Factors Behind Weavers Migrating from Myanmar to Mizoram State, India

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Abstract

This article investigates the impact of wage differences, access to information and moving costs on the migration decisions of Myanmar weavers living in Aizawl, Mizoram State, India. Using qualitative research methods including in-depth interviews and key informant interviews with 17 migrant weavers, I argue that wage differences are the most important factor for migration decisions. The data generated also provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of migrant workers in the weaving industry and their livelihoods. By highlighting some of the challenges faced by migrant weavers and how and why they migrate to Mizoram, this study contributes to our understanding of the complex dynamics of migration and labor market outcomes in Mizoram State.

Introduction

Myanmar is currently facing an unprecedented crisis, with political instability, economic hardship, and growing violence and insecurity around the country. Since the military coup in February 2021, living conditions have dramatically worsened, and tens of millions of people now live in poverty. The crisis was exacerbated by a severe third wave of COVID-19 in 2021, which strained the economy and provision of healthcare. Prices for key household commodities rose significantly, making staples unaffordable for many.

The Myanmar military governs by force and regularly uses force against civilians. This includes the arbitrary confiscation of private assets, the bombing and destruction of hospitals, schools and religious buildings, the dropping of firebombs on

community homes and the brutal killing of civilians, including vulnerable populations like children and the elderly. Additionally, women are disproportionately sexually assaulted. The crisis in Myanmar continues to be ignored by the United Nations and many other members of the international community resulting in ineffective delivery of humanitarian aid. Huge numbers of people have been displaced within the country and into neighboring countries.

According to Aung Tun, migration (both internal and external) has since the 2021 coup become a critical determinant in shaping the country's future—the country is at a "Myanmar migration moment".[1] The primary reason for the increase in migration is likely security concerns, with many fleeing to avoid atrocities committed by the soldiers and the military's State Administration Council (SAC) regime. However, political concerns are also important, with many people leaving for other countries or liberated areas to better pursue activities related to their determination to overthrow the junta. Many people have also been forced into hiding within their own communities, no longer able to participate in public life since the coup for fear of arrest, torture and death.

With its multiple political crises and decades of wars, Myanmar is unique when it comes to displacement and migration. But in a global context, economic factors are usually the primary drivers of migration. Economic factors have long been particularly important for many migration pathways in Myanmar, and these routes have only increased in importance since the 2021 coup. One such pathway leads from upper Myanmar into Mizoram State, India, where there is a thriving handloom weaving industry. Skilled migration affects the increase of the total population in Mizoram State as well as general socioeconomic conditions there.[2]

This article aims to contribute to understandings of the dynamics of migration and labor market outcomes in Mizoram

[1] Aung Tun, 2022.
[2] Zirnunsanga, 2007.

State by asking: Why do skilled Myanmar weavers migrate to Mizoram State? What role does the wage differential play in their decisions? How important is access to information about the labor market in Mizoram State? And how useful are prospective migrants' existing social networks? This article poses these questions in order to investigate the impact of wage differences, access to information, and moving costs on the economic and social wellbeing of migrant Myanmar weavers residing in India. I used qualitative methods to answer these questions, including participant observation, informal conversations and key informant interviews with research participants.

