

Myanmar citizens abroad:

What the 2014 census tells us about migration



International
Labour
Organization

Key Facts

- 2,021,910 former household members are living abroad
- Of those living abroad 61 per cent are men and 39 per cent are women
- International migrants represent 3.9 per cent of the total population
- 70.2 per cent of all migrants live in Thailand
- Mon State has the largest number of migrants (426,586) living abroad
- 34 per cent of all migrants have stayed overseas longer than 5 years
- Around one quarter of the population of each of these townships lives abroad: Dawei, Mawlaymine and Hpa An

Introduction

In 2014 Myanmar conducted its first census in thirty years, the Myanmar Population and Housing Census (2014 MPHIC).¹ The census provides a crucial social, economic, and demographic picture of the country to support the development of appropriate policies and programmes for the improvement of living standards of the people of Myanmar.

The census, conducted from 29 March to 10 April 2014, included a question related to the migration of household members to other countries. Question 40 asked for the number of former household members living abroad for six months or more, the relationship to the head of household, their age and sex, the year they left to go abroad and the country of residence. This information note provides an initial analysis of this international migration data.

According to the 2014 MPHIC Myanmar has a total population of 51,486,253 persons. This overall number includes an estimated population of 1,206,353 persons who were not enumerated in northern parts of Rakhine State and a few areas of Kachin State. 67 per cent of all people in Myanmar who are of working age (15–64) are in the labour force, but the proportion of males is much higher (85.2 per cent) than that of females (50.8 per cent).

In relation to overseas migration, 2,021,910 former household members (61 per cent male and 39 per cent female) were reported to be living abroad. This represents 3.9 per cent of the total population. 70.2 per cent of all migrants living overseas were living in Thailand.

¹ For more information on the census, please refer to United Nations Population Fund '2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census', available at: <http://countryoffice.unfpa.org/myanmar/census/> [accessed 25 Aug. 2015].

The States that reported the highest absolute numbers of former household members living abroad are Mon State (426,586); Kayin State (322,461) and Shan State (235,869), all areas bordering with Thailand.

Destination of international migrants from Myanmar

The census collected information regarding eight destination countries: Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, India and the United States. All other destinations were grouped together in the 'other' category.

Table 1: Myanmar international migrants by destination

Destination	Number	% of all migrants	Male	%	Female	%
All countries	2,021,910	100	1,233,168	61	788,742	39
Thailand	1,418,472	70.2	812,798	57.3	605,674	42.7
Malaysia	303,996	15	245,772	80.8	58,224	19.2
China	92,263	4.6	53,126	57.6	39,137	42.4
Singapore	79,659	3.9	39,078	49	40,581	51
Other	49,774	2.4	31,108	62.4	18,671	37.6
USA	37,577	1.9	21,937	58.3	15,640	41.7
India	17,975	0.9	10,917	60.7	7,058	39.3
Korea	14,592	0.7	14,118	96.7	474	3.3
Japan	7,597	0.4	4,314	56	3,283	44

Although the 1.4 million migrants reported to be in Thailand is less than common estimates of 2 and 3 million,² the figure does quite closely correspond to the number of Myanmar migrants who were registered under the Nationality Verification system and who moved through Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) channels as of March 2014.³ It may be assumed that family members were more confident in recording the migration of family members who are in some form of registered system in Thailand, rather than disclosing information on relatives who have gone through irregular channels.

In Malaysia, 80 per cent of the 303,996 migrants were men according to the census and this closely reflects the situation in Malaysia where the jobs available for workers from Myanmar have been largely for men. Most of the women accompanied their husbands or family, with a smaller number working in the service and manufacturing industry.

There is generally little data available about the migration of Myanmar migrants to China because of its largely irregular nature. Most information that is available relates to the daily or seasonal migration at border crossing points, or to the arranged or sometimes forced marriages between Myanmar women and Chinese men. Myanmar migrants have also reported being taken to work in industrial zones in different parts of China. It is quite significant therefore that in the census,

² The report *Assessing Potential Changes in Migration Patterns of Myanmar Migrants* by IOM and ARCM, Chulalongkorn University, 2013 estimated that there were 2.3 million Myanmar migrants in Thailand.

