



THE  
FREEDOM  
FUND

# MYANMAR

Annual report 2024-2025





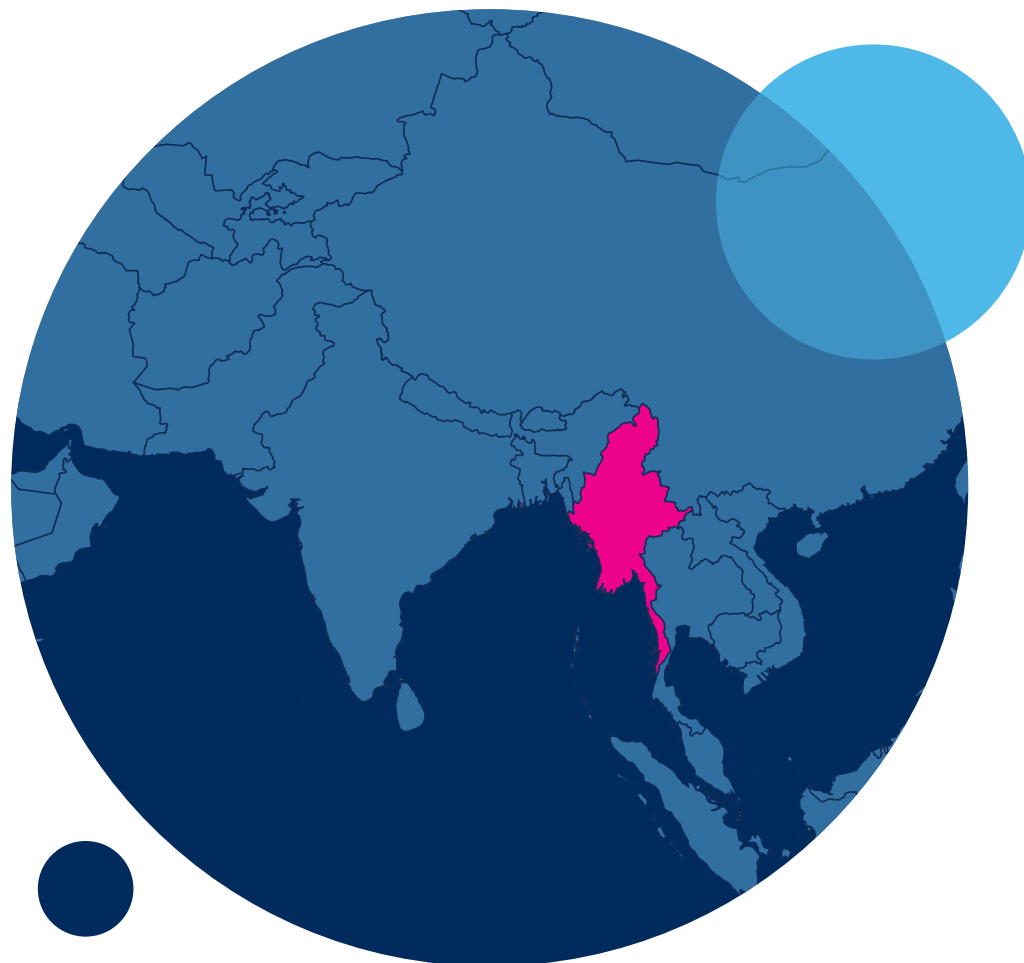
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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For the past five years, the Freedom Fund has been working alongside civil society organisations to navigate a complex environment in Myanmar to support communities and provide direct assistance to women and girls affected by, or at risk of, human trafficking and severe exploitation. Conditions for marginalised communities were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that began in early 2020. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar, which overthrew the democratic government, triggered a political crisis that further impacted the well-being of vulnerable communities across the country. Myanmar has long been a source country for human trafficking and had made notable progress in the prosecution of trafficking crimes, victim identification and rehabilitation leading up to 2021. However, the current political turmoil, marked by ongoing armed conflict between the military regime and resistance groups, has undermined the state's ability to protect and support human trafficking survivors and fostered conditions for the growth of exploitative industries within its own borders.

