordinate emergency response interventions and engage in discussions on conceptual clarity, such as how we together should define *human trafficking, forced marriage and forced childbearing in the Myanmar context*.

In addition to trainings that will help partners meet Freedom Fund finance and impact reporting requirements, throughout the month of September, Freedom Fund partners completed an intensive series of online safeguarding trainings led by the Freedom Fund's Safeguarding Manager. As a result of these trainings, partners immediately began their work finalising their organisational safeguarding policies and thinking through the steps of their implementation.



Finance reporting training with Freedom Fund partners

5. Case Study

Po was trafficked at the age of 15 by a broker, who persuaded Po that she would help her get a better education. Once Po arrived in China, she found herself sold to a Chinese man by the broker. At the hands of her Chinese husband and his family, she faced extreme physical and emotional abuse and was forced to bear three children. After years of exploitation, in mid 2020, Po finally managed to run away. Along her way, she met a woman who offered to help. She contacted her network via WeChat to find someone from Po's community. Eventually, Po's community and church leaders were found and informed, and they immediately came to meet her.

Once Po was back in Myanmar, she was referred to Freedom Fund partner. The Freedom Fund partner provided her with food and covered medical fees to address her immediate needs. However, the physical and mental trauma of her experience had left her extremely fragile, and she required more intensive medical care. The Freedom Fund partner facilitated her transfer to a hospital in Lashio, northern Shan State. With the support of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), all of her costs were covered. Po is now on the road to recovery and has even made plans to marry again.



Po's village is extremely remote and access is difficult due to security reasons. People in this area have very limited knowledge of human trafficking. As a result of Po's case, awareness about the risk has increased, and our partner is hoping to increase its outreach to these areas to continue the conversation about safer migration and human trafficking.

6. Impact data

	Global Indicator	2020 results
1	Lives impacted	1,491
2	Victims liberated	1
3	Individuals accessing social & legal services	1072
3a	Survivors accessing social & legal services	151
4	Community freedom groups supported	77
4a	Members of community freedom groups	399
5	At-risk children in school	2
6	Graduates of vocational training	150
7	Micro-enterprises started	12
8	Individuals with new access to government services	
9	Legal cases assisted	16
10	Arrests	15
11	Convictions	8
12	Changes in public policy	
13	Media stories	



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