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SURVIVING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MYANMAR: STORIES OF CHILDREN'S FIGHTS AND HOPES



Terre des hommes
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Terre des hommes

Terre des hommes (Tdh) is the leading Swiss child relief agency. Since 1960, Tdh has been improving the lives of millions of the world's most vulnerable children through targeted development and humanitarian crisis programmes and by working with network actors. Through our health, protection and emergency relief programmes, we provide assistance to over five million children and their families in more than 30 countries each year.

Tdh started working in Myanmar in 2009 and has been working in partnership with the Department of Social Welfare since 2010 as well as with other government structures and civil society organisations. This approach ensures Tdh generates long-lasting and sustainable change for the vulnerable children and their families it works for. Tdh in Myanmar has a country wide presence through its family reintegration programme, other flagship interventions are currently focused on Yangon and Mandalay.

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Supported by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Covid Collective is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The Collective brings together the expertise of, UK and Southern based research partner organisations and offers a rapid social science research response to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing Covid-19 related development challenges.

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Disclaimer

The names of the children mentioned in these case stories have been changed to protect their privacy and maintain confidentiality. The narratives told reflect the real-life experiences of children and their families before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of sharing these stories is to increase awareness and promote understanding of the challenges faced by children and their families. The contents do not necessarily reflect the views of Terre des hommes, (Tdh).

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List of Terminologies and Definitions

Coronavirus Disease (Covid-19)

An infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) virus.¹

Child Labour (CL)

Work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that: is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.²

Worst Forms of Child Labour (WFCL)

All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.³

¹ World Health Organization. Naming the coronavirus disease (COVID-2019) and the virus that causes it. Available at https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

² International Labour Organization. What is Child Labour? Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang-en/index.htm>

³ International Labour Organization. What is Child Labour? The worst forms of child labour. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang-en/index.htm>

About Children's Stories

This collection of children's stories was created as part of a research project titled "The Impacts of Covid-19 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Myanmar", which was conducted by Terre des hommes (Tdh) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) under the Covid Collective Research Platform in Hlaingtharya Township, Myanmar, from August 2021 and March 2022.

As part of the research, the research team conducted interviews with 58 children involved in child labour and worst forms of child labour. Among them, 15 were selected to co-write their stories. The stories were originally written in Burmese and then translated into English. Before collecting and writing the stories, the research team consulted with both children and their guardians. In addition, the research team used child-friendly and participatory methods throughout the story writing process. The stories provide insights into the pandemic's impact on the lives of children and their families, including consequences on their income, living conditions, food security, housing stability, physical and mental health, and their engagement in child labour including the worst forms. Additionally, the team gathered inputs and suggestions from concerned stakeholders from civil society and non-government organisations prior to the stories collection.

The goal of this collection of testimonies is to amplify the voices of children, enhance their visibility, and provide a valuable resource for organisations, partners, and practitioners working with children. We hope that these stories will shed light on the working lives of children and help organisations and practitioners promoting child rights incorporate the lived experiences and voices of children engaged in child labour in their programme design, pandemic recovery plans, and advocacy for long term solution to the worst forms of child labour in Myanmar.

Hlaingtharya Township

Hlaingtharya Township is located in the western part of Yangon, Myanmar and known as one of the poorest urban areas in Yangon Division. It is characterized by a high concentration of child labour, urban poverty, and internal migration from the adjoining Ayeyarwady Delta and other parts of the country. With an estimated population of one million, it is one of the most populous townships in Myanmar and is home to a large number of informal settlements. However, the township has inadequate infrastructure and services compared to its large and growing population. In 2020, the township was divided into two townships as West Hlaingtharya and East Hlaingtharya with the aim of improving the socio-economic condition and rule of law for its residents.

1. Putting Dreams on Hold: I Need to Prioritise My Family's Needs

My name is Yu Wai and I am 17 years old. I would call Hlaingtharya my home because I've been living there since I was little. I was only 10 when my father passed away eight years ago. Since then, my mother and siblings have worked together as street vendors selling seasonal fruits at the bus terminal. It was the only way for us to earn a living before the Covid pandemic. My brother worked menial labour and my sister worked at a factory.

Before Covid, I was a student and I finished grade 8. If not for Covid, I would have been in grade 9. Since I was a young kid, I always wanted to become an engineer and that's what motivated me to study hard at school. The Covid pandemic hit Myanmar after we took the final exam resulting in the countrywide lockdowns. My mom had to stop her work. My brother could no longer do casual work, and my sister also lost her factory job. Just like that, there was no more income at all for the whole family. I knew I had to do something to support my family. So, I told my mom we cannot continue like this for long and that I would start working during the summer break to support the family. That is how I began my job hunt. I remember it vividly because I did not tell my sister that I was looking for a job. Because I was underage, I had to use a surrogate ID¹ card to apply for jobs. But I did not land any job on my own. Later on, my sister found out about that, and with the help of her and her friends, I finally got a factory job.

It was in May 2020 when I started working at a factory. At that time, I just turned 15. I worked as a piece rate worker. The factory staff recorded the total output of my daily work and I got paid based on that. I worked from 8 am until 6:30 pm. I left my home around one and a half hours earlier so that I wouldn't miss the ferry picking us up at 7:15 am. I worked 6 days a week, and on some Sundays, I had to work

¹ In Myanmar, using a surrogate ID is a common tactic used by minors to apply for factory jobs.



overtime from 8 am to 4:30 pm. As a day labourer, I got paid 8,000 MMK² (3 GBP³) while monthly paid workers got 9,600 MMK (3.2 GBP) for working on Sunday. If we worked overtime during weekdays, we got 1,200 MMK per hour. On average, we worked 10 hours a day.

In my early days of working, I was not happy to be pressured to meet the production targets. Besides, wearing a mask all the time while working made me unable to breathe well. We were scolded by supervisors if we could not meet the production target. Those were the days I felt uneasy. But I did not share my feelings or talk about it anymore, not even to my mom. I keep it to myself because I did not want to burden them with my problems. In fact, my family did not want me to work as I am the youngest daughter. But we needed money to make ends meet. So, I was afraid that my mother would find out and would stop me from working. My mom always told me that a young person like me should be at school instead of doing menial labour. But I want to look after my mother by earning as much as possible to support my family. Although my mother said I was so young and delicate that I should be at school instead of doing menial labour, my family had no choice but to allow me to work. We needed a stable income. Whenever I feel so tired and frustrated at work, I talk and open up to female friends and seniors at work.

The second and third waves of the Covid pandemic caused the factories to suspend their operations. There were months with only 8 working days. When the factory resumed its operation, overtime work became scarce, and our working hours were reduced to only until 5 pm instead of 6:30 pm. During this time, my family had to depend on my brother's earnings from casual work and all our savings to survive. Sometime, my mother took out a few loans with interest guaranteeing to repay them when I resume my factory work. It was lucky that we received government support twice; 40,000 MMK (15 GBP), 20,000 MMK (7.5 GBP) and a bag of rice. Such support was a big help to cover our daily expenses. But, when the squatter housing units were demolished, our house was also destroyed. We were left with no choice but to move to a narrow and crowded dormitory style room. Now, we pay 80,000 MMK (30 GBP) a month for this accommodation which is a significant burden for my family.

I am now promoted to be a wage worker, but the flip side is that I got paid only 4,800⁴ MMK regardless of my production outputs. This is less than what I earned as a piece rate worker. I am not sure if it is because of Covid or other conditions in Myanmar. What I heard is that the roads are blocked and there are less raw materials being imported. That led to a limited number of supplies that had to be shared among work units in the factories. As a result, our wage has been reduced. But there is overtime work these days that pays me around 7,200 MMK (2.7 GBP) per day.

During the first wave of the pandemic, I was sick but there was no need for me to take an injection. But, during the third wave, I was very ill and lost my sense of smell. I was very scared as many people died. I had to take three shots to recover from the illness. I distanced myself from others because I did not want to infect anyone else.

I had originally planned to continue my education after the Covid pandemic but these circumstances forced me to prioritise earning money for my family's basic needs. My mother was also concerned and worried about me not continuing my education and being stuck in a menial job. Although Covid is now sort of over, things have not been the same as before. My mother had to stop selling fruits to take care of my grandmother, and my brother has moved out after getting married. This means that the

² The Myanmar Kyat (MMK) is the national currency of Myanmar

³ The British Pound Sterling (GBP) is the currency of the United Kingdom.

⁴ The minimum wage in Myanmar as of April 2023 is 4,800 MMK.

medical costs for my grandmother, food expenses, and rent all depend on my elder sister's wages. As a result, I have had to put my education dream on hold, even though I had originally planned to continue my studies after the Covid pandemic subsided.