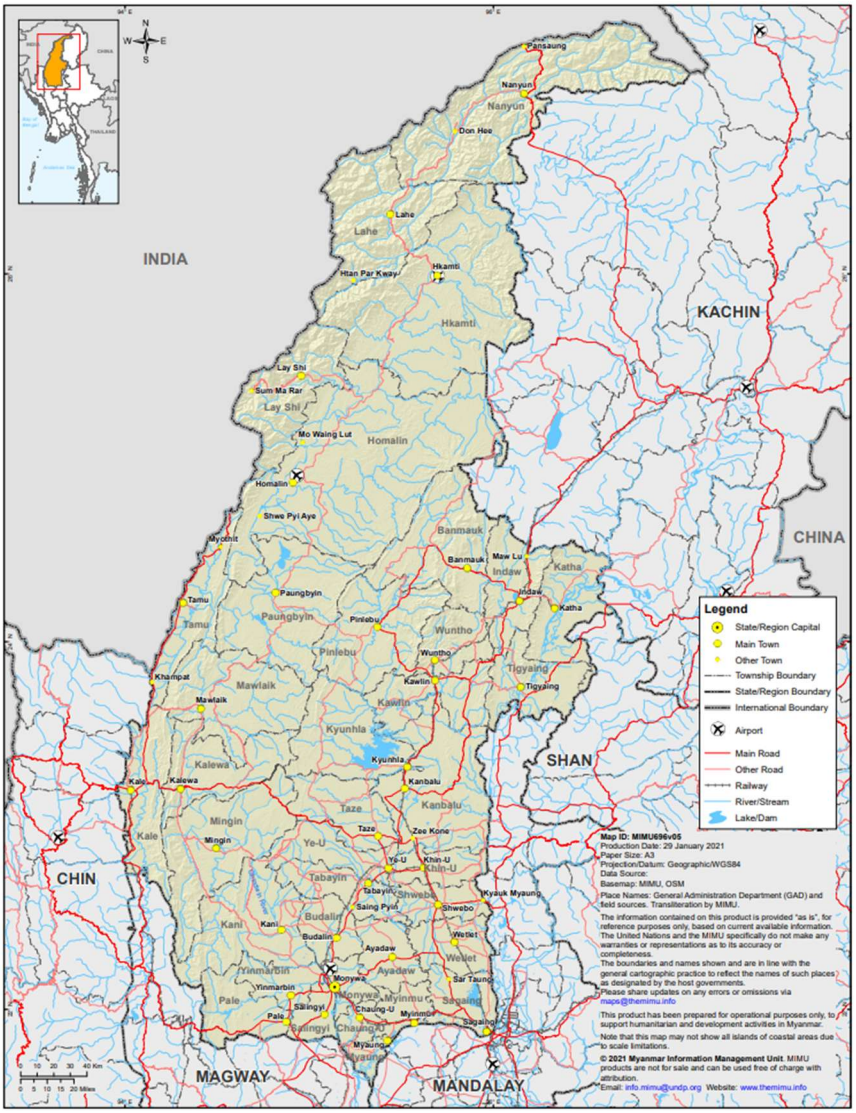
The article continues by first giving an overview of the migration pathway to Mizoram State from Sagaing Region and the general situation for weavers in both locations. It then explores some frameworks for understanding migration and the three economic factors identified in this article: the wage differential, moving costs, and access to information. It then explains the study's methodology, before introducing its findings, and concluding.

Weavers in Sagaing

Sagaing Region is an administrative region in upper Myanmar sharing an international border with India, identifiable in figure 1. It is the second-largest region or state in Myanmar, after Shan State, covering 94,621 kilometers squared, and is delineated into 37 townships, three of which form the Naga Self-administered Zone bordering India. The capital, Sagaing City, abuts the city and region of Mandalay, but most people in the state live in rural areas.

Figure 1

Map of Sagaing Region, reproduced from the Myanmar Information Management Unit (details in bottom-right of figure).



People in Sagaing Region involve in a variety of economic activities including industry, but agriculture and horticulture remain the primary livelihoods of residents. The region is known for its fertile soil and favorable climate which supports the cultivation of a variety of crops. Along with agriculture and horticulture, Sagaing Region also has a growing industrial sector that produces a variety of goods for both domestic and export markets. It is well known for its traditional handicraft industries, one of which is the weaving industry. Most industrial weaving takes place in Shwebo, Monywa, Kalay and Sagaing townships. Textiles such as blankets, shawls, men's and women's clothing and cotton bags are skillfully crafted with elaborate patterns to be distributed and sold globally. The Seikkun longyi, produced in Seikkun village in Shwebo Township, is an example of a product widely known and highly regarded throughout the country for its exceptional quality.