Recognising the increasing humanitarian emergency and gaps in systemic counter-trafficking responses in Myanmar, the program strategy for 2023-2024 was designed not only to address the immediate needs of the affected population but also to invest in the capacity building of frontline organisations, communities and survivors. This approach aimed to enhance resilience and strengthen their capacity to respond to the risk of exploitation, while supporting locally-led and survivor-led interventions for more sustainable outcomes.

During 2024, Freedom Fund partners successfully worked with local authorities on all sides to rescue survivors of exploitation and prosecute traffickers. They also maintained access to vulnerable communities in Internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, industrial zones and villages along the China-Myanmar border, promoting locally-led protection and vigilance. The program invested in partners' organisational development, piloted comprehensive economic empowerment support for survivors and



vulnerable households, strengthened community and survivor groups, and provided seed funding for income generation to community groups to ensure their future sustainability.

During the year, our partner organisations operating in Kachin State, northern Shan and Yangon Region reached hundreds of survivors with direct assistance, livelihood and reintegration support, and preventive measures, along with thousands more people with psychosocial support and awareness raising. Notably, 12 traffickers were arrested and prosecuted with the support of our partner in Yangon.

# OPERATING CONTEXT

In 2024, justice for people impacted by human trafficking has become increasingly elusive due to escalating corruption among authorities and a growing mistrust of institutions controlled by the military government. In Kachin State, for instance, ongoing territorial disputes led to the relocation of district and township courts to cities like Myitkyina. This shift has made it significantly harder for survivors to access justice, as they face challenges such as high travel costs and security risks.

The ongoing crisis has also resulted in widespread disruptions to education across Myanmar, with many young people leaving school to join the workforce. Unfortunately, many find themselves in exploitative situations in sectors such as mining, gambling, spas or hotels, particularly in the Wa Autonomous Region and Lashio. These environments subject them to forms of exploitation, including forced labour and, particularly for women, sexual exploitation.

In 2024, our program also detected a troubling rise in online trafficking, particularly involving forced marriages, surrogacy, forced labour and sexual exploitation, both domestically and internationally. The increased risk of forced conscription by the military government has further heightened the vulnerability of young people, especially men of conscription age who are fleeing the country. Key destinations for international trafficking include China, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and Dubai.

In 2024, our civil society partners faced a range of operational challenges. The military government's measures of deliberate communication blackouts, including complete network outages in areas with heightened resistance such as Kachin State and northern Shan, severely hampered the flow of information. Additionally, intense flooding in Kachin in July 2024 disrupted activities in program communities, knocking out electricity and internet



access and creating prolonged operational difficulties. Fortunately, the security situation in Yangon Region remained relatively stable, allowing for continued engagement with state agencies, including the Myanmar Police Anti-Trafficking Task Force, district attorney offices and the Department of Rehabilitation, to support survivors.

The military regime's civil society registration law remains a significant obstacle for our partners and other civil society organisations. The lack of official registration, which is the reality for most organisations, restricts their ability to receive funding support internationally.

## PROGRESS TOWARDS SYSTEMS CHANGE

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With Myanmar's administration divided between the military regime and various armed resistance groups, and the security situation remaining volatile, striking a balance between investing in long-term, impactful programming and addressing the increasing vulnerability and life-saving emergency needs of individuals is particularly challenging. Additionally, reduced funding and shorter durations of support for frontline local organisations in the humanitarian context further complicate efforts to achieve sustainable systems change.

However, in 2024, recognising the growing humanitarian needs, the increasing public trust in and reliance on local organisations rather than state institutions, and the burden placed on these organisations, our program maintained a pragmatic approach. This approach empowered local frontline partners to act as a bridge between communities, survivors, service providers, local networks, funding agencies and local authorities in their respective regions. In these areas, partners worked closely with relevant counterparts to advocate for essential services for survivors, coordinate rescue operations both domestically and across international borders, and facilitate post-trafficking care services. This strategy has proved effective in fostering locally-led and survivor-led solutions to human trafficking in humanitarian and crisis contexts while ensuring stronger support for survivors.

