



# Myanmar Hotspot Annual Report 2021



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# 1. Operating context

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military seized control of the country while announcing a one-year state of emergency, citing claims of voter fraud in the national elections of November 2020. This event has led to a political crisis affecting the welfare of vulnerable communities across the country. As of March 2022, an estimated 900,000 people were internally displaced in Myanmar – 500,000 of whom have been displaced February 2021 (UNOCHA, Myanmar Humanitarian Update No. 16, 19 March 2022). High-risk coping strategies are leaving many people vulnerable to extreme exploitation. Operating in an unpredictable environment, Freedom Fund partners have adjusted their strategies to support survivors' repatriation as well as recovery and reintegration. Locations for outreach activities in communities have been shifted if necessary.

In 2021, the covid-19 pandemic continued to take a hold of the country. In mid 2021, a third wave of covid devastated the Myanmar public (with a less devastating fourth wave arriving in the country in early 2022). Infection rates skyrocketed and hospitalisations and deaths reached a level that had not been seen in Myanmar since the start of the pandemic. At various times, Freedom Fund partners have had to close their offices for a whole month due to infections among their staff, while covid-related restrictions on movement and assembly continued to affect their operations.

Our partners have been monitoring the situation closely through their networks on the ground, and are beginning to detect some worrying trends domestically as well. Reports of internal trafficking are emerging, in particular of Myanmar and foreign women and girls being trafficked for forced sex work to areas along the Chinese border, including the autonomously administered Wa state. Furthermore, reports of the entire population of villages moving because of promises of work in gold mines have raised concerns due to the extreme working conditions reported.

## 1.1 Human trafficking trends

The crisis in Myanmar has put an already vulnerable population in an even more desperate situation and has resulted in an increase in the number of internally displaced people as well as a push to leave the country where possible. Despite the covid-19 epidemic and the closure of the Chinese border gates until recently, brokers continued to smuggle people across the border, indicating a high likelihood of traffickers using similar routes.

## 2. Progress towards systems change

### 2.1 Headline results

**2,000 vulnerable households in villages and IDP (internally displaced people) camps have received relief support, benefitting an estimated 8,000 individuals**, to address the immediate needs arising from the conflict and the covid-19 pandemic. Support included packages of dried food items and other cooking essentials as well covid prevention materials. Vulnerable individuals who had tested positive with covid-19 received meals while staying in local quarantine centres.

**142 self-help groups in vulnerable communities were supported with 752 group members trained.** Despite challenges in accessing communities throughout 2021, partners were able to establish and provide support to an additional 72 community groups. All the groups serve as critical entry points to empower communities to better understand their rights and the available options to be better able to protect themselves against exploitation. In addition to formal group members, partners also empowered local action teams and community mobilisers to provide similar support to communities.

**More than 1,500 community members, including religious leaders, women and youth leaders, engaged in dialogues, trainings and awareness-raising sessions** on the topics of human trafficking, forced marriage and safer migration, further strengthening understanding at grassroots level about the risks of trafficking and beginning to tackle the stigma attached to exploitation. Bringing these participants together during a time of crisis was only possible due to the strong relationship between our partners and the project communities, built through years of direct support and community mobilisation.

**55 survivors of human trafficking (including forced marriage) and domestic abuse as well as vulnerable female migrants received emergency support**, including shelter, food,

medical and psychosocial support as well as legal advice.

### 2.2 Progress towards hotspot objectives

In the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges, including constant health and security concerns, our partners in Myanmar have continued to provide services to survivors of human trafficking, and importantly, they maintained a presence in communities through their networks, outreach work and community groups.

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

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Access to communities during this time, due especially to the risks associated with travel, became a real challenge during the reporting period. However, Freedom Fund partners were able to draw on their local connections to better understand the security situations and negotiate access, where possible. Continuing engagement with vulnerable communities affected by the crisis, through outreach and relief, has been critical for learning about emerging needs and potential future trends.