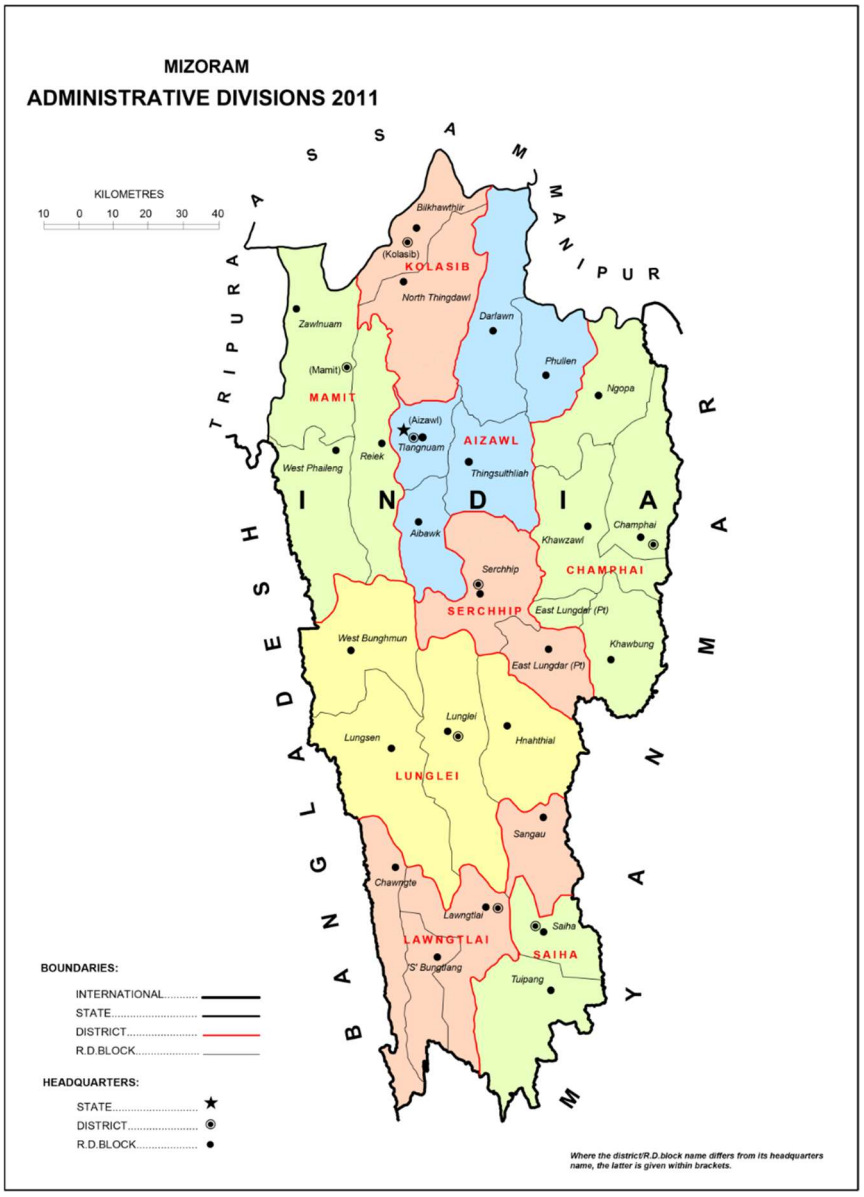
Sagaing Region is an important part of Myanmar's cultural and economic landscape. Most people there are Bamar, with a rich cultural heritage that is closely tied to Theravada Buddhism. The region has a long history, with ancient imperial centers and riverine port cities, and it has played an important role in shaping Myanmar, its history and culture.

Weavers in Mizoram

The majority of the population in India's Mizoram State identify as Mizo, which is a Tibeto-Burman language speaking group of people. The state has a population of over 1 million, with the majority residing in rural areas, though the capital city Aizawl is growing fast. Mizoram State borders Myanmar's Chin State on its east frontier. Of all the states in northeast India, Mizoram State has been the most welcoming to Myanmar people since the 2021 coup.

Figure 2

Map of Mizoram State, provided by the author.



There is significant state support for labor in Mizoram State, and the workforce there has one of the highest percentage of females in all of India. The Labor, Employment, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship Department (LESDE) of the Government of Mizoram provides employment assistance to unemployed educated youth and conducts various initiatives such as preparing skill development plans, baseline surveys, and tracer studies to improve the labor market in Mizoram State. The LESDE also conducts awareness campaigns in collaboration with other departments in schools and colleges. These campaigns aim to raise awareness about skill development opportunities among students and women. In addition to formal employment training and work opportunities, Mizoram State has a thriving informal sector. For example, the Thakthing street market in Aizawl provides an outlet for small growers and farmers to directly market their produce to customers at low transaction costs.

The Mizoram State economy is supported by a range of activities such as agriculture, horticulture, forestry and industry. Along with agriculture and horticulture, Mizoram has a traditional cottage industry of handloom weaving, and a growing power loom textile industry, renowned for producing a diverse range of popular garments. Weaving is a well-known art form of the Mizo people, who are highly regarded in India for their expertise in this craft, which is an integral part of their culture. The weaving industry also provides employment opportunities and income for rural communities and contributes to poverty reduction and the state's economy.