A 2022 amendment to Myanmar's anti-trafficking law mandates the formation of community-based anti-trafficking committees (or working groups) comprising five to seven members from each township, including from civil society organisations (CSOs). Since the law was passed, a Freedom Fund partner has worked closely with the Department of Rehabilitation to support its effective implementation. This has included providing input on drafting a manual to guide the formation and operation of these groups, drawing from practical experience in establishing and working with community-based



anti-trafficking groups under the project. In 2024, this partner also began establishing community watch groups in their project areas. To date, 11 groups with 127 members have been formed. These members have been trained to deepen their understanding of human trafficking, improve survivor referral processes and lead community awareness-raising initiatives. The groups are the first of their kind in Myanmar, in alignment with the country's new anti-trafficking legislation, and a model for the law's implementation going forward.

Beyond Myanmar, in 2024 the Freedom Fund collaborated closely with civil society organisations across Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, as well as with ASEAN-Australian Counter Trafficking and Johns Hopkins University. The efforts focused specifically on drawing attention to forced marriage of adult women and its connection to human trafficking among regional governments. For example, the Freedom Fund participated in a series of ASEAN consultations held in Laos and Indonesia to develop the ASEAN Guidelines on Preventing Child and Forced Marriage in the Context of Trafficking in Persons (the ASEAN Guidelines). Together with a Freedom Fund partner and a Burmese survivor of forced marriage, we successfully advocated for the Drafting Committee to extend protections to adult survivors of trafficking for forced marriage (previously, the guidelines addressed only child forced marriage). The ASEAN Guidelines are expected to be finalised by May 2025 and disseminated to the 10 regional governments.

# HOTSPOT OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

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## Headline results

Recognising the increasing humanitarian emergency needs of the population and gaps in systemic counter-trafficking responses in Myanmar since 2021, the program strategy for 2023-2024 was designed not only to address the immediate needs of the affected population through flexible funding for emergency assistance but also to invest in the capacity building of frontline organisations, communities and survivors. This approach aimed to enhance people's resilience and strengthen their capacity to respond to the risk of exploitation while supporting locally-led and survivor-led interventions for more sustainable outcomes, rather than focusing solely on the number of outcomes achieved. Accordingly, in 2024, the program invested in the organisational development of partner organisations, piloted comprehensive economic empowerment support for survivors and vulnerable households, strengthened community and survivor groups, and provided seed funding.

In 2024, together, our partner organisations provided social or legal services, including livelihoods and reintegration support to 1,760 individuals, including 292 survivors, and formed 23 community-led counter-trafficking groups with 200 members, including a survivor group with 47 members, in Kachin State, northern Shan and Yangon Region. Currently, 20 of these groups are active on the frontlines, leading survivor assistance and preventive measures such as victim identification, referral for assistance and awareness-raising. In 2024, through community-led and survivor-led awareness-raising and community psychosocial support activities, 4,696 individuals were also reached.

Impressively, as a result of the program and amid the ongoing challenges in the Myanmar justice system, 12 traffickers were arrested and prosecuted with the support of our partner in Yangon.

## Progress towards hotspot objectives

Amid challenging operational conditions in Myanmar, Freedom Fund partners successfully worked with local authorities on all sides to rescue survivors of exploitation and prosecute traffickers. They also maintained access to vulnerable communities in IDP camps, industrial zones and villages along the China-Myanmar border, promoting locally-led protection and vigilance.

**Hotspot Objective 1:** Provide critical support services to survivors of extreme exploitation, including human trafficking, forced marriage, forced childbearing, domestic servitude, forced sex work and child labour, among others.