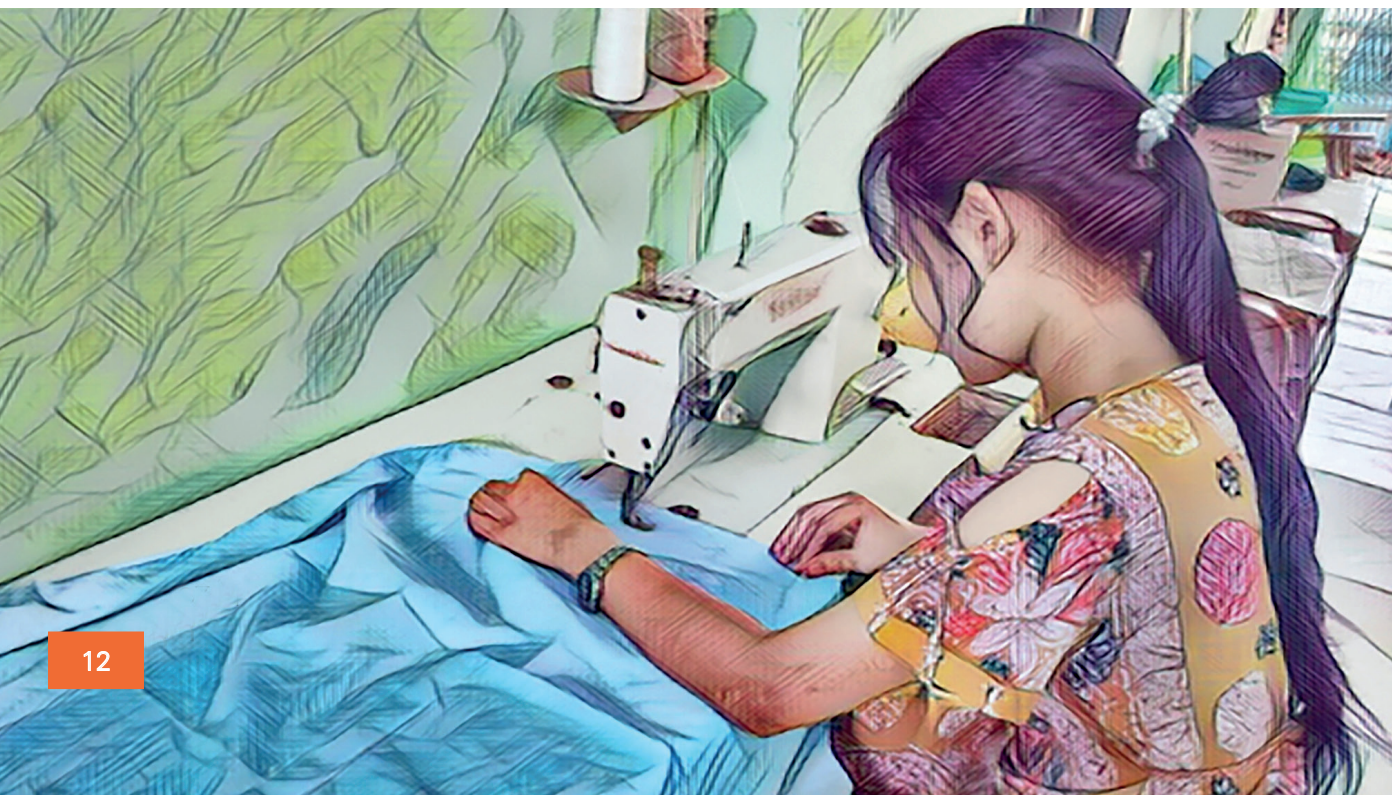
It is disappointing to think about the opportunities I might be missing out on by not pursuing higher education. I should be in grade 11 by now, but now I have only completed grade 9. I wanted to do a lot of things and used to dream of becoming an engineer, interpreter, or even a movie star if I have a chance. My mother also hoped that I would become a college graduate. However, under the current circumstances, I must be realistic and focus on what I can do to provide for my family. In the future, I want to start my own clothing and garment shop which will allow me to earn a stable income for my family.

2. Taking Care of My Mother and Making Ends Meet

My name is Aye Aye. I am 17 years old. I have two sisters and I am the youngest. My two older sisters have already got married. My father passed away when I was young. Before Covid, I lived with my mother, grandmother and my nephew. During the Covid, my uncle got divorced and he and his son came to live with us. My nephew is now in the first grade. I only attended school until the 8th grade. Our family has been living in Hlaingtharya since we were young. We had built a house in a slum community and lived there until the squatters were demolished last year. Now my family lives in a rented room at a dormitory with a monthly rent of 80,000 MMK (30 GBP).

Before Covid, I went to school. At that time, one of my older sisters was not married yet, so she was the only one who supported us financially with her work at a factory. Our family was able to live comfortably. In the past, I thought that I would continue till I finish high school. But my sister got married and moved out. This left us without no one to support and things became difficult. Our financial situation was not good to make ends meet. Both my mother and grandmother are too old to work. Eventually, I dropped out of school to support my family financially. Now, I am the only breadwinner for my family of five.

When I started working, I was 13. It was before the Covid. I was very young and I also did not have my identification card. So, I had to borrow someone else's identification card to start working as a day labourer at a garment factory. The lady near my house helped me find my first job. My job there was to put duck feathers or wool into warm clothing. I had to work for 10 hours a day, including Sundays as it was normal for a day labourer. There were almost no days off. The wage was only 4,500 MMK (1.8 GBP) per day. As a sewing assistant, it was a physically and mentally exhausting job. I had to finish between 100 and 150 pieces every day to meet the daily production target. If I would not finish the target, they would tell me off. If I made a small mistake, I would get scolded by senior and adult workers. I could not explain or speak up because



I was afraid of losing my job as jobs were scarce to find during Covid. So, I just listened to them and tried hard to finish the work on time. I worked there for about a year and a half. I had to make a lot of clothing every day and I was too tired. I finally quit that factory job because I could not do it anymore.

After leaving that factory job, my cousin sisters helped me get another job at a shoe factory. However, the working hours were even longer than the previous job. I work from 6 am to 6:30 pm, 12 to 14 hours a day. On the days when I had to work overtime, I worked until 8 pm. There was Sunday off a week. The salary was 250,000 MMK (100 GBP). My primary task was to glue the shoes and put ribbons before sending them to the tailors. Covid broke out when I was working there, and the factory was closed for a month. For that month, I only got 50,000 MMK (19 GBP) for my salary.

When the virus was very serious, the factory reduced day labourers. When the situation improved a little, they were called back for work. When the virus was less serious, the factory reopened but reduced the workforce by over 50 or 100 workers, mostly the day labourers. Luckily, I could still keep my job. However, to follow the social distancing rules and other preventive guidelines, the workers were asked to take turns working week by week. This meant that when we worked we had to work harder as there were fewer people. It was very exhausting. During the height of the pandemic, I did not have to work overtime and could return home earlier, around 4:30 or 5:30 pm. But because the working hours were reduced, there was a decrease in pay, my salary reduced to 150,000 MMK (100 GBP). Although I was less tired and had more free time, the salary reduction made it more difficult to make ends meet for my family than it was before Covid. We received rice and other essential commodities once when they were distributed in our neighbourhood. We also got 40,000 MMK (15 GBP). I don't remember for sure which group came for distribution. But those distributions helped my family. Later, those who came to donate did not come anymore.

During the Covid period, I was afraid of getting infected with the disease and I was so worried that I cried many times. I had thoughts like "what if my family and I were infected, what would I do, and how are we going to get treatment in such difficult times?". There was no money for medical treatment. I was also worried about not getting my salary if I got sick and couldn't go to work. If I do not get my salary, how are we going to eat, and how are we going to pay back the debts? These scenarios played in my head constantly leaving me anxious and distressed, and I cried a lot. So, even at home, I wore a mask to avoid getting infected because I was afraid of coming down with Covid. At first, when there were a high number of Covid cases, the factory provided us with masks and hand sanitizer. But later as time passed, the factory stopped providing face masks and people stopped wearing masks. I felt a bit strange to be at work without a mask and scared of getting infected. I think we were just lucky that my family and I did not have Covid.

I worked in that shoe factory for almost 3 years. As more and more people got Covid, the outbreak of Covid got so serious that the factory could not continue operations. The shoes were not sent and the work became unstable. The factory only paid 150,000 MMK (57 GBP) for the salary, so I decided to quit that job. I then started working as a sewing assistant in a garment factory. I have been working at this garment factory for about seven months. My job is to draw on the clothing with a pencil to be tailored. I have to finish 500 units every day. I have to work between 10 to 11 hours a day. We have no overtime work in this factory, so the salary is only 150,000 MMK (57 GBP) which is not enough to support my family. We often have to take on more debts to make ends meet.

We didn't have much debt before Covid. If we took a loan of 100,000 MMK (38 GBP), we could pay it back on time. When the Covid came, it became very difficult to

pay for rent, food, and repaying debts. When I get my salary, we have to pay back what we used in advance and money that we borrowed from others before the end of the month. Then we set aside the money to use for this month and it's hardly enough. We are having difficulties with paying back debts every month. There was a time when we couldn't pay back the debts, and I had to pawn my phone. Every month, most of my salary went to pay back debts which always made me sad and felt frustrated. And it breaks my heart seeing my mother cry because we could not pay debts. When I feel upset, I have a cousin sister whom I could share my feelings and emotions to.

I was very disappointed when I had to leave school and start working. But we needed the money. Starting work was exhausting for me because I only attended school and I had never worked before. There were times when I was so tired that I broke down and cried. I even told my mother that I did not want to work anymore. But she encouraged me to keep going, to bear with it and she said it would get easier and I would get used to it over time. I knew that my family relied on me and I just pushed myself to work harder. Eventually, like my mother said, I got used to the work slowly, I kept working with a desire to support my family. Now, although my mother said I should return to school, I have no plan to return to school. I have decided to take care of my mother and ensure that our ends will meet.

3. I Carry Loads to Support My Family

My name is Kyaw Swar and I am 17 years old. It's been about 14 years since my family moved to Hlaingtharya, and I have grown up here. My family consists of seven: my grandmother, mother, elder sister, little sister, two nieces, and myself. My father passed away four years ago. My grandmother is 82 and in poor health. My mother cares for all of us. We cannot afford to get ill. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, my elder sister worked at a dried fish factory to help support our family. My little sister and I were both students. I had just finished grade 8. I loved attending school, and my favourite hobby is reading. I have always dreamt of becoming a doctor someday. Unfortunately, when the pandemic hit, the school was closed, and my sister lost her job. It became even more challenging than before for my family to make ends meet.

Prior to the pandemic, my family's financial situation was relatively stable. My elder sister's income coupled with my earnings from part-time work during school holidays, allowed us to make ends meet. We were able to afford basic necessities, and my little sister and I could attend school. But, as the Covid situation grew worse, my elder sister's work was affected, and her working days and hours were reduced and became irregular. She was only able to work for 3 days a week. She got 3,000 MMK (1.1 GBP) only for each day she worked. She said goods are not getting delivered on time due to frequent lockdowns.

Although there was low income in the first and second waves, we could still survive on rice and food from donors. We received rice packs two to three times. Each pack could feed us about 15 or 20 days. We did not get cash assistance because we do not have a family registration except the one that was declared on TV that all households would receive 40,000 MMK (15 GBP) from the government regardless of household registration. Later, there were not many donors. My family situation became worse when slum evictions happened at the end of the 2021. Before, we did not have to pay any rental fees. But after the house was demolished, our family lived in a hostel. We had to pay 80,000 MMK (30 GBP) rent per month. Every situation for my family became difficult because we had to save money to pay rent every month. Even if we tried to make our ends meet, we



could not do it because the price of basic commodity goods increased. So we borrowed money from others with the high interest rate to survive.