³ Figures issued by the Thai Ministry of Labour for March 2014 include 983,514 in the Nationality Verification system and 104,332 under the MOU system. One Stop Service Centres which opened from June to October registered a further 623,648 Myanmar migrants.

China ranks as the third country in terms of outward migrants with a reported 92,263 Myanmar migrants.

Singapore has long attracted Myanmar migrants with English skills for the hospitality industry and in other 'white collar' working environments. In 2013 an agreement was made between the two governments to send domestic workers to Singapore as of March 2014.⁴ The availability of jobs in hotels and domestic work is reflected by the slightly higher number of women (40,581) migrants to men (39,078).

Myanmar workers have been migrating to the Republic of Korea under a government to government Employment Permit System (EPS) scheme since 2008. Nearly all of the jobs made available through the EPS scheme are for men and this is reflected in the census by the much higher numbers of men (14,118) migrating than women (474). These numbers are higher than most official estimates. According to the EPS data, there were 7,895 Myanmar migrants in Republic of Korea in February 2013.

Around 50,000 household members were reported as living in countries not listed in the census. It can be assumed that this included countries where migrants were working, such as countries in the Middle East as well as countries of resettlement for refugees and exiles, such as Sweden and Canada.

Length of stay overseas

Although 66 per cent of migrants stayed overseas for less than four years, over 600,000 migrants had stayed in another country for longer than five years. However, from the information provided in the census we cannot determine whether the migrants stayed in only one country or several countries during those periods.

Table 2: Length of stay overseas

Length of stay	Number of migrants	%	Male	Female
Less than 15 months	624,196	30.9	396,140	228,056
15 months to 4 years	742,097	36.7	446,544	295,553
5–9 years	396,469	19.6	237,303	159,166
10–19 years	206,186	10.2	121,305	84,881
Over 20 years	27,362	1.4	16,938	10,424
Not stated	25,600	1.3	14,938	10,662

In the breakdown of length of stay by place of origin, migrants staying longer than 20 years mostly came from Kayah State, Yangon and Shan State, while there were higher percentages of migrants staying between 10 and 19 years from Shan State and Chin State.

⁴ In September 2014 a five month ban on domestic workers going to Singapore was imposed and this ban was renewed in June 2015.

Table 3: Age of migrants

Age	Number of Migrants	% of total	Male	Female
0–4 (pre-school)	33,775	1.7	17,312	16,463
5–14 (school age)	59,385	2.9	30,916	28,469
15–19 (school and working)	229,407	11.3	130,592	98,815
20–55 (working age)	1,676,819	83	1,041,568	614,135
56 upwards (working or retired)	22,524	1.1	6,480	9,744

Table 4: Origin of international migrants, State by State (highest to lowest)

State of origin	Numbers of household members living overseas			By top destinations		
	Total number of migrants (% of State population)	Men	Women	First destination	Second destination	Third destination
Mon State	426,586 (20.7%)	245,564	181,022	Thailand (385,487)	Malaysia (32,620)	Singapore (4,324)
Kayin State	322,461 (20.4%)	173,430	149,331	Thailand (304,980)	Malaysia (12,864)	Singapore (1,150)
Shan State	235,869 (4%)	116,054	119,815	Thailand (179,783)	China (42,490)	Malaysia (5,749)
Tanintharyi	203,232 (14.4%)	112,834	90,398	Thailand (187,968)	Malaysia (12,879)	Singapore (685)
Bago Region	169,691 (3.4%)	110,367	59,324	Thailand (129,069)	Malaysia (26,564)	Singapore (6,529)
Yangon Region	166,698 (2.2%)	109,855	56,843	Malaysia (45,593)	Singapore (33,910)	Thailand (32,791)
Rakhine State	115,502 (3.6%)	94,903	20,599	Thailand (74,730)	Malaysia (28,200)	China (7,833)
Magway Region	84,422 (2.1%)	62,023	18,399	Thailand (36,674)	Malaysia (30,020)	China (11,454)
Mandalay Region	80,071 (1.29%)	59,578	20,493	Malaysia (30,998)	Thailand (28,334)	China (8,239)
Sagaing Region	64,252 (1.2%)	43,686	20,566	Malaysia (27,184)	India (9,012)	Thailand (7,981)
Ayeyawady Region	59,488 (0.9%)	42,572	16,916	Thailand (29,382)	Malaysia (16,704)	Singapore (8,021)
Chin State	51,545 (10.7%)	33,975	17,570	Malaysia (27,016)	USA (12,117)	India (5,880)
Kachin State	21,840 (1.2%)	10,163	11,317	Thailand (9,250)	China (6,137)	Malaysia (2,712)

