



International  
Labour  
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# MIGRANT STORIES CELEBRATING INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY 2020 #BRINGING BACK THE SKILLS

Funded by



## Livelihoods and Food Security Fund



managed by UNOPS



December 18th is International Migrants Day. On this day 30 years ago, countries around the world agreed on international standards to protect migrant workers. Every year in Myanmar we celebrate this day to remember Myanmar migrant workers, thank them for their contribution to Myanmar's economy and to raise awareness about the lives of migrants.

This year, we collected the stories of migrants who came back to Myanmar. We want to highlight the lives and work of migrants when they return to Myanmar to show how they are using their experience and skills when they return to Myanmar. Sincere thanks to all those who shared their stories.

## Jimmy Yard



Hi, I'm Jimmy Yard, I'm 32 years old and I come from Manaung Township, Rakhine State. Since I was young, my younger sister and I lived with my grandparents because our parents were working in Thailand. We all depended on the money sent back by my parents, which allowed me to study and attend Dagon University. My dream was to get a job that would support my family so we could all live

together again.

So I looked for work overseas and in 2010, I contacted an agency to go to work in Malaysia. It cost 1,200,000 MMK and this was deducted from my monthly wage in Malaysia. I worked in an electric motor recycling factory but the conditions were very

bad so I couldn't work for the two years of my contract at that factory. I asked to change the work sector after one year and was told I would have to pay three times my monthly salary to change jobs. My employer kept all my documents so I left without my documents and went to join my parents in Thailand where I got a job in a glove-making factory.

I worked there for over 1 year and then crossed the river back to Myanmar. After these two experiences of working very hard with little money, I decided to study English so I could go to a country with higher wages. I studied and worked part time in many different jobs in Myanmar. In 2014, I applied for a job as a sales assistant in a shopping mall in Dubai. This was the turning point in my life. I was paid \$US 1,000 a month and could send money home. In the three years I worked there, my English improved a lot and I learnt a lot about sales. With the money I saved, I bought a piece of land in South Dagon, built a house and invited all my family to come and live with me. In Myanmar, I got a job offshore with an oil and gas drilling company as an interpreter. I found the job through my social network especially other returned migrants. As I had worked overseas and had good references, it was much easier to get an interview for the job. But even though my English was good, I still had to work hard to learn the new technical language needed for my new job. I have been in this job ever since and now enjoy interpreting for foreigners, also I can earn a good salary with which to support my family. My dream is to be a writer in the future and to translate English novels into Myanmar. I really want to share my knowledge and skills in the rural areas of Myanmar.

My tips for other workers are to prepare well before migrating, learn the language, the skills needed and the culture. And when you are thinking of returning, try to contact other returned migrants to get information about jobs available and to learn from their experiences.

## **Ma Yamin Ei**

My Name is Ma Yamin Ei, I'm 33 years old, a single mother and have one 4 year old son. I worked as a migrant worker for about two years at a garment factory in Mae Sot, Tak province Thailand. I returned back Myanmar in October, 2018.

I felt quite happy to come home as I can live with my son. I tried hard to work and save money in Thailand. I learnt about garment manufacturing and sewing when I worked in the factory. As planned for our family future, I saved some income and when I returned back, I could open a clothing shop in Ingapu Township. I sell premade clothes and am also a dressmaker. My experience in Thailand helped me a lot to set up this shop. I am satisfied to have a moderate daily income from the customer orders and to be able to live with my family again.

There are so many reasons for Myanmar women workers go to work in other countries and many face a lot of difficulties. I encourage all potential migrants to get as much information as possible before migrating to ensure safe migration and reduce the challenges. If you are well informed it is easier to know how to solve problems. Also, I'd like to tell migrant women to



**I'd like to tell migrant women to learn skills and experiences as much as they can when they are abroad to use when they return back.**

**Yamin Ei**



learn skills and experiences as much as they can when they are abroad to use when they return back. I think it would be good if migrants can get skills training that can be practically used in the workplace.

## La De Bu



**Issuing certificates for return migrant workers based on the skills they developed will be very effective. It will be a ticket for food to eat for their entire life.**

**La De Bu**



Hi, my name is La De Bu. I had been working in Singapore for 13 years continually since 2007 until I took leave for a month from my company in March, 2020. I went back to my home town Kutkai which is located in Northern Shan State, Myanmar. At first, I did not intend to return home completely. I returned as a holiday leave. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I could not return to Singapore. Therefore, I have to find a way

to make my own income since the end of pandemic is unpredictable.