The current crisis in Myanmar has resulted in the breakdown of an effective response to human trafficking and support for survivors. To address this gap, Freedom Fund partners continued to provide direct assistance to survivors of trafficking, including rescue support, shelter, food, legal aid and case management as well as psychosocial counselling, hotline services, livelihood support and comprehensive reintegration assistance. A mobile safehouse operated by one of our partners remains one of the last of its kind in Kachin State due to the instability on the region, therefore filling a critical gap at a time of great need. Notably, with the help of local stakeholders, community leaders and locally established volunteer networks, partners collectively identified and assisted a total of 292 survivors.

These services were not only limited to survivors of exploitation, however. Recognising the vulnerability of other groups to exploitation, partners widened their target population for services to include survivors of gender-based violence more broadly, including domestic violence and rape, as well as vulnerable migrants or returnees. Freedom Fund partners were able to support almost 2,000 vulnerable individuals with critical assistance, such as shelter, counselling and recovery services, to ensure their safe reintegration and resilience to avoid situations of exploitation in the future.

The situation in Myanmar has weakened the legal response to cases of human trafficking and forced labour. Courts are too far or too busy with cases, leaving many survivors without real access to justice. In this challenging environment, Freedom Fund partners continue to advocate on behalf of



survivors, providing legal advice and transportation support to those who choose to pursue legal action where feasible. During this reporting period, 109 survivors received legal support. These efforts led to 19 court cases and the arrest of 12 perpetrators, including five women and seven men, including 2 Chinese nationals.

Our partners also provide psychosocial and counselling services in various forms, including peer group meetings as well as integrated psychosocial and counselling services. Another partner operates a hotline and community information sharing and psychosocial-social support sessions in communities affected by insecurity. This kind of support has been particularly beneficial for women and survivors in Kachin, enabling them to cope with trauma, regain a sense of stability and strengthen their emotional well-being in the face of ongoing hardship.

Long-term reintegration of survivors remains challenging. This program has explored different strategies to provide sustainable, long-term support that will prevent re-trafficking or other high-risk coping strategies. Partners supported the establishment of micro-businesses and vocational skills training. Activities were building on and bolstering family and community support. Based on past experiences and lessons learned, previous livelihood assistance efforts often failed due to a lack of family support, debt and the survivors' limited capacity.

**Hotspot Objective 2:** Support communities, families and individuals at risk of extreme exploitation to protect themselves and make informed decisions.

As a result of a newly introduced mandatory conscription law, many civilians, especially young people, have started to flee abroad for safety and work, particularly to China and Thailand. In Kachin State, the law has severely affected youths, with many joining the People's Defence Force (PDF) or Kachin armed groups. Additionally, many, including young women, have migrated to work in rare earth mining areas where they face heightened risks of sexual and labour exploitation. Across Yangon Region, partners observed that youths were taking risky migration routes, facing extortion by authorities and joining the PDF to avoid conscription into the military. In response to these developments, partners intensified their preventive outreach in high-

risk communities, targeting aspiring migrants, low-wage industrial workers, displaced populations and people living along the Chinese border.

For several years now, Freedom Fund partners have focused on establishing and strengthening community-based groups, including community watch groups, local action teams, survivor groups and women mobilisers—women volunteers who encourage, organise and lead other women to take action for gender equality and the protection of women in villages and internally displaced persons. Starting from 2023, these groups have become critical support networks, addressing the gaps left by the failing state protection mechanisms. They have been instrumental in raising awareness and responding to trafficking cases in their communities. Working closely with these 23 community groups and three local community mobilisers, Freedom Fund partners reached 4,696 individuals through community level engagement. Awareness-raising and training activities reached communities affected by the crisis, including displaced persons (IDPs), to enhance their understanding and awareness of safe migration, the risks of irregular migration, forced labour conditions in specific industries, gender-based violence and available assistance.