Nay Pyi Taw Union Territory	11,928 (1%)	9,244	2,684	Thailand (6,214)	Malaysia (3,679)	
Kayah State	8,385 (2.9%)	4,920	3,465	Thailand (5,601)	Malaysia (1,134)	Singapore (716)

Top four States/Regions of origin for international migrants

Mon State reported the highest number of household members living overseas; with one district, Mawlamyine reporting 25.2 per cent of its population having migrated, mainly to Thailand; compared to 20.7 per cent for the whole State. Mon State is in close proximity to Thailand and Mawlamyine is a major transportation hub onwards to the Thai border. Conditions in Mon State were generally reported as being better than the national average, with infant and under-five mortality being significantly lower and life expectancy higher. It may be that living in better conditions allows people to migrate overseas more easily or it may be that migration from the area has improved the conditions.

The State with the second highest number of migrants, **Kayin State** borders directly with Thailand and is home to one of the major land border crossings, Myawaddy to Mae Sot. Approximately 100,000 people from Kayin are housed in six refugee camps along the border with Thailand.⁵ Almost all migrants migrating regularly through the MOU process to Thailand pass this border check point. Hpa An, like Mawlamyine is at a major crossroads with roads heading for Thailand, and 25.6 per cent of the population were reported to be living overseas. According to the census Kayin State has one of the lowest literacy levels in the country at 74.4 per cent, the percentage of people of working age in the labour force is lower than the average at 60.7 per cent and it has a much higher than average unemployment rate. A very large percentage, 32.7 per cent of over 15 year olds did not have any form of identity card.

While **Shan State** ranks third in absolute numbers of migrants living abroad, as a percentage of population migrating, at only 4 per cent it is much lower than both Mon State and Kayin State. Considering the historical links and long standing migration from Shan State to Thailand, this percentage is surprisingly low. It is possible that there was under-reporting due to several factors. Much of the migration from Shan State is irregular and family members may have been afraid to report on the migration of their relatives. In some areas, language may have been a barrier. Moreover, several of the major migrations from Shan State have been in response to conflict and to forced relocations. As such whole families have moved leaving no one left in Myanmar to mention them in a census.

Shan State has busy border crossings with both Thailand and China. Shan State reported more women migrants than men, including to China, Singapore and even Malaysia. According to the census Shan State has the lowest literacy levels of the whole country at 64.6 per cent and the second to lowest access to improved sanitation at 63.8 per cent. It also falls below the national average for access to improved sources of drinking water (54.7 per cent). The percentage of people in the labour force is significantly higher than the national average at 77.5 per cent. Shan

⁵ See: The Border Consortium, 'Refugee and IDP Camp Populations: September 2014', available at: <http://www.theborderconsortium.org/media/54370/2014-09-sep-map-tbc-unhcr.pdf> [accessed 25 Aug. 2015].

State had a bigger than average percentage of over 15 year olds who did not have any identity card at 27.7 per cent.