The weaving profession is gendered female, and women learn to weave at an early age, producing *puans* on traditional loin looms for cottage industry. These garments, similar to *longyis*, are worn by women as their native dress and are renowned for their beautiful design and intricate embroidery. In addition to *puans*, weavers also produce *puanchei*, *ngotekherh*, and *kawrchei*, garments popular among Mizo women and worn during traditional ceremonies and festivals, as well as shawls and shoulder bags. Weavers use both the loin loom and the fly shuttle loom. The fly shuttle loom produces better quality fabrics for

those who can afford them and helps weavers produce longer lengths of cloth with uniform quality. The loin loom is used for making fabrics that are 16-22 inches wide and at times for making narrow strips of pile carpet and blankets.[3]

The handloom industry in India provides employment to 2,783,000 households, with women making up 77 percent of the workforce. There are several weaving clusters in Mizoram State. Some of the places where weaving is prominent include Serchhip district (Thenzawl) and Aizawl district (Aizawl). The textiles produced in these regions are known for their intricate designs, vibrant colors, and high quality, and are popular within Mizoram and beyond. A study of the Thenzawl handloom cluster revealed that it has become a model of entrepreneurship for underprivileged women, with 98 percent of the 205 micro handloom enterprises owned by women.[4] However, a study conducted on the socioeconomic profile of handloom weavers in the Zuangtui handloom cluster suggested that weavers there face financial constraints, health problems, and poor government support.[5] In general, the state government claims to provide support to the weaving industry through various initiatives such as skill development programs, financial assistance and marketing support. These initiatives aim to improve the skills of weavers, provide them with access to capital and help them market their products.

The Migration Pathway

The India-Myanmar border stretches 1,643 km, separating the Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, from Kachin and Chin states, and Sagaing Region in Myanmar. Chin State borders six districts of Mizoram, while the districts of Churachandpur, Tengnoupal, and Chandel in Manipur share borders with Myanmar's Kachin State and Sagaing Region.

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[3] Sampada, 2023.
[4] Ramswamy & Kumar, 2013.
[5] Lalmalsawmi Renthlei, 2019.

People have been moving across these regions for centuries before the nation-states of India and Myanmar came into existence.[6] However, in the past half-century ethnic conflict and the suppression of minority groups in Myanmar has intensified the migration of people from Myanmar to northeast India. The proximity and shared cultural ties between groups in this area facilitates cross-border movement.[7]

Many people migrated from Myanmar to northeast India after the 1962 military coup in Myanmar. In 1988, another military coup in Myanmar led to mass violence, torture and killings of pro-democracy demonstrators, pushing another wave of people to leave Myanmar for northeast India (and other neighboring countries). Many of these refugees settled in Mizoram State. Then once more, after the 2021 military coup, pro-democracy protests were attacked and many inhabitants of Myanmar's Chin State sought refuge in Mizoram State. According to K. Vanlalvena, a Rajya Sabha member from the ruling Mizo National Front (MNF), over 40,000 refugees from Myanmar have found shelter in Mizoram since the coup. These refugees are members of the Chin ethnic group, which includes the Lai, Tidim-Zomi, Lusei, and Hualngo communities which have close ties to the Mizo community. Very few of the refugees are Bamar.

Before the 2021 coup, Sagaing Region was mostly spared the routine military violence and oppression that has long been inflicted on minorities in border regions. However, since the 2021 coup, the region has become one of the frontlines in the battle against the junta and has suffered thousands of deaths, hundreds of air strikes, and mass arson attacks on villages. This destruction has compelled many from Sagaing Region to seek refuge in neighboring cities and countries. Many displaced people with weaving skills fled to Mizoram State, following an established economic migration pathway, so that they could continue to support themselves with their profession. These migrants are in one sense refugees, but they can also be termed economic

[6] Pakem, 1992.
[7] Sangpuii, 2016

migrants, as they fled to Mizoram State based on the foreknowledge that they could at least work in their trade there.

While currently more people migrate from Myanmar to northeast India than the other way around, it was not always this way. During the years of insurgency in northeast India from 1966 to 1986, a period of turmoil known as 'Rambuai,' many Mizo families sought refuge in Myanmar. The signing of the Mizoram Peace Accord in 1986 between the Government of India and the MNF reduced violence and insurgency in the region, leading to Mizoram's recognition as a separate state in 1987.

The next section looks at migration more generally, including global statistics, frameworks for study, and the general factors in economic migration decision-making that this study sought to understand in the context of Sagaing-Mizoram weaver migration.

Motivations, Migrants and Migration Studies

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant as any person moving across an international border or within a state away from their habitual residence. As the world has grown more connected over the last fifty years, there has been a concomitant rise in the number of international migrants. Migration is an important aspect of population studies and can be seen as a form of human adjustment to social problems. Migration affects the size, structure, and quality of the populations and provides a network for the diffusion of ideas and information.

