

International out-migration in Myanmar³

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Synopsis

- Migration refers to people's spatial mobility when they change their usual place of residence to a well-defined destination for numerous reasons, especially to find decent work.
- According to Myanmar's 2019 Intercensal Survey (ICS), nearly 4% of the population (1.6 million) lived abroad then. Of this proportion, 61% were male, and 39% were female. Approximately 67% were living in Thailand. The majority of emigrants (approximately 96%) migrated for economic reasons.
- This study aimed to analyse international out-migration in Myanmar using 2019 ICS data. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's chi-square test, and a binary logistic regression model were applied to analyse the data.
- The association between gender and all characteristics was statistically significant. Gender, age, the year the individual left Myanmar, current country of residence, reasons for leaving, types of channels used for leaving, education level, marital status, current activities abroad, and the main channels used for sending money home are factors that influence remittances sent home by migrants.
- The results could be useful for developing programmes and policies to hinder brain drain, prevent a labour shortage, create employment opportunities, and promote people's livelihoods.

Introduction

Migration, fertility, and mortality are three components of population change (Department of Population, 2020). In countries with declining fertility and low mortality rates, migration is a leading cause of population change. Migration for labour-related reasons is gaining importance globally. The remittances migrants send home to their families account for a significant share of overall household income, particularly for poor households (Maharjan and Myint, 2015).

Migration brings benefits to both the destination and the area of origin. Migrants and the communities that host them overwhelmingly benefit from migration, as do the communities that migrants leave. However, there are problems associated with migration, such as social conflict, environmental degradation, and difficulties associated with the separation of migrants from their families and community members; these issues need to be understood and addressed through policies that deal directly with them. In addition, there are economic consequences, such as labour shortages, in areas facing net out-migration and the need to provide adequate productive employment opportunities in places facing net in-migration (Department of Population, 2016).

In developing countries such as Myanmar, migration from the countryside has occurred in response to natural resource depletion, poverty, political instability, civil conflict,

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landlessness, small farms, natural disasters, drought, low wages, less job opportunities, and other pressures in rural areas. Young adults living in urban areas or working in the manufacturing sector, informal jobs, and related contexts travel abroad for both economic reasons (e.g. to seek better employment opportunities, to save money, to send money home, etc.) and personal motives (e.g. to obtain an education; to acquire knowledge, skills, and experience, etc.).

Understanding migration patterns is necessary for effective social and economic policies and programmes. The amount of movement, the size of flows between areas, differentials between migrants, and reasons for leaving one's country all need to be examined. In this regard, this study investigated international out-migration in Myanmar based on gender. The results provide an overview of international out-migration in Myanmar and a basis for policies and planning related to the rights of international migrants and their protection.

Source of data and methods

This study used data from Myanmar's 2019 Intercensal Survey (ICS). A total of 14,394 out-migrants were included in the analysis. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's chi-square test, and logistic regression were performed using SPSS (version 26).

Results

1. Descriptive analysis

Former household members living abroad

Information from the 2019 ICS shows that approximately 1.6 million former household members lived outside Myanmar. Of this proportion, 61% were male, and 39% were female.

Current country of residence

Approximately 67% of those living abroad lived in Thailand. Malaysia hosted approximately 14% of the reported total, followed by China (6.7%) and Singapore (4.5%). This pattern is consistent with the findings of the 2014 census.

Reasons for leaving Myanmar

The majority of both male and female emigrants (about 96%) migrated for economic reasons, with a higher proportion of males than females (97.3% vs 93.4%). Education was the second primary reason, although this figure was extremely low (2%), with a larger share of females than males (2.5% versus 1.6%, respectively).

Types of channels used for leaving Myanmar

About 26% of those living outside Myanmar reported that the channel they used to leave the country was 'family connections'. The second most common channel was a 'labour broker' (24%), followed by 'friend connections' (18%). The most common channel for male emigrants was a 'labour broker' (26%), while it was 'family connections' (30%) for female emigrants.