In addition to trainings and conventional awareness-raising events in communities, partners have used various other methods to engage the targeted populations, such as quizzes, dance, music and social media. Online engagement with messages disseminated by partners has proved to be highly effective in a context where in-person events are often logistically challenging. A music and traditional dance showcased by one partner to raise awareness about trafficking among youth online received 4.4k likes and 73.5k views. Such posts have also attracted survivors and their family members to reach out to civil society organisations seeking help and assistance. For example, one partner's lawyer assisted a survivor of forced marriage who had contacted them through their Facebook page, ensuring her safe return and reintegration with support from the Kachin local authority's Kachin-Chinese Border Liaison Wing (KYPC).

Survivor leadership in information campaigns generated high engagement, particularly in industrial zones and villages. Partners reported that survivors' testimonies brought the messages to life, leading to increased awareness and reports of incidents by the audience. The program supported the establishment of a survivor group in Yangon, with its 14 members receiving

two trainings focused on trafficking in persons, safe migration and life skills. In addition to awareness-raising activities, group members also engage in peer support and advocacy for survivor assistance.

The program also targeted bus drivers in border areas to educate them about trafficking for forced marriage and sexual exploitation. Consequently, partners have reported that bus drivers in Kachin State and northern Shan have become more vigilant regarding women travelling to the border for the first time, leading to reports to border control authorities and armed groups that safeguard borders, for comprehensive screening of women crossing the border.

All partners reported that, despite the recent increase in irregular migration and women agreeing to marry Chinese men to alleviate livelihood stress, the program's information campaigns have encouraged these populations to seek information, adopt a more cautious approach and engage in community-wide preventive efforts. A participant of an anti-trafficking training and information session said: *"I live in Pang Sai. Through the awareness outreach activity, I learned not to blindly trust what others say. I also gained knowledge that I couldn't obtain at school. This has taught me where to seek help if something happens around me."*

**Hotspot Objective 3:** Support the integration of anti-human trafficking/extreme exploitation efforts into the local humanitarian response.

While conflict and crisis directly exacerbate vulnerability to exploitation, humanitarian efforts in these contexts often fail to adequately address or recognise the trends of human trafficking and extreme exploitation that accompany the emerging humanitarian needs. Our program seeks to fill this gap by engaging with humanitarian responders, where possible, to share vital information about the existing vulnerabilities within our partners' communities.

In this context, our partners in Kachin State and northern Shan, particularly in areas facing acute humanitarian needs and ongoing armed conflict, have been working to raise awareness and foster synergies in the services provided to survivors. This collaboration is in partnership with the Gender-

based violence (GBV) workstream led by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The safe houses run by one of our partners are co-funded by the project and other humanitarian actors, offering shelter to survivors of GBV and human trafficking. Another partner, also a member of the GBV workstream, has actively contributed to discussions on the protection needs of GBV survivors, particularly those who have endured sexual exploitation, labour exploitation and forced marriage to Chinese men in the rare earth mining areas of Pangwa and along the Myanmar-China border.

The Freedom Fund has been working to raise awareness of the urgent needs of human trafficking survivors and their link to ongoing conflict, especially among humanitarian actors in Northeast Myanmar, including Kachin State and northern Shan. On August 30th, 2025, in collaboration with the INGO Forum in Myanmar, the Freedom Fund's Program Manager hosted an information and training session on human trafficking and the Freedom Fund's approach, in partnership with local CSOs, to combat human trafficking amid the ongoing crisis. The session was attended by humanitarian actors, including both INGOs and local CSOs operating in Northeast Myanmar. The INGO workstream coordination platform serves as a valuable space for both INGOs and local CSOs in Myanmar to learn from one another.

At the national level, the Freedom Fund has worked to raise awareness about emerging forms of exploitation, particularly the escalation of trafficking for forced marriage and childbearing following the reopening of the Chinese border in 2023-2024. This was achieved through active participation in Human Trafficking Working Group meetings chaired by IOM and UNICEF Myanmar, where evidence-based data and trafficking routes -derived from the lived experiences of survivors identified by our partners - were shared.