When my family situation became worse, and with the school closed, I started to find a job. Actually, I have been working since I was 13 years old. I worked as a mason during the school holidays with neighbours. I also worked as a dock loader. At that time, it was not easy finding work because I was still young and physically small. Now, as I am more physically developed, there are more opportunities for me to get a job. I have been working as a dock loader starting from March or April 2021 during Covid-19. A neighbourhood friend who was working at the Bayintnaung market asked me to work with them. I have been working as a dock loader ever since.

When I worked as a dock loader, I got up at 5:30 am and went to work by boat. I arrived at the workplace before 6 am and then started to work. There were 50 or 60 people carrying goods, mostly adults and young boys who were around the same age as me. When the ship was moored, I carried goods competing with adults. The work finished at 5.30 pm. I worked 11 hours a day and there was only a five or ten minute break to have lunch. This work was very difficult for me. I had to carry 30 or 40 loads a day. When I carried goods every day, I felt a backache. My mother gave me medicine to take from the store every night. When I woke up the next morning, I felt better and then I went to work. If the goods came normally, I could earn more money. But the maximum was about 4,500 MMK. If the goods were less, I only got 3,000 to 4,000 MMK (1.5 GBP). On the day the goods didn't arrive, the employer gave me 1,000–1,500 MMK (0.4–0.6 GBP) for transportation and went back home. I felt disappointed these days.

My family members got sick because there were many people who caught the Covid-19 at the place where I was working. My elder sister and I had to take a break from work for one week. And then, I went back to work to support my family. I took medicine and wore a mask when I went to work, though I was not feeling well. Because Covid was really bad at that time, employees who wore masks were only allowed to come to work. Masks were very expensive, and we could not afford to buy them. So, I did not go to work.

Now, I no longer work at the Bayintnaung market because the pay was low. Now, I have been working at the chicken-feed processing warehouse for the last two months. I work from 6 am to 6:30 pm. When goods arrive regularly, I earn 10,000 MMK (3.7 GBP) and when the goods do not arrive, I get 6,000 MMK (2.3 GBP) per day. There are only five workers including myself, so I do not have to compete with others to carry the goods. There are days I have to carry 60 to 70 heavy loads. But there is no more back pain like before because I am getting used to this work. But sometimes when I slipped while carrying goods, I got a backache. It got better after I applied ointment. Although I now make more money than before, paying for the rent and paying my little sister's school fees make it harder for us to make ends meet compared to our situation before the pandemic. Now, there is only my income because my elder sister no longer has a job. There are days we only have one meal for the whole day to balance between my income and family expenses.

I usually open up to my mother when I feel sad and tired. Although our lives become harder, we try to make ourselves happy by joking or teasing each other. Now, schools are reopened and I see children going to school. I wish I could go back to school and study. I feel sad because I can't afford to study. If there is any chance for me to attend school, I will go back to school. But I cannot because I have to earn money to support my family. Although my dream is to become a doctor, now if I have money, I will buy a little compound to live with my family happily and peacefully. I will try my best to make my dreams come true.



4. From a Young Student Transitioning Into Migrant Worker

My name is Aung Htet and I am a Karen boy. I come from a family of six. I am the second among the four siblings. I am 14 and my elder sister is 17. My younger sister and brother are 9 and 8 years old and they go to school. It has been five years since we moved from Twente township in Yangon Region to Hlaingtharya. When we first arrived here, we rented a small house. My parents were able to find jobs and later saved up enough money to buy a small piece of land by instalment in one of the squatter communities in Hlaingtharya. We built a small house to live there. So, we did not have to pay rent.

Before the Covid outbreak, my family was doing well. Both my parents and my sister were all working. My father worked as a security guard at a construction site, while my mother worked in a Chinese snack shop. My sister dropped out of school when she was in Grade 11 to help support the family. She worked at the same shop where my mother worked and where she earned around 1.8 Lakh MMK (68 GBP) per month. There, she even learned to speak some Chinese. My younger sister and I were attending school. I finished grade 8.

However, after Covid started, things took a turn for the worse. Both my parents lost their jobs and my family's situation became very difficult. After the first wave, my father lost his job as the construction site closed down due to Covid. Following that, the Chinese snack shop where my mother was working also closed down and moved to another place. They stopped hiring my mother. Since then, my parents could no longer work full time and mostly stayed home which really affected us financially. Although my father worked casual jobs occasionally whenever available, these jobs were not regular. So, we struggled to make ends meet. So, after finishing the final exam and during the summer holiday, I started working at my sister's workplace as a live-in worker. Since then, my sister and I have become the main earners for our family and my family entirely relied on our incomes.

My job there was preparing dough for steaming, grinding wheat and cutting or mincing pork to make Chinese pork buns, dumplings and other snacks. We only earned on the days that the business operated. So, I earned around 50,000–80,000 MMK (19–30 GBP) per month. My sister's earnings also went down from 1.8 Lakh MMK to 80,000 MMK (30 GBP). During the Covid pandemic, the dumpling business was not doing well, so there were fewer orders. So we only had 5 to 10 working days a month. The regular working hours started from 8 am to 8 pm. On less busy days, we finished at 8 pm. But on most busy days like festival days, we had to start working as early as at 7 am and finish as late as 1 or 2 am next day or sometimes 4 am the following morning. We barely had time for breaks on working days, and we could only rest when the employers went outside. On days that we were not making dumplings, we had to prepare meals and do house chores. I had to cut a large amount of pork which often left my hands sore and joints hurt.

During the Covid waves, we were not allowed to go home as the employers were concerned that we would catch the virus and spread. So, my sister and I could not visit our family. Although I was worried about my family and wanted to visit them, I was also afraid of catching the virus and losing my job. I was stressed, but I did not share my feelings. I just played mobile games and sometimes prayed to God.

My family and I did not catch the virus during the waves, but we did have some illness and health issues. Before closing down his job site, my father had to stay in quarantine because someone at his work got tested positive with Covid-19. And since my youngest brother was not very healthy, he often got sick, so we often had to take him to the clinic and buy medicine for him. Because medicines were getting more expensive during the pandemic and its peaks, we had to prioritise buying medicine over spending on food.

For me, in the aftermath of the third wave, I had an accident while helping my employers move to a new place. I fell off the truck and broke my right hand. I was taken to a clinic. My employers paid the medical bill and later deducted the cost from my wages. So, I earned 50,000 MMK (19 GBP) only for that month. Because of injury, I was unable to work and took two weeks off work but when I returned, I was expelled from work. With my sister's income alone, it was extremely challenging for us. We had to reduce our meals and other expenses to make ends meet. We even had to borrow money from a neighbour at a 20 percent interest rate to cover the cost of medicine and follow-up visits to the clinic. Sometimes, my sister's income was used to repay these debts. At one point, we received a donation of rice, eggs and cooking oil that we could eat for about two months. However, such donations became less frequent after the third wave.

Following the accident and my return home, the houses in the squatter area that we lived in were demolished. We returned to our hometown as we could not afford to rent a new place to live. Sometime later, my sister left her job at the Chinese snack shop and found work in Laukai, a Myanmar-China border town. After a few months, I followed her to start working at a restaurant with the help of her friend. I have been working here for over a year now. My job involves assisting in making fruit juice and drinks as well as making Chinese snacks. I work along with three other adult workers who are all older than me. My job requires me to switch between day and night shifts, but mostly I work the night shift from 8 am to 8 pm, which is quite exhausting and sleepy. I live in the dormitory provided by the employer, but since we work different shifts and long hours, I don't have many friends to talk to. And, due to the security reasons we [workers] are not allowed to leave the work compound freely.

Before, I planned to return to school and study till high school and take the matriculation exam no matter if I would pass the exam or not. But it seems very impossible at the moment as my family relies on my sister's and my income. I do not know what to expect and hope for the future since I cannot go back to school. I am not sure what I would have to do if not for this job. My sister told me to learn Chinese so that I can work as an interpreter or have better job opportunities. But I like playing mobile games and I always do in my free time. I want to become a gamer. I admire those gamers who represent their country and I want to be like them.

5. All I Need Is a Stable Job

My name is Aung Htun and I am a 17 years old boy. My family consists of eight people including my parents, five siblings including myself, and my nephew. Our hometown is WaKalMa Township, but we moved to Hlaingtharyar about three or four years ago, before the Covid 19 pandemic began. Back in our hometown, my father earned a living through fishing. One day, he heard that there were more job opportunities in Hlaingtharyar, so we decided to move there. Unfortunately, things didn't turn out as we expected. Even before the pandemic, finding a job was difficult, but there were still jobs to do and we all worked hard to make ends meet. When the pandemic hit, things got even harder, and we struggled to maintain a stable income. Now, although Covid cases have decreased recently, my family is still struggling to find work and we have not been able to secure a regular source of income.

After we moved to Hlaingtharyar, my father got a job as a water gate valve guard, and we all lived near his workplace. Before the Covid outbreak, my mother used to work as a woodchopper for a living, but now she stays at home to take care of the children and does house chores. My older sister worked at a small restaurant and earned 4,000 MMK (1.5 GBP) per day. My 12-year-old younger brother and 9-year-old younger sister also worked at a small restaurant. They were in grade 4 before they started working. If they still want to go back to school, we will let them, but they are not interested in pursuing education anymore. My older brother never went to school and he started working at a young age. Unfortunately, he had a brain infection caused by hepatitis when he was 14, which affected his brain. My mother never asks him to do hard labour. So, he only works when he wants to. I went to school until grade 1, and when I was 13 years old, I started working with my brother. We worked as masons and also worked at a tea shop, tavern, and pub.

When the Covid pandemic began, my older brother and I were working at a tavern in Shwegonetaing, downtown. I was too young to know how much we earned, but my mother managed our salaries so only she knows about it. We woke up at 5 am every day to help cook and prepare the tavern for opening. We worked at the shop during the day and at night we polished sculptures because our employer was a sculptor. We delivered the sculptures at 9 pm and returned at 12 am. My older brother enjoyed polishing the sculptures because he felt like he was learning new skills and techniques from doing it. But, we quit because we felt anxious about delivering the sculptures late at night, which we thought some people might think that we were doing something illegal or look bad in the eyes of others. At that time, my neighbour friends, who worked as dock loaders at the Byintnaung Market, asked us to join them, so we started working there. My older brother worked from 12 pm to 4 pm, and I worked from 4 am to 5 pm. I earned 2,000 or 3,000 MMK (0.7–1 GBP) on days when there were fewer loads, but I earned 4,000 or 5,000 MMK (1.5–1.9 GBP) on days





when there were more loads.