One of my friends came and asked me for a partnership for doing a small business in the field of doing ceilings. Since he was working in Singapore for five years in doing

ceiling as a worker. He is confident in that job, but he did not have enough money to start a business. I accepted his plan and we have been doing our business for 5 months under the name of "Trio service". It is based in Kutkai and we appointed two part-time general workers. Regarding the job, we had accepted several requests from customers for doing ceilings. I am really glad because the feedback from the customers is very good. Actually we are also doing wiring when we do ceiling. Honestly, the business does not match with my experience. I could repair air-conditioning and big machines. Here in my hometown, no one is using air-conditioning since it is cold the whole year. There is no big plan for manufacturing. In the meantime, I do not decide yet whether to go back to Singapore or not. If I have a stable income, I would rather stay here.

We do not know what to do next, after one job is done. Since it is a small business and start recently, there are not many customers requesting our services. Finding raw material with fair price is not possible in my hometown, I have to go and buy from Mandalay.

I graduated in Geology by distance learning in 2007. I had worked in Motorcycle repair workshop for a year before I graduated. When working in that job, I realized that I am interested in doing that job. As a result, I decided to go to Singapore in order to earn money and for my further study and I also admired the Singapore country as a developed country at that time. I passed the interview and got a job as a mechanical fitter in Singapore not via an agent. Because the company's delegator came to Yangon and interviewed all the applicants directly.

I worked in a rubber company for five years - as a mechanical fitter for a year, as a skill technician for two years and as a foreman for two years respectively. As a mechanical fitter, I mainly worked in pipe systems, learning with the supervisor's instruction. As a skilled technician, I was responsible for supervising pipe connections. I checked staff work permits daily and sent a monthly report to my supervisor about how many people worked at the site and what their accomplishments were. I did not find a way to study since I had to follow by my supervisor's schedule.

After five years, I applied to another company as a technician grade 2. I got that position at first and after was promoted to technician grade 3, senior technician and assistant engineer gradually. After I got a diploma in mechanical engineering, I got a promotion to be an assistant engineer. Working in that company, overtime was not a must, therefore I had time to study as a part time in advanced diploma in mechanical engineering for 8 months, and for another two years in mechanical engineer as a diploma programme. Actually working and learning at the time is not easy, as demand of the job (for example, at first we used autoCAD software, that software is being used less because the technology is getting advanced) we needed to learn and upgrade our skill all the time. Otherwise, you will left behind in a competitive world.

Both of the companies I worked in manufacture rubber. I worked in machine maintenance.

I would like to suggest those who are working in foreign countries, before you plan to return, you should start a business ahead with someone trusted person or your family members. Everything should be documented for example how much money are sent or agreement between you and others regarding the business. After you return and start the business, you will probably have to invest for one or two years to run business smoothly.

Issuing certificates for return migrant workers based on the skills they developed will be very effective. It will be a ticket for food to eat for their entire life. Right now, they do not have any certificate to prove for their skill when they return. It makes it difficult to find a job or start a business.

## Nini



Hi, I'm Ni Ni, I worked in Dubai for five years in Hilton Hotel, Dubai. I applied for the job directly at the hotel. For the first 3 years, I was on the housekeeping staff and then I attended the staff development training programme provided by the hotel and learned to be a chef. I used my one month annual leave to attend this course. When a vacancy came up, I applied and became the Commis chef in

that Hotel. At the time, I was pregnant. I got free medical care during the pregnancy.

I came back to Myanmar three years ago. It was a little bit challenging to get a job in Myanmar as I had been away from the country for 5 years and I didn't know of any job matching agencies within Myanmar. So I could only try to find a job using Facebook. Then, I got a good position job in a hotel though the basic salary is quite different with overseas. The experience from Dubai was really important for me, not only to learn the cooking skills but also to understand work ethics.

It's difficult to know what will happen with the Covid pandemic, hotels have been badly hit; so I'm confused about the future and at the moment, I am sharing some of my kitchen knowledge on Facebook for the housewives to improve their daily lives.