Main channels used to send remittances home

Approximately 17% of the respondents relied on friends or relatives to carry money for them. About 9% were still using the 'Hundi' (informal money transfer). Only a few migrants used money transfer operators such as Western Union, Money Gram, and Xpress Money (6.8%) or mobile financial services such as Wave Money, True Money, and M-Pitesan (4.8%). A higher proportion of males than females used banks to send remittances home (67%

versus 54%), while higher proportion of females than males used the remaining channels to send remittances.

Remittances

During the 12 months before the survey, nearly 69% of emigrants had sent remittances to households in Myanmar. Approximately 36% sent between 500,000 and 2,000,000 kyats, while another 36% sent less than 500,000 kyats. Approximately 17% sent between 2,000,000 and 4,000,000 kyats, and only 11% sent more than 4,000,000 kyats. There was a slight gender-based difference in the amount sent; 29% of males sent more than 2,000,000 kyats, while this figure was only 26% for females.

Current activities abroad

Most of the emigrants (92%) were working as ‘employees’, which supports the idea that the majority of them left Myanmar for economic reasons; there was a somewhat higher proportion of males (95.7%) than females (86.2%) in this category. Moreover, about 7% of female emigrants were engaged in ‘household work’ compared to only 0.2% of males.

Highest level of education completed before departure

Most emigrants were not well educated before they left for foreign countries. About 34% of the emigrants had only finished primary school, and 32.3% had completed middle school, with 8% having no education at all. Although the education levels of both males and females conform to national norms, female emigrants tend to be less educated than their male peers.

2. Bivariate analysis

According to Pearson’s chi-square test, the association between gender and all other characteristics such as migrants’ age, the year the individual left Myanmar, the country the individual currently resides in, reasons for leaving, types of channels used for leaving, education level, marital status, current activities abroad, amount of money sent home by migrants, and the main channels used for sending money to one’s household is statistically significant at the 1% level (see the Appendix, Table 1). Likewise, the association between remittances and all characteristics are statistically significant at the 1% level (see the Appendix, Table 2).

3. Multivariate analysis

The results of the binary logistic regression show that migrants’ gender, age, the year they left Myanmar, the country they currently reside in, reasons for leaving, types of channels used for leaving, education level, marital status, current activities abroad, and the main channels used to send money to one’s household are influencing factors of remittances sent home by migrants (see the Appendix, Table 3).

Females are 0.912 times less likely to send over 1 million kyats home yearly than males. Emigrants aged 18–45 and 46–65 are about 1.426 and 1.733 times more likely to send over 1,000,000 kyats home per year, respectively, compared to those younger than 18. Migrants who left Myanmar from 1996 to 2010 are approximately 0.818 times less likely to send over 1,000,000 kyats home than those who left in 2011 or later.

Emigrants to Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan are about 1.184, 1.530, and 1.921 times more likely to send over 1,000,000 kyats home per year, respectively, compared to emigrants

to Thailand. Emigrants to China are approximately 0.580 times less likely to send over 1,000,000 kyats home yearly than emigrants to Thailand.

Migrants who left due to marriage are 0.421 times less likely to send over 1,000,000 kyats home per year than those who are unemployed or have business reasons. People who left due to employer-made arrangements, family connections, and other reasons are 0.812, 0.669, and 0.640 times less likely to send over 1,000,000 kyats home per year, respectively, compared to those who left through recruitment agencies and labour brokers.

Emigrants with primary school, middle school, high school, and university education are 1.666, 1.715, 1.737, and 2.483 times more likely to send over 1,000,000 kyats home per year, respectively, compared to those with no education. Single individuals are 1.093 times more likely to send over 1,000,000 kyats home yearly than married individuals.

Employees are 1.853 times more likely to send over 1,000,000 kyats home yearly than employers and own-account workers. Compared to using banks, the likelihood of sending over 1,000,000 kyats home per year is 0.544 times lower when using cash carried by another person (friend/relative), 0.668 times lower when using Hundi, 0.594 times lower when using money transfer operators (e.g. Western Union, Money Gram, Xpress Money, etc.), and 0.661 times lower when using mobile financial services (e.g. Wave Money, True Money, M-Pitesan, etc.).