The decision to migrate from one place to another is complex and influenced by a variety of factors. Some individuals may choose to relocate in search of improved economic opportunities, while others may be forced to leave their homes due to environmental issues, conflict, or persecution. For instance, people may migrate to escape discrimination based on their ethnicity, religion, nationality, or affiliation with a specific social or political group, or to escape climate change, natural disasters and

erosion. Access to family members, healthcare and education can also be factors in migration.

These and other drivers of migration are structural components that can influence, enable, limit or initiate migration processes. These drivers affect levels of migration, the probability of specific migration paths, and the appeal of various destinations.[8] While migration is as old as human history, the study of it as a disciplinary phenomenon is relatively recent, with several theories and frameworks proposed since last century to better understand migration drivers, flows and stocks, and their impacts.[9] Three of these are particularly relevant to the study of weavers migrating to Mizoram State.

Hein de Haas presents a framework that conceptualizes migration as a function of people's aspirations and capabilities to migrate within perceived geographical opportunity structures.[10] The framework defines human mobility as people's capability to choose where to live and draws on Isaiah Berlin's concepts of positive and negative liberty to conceptualize how macro-structural change shapes people's migratory aspirations and capabilities.

Then, Van Hear et al. present a framework called push-pull plus to understand migration flows better.[11] The authors suggest distinguishing between predisposing, proximate, precipitating, and mediating drivers. They argue that proximate and mediating drivers offer greater potential for intervention and migration policy should be understood within the wider political economy.

Jacobsen focuses on the pursuit of livelihood opportunities by refugees and other forced migrants outside camps.[12] Drawing on a theory of "displaced livelihoods," the author examines how the livelihoods of the forcibly displaced differ from those of other migrants and stresses the need to reconceptualize refugee

[8] Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022.
[9] Hagen-Zanker, 2008.
[10] de Haas, 2001.
[11] Van Hear et al., 2018.
[12] Jacobsen, 2014.

programs to support both refugees and their hosts. The author concludes with recommendations for future advocacy, programming, and research.

These scholars' general approaches can be useful to understanding migration in general. But more work needs to be done on understanding the specific challenges Myanmar weavers who migrate to Mizoram State face and their motivations for migrating.

Wage Differentials

Differences in wages between regions or countries, known as wage differentials, can be a significant factor in people's decision to migrate for economic reasons. When one location offers higher wages than another, workers may choose to move there to improve their financial situation. This is especially true for low-wage workers who can see a substantial increase in their standard of living by moving to an area with higher wages.

Differences in wages can arise due to a variety of factors, such as variations in the cost of living, the state of the job market, and the balance between the availability of workers and the demand for labor. Governments and other organizations may try to address wage differentials through policies such as minimum wage laws, collective bargaining agreements and targeted economic development programs.

In addition to improving their own financial situation, economic migrants can also contribute to the economic development of their destination. By bringing their skills and labor to a new location, migrant workers can help fill labor shortages, increase productivity and stimulate economic growth. However, economic migration can also impact both the destination and origin locations, generating increased competition for jobs and housing or the loss of skilled workers.

Moving Costs

Expenses incurred from relocating can play a significant role in a free individual's decision to migrate or not (most relevant for those not being displaced or compelled to flee home). If the potential financial benefits of living in another location outweigh the costs of moving there, people may choose to migrate to improve their financial situation. Moving costs can include transportation, housing, and obtaining necessary documents or permits. These costs can vary based on factors such as the distance between the origin and destination, the availability and cost of transportation and legal and regulatory requirements.

If wages are significantly higher in a destination location, or if there are better job opportunities and easier working conditions there, then some people may choose to migrate even if moving costs are high. In the same way, however, high moving costs may directly prohibit others from migrating even if it would otherwise be beneficial. In these cases, interventions such as providing financial assistance or helping with obtaining the necessary documents or permits can help.

In addition to direct financial costs, there may also be intangible costs associated with migration. For instance, individuals who migrate for work may experience feelings of loneliness, prejudice or challenges in obtaining necessary resources in their new place of residence. These intangible costs can also influence a worker's decision to migrate for economic reasons. By carefully considering the potential financial benefits against the all the costs of moving, workers can make informed decisions about whether migrating will improve their financial situation or not.

Access to Information

Access to information is a critical factor influencing decisions to migrate for social reasons. When individuals have access to information about opportunities, living conditions, and social networks in other locations, they are better equipped to make informed decisions about whether or not to migrate. Information

can be obtained from various sources, such as personal connections, media outlets, and both government and non-government organizations. The advent of digital technology and social media has made it easier than ever for people to access information about other places. Prospective migrants can learn about the experiences of those who have already migrated, as well as research legal requirements, living conditions, employment opportunities, and social services in other locations.