When Covid-19 first started, lockdown rules were not very strict, so we could still go out and work a little. But later, the preventive measures became stricter, and we could not work anymore. During the third wave, the situation became even worse as there was a curfew due to the high number of Covid infections. The worst part was that I could only go out to work between 6 am and 8 pm, which meant that we had fewer working hours. And my older sister's tavern work became so irregular that she could not work everyday. Our family struggled to make ends meet.

In the beginning of Covid, my family received relief support for essential food supplies from the church. For financial support, we received 40,000 MMK (15 GBP) from the government. We had to cook two pounds of rice for a day because we are a big family. It was a little convenient when we received such donation. Lately, no one came because the situation was bad. So, there haven't been any donors for a long time.

After being evicted from our slum house, my family had no place to live. So we moved here. Now my father is working as a day labourer in a construction site. His job is just random, so he does not always have to go to work. My elder sister also struggled with her job, which became irregular and she had to work every other day. She eventually left the family leaving her son with us. We do not know where she is and have lost contact with her. So, my family is now taking care of my nephew who is just one year old. Unfortunately, our family got sick, and we could not afford to go to the clinic, so my mother made a herbal decoction to treat us. Although I was also sick, I had work to do so I didn't take time off, because work may not always be available. If there was no work, I didn't want to take a rest but I had to. Even though the lockdown rules have been eased, there has been no steady work for us, and we continue to struggle to make ends meet.

During the last two months, I have been working at a different warehouse after leaving the Bayintnaung warehouse. On days when there are loads to carry, I can earn a daily wage of 4,000 to 6,000 MMK (1.5–2.3 GBP). However, when there are fewer or no loads to carry, my employer may ask me to leave without compensating my transportation expenses, and it is really difficult for me. Sometimes, my mother borrows money from others to make ends meet. My elder brother once told me that he felt torn when he could not afford to feed our hungry and crying nephew, and ended up scolding and beating him. For me, when I feel upset, I pray and my mother also told me to always pray because I feel relieved when I pray.

Now, as the pandemic has ended, I am looking for a job with a stable income, like working in a factory. I find that carrying loads is not a stable job, so I'm hoping to find a job at a drinking water factory. At the moment, I have applied for a job as a mason, and I will take it if I get hired. Since my father is getting old and can't work like he used to, I want him to take a rest from doing hard labour. My plan for the future is to work hard, save up money to buy our own home, and live happily with my family. I'm hopeful that my dreams will come true.

6. My Longing to Reunite With My Mother

I am Tun Tun, a 16 years old boy who was born in Hlaingtharya. My mother said I am different from other kids, and needed special care due to my intellectual disability. My parents came to the town and settled when it was first established as a township. We used to live in a small family of five with my parents, my two older sisters, and myself when my father was still with us. Unfortunately, he passed away when I was just one year old due to stomach disease. After his death, my mother, my two older sisters, and I moved in with our sick grandmother as we could not afford to live on our own. But, due to my grandmother's medical expenses, and eventually, we had to sell her house to cover the cost. When my grandmother passed away, we were left with nowhere to go. So, we ended up living under a highway bridge where we built a small hut to live in. As time went by, my older sisters got married and moved away to other towns where they started their own families. They hardly ever contact us, so it's just my mother and I left alone. My mother is now 52 years old. Since my father passed away, she has worked tirelessly at various jobs to make ends meet and take care of me. She has worked as a cleaner at a factory, at a tea shop, construction work, and taking on casual jobs within our community.

When I was a child, my mother had a big dream for me. She wanted me to finish high school. But, I was able to attend school only until grade two due to my autism spectrum disorder, which made me different from other kids and also affected my ability to communicate. I was often a target for bullying at school. My mother was concerned about my safety and well-being at school, and eventually pulled me out of



school. Since then, I started to follow her wherever she went, whether it was to collect waste, to work at a tea shop or work at casual jobs. I have helped and worked along with my mother since then.

Before Covid, my mother and I had worked different jobs. We used to clean a factory and earned 35,000 MMK (13 GBP) per month for two years. We even cleaned the manager's house and got paid extra for it. Unfortunately, our employer left and we had to find a new job. So, we started working at a tea shop and worked there for three years. But, the shop had to close down for some reason, and we lost our job. After that, we started collecting waste and bottles in the streets and neighbourhood to make ends meet. It turned out to be a good way to earn a living because we made around 10,000–20,000 MMK (3.8–7.5 GBP) per day. It was hard work, but my mother and I could work together and we were okay because of it.

When Covid hit and the lockdowns began, it became even more challenging for us to make a living from collecting waste. We were not allowed to go out as freely as we used to, during the day or at night. The places where we used to collect bottles and waste were closed. Fewer people were going out due to the pandemic and workplace closure resulting in less recycled waste to collect. Sometimes, we had to begin working very early in the morning, around 3 or 4 am and finish around 8 or 9 am, and only earned about 3,000 MMK (1.3 GBP). Our financial situation became very difficult because we had no income and the prices of commodities increased.

In the early days of Covid outbreak, we received some relief assistance, two kilos of rice and one bottle of cooking oil, which was not enough to sustain us. Sometimes, we had to borrow rice from our neighbours, and my mother even had to borrow money with interest on the days when we couldn't go out to work and didn't have anything to eat. There were times when we only had enough food for breakfast and went without dinner. Sometimes, we just ate plain rice with oil, and salt. In the beginning of the pandemic, we received two kilos of rice and one bottle of oil. For those days that we had donations we could stay home and no need to go out to collect bottles.

During the pandemic, my mother and I did not contract the virus. My mother and I always wore masks when we went out for work. We also made sure to wash our hands and clean ourselves before entering our home. I have a stomach disease, which made me visit the clinic when it got worse. After breakfast and a shower, my mother would let me rest so that I wouldn't become too tired and start shouting or becoming aggressive. My mother is physically healthy but sometimes she is stressed and depressed. She was worried about not being able to find a job and making ends meet. She worried that if we couldn't earn enough money, I would be in trouble. She worries that something bad would happen to me because I sometimes do things that worry her. These thoughts sometimes made her depressed.

About two years ago and during the Covid, our home, along with those of other squatters was demolished. I felt desperately about that because my mother and I had lived there since I was young. Just before it was destroyed, we put so much effort into repairing the wall and the roof because they leaked during the raining season. We even had to borrow money from our employer to make these repairs. However, all of our hard work went to waste and we were left with a debt to repay. It was a sad and frustrating reality for us.

Fortunately, we received housing assistance from Tdh for three months. But after three months, we were unable to pay the rent and my mother sent me to a friend's home in another township. My mother stays with other 6–7 women who she can share the rent with. I cannot stay there since I am a boy. It has been 6 months now my mother and I live separately. She visits me on weekends. But sometimes I miss her

so much that I took a long bus ride and came alone to see her. My mother does not like me taking the bus alone because she worries that something bad would happen to me. She always said "Be patient and wait a little more, I am working hard to save money to bring you back and live here together."

Currently, my mother works very hard to earn a living and bring me back to live with her. She does many different jobs, such as selling flowers, collecting waste, doing casual work, and sometimes even doing house chores and washing for other people in our community. She can earn around 4,000 to 5,000 MMK (1.5–1.9 GBP) a day, and she saves some of her earnings to pay for our rent. For example, if she earns 5,000 MMK in a day, she puts aside 2,000 MMK (0.75 GBP) for rent and she often eats very little to save money for us. My mother always tells me that she wants to make sure that I am safe and taken care of, when something happens to her.

In the past, I did not like collecting waste because it was too hot walking around the streets under the sun and I was too hot and too tired. My dream was to have my own food cart to sell papaya salad. I also wanted to learn how to drive as cars are always my favourite toys. But, things have changed a lot for us due to Covid. All I want now is to work and live with my mother again, just like before. I want to work hard and save up money to rent a room and buy a waste collecting cart so that we can collect waste together again. My only wish is for things to get better like the way it used to be. I just hope that it will happen soon.

***Note:** Please, note that since it was difficult to talk to the child alone, we had a conversation with both the child and his mother, and the story was written from the child's perspective.*

7. I Sold Flowers to Support My Family During Pandemic

I am Wai Wai, a 13-year-old girl. I belong to a family of five members: my father, mother, elder brother, younger sister, and me. My father drives a construction truck to earn money for our family. But he does not live with us in Yangon as he works in another town. He is only able to visit us once a month due to the distance, but he does transfer money to us to make ends meet. My mother used to sell snacks in the community to support our family but she does not work anymore as she recently gave birth to my younger sister and needs to take care of her. After our home in the slum community was destroyed in the third wave of Covid, my family moved to a cramped dormitory-style room near where we used to live. My mother could not sell snacks anymore since then.

Before Covid, I had just completed fourth grade and was studying with a neighbor teacher, who taught me, as I was about to enter fifth grade. My 16 years old elder brother had completed sixth grade, dropped out of school to support our family selling flowers at the traffic lights in the downtown area. He sometimes brought me along to the places where he sold flowers, and that was how I started selling flowers. At the time, I was only 11 years old, but I wanted to help my family as we were struggling to make ends meet. I was too young to fully understand why my family was struggling financially. But I am proud to be able to contribute to our family's income through selling flowers.

Everyday, my brother and I took a bus and headed downtown at around 11 am. Once we arrived, we grabbed some food for breakfast before collecting flowers from our employer. We began selling them in the afternoon. Because we could sell more flowers in the evening and night, we started selling until 12–12:30 am. There were times when we missed the last bus, so we had to sleep at the traffic lights. As a wage, we received 1,000 MMK (0.38 GBP) in return for every 5,000 MMK (1.9 GBP) worth of flowers we sold. On a regular day, I could sell between 10,000–15,000 MMK (3.8–5.7 GBP) and earn around 2,000–3,000 MMK (1 GBP) per day. My brother sold more flowers, selling up to 30,000 MMK (11 GBP) worth of flowers and earning 6,000 MMK (2.3 GBP) per day.

When the Covid outbreak hit and restrictions were put in place, it was difficult for us to go to work and come back home. So, we could spend more time selling flowers both during the day and at night. Everyday, we woke up early at around 6 or 7 am and headed



out to sell flowers. We then returned for lunch and rest at around 11 am or 12 pm. After that, I would go back out to sell flowers at 3 or 4 pm until the time when cars were no longer on the road. We returned to the rented room and slept until the next morning.