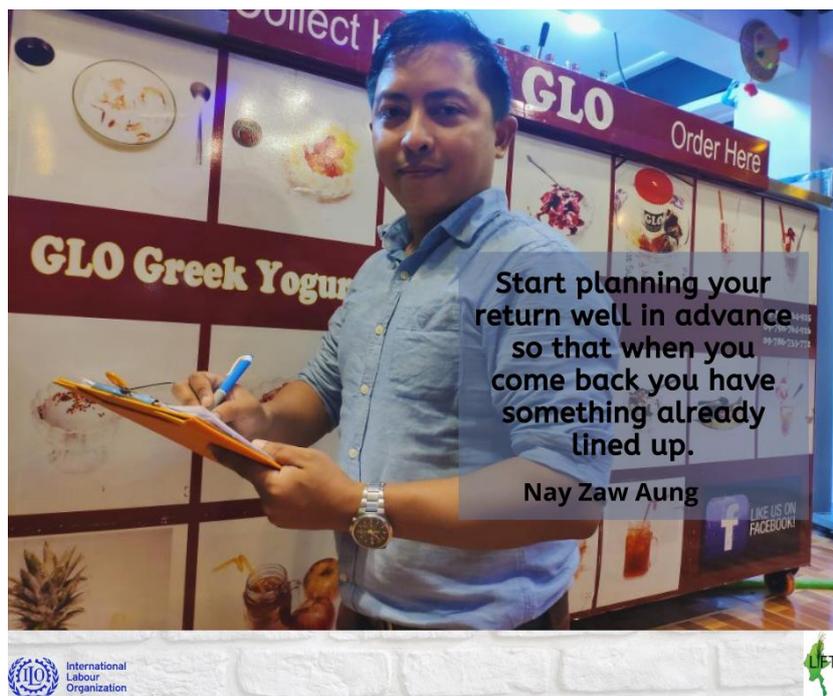
I hope that when Myanmar workers go overseas, they don't only concentrate on earning money but also on gaining skills.

I hope that soon there will be recruitment agencies in Myanmar which reach out to migrants overseas who are thinking about returning and recognize their skills.

## Ko Nay Zaw Aung

I was working in Dubai, UAE countries, as a Production Supervisor (Operation Management) for 8 years. The company worked in food manufacturing and restaurants. In the late 2012, I returned to my home country. Although I was happy to return home, it was difficult to find a job where I could use my experience or get a salary that I expected. I had assumed this to be the case, so two years before I left Dubai, I started to work on setting up my own business in Myanmar.

As a result, I could start the business within three months of returning. As I had been away from Myanmar a long time I had to familiarise myself with the rules and regulations here regarding health standards. So I set up the GLO Greek Yogurt and Restaurant in 2013; it was inspired by my work experience in Dubai. I believe that my restaurant sells quality



food which is also nutritious and healthy. Of course there are many challenges but it is also fun, especially with the support from my family and my wife. I feel really satisfied when people recognise and support our brand.

For Myanmar people working abroad, it is not easy to set up your own business on return. Having a reliable loan system in the financial policy would help a lot. Also, it's important to get certificates to show your training or at least a reference from your boss.

And like me, it's important to start planning your return well in advance so that when you come back you have something already lined up.

## Wah Wah

Hi, I am Wah Wah, from Kayin State. When I was 19, I migrated to Malaysia. I have worked in Malaysia for 6 years and in Thailand for 3 years. In Malaysia, I worked in a small business that produced food to serve to the Chinese traditional Gods. Every day, I had to wake up so early in the morning. I prepared the ingredients and cooked, and then, I had to deliver the food. During the rest of day, I worked in the shop selling the food. They were very long days without breaks. I was so tired so I ran away from this shop after three months.



**I am proud that I could get skills overseas and use them to open the restaurant here and I hope that the situation will improve so I can open it after the pandemic.**

Wah Wah



I went to my brother who worked on the ship off the coast in Malaysia and I did cooking on the ship. After 1 month working on the ship, my agent and my boss from the Chinese traditional food shop followed me and requested me to go back to my old job. I agreed and I worked there for another 3 years. This time my boss was good to me

and we gained mutual respect for each other. Sometimes, she gave me flexible rest time if I finished all my jobs. But my passport was kept by the agent for 3 years even though they promised to give it back to me if I worked at this shop for 1 year.