One part of access to information is access to a social network through which one can receive and evaluate information. The influence of one's social networks on their decision to migrate is significant.[13] If a prospective migrant knows other migrants, they can access better information about job opportunities and living conditions elsewhere and learn about intended destinations. But social networks go beyond just access to information. They also constitute support systems, facilitating material or emotional assistance, such as financial aid, housing, or simply companionship. As migrants settle into a new environment, their social networks change, often leading to new connections and opportunities. These can help migrants assimilate into their new communities and access needed resources. Having a supportive social network can help migrants feel integrated into and accepted by their new community, and provide opportunities for engagement and involvement, enhancing migrants' sense of belonging. In general, social networks provide compelling social reasons for migration including social support, belonging and social engagement.

To sum up, people migrate for various social, economic, and other reasons, and these are often interwoven in complex judgements. Economic migration may involve pursuing improved job prospects, increased income or a higher standard of living elsewhere. Other migration may involve reuniting with family members who have already relocated, fleeing from conflict or persecution or seeking a more desirable lifestyle in a different community. These motivations often overlap, as in this article's case

[13] Chi, 2020.

study. Migration is a complicated and multi-dimensional phenomenon influenced by a combination of economic and social motivations as people strive to enhance their situation and create a brighter future for themselves and their loved ones.

Research Methods

Most of the migrant Burmese weavers in Mizoram State live in Aizawl and hail from rural areas of Sagaing Region of Myanmar, especially from Monywa and Shwebo-Seikkun, as well as from Amarapura in Mandalay Region, Bago Region, and some other rural areas of upper Myanmar. The weaving industry in Aizawl is mostly located in Zuangtui, an industrial estate in the eastern part of the city, with some scattered worksites in the rest of the city wards. I estimate there are approximately 1,400 migrant Myanmar weavers currently working in Aizawl, in Zuangtui, Vaivakawn, Kulikawn, Thrkthing, Durtlang, Luangmual, Khatla, Chhingaveng, and Tuikualtlang wards.

From July to October 2022, I had the opportunity to live among a community of migrant Burmese weavers in Zuangtui. Visiting their worksites and sharing meals together, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of their way of life, livelihoods and culture. Through more than 100 informal conversations with the weavers, I learned of their challenges and aspirations. I also observed their working conditions firsthand including their engaging social activities. As I listened to their stories, I was struck by their resilience and sense of community. Living with the weavers in Zuangtui was a truly enriching experience that allowed me to connect with this vibrant community on a personal level and this period of my life directly inspired this research article.

In June and July 2023, I conducted in-depth and key informant interviews with seventeen of these weavers in order to generate qualitative data on their unique situation. Through the interviews, I learned about why they migrated and the challenges they faced, including language barriers, cultural differences, and economic hardships. Despite these obstacles, the weavers were dedicated to their craft and were determined to preserve their

traditional weaving techniques. They spoke passionately about the importance of passing down their knowledge and skills to future generations. Through these interviews, I was able to gain a unique insight into the lives and experiences of this community.

Some of their demographic details are shown in table 1. Of major note is the fact while weaving is gendered as a female profession in Mizoram, most of my interviewees were male. Female weavers were much more likely to decline my interview requests than males. I cannot be sure why, but it may be that female weavers were more anxious or less confident than the males.

Table 1

Research participants and demographic data.

No	Participant	Arrived Year	Age	Male/Female	Marital Status
1	A	1986	52	Male	Single
2	B	1987	55	Female	Married
3	C	1988	54	Male	Single
4	D	1990	51	Male	Married
5	E	1990	67	Male	Married
6	F	1992	42	Male	Married
7	G	1999	57	Female	Married
8	H	2000	45	Male	Married
9	I	2002	60	Male	Married
10	J	2006	53	Male	Single
11	K	2007	52	Male	Married
12	L	2007	40	Male	Married
13	M	2010	30	Male	Married
14	N	2017	46	Male	Married
15	O	2019	39	Male	Married
16	P	2022	40	Female	Married
17	Q	2022	52	Male	Married

Findings

My data shows that the primary reason for Myanmar weavers to migrate to Mizoram State for work is the difference in wages. Wages in India can be double, triple, or even quadruple migrants earning capacities in their places of origin. Details of respondents' reported wage differentials between home and Aizawl are shown in table 2. Other reasons research participants gave for migrating included economic difficulties, experiences of humiliation and discrimination, and involvement in the 1988 uprising. However, I consider these secondary to the wage gap.