During the Covid waves, we faced the same difficulties as many others. My father had no work because his driving job was not going well. My mother could not sell food because she was pregnant. So my family solely relied on the money my brother and I earned from selling flowers to make ends meet. During the second wave of Covid, my mother fell ill and had to be hospitalized after coughing up blood. She tested positive for Covid after being discharged from the hospital, and I stayed with her at the Covid Center for a week. My brother stopped selling flowers because he had to take care of us and our little sister while we were sick. It's been a tough time for us because, without any work or income, we had to borrow money from others to make ends meet. During that time, we received essential food items four or five times from generous donors. Additionally, my teacher provided us with eggs every week, which we used to supplement our meals. As if things weren't already difficult enough, our slum house was destroyed along with others, so we had to rent a very small dormitory-style room. We now have to pay 80,000 MMK (30 GBP) per month for rent and electricity, which has made things even more challenging. My father sent us money to cover the rent. And my brother had to go back to work to support us.

When my grandfather heard that we had trouble making ends meet, he supported us, since he was doing well financially. But we could not rely on him for too long, so I started looking for a job. I took up a job washing beer bottles when I heard about an opportunity. The work paid me 5,000 MMK (1.89 GBP) a day for carrying bags of bottles and washing them with water all day. The job was a very tiring job that I only managed to last for two weeks before I felt too exhausted to continue.

Thankfully, a neighbor sister helped me to get a job at a factory where she worked. I have been working there for the past two months as a day laborer, earning 3,600 MMK (1.36 GBP) per day. As a helper, my tasks involve cutting clothing, washing them, and drying them. I do all the work instructed by senior tailors. The working hours are from 8 am to 4:30 pm, and if they call for overtime, the overtime shifts are divided into different shifts at 6:30 pm, 8:30 pm, and 10:30 pm. I am paid 600 MMK (0.22 GBP) per hour of overtime. If I work overtime more, I get more money.

My current work at the garment factory is good for me. I feel more comfortable working here than selling flowers because I don't have to walk around under the hot sun and my legs don't hurt anymore. But if possible, I want to work at a sewing factory to earn more money. My dream of becoming a teacher has not changed. If possible, I still want to go to school and try to become a teacher. But, for now, I plan to work hard in my current work to make ends meet because this is more important for my family.

8. I Just Want a Comfortable Job in the Shade

My name is Maung Maung. I am a 15-year-old Karen boy. I come from a big family of nine members, including my parents. I have seven siblings and I am the fourth child. My three older siblings are all married, but my older sisters are still living with us. My two younger siblings are currently attending school but the youngest one hasn't yet started. We moved from Ayeyarwady Region to Hlaingtharya. Before, we built our own hut in one of Hlaingtharya's squatter areas, so we didn't have to pay rent. However, last year, just after the third wave of Covid, the houses in the slums, including ours, were demolished. Because we are a big family, it was tough finding a new place to live, so renting a room in a hostel wasn't an option. Fortunately, we found a plot of land owned by someone else in Hlaingtharya and we asked if we could rent to build a new house for us to live there.

Now that we have to pay rent for the land we live on, we all need to work to make ends meet. Even during the Covid period, I had to find a job. Before Covid, I used to work at a tea shop and a beer restaurant in Insein. But during the pandemic, my father, sister, and I were unable to find regular jobs for two years, which made it challenging to manage our expenses.

In the past, my two elder sisters and I used to work to support our family. They worked in a factory, and I worked at a restaurant. My father had casual jobs, so he did not always have work. When work was scarce, I would go to the creek to catch fish, or if someone needed help carrying bananas, I would do that. Sometimes, I worked as a day labourer when people were building houses in the village. My mother took care of the household chores, cooked meals, and looked after my youngest sister.

During the peak of Covid cases, we were unable to work, and this led to a decrease in income. As a result, it became even more challenging for us to make ends meet, and we struggled to have regular meals like before. Thankfully, we received some help from the government in the form of 30,000 MMK (11 GBP) once and 40,000



MMK (15 GBP) once, as well as two bags of rice from the basic food supplies distributed in our ward. Since our family is quite large, one bag of rice only lasted for about 15 days, and after that, we had to manage with whatever we had. Sometimes, we had to go without meals altogether. This made me sad, especially when I saw my younger siblings unable to enjoy snacks like they used to and crying because of hunger.

During the peak of Covid cases, we were scared of catching the virus, so we stayed indoors and made sure to wear face masks and use hand sanitizers. However, my brother, father, sister, and I still fell ill. Unfortunately, we couldn't afford to see a doctor, so we had to borrow money to buy medicine. We also had to borrow money in monthly instalments because we were already struggling to make ends meet. The interest rates were also high, going from 15% to 20%. It was hard to find people willing to lend us money. And borrowing money and paying interest only made things worse. I need to find a job so I can pay off our debts. It's hard not to feel upset when we have so many debts to pay back.

Back when I was living in the village with my grandparents, life was great. I enjoyed going to school and had no worries. However, things took a turn when my elder sister got married and there was no one left at home to work. So, at the age of 11 or 12, I had to start working to help make ends meet. I did all sorts of jobs such as masonry work, carrying sand, digging the ground, and hauling gravel from the car. Eventually, I found a job as a live-in worker at a tea shop in Insein through the help of a neighbour, where I worked 14 hours a day for a monthly salary of 60,000 MMK (22.7 GBP). Unfortunately, working there was tough, as I didn't get enough sleep because of long working hours and harsh conditions. The owner was also cruel, often cursing at his employees while we worked. It made me feel uneasy and uncomfortable to continue working there, so I eventually ran away with a friend and returned home to Hlaingtharyar. A lot of people who worked at that shop also ran away before me due to similar reasons.

Subsequently, my friend's mother helped me find a job at a beer restaurant in Hlaingtharya where I earned a higher salary of 70,000 MMK (26.5 GBP) per month. However, the job was even more exhausting than the previous one as I had to work for 18 hours a day, starting from 5 am until 11 pm, and I only got 4.5 to 5 hours of sleep. Because of sleeplessness, I became very thin. What made it worse was that some customers would get drunk and verbally abuse me, which made me very distressed. Eventually, I could only work for 15 days before quitting. I didn't receive my full salary.

When Covid-19 first hit, I was working as a waiter at a school in Hlaingtharyar. I had been working there for about 4 or 5 months, earning around 3,000 MMK (1 GBP) per day while working for only 8 hours a day. The owner was kind, and I even received some pocket money. However, when the Covid cases started to rise, the school was closed, and the restaurant had to close as well. This meant that I couldn't work anymore, and neither could my father or sister because there were no jobs available due to the factories and other workplaces closing down.

Even if there were job opportunities, the wages had decreased drastically. For example, before the pandemic, a day labourer could earn 10,000 MMK (3.8 GBP) per day, but now it was only 7,000–8,000 MMK (2.6–3 GBP). Although the wages were low, we had no other choice but to take on whatever work we could find to survive. During the lockdowns, we were barely able to make ends meet, and it was an incredibly challenging time for us.

When the number of Covid cases reduced a little, I found a job at a garment factory. My work was to carry fabric rolls and garments that had already been sewn, and place them on a car. I had to work for 10 hours each day and was paid 5,000 MMK (1.9 GBP) per day. However, my job lasted for only two weeks because the factory had to reduce the number of workers since they weren't receiving any more garments.

After losing my job, I returned to my village with my father since there were only a few jobs available in Hlaingtharya. For almost three months, my father and I worked as grain carriers, doing both day and night shifts and earning almost 20,000 MMK (7.6 GBP) per day. However, due to the poor prices of rice, these jobs ceased, and we had to return to Yangon. To make some money, we went to the forest and cut down trees and branches to sell as firewood. We did this for three months before returning to Hlaingtharya. Recently, I began a new job as a mason at a construction site where a factory is being built. I started working there two days ago.

My sister and I both have jobs now, which makes it a bit easier for us to make ends meet compared to when Covid infections were widespread. It was tough for me to find a job and I got tired of constantly moving from one job to another, but not having a job was even harder. I had to take whatever job I could get. I feel happy when I'm working, but when I'm at home without a job, I feel miserable. It's even worse when there are fights or problems at home, especially between my sister and her husband, who doesn't have a job. Whenever I feel upset, I visit my friends whom I can share my feelings with and play football with.

In the future, I hope things will get better and life will be more manageable like it used to be. I would like to have a regular job that doesn't involve long hours, no sleep, and being yelled at like working in a tea shop or beer restaurant. I'm interested in fixing air conditioners, but it's not a must. I do not have any big plans for the future. I get really tired when I have to work outside under the hot sun, so if possible, I want to do a job that's comfortable and done in the shade. That's all I just hope for.

9. Working at a Wig Factory as a Gratitude to My Parents

My name is Thet Thet and I am 15 years old. I have six siblings including my twin sister and me. There are two older and two younger siblings. Just before the Covid pandemic, our eldest brother got married and moved out to start his own family. Five of us are staying with our parents. We all children were born in Hlaingtharya. Before the Covid pandemic, my family rented a squatter area in Hlaingtharya with 80,000 MMK (30 GBP) monthly rental fee and built a small house there to live in.

Before the Covid pandemic, my father was working as a three-wheeler driver and also provided water delivery service in our neighbourhood to support our family. My mother used to sell fruits in the market but she stopped working since our little sister was born as she was too young and needed constant care. My elder sister, my twin sister and I were attending school. My elder sister studied grade 8 and my twin sister and I were in grade 5. Our eldest brother also worked as a three-wheeler driver to contribute to the family's income. But he got married and started supporting his own family. So, my family had to rely solely on my father's earnings. Our financial struggles started since then, and it was challenging for us to make ends meet. So, to help support the family, my elder sister dropped out of school to work as a daily labourer at a garment factory earning 4,800 MMK (1.8 GBP) a day. At that time, she was just 14 years old, so she borrowed a neighbour's ID to apply for a factory job. As a day labourer, it is a requirement that she needs to show a national registration identity card to enter the workplace every day. After working there for three months, she had to quit the job as that neighbour friend needed her ID back to apply for a job for herself. She tried to request a day off to find another ID card but the request was denied and that's how she lost that job.

Due to Covid regulations such as curfews, movement restrictions, and no passing zones, my father's job as a three-wheeler driver was not doing well. Before that, he could earn more by working early in the morning or late at night, but that was no longer possible. As a result, my family's financial situation became worse and we fell into debt to survive. Consequently, my twin sister and I had to find ways to make money to support our family.