After that, one of my friends contacted me to work at a Computer Warehouse Company. After working at this company for 3 months, the boss liked my performance so he bought my passport from the agent. I worked in a computer equipment warehouse as a stock controller for 3 years. Every day, I checked the stock list. One of my friends from Myanmar who also came to work at the company told me about labour rights, it was the first time I had ever heard about working conditions, I had never heard anything like this from my agent and I was so mad and angry at the agent. But fortunately this company treated us well although one of the supervisors bullied us a lot. After 3 years I returned to Myanmar, but I couldn't find a job so I left for Thailand.

With one of my friend connection, I found work in a seafood processing factory. Working there was not easy because you have to stand all day without resting. My friend collapsed and I had to take care of her, so we left this factory. In Thailand, most of my friends were working at the same factory, so it was not easy for me to find another job. I eventually got job in a hotel doing room service and later I became assistant chef at this hotel and I learned how to cook Thai traditional foods.

In 2019, I came back to Myanmar. I was so happy to see my family and friends and my hometown that I had missed so much for so long. At first, I thought I would just come back for a visit and then return to Thailand but then I decided it was an endless cycle and I wanted to change it so I decided to find work in Myanmar. Now I am running my own small restaurant in my hometown in Kayin State. I used my experience and skills learnt in cooking in the hotel and seeing how the restaurant was run in Thailand. In my restaurant I serve Myanmar and Thai food. It has become popular. But doing business is hard. Other restaurants copied my food and my ideas. But I guess that is business and I believe that the customers will choose the restaurant with the best food and best service. During Covid-19 we cannot serve food at the restaurant but we can deliver, but it is not the same as when my customers come and sit and eat and chat and not only enjoy the food but also the company. Most of them don't have the culture of ordering take away food so for the moment, I might have to close my restaurant.

I think most people think that returning migrants come back with lots of money, so we aren't included in the packages to help people during Covid. But as you see we are also suffering due to the closures. Anyways, I am proud that I could get skills overseas and use them to open the restaurant here and I hope that the situation will improve so I can open it after the pandemic.

My tips for migrants going abroad, before leaving, try to be sure to get pre-departure trainings. And try to find which will help you in your future life. Learn some basic language phrases before you go. While working overseas, try to save money and try to get experience. So when you return to Myanmar, you can start your own business or you can implement your dreams (such as building house, buying land, etc) and try to reuse your working experience in Myanmar and find opportunities. Try to finish your studies first. It is easier when you go other countries with higher education level so you can find better paid work.

## Ahr Bar

I am Ahr Bar, former migrant worker, living in Tachileik Township in Shan State and working at Mawk Kon MRC where I give assistance to migrant workers as MRC consultant. My family is part of Ahr Khar tribe which is ethnic of Shan. So, I can easily learn Shan language, Lahu, Akhar, Myanmar as well as Thai language. I had many

different jobs in Thailand for many years. In 2006, I first migrated to Thailand legally for overseas employment through an agency. I got a job in a factory in Songkhla province which is one of the provinces on the Thailand and Malaysia border. I worked at there for 2 years as a translator between Thailand supervisor and Myanmar staffs.

In 2008, I moved to another job in Bangkok, Thailand and worked at a different company as a translator and interpreter. This company is applying for temporary passports and work permits to Thailand government for migrant workers and giving awareness to migrant workers who were coming to Thailand from Cambodia, Lao and Myanmar. I was in the Myanmar migrant awareness section to do temporary passport application.

In 2014, I came back to Myanmar from Thailand and could not bring back any skills, except fluency of Thai language. So, I could not find a job I wanted in Tachileik because I didn't want to work in the Casino and gambling industry. If I wanted to work in this sector, I could easily get a job because of Thai language fluency and basic level of Chinese language. I thought that such kinds of employment could not