#### **Awareness raising and trainings**

In one notable example, a Freedom Fund partner was able to continue to conduct anti-human trafficking awareness trainings and broader support despite the current challenges by adjusting their geographic areas to villages with safer access. In total, they were able to reach more than 1,000 community members. The participation of survivors in some of these trainings made these events especially effective, as the sharing of their lived experience left a much deeper impact on the training participants. Notably, Chinese participants joined one of these awareness-raising sessions,

giving them the chance for the first time to have access to such information. The session was well received, and participants requested that other Chinese community members be invited in the future. A further 208 people were educated on anti-trafficking awareness through another organisation's community level awareness-raising sessions, with an additional two anti-trafficking awareness sign boards erected next to Lashio Station and Lashio Muse Highway.



A Freedom Fund partner reported that in one village parents used to send their children to China to earn money. After participating in an awareness-raising session provided by the organisation, parents jointly decided to keep their children closer to home, preferring local income-generating opportunities, such as daily work on farms or in restaurants, to be able to monitor their children's welfare and safety. This example illustrates the challenges faced by parents as they are unable to provide for their families without their children also contributing to the household's income. Partners' interventions can reduce the risk faced by vulnerable families (by discussing the extreme risks involved in sending their children further away) but, during this difficult period, they are unable to prevent children from having to engage in child labour.

This year, due to safety concerns and the covid-19 pandemic, partners continued to provide both in-person and online trainings on

anti-human trafficking. A Freedom Fund partner in Kachin was able to reach 81 community leaders and representatives, who were then asked to share the most critical anti-trafficking and safe migration messages with three other people in their social networks, such as family members, friends, co-workers and neighbours, reaching a further 243 people. Nineteen of the most active participants - the majority of whom are young women and religious leaders - were selected as community mobilisers to help facilitate future outreach activities. The organisation relies heavily on its community mobilisers to access communities and for them to then provide information and refer any cases brought to them from the community to Freedom Fund partners or other organisations. In late 2021, Freedom Fund partners provided a series of virtual trainings to these mobilisers covering topics such as gender, public speaking, and paralegal services.

### **Community mobiliser prevents trafficking of young woman into sex work**

18-year-old Rose\* left home to work in a traditional restaurant through the referral of a local broker. A week after she left, her parents still had not heard from her, so they contacted a community mobiliser who had been trained by a Freedom Fund partner as they were concerned about Rose's wellbeing. Only knowing the phone number of the restaurant through Facebook but not the location of the restaurant, the community mobiliser and parents called the restaurant to order some food. They followed the delivery person back to the restaurant's location. There they found their daughter locked away in a luggage room, and they were able to get her safely home. Later they found out that the restaurant owner sends waitresses away to work at a casino where they end up forced into sex work. Due to the awareness-raising by Freedom Fund partners in the community and the presence of a local mobiliser, Rose's parents knew to act quickly to prevent their daughter from falling into the same trap that others had previously fallen into.

*\* Name changed to protect identity*

### **Supporting local networks and leadership to protect communities**

Freedom Fund partners continued their engagement with community leaders through local consultations and meetings with local action teams. The appointment of and support for focal persons and local action team members has been particularly crucial during 2021, as these contacts provide regular updates to partner staff even when they are unable to access certain areas due to security concerns or covid-19 restrictions. In particular, religious leaders have integrated the program's messages on human trafficking, forced marriage and safe migration into their worship services and meetings.

Previous support in these communities and presence of local action team members have resulted in villagers recognising the risk of trafficking while also referring survivors of human trafficking to the Freedom Fund partner for follow-up. Previously, a returning survivor would have been shunned by the community, facing extraordinary challenges to reintegrate and recover.

Another Freedom Fund partner was also able to continue its support to communities by establishing another 72 community self-help groups, bringing the total number of groups supported through trainings and mentoring support to 142. These groups act as savings groups for their members, while also creating a safe space to discuss relevant issues in their communities. The ongoing crisis has meant that the focus of some of the trainings has been changed from 'governance' to 'community development' to ensure the relevance of the topics discussed. Other topics, including sessions on women's and human rights, and human trafficking and social media, have remained relevant and popular. Members have been keen to meet and discuss the most pertinent and relevant issues within their communities.