When schools closed down, my twin sister and I started looking for jobs to earn some money. A woman from our neighbourhood helped us get jobs at a wig factory, with a broker fee of 10,000 MMK (3.8 GBP) for each of us. The factory was conveniently located in our neighbourhood and we worked from 8 am to 5 pm with a one-hour lunch break. Our job was to knot a single hair using a needle which required a sharp eye for detail. Sometimes, my eyes got sore and I accidentally got pricked by a needle. We were scolded if we took more than a 15-minute break. The pay was between 10,000 and 15,000 MMK (3.8–5.7 GBP) per wig, and it took us about a month to finish one or two wigs with relentless hard work. While we could have worked on the wigs at home and potentially finished them more quickly, we were worried that the quality of the electricity at our house could damage the wigs. We could not afford to pay for any damage since the work requires a sharp eye for details. During the high peak of Covid-19 cases, there was no work available due to the shortage of raw materials that arrived from China. So work was only available for 10–15 days per month. However, when the raw materials arrived, we had to work overtime, sometimes until midnight, to finish urgent orders in a short amount of time.



My elder sister joined us at the wig factory after losing her job at the garment factory. She also took other factory jobs when they were available. Later, she left and worked at a snack retail shop in our neighbourhood, but she wasn't paid properly. In the first month, she was paid in rice and cooking oil, and in the following months, she only received 50,000 MMK (19 GBP) for her work. She was verbally assaulted for making a mistake for miscalculating prices. Eventually, our father made her quit that job. Now, she is working as a day labourer at a bag production factory, where she earns 3,600 MMK (1.4 GBP) per day.

In July 2022, my twin sister stopped working at the wig factory and helped my mother sell items for about one to two months. She now works at a hat factory, earning a daily wage of 3,600 MMK (1.4 GBP). If she works overtime, she gets paid 900 MMK (0.34 GBP) per hour. She works from 8 am to 6 pm every day. As for me, I am still working at the wig factory, but I have been asked to work in a different unit where I have to separate individual hair strands from a bunch of hair by striking them. It's a tough task and I hurt my shoulders and hands while doing it. I get paid only 3,500 MMK (1.4 GBP) after finishing 20 tufts of hair, and I have to finish 40 tufts every day from 8 am to 5:30 pm without any breaks. Sometimes, I feel like I can't do it anymore because it takes a lot of energy to keep doing the same task for the whole day.

The third wave was a really difficult time for us. Everyone in my family got sick one after the other although we all stayed home except for my father who went out to buy food and necessities. We suffered from minor colds and treated ourselves by buying medicine from the local drug store. However, this period was incredibly difficult for us as the prices of medicines went up very quickly and became very expensive. We could not afford them.

After the third wave, many homes in the squatter area were demolished and we had to move to dormitory-style housing in Hlaingtharya. The rent for one room was 60,000 MMK (22.7 GBP) per month, but our family needed two rooms at a total cost of 120,000 MMK (45 GBP) per month because my family was too big for one. This meant that we had to pay more rent than before. To cover the rent and support ourselves, my father resumed his job as a three-wheeler driver, and my twin sister, elder sister, and I were also working. This allowed us to slowly pay off our debt.

Previously, we considered returning to school once classes resumed. But, it seems impossible to do so. The cost of education for us and my younger siblings was so high that there was no way we could rely solely on my father's earnings. Besides, with the prices of basic commodities increasing and additional expenses for renting fees, it could be very difficult for us to make ends meet. On top of that, my sister and I wanted to contribute financially to support our parents as a way of expressing our gratitude. My goal right now is to work hard to save money to buy a home for my family and open a grocery shop. I wish to live a peaceful life with my family.

10. The Pandemic Setback My Dream of Becoming a Professional Footballer

My name is Aung Aung. I am a 17 years old boy. I am the fifth child among my eight siblings. My elder brother and sister are already married and living separately. Now, there are seven of us living with our parents in the same house. Before Covid hit, we used to live in an unsettled community, but when that area was demolished in late 2021, we moved to the municipal area where my mother and brother work. Fortunately, the municipal authorities allowed us to build a small house to live in, and we do not have to pay any rent. Now, my youngest three siblings attend school while the rest of us work to support our family.

Before Covid hit, I was attending grade seven. My parents and older brother worked. My father worked as a bus assistant helping passengers find their buses and carrying their luggage at a busy highway bus terminal near where we lived. My mother and older brother worked at the dump site municipal office. During weekends or school breaks, I helped my father with his job and worked with my uncle to deliver charcoal bags earning around 10,000 MMK (3.8 GBP). Working as a bus assistant is indeed a challenging job, with long hours and physically demanding work. On top of that, there were days when the police would come and search us, suspecting that we were involved in drug use or dealing. To avoid any false accusations, we refrained from working on those days, earning nothing. But we still managed to work in the evenings as some buses departed at that time. On busy days, we earned 5,000 or 6,000 MMK (1.9–2.3 GBP), but it was still not sufficient to meet our family's basic needs. Our



earnings only cover the cost of rice and cooking oil since we were a large family. So, we often took out loans with 20 percent interest rate. If we borrowed 10,000 MMK (3.8 GBP), we had to pay it back with an additional 2,000 MMK (0.8 GBP) in interest per month. This meant that we were caught in a cycle of debt every month, struggling to keep up with our expenses.

During the peak of the virus, my family's economic hardship worsened. We were barely making ends meet. The Covid restrictions led to a decrease in my earnings as buses weren't operating, and there were no passengers to assist. Before, we could work till 11 or 12 midnight but with the restrictions, we could not go out after 7 pm. Even on days when we did manage to work, we only received half of what we used to, earning only 3,000 MMK (1 GBP) instead of the usual 6,000 MMK (2.3 GBP). So, we had to rely on my mother's salary to survive. Our situation became so dire that we could barely afford to buy food, and we had to resort to eating less rice than usual. However, during those difficult times, we were fortunate to receive a bit of help. We were given 2 and a half kilos of rice and a bottle of cooking oil, which was a small relief for us but better than receiving nothing at all.

Although my family managed to avoid getting infected with Covid, we all fell ill with common fevers during the pandemic. We initially tried to treat ourselves with pills, we only visited the clinic if we didn't feel any better. My mother's high blood pressure, and my father's accident made things worse for my family. A motorbike hit him while he was biking home from work, resulting in a broken leg and hospitalisation. We had to borrow 20 lakh MMK (758 GBP) to cover the medical expenses, leaving us in debt and unable to afford my mother's medication. My father was no longer able to work, so I had to take his place as a bus assistant at the terminal. I do not like this job because I had to compete with other adults and there were many adult men who often got into verbal and physical fights. But I liked working and playing together with my friends at the bus terminal.

When the virus decreased and schools reopened, I did not return to school. I was very sad for not going to school and not learning anything. Instead, I started working at the same municipal job as my mother and elder brother do, when they were recruiting new workers. It has been more than two years now since I started working here. My job involves collecting trash from the streets, picking them up and transporting them to the dump site using a truck. I work for 8 hours a day without any day off and get paid a monthly salary of 80,000 MMK (30 GBP). My job is dangerous and risky, so I have to be very careful while working. Once, I almost fell off from the truck while collecting trash, but fortunately, my friend quickly grabbed me in time to save me. It was a scary experience. Sometimes, I wanted to quit this job because of constant danger and tiredness made me drained both mentally and physically. There were days when I could not get out of bed because of body pain and ache. Some other times, the municipal staff asked us to work additional tasks like cleaning tunnels, laying bricks and painting fences without paying us for it. These tasks were really tiring, making me feel down and sad. I told my mother that I want to quit this job but she does not want me to quit this job and would not let me.

I am good at playing football and always dream of becoming a professional footballer. I used to attend football training during summer holidays to improve my skills. When Covid came, the training centres were closed, and I was very upset. I even thought of going back to school and prioritising my education and will try hard to become a footballer. But now I just hope that I can quit this job and get a stable job in a factory. I think it would be good if everyone in my family will get a suitable and reasonable job and save up money to buy our own piece of land to build a home on.

11. Giving Up on My Dream of Becoming a Teacher to Support My Family

My name is Su May. I am 15 years old and the oldest daughter among my siblings. My younger brother and sister are 12 and 10 years old. We were all born in Hlaingtharya, where our parents have lived for twenty years. My father passed away a year ago after suffering from paralysis and being bedridden for three years. Since then my mother has worked hard to make ends meet by picking leaves and vegetables in the field and selling them in the market. Sometimes she works at construction sites. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, my mother could afford to send all of us to school. I completed the sixth grade; my sister and my little brother finished fifth grade and third grade. I used to assist my mother in her work during school breaks. But we do not ask my younger sister and brother to do any work.

Before moving here, we lived in a slum community where we built our house, so we did not have to pay rent. Close to where we lived, there is a river and a bridge that serves as a path to the field on the other side. Every day, my mother and I crossed the bridge to go to the field to collect vegetables, mostly watercress and other leafy greens that we could sell. There were also people in the area collecting vegetables like us. Our normal days began early, waking up at 6 am and eating leftover rice from the previous night for breakfast. We left the house around 6:30 or 7 am and spent the whole day in the field picking vegetables that we could find. We usually waited till we got back home to have lunch. We have to be very careful of snakes, insects, and other harmful animals. At first, I was very scared when I saw a snake, but later I wasn't so scared anymore. After collecting vegetables we have to put them in bags and carry them back home. My mother could not carry them alone so I helped her carry them home. We came back home around 3 or 4 pm. Then we had lunch. We were packing the vegetables to sell them while having lunch. If there was someone who wanted to



buy all of them to resell, we sold them to that person. If not, we had to sell them ourselves walking around the streets. A day usually ended like that for us.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, it was very difficult to make ends meet. Our primary source of income was selling collected vegetables and we could barely earn enough to feed ourselves. We earned just 3,000 to 4,000 MMK (1.8 GBP), sometimes 5,000 MMK (2 GBP) a day. The situation worsened when my father got very sick and became bedridden, while my mother's health also declined. It was difficult for my mother to work like before. We were struggling to even afford to buy food to eat. When Covid-19 wave heightened and preventative measures with lockdown and stay-at-home orders were in place, we could not go out to collect vegetables. Things got even worse, we were only able to eat rice with fish paste because we had no income at all. My mother had to borrow money from her friends.