Limitations

It was impossible to examine the effect of the variables on out-migration due to the data availability of the ICS. This study only focused on the relationships between gender, the remittances sent home by out-migrants, and related factors. In addition, the effects of these related factors were compared.

Conclusion

Migration presents challenges and opportunities for the countries of origin involved. Policymakers must overcome challenges and take advantage of opportunities. Emigration may lead to the loss of much-needed human capital (i.e. brain drain) and create upward pressure on wages, thereby reducing competitiveness. However, it also creates a flow of remittances, which serve as an important source of income for many low-income families. It can increase international connections in the form of trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), and technological transfers.

For policymakers in the countries of origin, the optimal strategy is to improve business and employment opportunities, take advantage of financial and technological inflows, and reduce the loss of highly skilled labour.

There is imprecise information on remittances; some households reported having more emigrants, and some reported reducing the amount of remittances. The government should implement a reliable system of remittances from both abroad and within the country. This will not only encourage those abroad to send more remittances but will also make it easier to quantify the resources being sent back to the country.

Little is known about immigrants' legal status. Undocumented migrants face the risks of trafficking, exploitation, and abuse. Given the large number of emigrants, the time may have arrived for comprehensive policies and legislation on international migration that cover

issues such as the rights of international migrants, their protection, and the documentation process.

Ideally, potential migrants should be able to decide whether to migrate based on their own choices. National policy should focus on creating more and better employment opportunities so that potential migrants can choose whether and where to move.

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Appendix

Table 1: The relationships between migrants' gender and their characteristics

Characteristic	Classification	Chi-square value	P-value	Gender	
				Male	Female
Age	Younger than 18	11.137**	0.011	292	240
	18–45			7521	5596
	46–65			463	271
	Older than 65			7	4
The year of leaving Myanmar	1965–1980	66.603***	0.000	6	11
	1981–1995			107	82
	1996–2010			1330	1295
	2011 or later			6840	4723
Country of current residence	Thailand	877.762***	0.000	5196	4708
	Malaysia			1706	331
	Singapore			236	402
	China			427	346
	Japan			99	97
	Other			619	227
Main reasons for leaving	Employment/business	98.295***	0.000	8197	5921
	Marriage			13	82
	Other			73	108
Type of the channel used for leaving	Recruitment agency, labour broker	185.835***	0.000	1833	3350
	Employer-made arrangements			305	476
	Family connections, friend connections			2990	3340
	Other			983	1117
Education level	None	131.851***	0.000	622	546
	Primary school			2756	2214
	Middle school			2699	2077
	High school			1344	851
	University			566	363
	Other			296	60
Marital status	Married	130.435***	0.000	3310	2179
	Single (never married)			4879	3703
	Widowed			17	70
	Divorced/separated			76	158
	Other			1	1
Current activities abroad	Employer, own-account worker	560.112***	0.000	111	88
	Employee			8064	5413
	Other			108	610
Total amount sent home	Less than 1,000,000	7.189***	0.007	4377	3367
	More than 1,000,000			3906	2744
Main channels used for sending/bringing money to one's household	Bank	248.591***	0.000	5245	3101
	Money carried in cash by another person (friend/relative)			1383	1415
	Hundi			701	791
	Money transfer operators (Western Union, Money Gram, Xpress Money)			568	457
	Mobile financial services (Wave Money, True Money, M-Pitesan)			372	335
	Other			14	12

Note: ***, **, * represent the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of significance, respectively.

Source: Department of Population (2022)

Table 2: The relationships between remittances sent home by migrants and their characteristics