### **Livelihoods support during a time of crisis**

Targeted livelihoods support was provided to 84 vulnerable individuals, including survivors of trafficking and gender-based violence, to pursue micro enterprises such as shoe making, food preparation, pig raising and others;

the activities were greatly appreciated by community members, at a time when livelihood options were becoming increasingly scarce.

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### **Hotspot objective 2: Support trafficking survivors to leave situations of exploitation, recover, and reintegrate**

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Due to reduced coordination between civil society organisations and local authorities, most cases of human trafficking are now referred to our partners by community members directly, highlighting the need for civil society to fill gaps where government is no longer reaching. At the same time, office closures and restrictions on movement due to insecurity and covid-19 have meant that direct access to survivors of trafficking has become more challenging at times for our partners. However, by switching to remote support where possible and appropriate, and with slight adjustments to their targeting, some services have been able to continue.

In 2021, Freedom Fund partners provided emergency support to 11 survivors of forced marriage, including food, shelter, emergency kits, medicine, psychosocial counselling as well as travel support. The 11 women found themselves in situations of extreme exploitation after being tricked by friends or online brokers to travel to China for work or for marriage. After their escape from the households, they were handed over to the Myanmar riot police through the border liaison office with the help of the Chinese police. Families then helped survivors reach our partners for recovery support. Three of the 11 survivors also received livelihoods support to help their reintegration process. Our partners were able to support two of the women who lived in Northern Shan State to return to their families despite covid-related challenges. Others were sent home by the government's relief centre. Our partners conducted independent follow-up with each survivor, either in person or via telephone, as the situation allowed.

During the reporting period, another partner managed to provide legal advice to 20 survivors of human trafficking and their families, specifically around identification of missing persons, witness rights under legal procedures, and other issues. The lawyers were able to

provide court representation in three human trafficking cases in early 2021. However, since March these activities were hindered by covid-related restrictions and the evolving political situation in Myanmar.

Another Freedom Fund partner facilitated the rescue of two women who were trafficked to Wa state for sex work. A community mobiliser became aware of the situation and alerted our partner's staff. While Wa is currently outside the organisation's operational area, they were able to reach out to local church leaders in Wa who were able to locate the two women and rescue them.

This past year has left a psychological toll on people across the country and especially amongst individuals working for civil society organisations. In recognition of the psychological impact of the current situation on its team, one Freedom Fund partner extended its psychosocial counselling, which is usually only available to survivors of trafficking or sexual or gender-based violence, to its staff.

In order to better understand the options for survivors of human trafficking in China, we commissioned a consultant to conduct desk research on the national laws and regulations concerning formal remedial measures available to foreign victims of trafficking in persons in China, specifically focusing on trafficking in persons for forced marriage. This internal document was aimed at deepening the understanding of the Freedom Fund team to better advise our partners and inform our own strategy going forward. The findings revealed, as expected, that the legal framework in China alone creates barriers to ensuring appropriate responses. Service provision and support to help survivors return is patchy and relies on the understanding and attitude of local law enforcement offices, many of which consider forced marriage issues a personal matter. In practice, Freedom Fund partners have tried to work around these limitations by relying on informal networks and mobile technology.

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### **Hotspot objective 3: Influence policy and practice relevant to safer migration and trafficking for forced marriage**

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No progress was made against this objective during the reporting period.

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### **Hotspot objective 4: Respond to the needs of women and girls resulting from the current crisis in Myanmar**

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Access, particularly humanitarian access, proved challenging this year. Despite constantly changing security dynamics, our partners were able to provide critical relief support in vulnerable communities and in IDP camps. In total, our four partners were able to reach 2,000 households with support packages, including a combination of food, hygiene and covid-19 protection items. The support not only addressed the immediate survival needs of the households, but also created an opportunity to engage with recipients to collect information about trends and introduce discussions around protection and migration. Importantly, it helped deepen the trust between our partners and the communities.

Emergency support (shelter, food, medical and psychosocial support) was also provided at a partner safehouse to survivors of human trafficking and additionally to women at high risk of trafficking, particularly women who had escaped situations of domestic violence and others who were pursuing high risk migration journeys.






*Humanitarian relief in Mungbaw village, Muse*





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