During the third wave, a new jellyfish factory opened near our neighbourhood and both my mother and I worked there where each of us was paid 5,000 MMK (2 GBP) a day. However, my mother's health declined and she could only work there for five days. Worried that we would not have an income, I continued working there without taking a single day off. Our job there involved cleaning and draining jellyfishes and sorting them into different sizes and placing them into packaging containers. The working hours were from 6 am to 5 pm and it was like working all day long. Everyone who worked there was asked to wear masks while working to prevent the spread of the virus. But I felt it was terrible to breathe while working because there was only one entrance gate. These jellyfish were transported all the way from Rakhine state, and due to transportation interruptions, the factory was forced to close down after I had worked for 20 days. After the factory closed down, we had to return to our old job of picking vegetables in the field.

Luckily, during that time, there were some donors who donated basic food items in our neighbourhood. We got a big bag of rice and a few kilos of rice and two times of cash assistance (20,000 and 40,000 MMK) (7.5–15 GBP) from the government. I felt happy and relieved to receive such support in our difficult time of no job and income. Sometimes, I was stressed and felt very sad when we did not have rice to cook, when my mother was sick, and my brother and sister cried out of hunger.

Just after the third wave, the houses in slum areas were demolished. We had to relocate to Dala Township because we could no longer afford to rent a place in Hlaingtharya. Even there we have to pay 50,000 MMK (19 GBP) per month for a new place which makes me extremely worried. And there are no job opportunities nearby and the field we used to collect vegetables is now too far from our new home. So we can no longer collect vegetables and rely on that as a source of income anymore. So, my mother had to do house chores at someone else's home to feed us.

Since we moved here, we have been having a hard time to make ends meet. Some days, we only had one meal to eat. After arriving three months in Dala, I ended up working different jobs. I carried water in buckets and sold them and got paid 100 MMK for every two big buckets. I also worked at my uncle's house as a housemaid with 50,000 MMK (19 GBP) per month. After that, I returned to the jellyfish factory when it opened again where I was paid just around 3,000 to 4,000 MMK (1–1.5 GBP) a day. Unfortunately, the factory is now too far from my new place, it took me almost an hour of walking and taking the bus to get there every day. I finally gave up that job as my mother was worried about my safety as I often arrived home late like 7 pm. I also felt it was not safe to take a bus and walk alone at that late hour. Now, my mother found a job at a construction site and I have asked to join her at work. Although she is worried that I would not be able to do it since it is a physically demanding job, I have no other choice but to take it in order to make a living and support my family.

Since the pandemic hit, schools were closed, and my family's financial situation has gotten worse. As a result, I lost motivation to go back to school. I will not go back to school since both my younger sister and brother are already in school. In addition to my brother's and sister's school fees and daily food expenses, I also have to worry about paying rent every month. I need to work to help my mother and support the family. So, not having a steady job is a burden for my family. If possible, I want to work at a factory where I can earn a steady income. Before the pandemic, I used to have a dream of becoming a teacher. But, now, I just hope that I have a steady job and income so that my family will have a better and comfortable life.

12. I Want to Be a Tailor and Care for My Grandmother

My name is Nadi, and I am a fifteen years old girl. I come from a large family of seven siblings. My father passed away from tuberculosis more than six years ago, and my mother has since remarried and moved to Sategyikhanaung township, leaving us with our grandmother. My three older sisters had already married and moved out before the pandemic hit. Unfortunately, after the third wave of Covid-19, our slum house was evicted, and we had to move to Insein township to live with my two other sisters. The cost of renting a room in Hlaingtharya was too high, and my sisters felt that it was not a safe place for our elderly grandmother to live. My elder brother now lives and works in a factory, and my younger sister lives with our aunt and our youngest brother lives with my father's side of the family. They both attend schools.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, our family had been struggling financially. To make ends meet, my grandmother worked hard by picking and selling watercress, earning around 3,000 MMK (1 GBP) a day. We were careful with how we spent the money she earned. I began helping my grandmother when I was just 8 years old, selling watercress before and after school. I eventually dropped out of school to help my grandmother more.

Every morning, my grandmother would wake up early to pick watercress, bundle them up, and sell them in our neighborhood until 2 or 3 pm. My elder brother dropped out of school when he was in grade 7 and worked as a casual worker to contribute to our family's income. Despite our efforts, we still found it hard to make



ends meet, and the Covid-19 pandemic made things even more challenging for us. My elder brother was also out of work, and our grandmother was too old to work. As the pandemic continued, I was unable to return to school due to school closure and the livelihood challenges we faced at home.

During the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was difficult to pick up and sell watercress because many places and streets we used to go were restricted to prevent the spread of the virus. So, there were fewer places to pick and sell the watercress, and some places could only be accessed with passing cards which were provided by ward authority only to their residents. During this time, we relied on the money we earned from selling watercress and the rice and eggs given to us from the church to feed ourselves. However, the food and supplies were limited, and we often went without eating for days. If we were given 2 pounds of rice in a week, we could only afford to eat for four days.

To help support my family, my grandmother sent me to learn tailoring at a nearby motorized tailoring shop. Once I completed my training, I began working as a tailor in a home-based factory in our neighborhood. There were only 33 employees because it was a home factory. My daily wage was 3,600 MMK, and my employer promised to increase my pay to 4,800 MMK after three months, but that never happened. I was paid 3,600 MMK for working from 8 am to 4 pm, and if there was overtime, I earned an extra 1,000 MMK per hour. Sometimes, when there was an urgent order with lots of fabric to sew, we were asked to work until 7:30 or 8 pm, and occasionally even until dawn. During these long days, I only had 15 minutes for lunch and dinner breaks. If the fabric was particularly important, I would be given one hour for sleeping time, but since the factory was small and cramped, I would just lie down and sleep there. If I woke up after my nap, I would work throughout the night until morning without stopping. I worked like this for five or six days each week, depending on how much work there was.

Although the work was tiring for me, I was happy to work because I like sewing. But sometimes, I could not sleep and got sick from exhaustion. When this happened, I took medicine and still went to work. The employer gave me a day off only when there was no electricity in the factory and no fabric to work on. Whenever I felt exhausted, I shared my feelings with my friends at work. Eventually, the factory closed down. Shortly after, our home was evicted, and as a result, my family and I had to move to Insein.

During the pandemic, all of my elder sisters who worked in factories got divorced and were left with young children. As they supported our grandmother financially, she did not have to sell watercress anymore. I also started working at a sewing factory and earned 3,600 MMK per day. However, my sisters asked me to leave my job after three months, so I could take care of our aging grandmother and my niece and nephew who lived with us. Even though I wanted to go back to school, I think it is not possible. But I enjoyed sewing and wanted to become a tailor. In the future, I hoped to use my tailoring skills to take care of my grandmother, just as she had taken care of us.

13. Hope for a Better Job Than Waste Picking

My name is Ye Ko. I am a 15 years old boy. I have twelve siblings. The two youngest are my half-sisters. My father passed away four years ago, leaving my mother to take care of all of us. After his death, my mother remarried. We call our step-father as father. He used to work as a mason before meeting my mother. He started working as a waste collector to support the family. Four of my elder siblings have already got married. One of them is divorced and she and her son are living with us. We all live in a small house we built. The land is owned by a rich man. We do not have to pay rent.

Before Covid, I was attending grade 6 at a monastic school. To contribute to the family, I also collected recycled waste before and after school. Every day, I woke up early at 5:30 am to begin collecting waste and made sure to finish before school which started at 9:00 am. After school ended at 3:30 pm, I continued collecting waste until 6 or 7 pm. Eventually, when Covid came in, I had to drop out of school and became a full-time waste collector to help make ends meet for my family.

My step-father went to other neighbourhoods with his small cart to pick up recycled waste, while my younger sister and I went to different places where he did not go. But my mother was concerned about my sister's safety as she is a girl and being grown up. So, she sent her to work at a grocery shop in a nearby village where she worked as a live-in worker and earned around 80,000 MMK (30 GBP) per month. So, I mostly collected waste alone, but sometimes I collected with my other younger siblings when their school was closed during the weekends and occasionally with my friends. I worked for at least 7 to 8 hours per day. My step-father and I collected waste all day long, and at the end of the day, we only managed to earn 6,000–7,000 MMK (2.5–3 GBP). Since we are a big family, our income was not enough to support ourselves. We managed to survive with what we had. There were days when we could not buy rice, so we cooked less rice, reducing the quantity of rice from seven to four cups. My parents always made sure that we ate first and they ate whatever was left.



To relieve the financial hardship, we bought food items on credit from the local grocery store. It is like paying off the old debts while also taking new ones. There were times we could not pay off the old debts and we were unable to take new ones from the grocery store. As a result, we were left with nothing to eat and were starving.

Even when Covid-19 hit, I did not stop working. But when Covid rules such as the stay-at-home order were tightened, I had to stay at home for about two days. I could not afford to stop working completely. We need to put food on the table. So, I resumed work wearing a mask. Without my work, we would not have anything to eat so it was impossible for us to stay home and fear of getting infected with disease. We could not just avoid this Covid. During the pandemic, I also had to work longer hours, around 2 to 3 hours more than usual – just to earn the same amount of money. Since we had to use up the money we earned every day on food, we had to work every day. During this difficult time, we received some relief and in-kind support such as a bag of rice, eggs, cooking oil and canned fish which really helped us to survive.

Luckily, my family and I were not infected with Covid but we did experience some minor illnesses such as fever and sneezing. Whenever we got sick, we would just take painkillers. There was a time when I was very ill, I had to take two days off from work to recover from it. I returned to work as soon as I felt better.

Currently, since the past five months, I have been working with my sister at one of the dumpsites in Hlaingtharya. I work long hours – between 12 to 14 hours per day, earning 6,000 MMK (2 GBP) per day. Sometimes I work day shift and other days I work night shift which lasts 6 o'clock in the morning until 6 o'clock in the evening. During night shifts, I often feel so exhausted, tired and sleepy. But now I am working in a dangerous workplace since the garbage trucks sometimes hit people who are working in the dumpsite. I recently witnessed a child who was collecting trash hit by a garbage truck. This incident always makes me feel worried and unsafe while working. I have to be very careful and try not to fall asleep while working because if something happens, no one would take responsibility for us. Although I feel that this work is too risky for me, I am also under pressure because my family's financial situation is not going well. So, I just think to myself that I have to work with what I have got to support my family.