Table 2

Participants and their reported wage differentials.

Participant	Multiplier Between Mizoram and Home
A	4
B	3
C	4
D	4
E	2
F	2
G	3
H	4
I	2
J	3
K	4
L	3
M	3
N	4
O	4
P	3
Q	2

I divide Myanmar weavers who migrated to Mizoram State into three groups. First are the experts in the craft, who live separate to their workplaces, work at a high level, and earn four times (or more) the income they would earn at home. This expert class can generate income from fashion design in addition to weaving. Then there are mid-level experts, who have good weaving skills and can earn up to three times what they would have earned at home. Then there are the less-skilled migrant weavers who perform only basic activities, like spinning. They still earn up to twice what they would receive in their home communities.

If a family works diligently in weaving for four or five years in Aizawl, they can afford to buy homes back in their native land and even start weaving businesses there. Several individual research participants said that working for only two days in India can provide enough income to sustain them for a week back home. Some even claimed that a week's worth of work in Aizawl is the equivalent of an entire month of income in Sagaing Region.

Daw Cherry, a 57-year-old from Monywa Township who migrated to Mizoram in 1999, shared her experience:

> *I came here to work due to the economic crisis in my home country. Back there, my daily wage of 2,000-3000 Myanmar Kyat couldn't even cover a day of food. Here, I earn about 400-500 Indian Rupees a day, which is equivalent to more than 10,000 kyat and is sufficient. As I've grown older, my needs have changed. In the 10 years since I arrived, my expenses have increased significantly. Now, I earn enough to sustain myself and I'm not in debt.*

Some families migrate as a unit to work in Mizoram State. If four or five family members work hard for five to ten years and pool their savings, they can afford to buy a house and farm together in Myanmar. After accumulating enough capital, many go on to invest it back home and go on to achieve success in business.

Individual migrants often have comfortable lives and good incomes, but their savings are lower than that of family units. Wages are paid weekly on weekends, but many migrants spend

their earnings quickly and end up in debt as time goes by. As they age and their productivity decreases, some struggle to balance their income and expenditure and even fall into financial difficulties. U Myint Zaw, a 53-year-old man from Shwebo Township, migrated to Mizoram State in 2006. As an unmarried single man, he still struggles financially:

> *I've been weaving since I was 36 years old and am skilled in preparing looms and other weaving-related tasks. However, as a single worker, I spend everything I earn. I worked for the same employer for many years and was even treated like family. However, due to an issue last month, I had to move to another house. The fabric design there is difficult and the wages are low, so I'm looking to move again. My wages are twice or three times what my wages would be at home, but I spend everything without saving, so I'm not very comfortable.*

U Zaw Tun, chairman of the Myanmar Social Welfare Association in Aizawl, noted that the 1980s and 1990s were a good time for migrant Myanmar weavers:

> *At that time, people from Shwebo Township came to Mizoram as professional weavers. Employers provided them with private accommodation and ensured they lived comfortably. Workshops were located separately from their living quarters. The number of weavers was small, so employers took care to provide for their needs. However, over the 1990s, the number of weavers increased exponentially and they could no longer have their own accommodation. They had to live in the workshops. In the 1980s and 1990s, the exchange rate was around one rupee to two kyat, so wages were very good and the weavers could support their families in Myanmar.*

According to my interviews, the likely average weekly wage for a migrant working in the weaving business in Aizawl is about

2,500 to 3,500 rupees, with weekly incomes ranging from a minimum of 2,000 rupees to a maximum of 10,000 rupees, depending on the role and the weaver's expertise and experience. Some are employed as supervisors of workshops, liaising between the weavers and the employer, communicating instructions to employees and ensuring that the weavers are paid their weekly wages. Fluency in the local Mizo language is essential for this role. Supervisors also often operate the rotor for the loom and are compensated accordingly, typically earning a monthly salary of 3,000 to 5,000 rupees. Migrant weavers who have not yet mastered weaving can engage in spinning, earning a weekly wage of 2,000 to 3,000 rupees. Some work as fabric designers, earning a weekly wage of approximately 10,000 rupees.

Access to Information

During the 1980s and 1990s, information about weaving conditions in Mizoram State was primarily communicated through face-to-face interactions and written correspondence. Messages could also be received from traders in Chin State who had connections with Mizoram State. Additionally, information could be obtained from the many Mizo people who lived in Kale Town in Sagaing Region.