On September 13th, a Freedom Fund partner in Yangon provided a platform for survivors during the 12th Anti-Trafficking Day of Myanmar to highlight the increasing risks of trafficking faced by the people of Myanmar amidst the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Survivors courageously shared their personal experiences, offering valuable insights to improve support and protection for others. This event, supported by International Justice Mission and the Freedom Fund, was attended by representatives from local and international organisations, such as IOM, UNODC and ILO, as well as community watch groups and survivors actively working to combat trafficking in Myanmar.



During the event, our partner called for renewed connections and collaboration among local and international organisations, as well as survivor groups, to unite in the fight against human trafficking in the crisis context of Myanmar.

## Supporting a community of practice

The Freedom Fund encourages active coordination and collaboration between civil society organisations to work toward the common goal of protecting women and girls from exploitation in Myanmar. In 2024, we continued to hold quarterly partner meetings to ensure the regular sharing of data and to promote joint problem solving. In a context where trust is undermined by a complex political divide, the program was able to support a small community of practice and build trust to encourage coordination. Freedom Fund partners referred cases to each other or their wider networks and reached out when they needed support such as rescue and repatriation, shelter support and other emergency assistance.

Recognising that such collaboration is also necessary to support a more effective cross-border response, the Freedom Fund identified and reached out to civil society organisations across the wider region. In October 2024, the Freedom Fund, in partnership with Johns Hopkins University, convened a first in-person meeting of the Mekong Community of Practice focused on addressing forced marriage and violence against women and girls in the context of trafficking in persons in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). The event brought together 13 civil society and women-led organisations from GMS countries and aimed to foster collaboration and knowledge exchange, as well as strengthen measures to prevent trafficking for forced marriage and other forms of exploitation. Key issues discussed included the drivers of trafficking for forced marriage, challenges in identifying and reporting cases, the impact of trauma on survivors, barriers to accessing remedies, complexities in cross-border trafficking cases, and the importance of community engagement and survivor empowerment. The same organisations had the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the draft ASEAN Guidelines, which was submitted to the drafting committee in early 2025.



## Case study

In 2024, the program supported the development of the ASEAN Guidelines on Preventing Child and Forced Marriage in the Context of Trafficking in Persons, a process led by ASEAN-ACT. The guidelines aim to establish a robust framework for frontline responders and policymakers in ASEAN to effectively combat trafficking in persons. To ensure that lived experience of survivors and insights from civil society efforts were integrated into the guidelines, the Freedom Fund facilitated the participation of representatives from a Myanmar-based civil society partner and a forced marriage survivor in a consultation workshop in Laos. During the workshop, they had the opportunity to address an audience that included ASEAN Sectoral Body representatives, ASEAN member states, UN agencies and civil society members, sharing their experiences and recommendations. This workshop was followed by another event where the Freedom Fund program manager passionately advocated for the inclusion of adult forced marriage in the guidelines. By the end of 2024, the draft guidelines were shared with the Freedom Fund and a group of civil society organisations for feedback before their finalisation. The program's direct involvement in this process ensured that insights from five years of implementation in Myanmar informed the regional framework, underscoring the importance of lived experience and the role of civil society in addressing forced marriage. The final guidelines will bring much-needed attention to this often-overlooked issue and guide ASEAN member states in developing their own domestic policies.

# IMAGES

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Yangon, Myanmar ©vermontalm/Adobe Stock

Cover

Community outreach meeting facilitated by Freedom Fund partner KWAT, Northern Shan

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12th Anniversary of Myanmar's Anti-Trafficking in Persons Day, organised by YKBWA and supported by the Freedom Fund and IJM Myanmar

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1st ASEAN Consultation on the development of guidelines on the prevention of and response to transnational child and forced marriage.  
During this event, a survivor accompanied by Freedom Fund partner YKBWA shared her lived experience.

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# VISION

Our vision is a world  
free of slavery.

# MISSION

We invest in frontline organisations  
and movements to drive a measurable  
reduction of modern slavery in high-  
prevalence countries and industries.

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