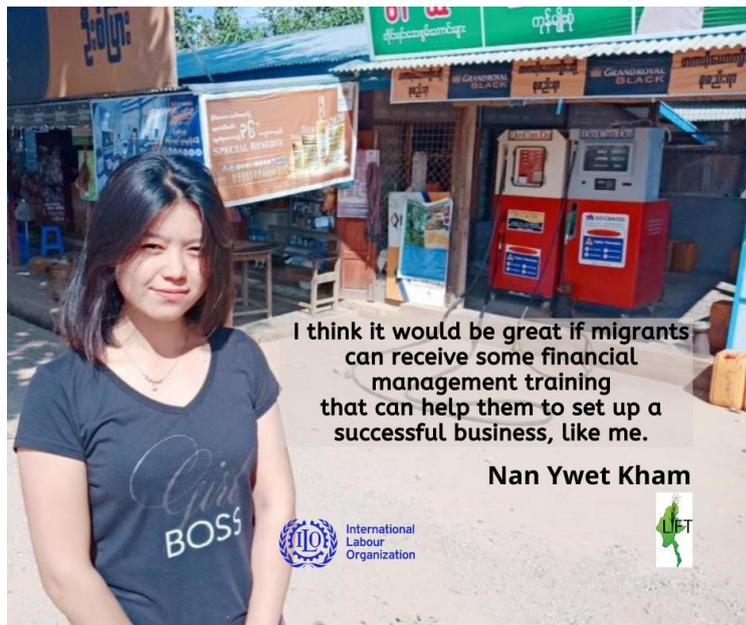


contribute to social and community wellbeing of Shan People. So, I bought a motor-carriage with the savings I had from abroad to serve delivery services in my community. I also worked with "Helping Hands" CBO funded by World Vision on a community development and youth aid programme. After that, I decided to help on migrant workers issue and to distribute information about migration. So, I worked at Mawk Kon Local Development Center by providing assistance to migrant workers as well as sharing my overseas experiences. I am very proud of sharing my overseas experiences with migrant workers who are planning to go to overseas. Before Mawk Kon set up in Tachileik, migrant workers found it very difficult to get information about migration and there was nowhere to raise complaints.

My advice to migrant workers to find out what it's like to work in their country of destination and sector of employment. Like, how are the working hours, monthly wage, and contract agreements? It will be great to join in pre-departures training, and to make sure migrants have contact information for migrant workers unions, organizations that can provide assistance, and labour attachés in countries of destination, and to prepare

passport and work permits well. Legal migration using formal channels can help migrants get more skills and be safer during overseas employment. All returning migrant workers need to bring back skills and skills certificates to help them get jobs in local and foreign enterprises. Also, saving money will help returned migrants to start a small business in Myanmar.

## Ma Nan Ywet Kham



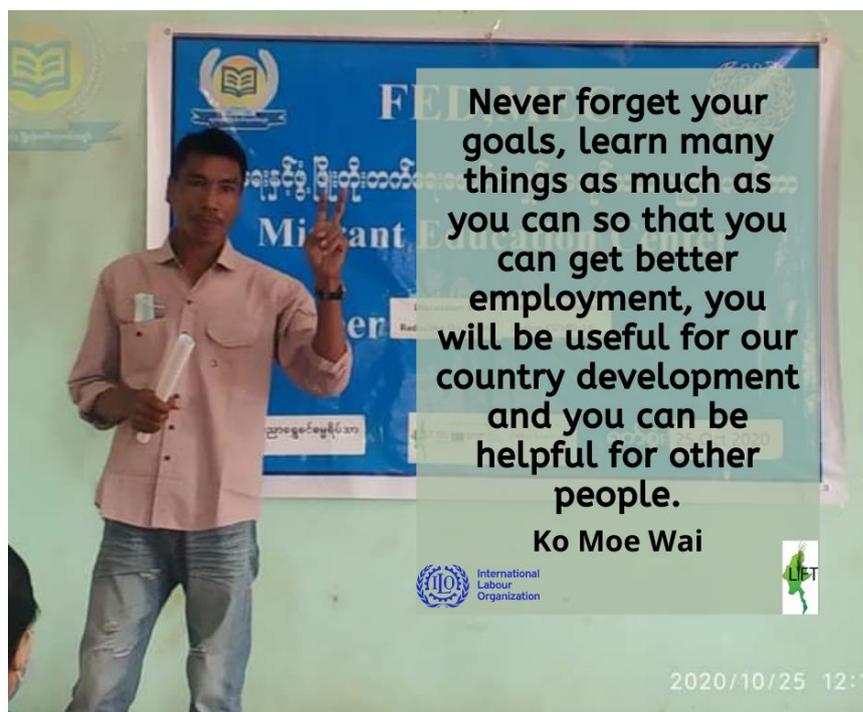
I am Ma Nan Ywet Kham, 27 years old. In Thailand I worked as a domestic worker at Ramkhamhaeng district and also worked as a sales person in the Klong Toey Market when I had free time. I worked in Thailand for nearly 10 years and finally returned back to our mother land Myanmar in January, 2018.