U Tin Tun, a 67-year-old man from Shwebo Township who migrated to Mizoram State in 1990 told me:

> *At that time, information about the employment situation was available only through those who traded between Kale and Aizawl. It was possible to travel by car from the towns of Shwebo to Monywa and then to Kalewa by ship. Then from Kalewa to Kale towns and then to Tedim town by car. From there to the border and on to Champhai of Mizoram State could be passed on foot. Aizawl was then accessible by car from Champhai. So depending on the weather conditions, road conditions and travelers, the journey from Shwebo to Aizawl could take a week or more.*

As mentioned earlier, after 1988 many residents of Shwebo Township relocated to Aizawl to pursue careers in weaving. During periods of high demand for skilled weavers, Mizo businessmen send representatives to Kale Town to recruit weavers, offering to cover all travel and food expenses. Some migrants to Aizawl had family, relatives, or friends already living there, while others made the move through contacts or acquaintances. However, some ventured to Aizawl without any prior connections, seeking employment in the weaving mills upon arrival.

By the 2000s, improvements in road transportation had facilitated mutual relations between Mizoram and Chin states and Sagaing Region. With good telephone communication at Rikhawdar on the Myanmar border, timely information could be obtained from the Mizoram side, including the demand for weaving workers and business conditions. This information could be easily accessed by making inquiries at the border. Additionally, with regular motorcar contacts available every week, it became easier to obtain information. Crossing the border creek of Tiau from Rikhawdar leads to the village of Zokhawthar on the Indian side, where there is also a motorcar service to Aizawl. As a result, communications became more convenient and information could be obtained faster than before.

Since 2010, advancements in communication technology have made it easier for people to connect through social networks. This has greatly benefited the weaving industry in Aizawl, as Mizo employers can easily find out about the demand for workers and expand their businesses by importing looms, rotors, and cotton spinning machines from Myanmar. Moreover, the convenience of money transfers has facilitated the hiring of Burmese weavers, who now travel more frequently due to the development of information technology.

Ma Maw Nyein Htwe, a 40-year-old immigrant who arrived in Manipur from Myanmar with her family in 2022, shared her experience with communication technology:

> *We moved from Manipur to Aizawl through the help of a former employer in Aizawl who called on the phone. The crisis in Manipur in May 2023[14] meant we no longer felt comfortable living and working there as migrant weavers. So, we decided to move on to Aizawl. Although our salary isn't as high as it was in Manipur, we feel more confident working here because there are no arrests.*

Moving Costs

Some migrant weavers come to Aizawl after being recruited by employers who cover their expenses, while others come at their own expense after first establishing a contact in the area. U Min Thu, a 42-year-old migrant weaver from Shwebo Township, shared his thoughts on the route and cost of travel to Aizawl:

> *When traveling from Monywa or Shwebo in Sagaing Region, or Amarapura in Mandalay Region, you first go to Kale Town, then to Rikhawdar, where you cross the border to Zokhawthar village on the Indian side. The journey from Zokhawthar to Aizawl takes about 10 hours by car. If you are coming from Shwebo Township, the cost to Aizawl is approximately 250,000 kyat. But if your employer covers your travel expenses, you won't bear any costs.*

Myanmar migrants can complete necessary formalities at the border gate if they choose to. The cost mentioned above refers only to the travel expenses. When coming from Sagaing especially, it is much cheaper to reach India irregularly than other common destination countries, such as Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore or South Korea.

[14] Mass violence broke out between Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities in Manipur State at this time.

Conclusion

The decision of Myanmar weavers to migrate to Mizoram State is influenced by a complex interplay of economic and social factors. On the economic side, the wage differential provides a strong incentive. By migrating to Mizoram State, they are able to earn higher wages and improve their standard of living. However, the decision to migrate is not solely driven by economic considerations. Social factors such as access to information about the labor market in Mizoram State and the existence of social networks also play a crucial role in facilitating migration. For example, having access to reliable information about job opportunities, working conditions and support services all help migrant weavers make informed decisions. Similarly, social networks can provide a safety net for migrants, helping them to overcome the challenges of settling in a new country. Moving costs are another factor that can influence the decision to migrate. The cost of relocating to another country can be significant and may deter some weavers from making the move.

Further research is needed to explore these and other contributing factors in more detail and better understand the rationalities and experiences of Myanmar migrant weavers in Mizoram State. By gaining a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between economic and social factors, policymakers and practitioners can develop more effective interventions to support the livelihoods of migrant weavers.

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