Characteristics	Classification	Chi-square value	P-value	Remittances	
				Below 1 million	Above 1 million
Gender	Male	7.19***	0.007	3367	2744
	Female			4377	3906
Age	Younger than 18	29.035***	0.000	347	185
	18–45			7001	6116
	46–65			390	344
	Older than 65			6	5
The year of leaving Myanmar	1965–1980	58.06***	0.000	12	5
	1981–1995			115	74
	1996–2010			1576	1049
	2011 or later			6041	5522
Country of current residence	Thailand	314.07***	0.000	5608	4296
	Malaysia			908	1129
	Singapore			230	408
	China			532	241
	Japan			55	141
	Other			411	435
Main reasons for leaving	Employment/business	21.50***	0.000	7567	6551
	Marriage			73	22
	Other			104	77
Types of channels used for leaving	Recruitment agency, labour broker	379.91***	0.000	2267	2916
	Employer-made arrangements			373	408
	Family connections, friend connections			3798	2532
	Other			1306	794
Education level	None	285.76***	0.000	839	329
	Primary school			2709	2261
	Middle school			2510	2266
	High school			1102	1093
	University			350	579
	Others			234	122
Marital status	Married	6.71***	0.000	2988	2501
	Single (never married)			4565	4017
	Widowed			55	32
	Divorced/separated			135	99
	Other			1	1
Current activities abroad	Employer, own-account worker	52.89***	0.000	141	58
	Employee			7148	6329
	Other			455	263
Main channels used for sending/bringing money to one's household	Bank	504.05***	0.000	3840	4506
	Money carried in cash by another person (friend/relative)			1888	910
	Hundi			921	571
	Money transfer operators (Western Union, Money Gram, Xpress Money)			630	395
	Mobile financial services (Wave Money, True Money, M-Pitesan)			447	260
	Other			18	8

Note: ***, **, * represent the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of significance, respectively.

Source: Department of Population (2022)

Table 3: Results of binary logistic regression model for remittances sent home by migrants

Characteristics	Classification	Exp (B)	Sig.	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
Gender	Constant	0.327***	0.000		
	Male (ref)				
	Female	0.912**	0.015	0.848	0.982
Age	Younger than 18 (ref)				
	18–45	1.426***	0.000	1.178	1.725
	46–65	1.733***	0.000	1.352	2.222
	Older than 65	1.682	0.419	0.476	5.936
The year of leaving Myanmar	2011 or later (ref)				
	1965–1980	0.484	0.186	0.165	1.419
	1981–1995	0.850	0.308	0.622	1.162
	1996–2010	0.818***	0.000	0.746	0.897
Country of current residence	Thailand (ref)				
	Malaysia	1.184***	0.001	1.067	1.314
	Singapore	1.530***	0.000	1.270	1.843
	China	0.580***	0.000	0.492	0.684
	Japan	1.921***	0.000	1.363	2.708
	Other	1.124	0.155	0.957	1.319
Main reasons for leaving	Employment/business (ref)				
	Marriage	0.421***	0.001	0.255	0.696
	Other	0.854	0.346	0.616	1.185
Types of channels used for leaving	Recruitment agency and labour broker (ref)				
	Employer-made arrangements	0.812***	0.009	0.694	0.949
	Family connections and Friend connections	0.669***	0.000	0.618	0.725
	Other	0.640***	0.000	0.573	0.716
Education level	None (ref)				
	Primary school	1.666***	0.000	1.443	1.924
	Middle school	1.715***	0.000	1.482	1.984
	High school	1.737***	0.000	1.479	2.041
	University	2.483***	0.000	2.010	3.068
	Other	1.184	0.203	0.913	1.536
Marital status	Married (ref)		0.029		
	Single (never married)	1.093**	0.018	1.015	1.177
	Widowed	0.683	0.100	0.434	1.076
	Divorced/separated	0.884	0.383	0.671	1.166
	Other	2.306	0.571	0.128	41.409
Current activities abroad	Employer and own-account worker (ref)				
	Employee	1.853***	0.000	1.346	2.551
	Other	1.304	0.144	0.913	1.862
Main channels used for sending/bringing money to one's household	Banks (ref)				
	Money carried in cash by another person (friend/relative)	0.544***	0.000	0.494	0.600
	Hundi	0.668***	0.000	0.592	0.752
	Money transfer operators (Western Union, Money Gram, Xpress Money)	0.594***	0.000	0.518	0.681
	Mobile financial services (Wave Money, True Money, M-Pitesan)	0.661***	0.000	0.561	0.779
	Other	0.472*	0.092	0.197	1.130

Note: ***, **, * represent the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of significance, respectively.

Source: Department of Population (2022)