In contrast to Shan State, **Tanintharyi**, which also borders with Thailand reported 14.4 per cent of its population living abroad. Dawei is the biggest town closest to the Htee Kee crossing to Phu Nam Ron (Kanchanburi) in Thailand, and reported the largest number of people leaving with 132,231 or 26.2 per cent of the population. The other major crossing to Thailand is the sea crossing at Kawthaung to Ranong. Situated in the southernmost tip of Myanmar, Tanintharyi is also closest to Malaysia.

The under-five mortality rate is one of the highest in the country at 84 per 1,000 with infant mortality rate also being high at 71 per 1,000. Only 8 per cent of the population use electricity as the main source of lighting and only 66.6 per cent have access to improved sanitation. Literacy levels are higher than average with male and female literacy levels being closer than reported in other States and regions.

Other States/Regions of interest

Rakhine State reported a much greater percentage of male migrants than any other State (82 per cent). This may be due to religious or cultural codes which restrict the migration of women by themselves. It may also be due to the danger involved in migrating from Rakhine State which most often will involve travel by sea. The information from Rakhine State is incomplete because not all residents were interviewed and this may particularly affect the census findings on migration since the movement of tens of thousands of people who self-identify as Rohingya⁶ is not recorded.

According to the census, Rakhine has the lowest access to improved sanitation of the whole country (31.8 per cent) and much lower access to improved sources of drinking water (37.8 per cent). Only 12.8 per cent of households used electricity as main source of energy for lighting. It records higher than average unemployment and only 58.8 per cent of all people who are of working age are in the labour force. 28.9 per cent of over 15 year olds did not hold any identity card.

Although **Chin State** ranks twelfth in terms of absolute numbers of household members living overseas, in terms of percentage of the State population, it ranks fourth with 10.7 per cent of the

Table 5: National averages

Indicator	%
Population overseas	3.9%
Labour force (85.2 per cent male, 50.8 per cent female)	67%
Literacy level	89.5%
Over 15 year olds with no identity card	19.3%
Households using electricity as main source of energy for lighting	32.4%
Access to improved sanitation	74.3%
Access to improved sources of drinking water	69.5%
Households using firewood as source of energy for cooking	62.9%
Infant mortality rate	62 per 1,000
Under-five mortality rate	72 per 1,000

⁶ See: "Thailand: End inhumane detention of Rohingya: Provide asylum seekers access to UN Refugee Agency", *Human Rights Watch*, 3 June 2013. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/03/thailand-end-inhumane-detention-rohingya> [accessed 25 Aug. 2015]; "Fleeing Rohingya find safety but not peace in Malaysia", *Thomson Reuters Foundation*, 28 June 2013. Available at: <http://www.trust.org/item/20130628094359-w7903/> [accessed 25 Aug. 2015].

population reported as living overseas. Chin State has the third highest infant mortality rate in the country after Magway and Ayeyawaddy at 76 out of 1,000 infants dying before their first birthday, and also a much higher than national rate of under-five mortality, 90 out of 1,000. It has a lower use of electricity as main source of energy for lighting at 15.4 per cent and higher use of firewood for cooking at 93.7 per cent. Both the literacy levels and labour force levels are lower than average, at 79.4 per cent and 64.8 per cent respectively.

Origin of migrant populations in countries of destination

Table 6: Origin of migrant populations in countries of destination

Country of destination	Region/State of origin			
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
Thailand	Mon (385,487)	Kayin (304,980)	Tanintharyi (187,968)	Shan (179,783)
Malaysia	Yangon (45,593)	Mon (32,620)	Mandalay (30,998)	Magway (30,020)
Singapore	Yangon (33,910)	Ayewaddy (8,021)	Bago (6,592)	Sagaing (6,343)
China	Shan (42,490)	Magway (11,454)	Mandalay (8,239)	Rakhine (7,833)
Korea (Republic of)	Yangon (6,837)	Mandalay (1,872)	Bago (1,425)	Magway (1016)
India	Sagaing (9,012)	Chin (5,880)	Yangon (995)	Ayewaddy (557)
Japan	Yangon (4,827)	Shan (412)	Bago (306)	Sagaing (236)