I was very happy when I returned back to Myanmar. Although I worked at Thailand

for our basic needs, I did not feel as happy as when I lived at Myanmar. I had an idea that I should save my income and start my own business when I returned rather than working for a boss. So, I discussed with my family and my family encouraged me for my dream. I transferred all my savings to my family to open a grocery shop in my village, Htee Sel Kher village, Loikaw Township. My family opened the shop using the money I sent, and it grew from a small shop to a successful business. Now, 8 years after we started the business, it is time to fulfill my dream. I decided to return back our country Myanmar once I felt that I had reached my goal and my dream grocery shop warmly welcomed me. Now, I run the grocery shop including do the finances. I can manage well as I learnt the skills and experience from selling in shops at the Thai market for extra money when I was a migrant worker. From the profits in my shop, I try to make it bigger. I am very happy to have been able to provide my family with my income while I was working abroad and now, the situation for our family is much better compared to before I went abroad.

Not all migrants can save money or know how to start a business. I think it would be great if they can receive some financial management training that can help them to set up a successful business, like me.

## Ko Moe Wai



My name is Moe Wai, I'm fifty years old now. I was a migrant worker and worked on fishing boats. I was born in Bokpyin near Kaw Thaug, which is located on the Thai-Myanmar border in the Southern part of Myanmar. My parents were fishers and owned many fishing boats, therefore I'm very familiar working on the fishing boat. I also have helped my

parents' work in my young age. Also, my parents sent me to school to study too.

However, my life has changed after 88 uprising in Myanmar. In 1988, I was studying at my high school in Kaw Thaug but suddenly all the schools closed. So I don't know what to do during my free time. At that time, one of my friends called Jimmy asked me to work at a fishing boat in Ranong. So we worked together as fishing workers on boat for three months first. Then he asked me to go and work at Cambodia, so we went to Cambodia with a fishing boat. It took us three years to get to the Cambodia border because on the way, we worked on fishing boat and went to every harbours of Indonesia and Thailand. Even though we worked very hard on fishing boats, we earned very little. So we decided to work at a mine in Cambodia on the border with Vietnam and we worked there for 2 years. It was not a success and I got malaria and ended up going back to home to Kaw Thaug.

After that, I decided to work in Thailand again. This time, I worked for a business man in Htaplamu fishing village in Phang Nga Province. I worked for a big fishing boat with 25 fishing workers and our boat caught fishes in the Indian Ocean between Myanmar and India. It was not legal fishing but in the ocean there were so many fishing boats it was like a floating village. We had to stay at least 6 months on the boat at a time and go back to shore for a few weeks to rest then go back to work. If there was a storm or heavy rain in the ocean, we raced to India or Myanmar shores to rest and then went back to the water again for fishing. I worked there for six years and experienced a tough life. There were no human rights on the boats and there were a lot of abuses and many people

disappeared in the sea. Therefore, I decided not to go back to the ocean again and worked on a small boat which worked between Phuket, Thailand to Indonesia.

After 1990, human-trafficking became a big problem and many people were being sold to fishing boats. Many fishing workers were also affected by HIV and more people died with HIV after 2000. In 2001 I worked in Htaplamu fishing village in Phang Nga Province of Thailand and was employed to be in charge of about 50 fishing boats.

My life was changed again by the end of 2002 because I applied for a field worker position at the World Vision Foundation for the HIV/AIDS Project. Because I can speak, read and write Thai and know many workers were suffering and I wanted to help people. I got that job and have attended many trainings on health and HIV as well as Human Rights courses including CEDAW for about one year. Then I worked for the community.

In 2004, I was able to participate the celebration of "International Migrants Day" in Bangkok with the support of World Vision. After the event, I went back to Htaplamu village on 25th December which is Christmas Day. But the next day, the Tsunami hit the Thai coast and many migrants were affected. I helped many migrants sending them to hospital and sending to the safe places. After this, I worked for Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) and attended human rights trainings in Mae Sot. Then, I worked for Foundation for Education and Development (FED) as a coordinator for Migrant Development Project which I helped many legal cases of migrant workers, providing information and supports for their migration regularization and organized so many cultural and sport events to help migrant and Thai communities to increase understanding and trust building between them.