Interpreting the data

The information from the census regarding international migration from Myanmar provides an overview of the migration patterns regarding the States/regions of origin and the countries of destination. It shows clearly that most international migrants migrate to the country which is closest – geographical proximity plays a major determining factor in choice of destination. It also provides useful information about the gender and age of the household members living overseas. It can be assumed that there is significant under-reporting of the numbers of household members living overseas, particularly in Shan State, which may be due to:

- fear of being punished for reporting family members who had left the country irregularly;
- concern about being taxed on remittances;
- language difficulties (between Myanmar and ethnic languages); or
- the migration of the whole family due to conflict, leaving no household members in Myanmar.

The census could not question the motivations for leaving and this has resulted in there being no distinction made in the data between: migrant workers, refugees in camps and resettled refugees. It may be safe to assume that the vast majority of household members living in the United States were resettled refugees but it may also affect other data significantly, particularly data regarding the length of time migrants stayed overseas. It may be that many of the migrants staying overseas

for long periods were refugees. It is not however possible to determine how long migrants had stayed in one country. A household reporting a migrant overseas for 15 years might be referring to someone who had spent 10 years in a refugee camp in Thailand and then been resettled to the United States; or to a migrant worker who had first gone to work in Malaysia for five years and then moved to Thailand.

Despite the limitations of the data on international migration from the census, it does provide some useful information for labour migration programming interventions for both Myanmar and the countries of destination.

Myanmar

- Some of the States/regions with high levels of migration also had large numbers of population over 15 years without any form of identity cards. This is particularly true for Kayin (32.7 per cent), Shan (27.7 per cent) and Rakhine (28.9 per cent) States. The lack of identity card will impact on the policy to document migrants already in Thailand and Malaysia, since an identity card together with house registration is necessary to apply for a passport.
- Around 60 per cent of the migrants overall were men and 40 per cent women. The percentage of women was particularly low in countries where regular migration routes are more common. In order to open more opportunities for women to migrate regularly to decent work options, bilateral agreements should include provisions to ensure that women also have access to the jobs available.

Myanmar and countries of destination

- The age breakdown as shown in Table 3 provides useful information to inform services in the countries of destination. As would be expected the vast majority of migrants are of working age, nevertheless, there are babies and young children who need special services including education. There are also a significant number of young people (15–19 year olds) who may be particularly vulnerable since education is not mandatory and for under 18 year olds only limited work is allowed.
- The census provides information about the State/region of origin of migrants as shown in Table 6. This information can be used as a guideline to prepare materials and provide services in the ethnic languages of the migrants.
- Developing policies to manage migration effectively needs to take into account the spontaneous movement of people through the closest border crossing to the neighbouring country.
- Most migration programmes are time bound and allow migrants to work only for a limited number of years. The census suggests that around one third of migrants are finding ways to extend their time overseas, and stay for much longer periods. Further data is needed regarding the length of stay and migration policies should be adjusted to respond to the actual situation.
- China ranks as the third country of destination for migrants from Myanmar. However currently there are no regular migration routes for migrants from Myanmar to China and very little information is available. It is recommended that further studies are conducted focussing on this migration corridor.

- The census found that a large number of migrants overseas were young people – too young to work full time legally but not necessarily able to study. This may represent a particularly vulnerable group of migrants who require special assistance and services.
- From all States and regions male literacy levels were higher than female literacy, for example in Shan State, 70.3 per cent of men were literate, while only 59.3 per cent of women. This information should be taken into consideration in the development of materials and information for migrants, particularly regarding employment contracts.
- Shan State had a bigger percentage of women migrating than most other states, including more women than men migrating to China (56 per cent) and to Singapore (67 per cent), and compared to other States, a high 40 per cent of all migrants to Malaysia were women. This should be noted for outreach to women in Shan State for pre-departure and reintegration program planning.

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