From 2012 to 2015, I was involved in the human-trafficking issue and went to the seas again to rescue stranded migrant workers in the seas. I also had opportunity to return to Myanmar in 2012, with the invitation of the first civilian government. Our FED team visited different States and Regions in Myanmar to observe the situation of communities of origin. I was able to provide pre-departure training to the people who are interested to migrate to Thailand.

In May 2019, FED opened a Migrant Centre in Kaw Thaug with the support of ILO and I'm now working there as a manager. During the Covid pandemic period, our Kaw Thaug MC helped over 2,800 migrant returnees to get care packages, travel documents and searching employment for some. I'm so proud for this job because I can help many migrant workers with my past experiences and skills as a migrant worker.

I would like to advise other migrant workers, particularly to young people, you should not forget your goals, learn many things as much as you can so that you can get better employment, you will be useful for our country development and you can be helpful for other people.

I also would like to suggest government that they need to facilitate easy and simple regular migration and they should provide decent jobs for migrants in coordination with destination countries. Moreover, government should provide skills required for the labour market and create more employment opportunities within Myanmar with decent wage. Government should have better management on human resources to have faster development for the country.

## Ma Htwe



My name is Nang Hlaing Hlaing Htwe and I grew up and lived at Loi Kaung village in Taunggyi, Shan State. I'm PaO ethnic and I studied very hard at school because I wanted to be a teacher. After I graduated, I became a teacher in Taunggyi. After 1988, schools were closed. I'm the eldest child in my family so I have to take care of my siblings. Therefore, I resigned from

my job and for the very first time, I migrated to Malaysia and worked as a teacher assistant at a pre-school for three years. Then I migrated again to Singapore and worked there as a nanny for two years and three months. In 1997, I returned to Myanmar because my mother was very ill and I need to take care of her.

During this time I started investing into my farm as well as doing garlic business to get income for my family. In 2004, all my savings were used up and I still need to earn money for my siblings. So I migrated to Monglar in China border. I worked as an English study guide for the children. But it didn't go well so I only worked for 6 months. In 2005, I migrated to Thailand working as domestic worker and nanny for foreign expats family. In Thailand, I had opportunities to learn new skills and knowledge because I got contact with MAP Foundation, the organization supports migrant workers' rights and women's rights. I attended women's exchange discussion and participated Annual Women's Exchange- Get together which empowered me to learn many knowledge and skills. I became a very active member of MAP women exchange and organized monthly women's discussion locally with the support of MAP Foundation until 2016. Through this

I also get networking with Thai Women's Associations and I can also support and help many other migrant women.

These migration experiences helped me to get involved in social work in Myanmar. Since I returned to my home in late 2016, I participated as a trainer for women's rights and leadership and support migrant workers in Taunggyi through PaO Women Organization, Southern Shan State Women Organization Network and Mitta Foundation. I also became a member of the Myanmar Red Cross Association and attended many trainings. Now I am a commander in the Myanmar Red Cross Association. My work has been recognized and received the "Women Capacity Outstanding Award" on International Women's Day from Shan State Women's Committee on 2018.

Currently, I'm working as an officer at Migrant Workers Resource Centre in local Labour Exchange Office in Taunggyi with the support of ILO. My role is to provide safe migration information, counselling services and helping the migrant workers who have suffered abuses or exploitation at the MRC and in the community. I'm so proud for my job because I can help many migrant workers and their families with my knowledge and experiences. Especially during this Covid-19 outbreak, I have been able to support many migrant returnees in Taunggyi through my work. I understand their feelings, worries and concerns as a migrant workers, I have provided my contact to every migrant worker I met, so that I could be useful for them in the future. I invited the migrant workers to visit MRC.

I want migrant workers to find out more information for their migration and help them figure out how to do the migration process themselves. This will help them to avoid abusive recruitment practices. There are MRCs, Labour Exchange Offices and many CSOs that can help them to get reliable information for migration. I also want to advise migrant workers to learn skills before they migrate or during their migration. The skills can help them to have better employment and opportunities.



## Livelihoods and Food Security Fund



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The ILO is implementing the Developing International and Internal Migration Governance (DIILM) project supported by the Livelihood and Food Security Fund (LIFT) to improve the safety and benefits of labour migration.

This collection of migrant stories, in their own words, was put together to celebrate International Migrants Day 2020. Returning migrants bring back skills to the benefit of all. Here, ten men and women share their challenges and successes through their migration stories.

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