When I feel stressed or sad, I talk to my mother. I do not share my feelings or problems with anyone else. If not to my mother, I just keep them to myself. For me, going back to school is impossible. So, I will continue working. In the future, I want to find a job in a factory that provides better working conditions and pay. I just want to support my family with a better job than the one I am doing right now. I just hope like that.

14. A Dream of Becoming a Fashion Designer

My name is Phwe Phwe. I am 15 years old girl. I belong to a family of four - my mother, elder brother, my younger sister, and myself. My parents got divorced when I was just 5 years old, so we siblings have been living with my mother since then. Sometimes, my father contacts us, but mostly we have been relying on ourselves to get by. We have been living in Hlaingtharya since we were born and we grew up here. Before Covid, my youngest sister and I were attending school, I was in grade 5 at a monastic school. My brother dropped out of school since he was just in kindergarten and became a novice monk. Three years ago, he returned home to work. But he never has had a fixed job. He sometimes works as a dock loader. Even before Covid, my mother and I were the main breadwinner for our family. Since I was seven, I have been helping my mother to sell vegetables at the local market, before and after school as well as during weekends and school holiday breaks.

At that time, we started with picking up watercress to sell them in the market. Later, my mother took a loan from a local money lender to start this vegetable-selling business which she then repaid from the profit she made every day. Every day, my mother and I went to buy vegetables from Thiri Mingalar wholesale market, and sold them at the market in our neighbourhood. We had to pay 1,000 MMK each morning and evening to get a permit to sell in the market. To make more sales, my mother and I sold separately in different spots in the market. Together, we made between 20,000–30,000 MMK (10–30 GBP) per day but after deducting the capital, we were only left with 4,000–5,000 MMK (1–2 GBP) of profit at the end of the day. Even before the pandemic, our income was barely enough to support ourselves.

The pandemic has impacted on our vegetable selling hours and the sales were not as good as before. Before Covid, I could sell vegetables from 6–8 am in the morning before going to school. After school, I would continue selling from 3:30 pm until 7–8 pm. But, when Covid hit, our selling hours were reduced, we could only sell until 5–6 pm in the evening. Also, the Covid restrictions and work closures forced many migrants from Hlaingtharya to leave the town and return to their villages. So, there were fewer people buying vegetables. Also, the prices of commodities had gone up, which further reduced our sales. There were days we went to the market to sell vegetables, but we could not sell much due to lockdown and stay-at-home rules. Some days, we even lost



our capital and did not make any profit. After returning part of the loan we took, we did not have any food to eat and were starving. When things were particularly tough during the Covid, we received Covid relief donations. My family received rice bags four or five times which we ate scantily for two months.

For us, the Covid did not affect our health much but significantly affected my family's income. Our financial struggle also made it difficult to pay rent. Before the Covid outbreak, we lived in a small hut that we rented in one of the slum areas in town. When Covid hit, we moved to my aunt's place in another slum as we no longer afford to rent a hut. We lived there for a year, but unfortunately, the houses in that slum community were demolished after the third wave of Covid. So, we had to find another place to live again. It has been a year now we have been renting a place that costs 60,000 MMK (30 GBP) per month.

During the first wave, my mother, concerned about me catching the disease, asked me to stay at home. In the third wave, a lady who lived near our house contracted the virus and lost her sense of smell. Her house was subsequently locked down to prevent the spread of the virus. We were fortunate that it did not happen to us. Although we did not contract the Covid, all of us in my family experienced symptoms such as sneezing and body pain. Since we could not afford to visit the clinic, we treated ourselves with what we had, buying cheap medicine that cost only 100 MMK which helped us feel better the next day.

We could not afford to miss a day of work. My mother's earnings alone would be just enough to pay off the debts. So, we had no other option but to put on masks to sell vegetables in the market. However, due to restrictions imposed on the number of shops allowed to open, many vendors including us had to close their shops. We had to find another place to sell our vegetables. Sometimes, we asked other shops that were allowed to open to let us share their space, while other times, we walked around the neighbourhood to sell our vegetables. Some days, my mother felt sick and she could not go to the wholesale market to buy vegetables, so we were unable to open our shop. Sometimes, I had to sell vegetables all by myself. Other times, I did house chores - cooking, washing and fetching water - for other families in the neighbourhood where I earned a little money to survive on. Those days were very exhausting and I often felt tired.

When the Covid situation improved and the school reopened, I was unable to go back to school due to my family's financial difficulties. Instead, I continued working along with my mother selling vegetables. We started selling from 6 to 11 am, and continued selling from 2 until 7 pm. On a normal day, we earn a profit of 4,000–5,000 MMK (1.5–1.8 GBP). But, with the increased commodity prices and prioritising on expensive housing rent and repaying debts, we still struggled to make ends meet. We need to pay off part of the loan we took regularly and every day to maintain our selling vegetable business. So, both my mother and I have to work. But my younger sister rejoined the school.

Covid pandemic has changed our lives a lot. Before, we were less worried about our daily lives. I could even take trips and also have meals together as a family. During the height of the pandemic, people avoided communicating or interacting with one another because they were very cautious and afraid of catching the virus. People did not talk much to each other. I also did not talk much to my friends. When I felt sad and overwhelmed, I did not share my feelings to anyone, I just kept them to myself and suffered in silence. Sometimes, when I was very upset, I cried alone and often fell asleep. When I woke up, I felt better and relieved as if nothing had happened.

Now, I have been working at a garment factory for almost four months, with the help of a neighbour. My job is to cut 50–60 pieces of fabric per hour. The work is quite exhausting because I have to stand for at least 11 hours a day, from 7:00 am to 6:00 pm. If there is overtime work, I will have to work until 8:00 pm. There is no work on weekends. Since I do not have a national registration identity card, I can only work as a day labourer, earning only 5,000 MMK (2 GBP) per day. For days with overtime work, I can make 8,000–9,000 MMK (3 GBP). I earn a monthly salary between 1–1.5 lakh MMK (57 GBP) depending on how many days I work. I am happier working in the factory than selling vegetables.

I initially planned to go back to school and study till I graduate from university after the Covid is over and the situation improves. I had a dream to become a fashion designer. But it seems very unlikely that I will be able to return to school. My family's financial situation has not improved. So, all I can do for now is to continue working at this garment factory. I am thinking of working hard until I become a line leader.

15. Moving Beyond Sewing: Striving Towards a Better Life

My name is Kay Khaing and I am 15. I live with my parents, who are the only family I have. Four years ago, we moved from the Bago division to Hlaingtharya when I was only 10 or 11 years old. My mother was suffering from rheumatic heart disease. My mother was helped by my aunts who live in Hlaingtharya to come here for treatment. So, my parents moved here first and I followed later. We ended up living here since then. When we first arrived, we rented a place to live in one of the squatter communities as it was cheaper than other places in the town. It cost us 30,000 MMK (11 GBP) per month. My father worked as a motorbike taxi driver, renting someone else's motorbike for 2,500 MMK (1 GBP) per day as a lease fee. This was the only job he could do because he is over 60 years old and too old to do other hard work. He earned about 3,000–4,000 MMK (1–1.5 GBP) per day for the household expenses, but sometimes he had to repair the motorbike when it broke down, which reduced his earnings. My mother invested 20,000 MMK (7.5 GBP) to start selling vegetables at the market which was the only job she could do with a little bit of money. She could earn 1,500–2,000 MMK (0.5–0.7 GBP) per day. Since we were only the three of us, we could still make a living with what we had.

At that time, I had already completed fifth grade, and I was going to move on to the sixth grade. However, due to the Covid outbreak, schools were closed. So, I began helping my mother sell vegetables on the streets to make ends meet. As street vendors, we had to lay out our goods on the ground to sell them, which worsened her health. If she sat for long periods, her joints would ache and become painful. Despite her condition, my mother was able to keep working until the first wave of the pandemic. But during the second wave, her legs were in so much pain that she had to stop working.



As the third wave of Covid hit, the house we were renting in the slums was demolished. So, we had to rent a small wooden dormitory-style-room nearby for 50,000 MMK (19 GBP) a month. We even struggled to pay our previous rent of 30,000 MMK (11 GBP) on time. But now the rent has increased making me constantly worried about not being able to pay it on time as well as to buy food. I had trouble sleeping at night thinking about these things. There were times, we had to borrow money with an interest rate of 20% just to pay the rent. The cost of the dorm was already expensive, and with my mother's worsening health condition, she was unable to sell vegetables anymore. This left us relying solely on my father's income, which was not always enough to cover our expenses. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, work opportunities were scarce, and people were not going out as much. This affected my father's earnings dropping from 3,000–4,000 MMK per day to 2,000 MMK (0.7 GBP). We had to make ends meet with what we had, reducing our meals as much as possible. Then I started running errands for other shops at the market and received some pocket money around 500–800 MMK (0.3 GBP) which I used to buy food for my family.

Following the third wave, we received some Covid preventive items and donation of groceries. We also received financial assistance once a month for three months, which was a huge help in covering our rent for that period and buying some medicine for my mother. Due to our financial situation, we did not have extra money to buy western medicine for my mother. We could not afford to bring her to the clinic and she had been relying on cheap traditional medicines since then.

In order to make ends meet, I took on whatever job I could find. Luckily, the lady who lived nearby washed used bottles for reuse/recycling and offered to let me help her. She paid me 1,500–2,000 MMK (0.5–0.7 GBP) per day from her wages, and I worked for her five or six days each week. I started work at 8 am and would finish by 2 or 3 pm in the afternoon. The work was tough and physically demanding; three people had to carry bags that were filled with 40–50 beer bottles from the car, empty and wash them thoroughly using a chemical and brush to ensure there was no smell. My hands soared and felt unwell from carrying those heavy bags and washing bottles all day long. Even when I was sick and my body ached, I still went back to work in the morning after taking some medicine without telling my mother. I never told her about how tired I was from work because I knew it would only upset her.

I worked for that lady for about four months. After that, I got a job at my aunt's grocery shop where I worked from 8 am to 4 pm. The work was not very tiring compared to washing bottles and my aunt paid me 2,000 MMK (0.7 GBP) a day. One month later, when a new factory was looking for day labourers, I applied. A sister [neighbour] who lived near our dormitory helped me apply. I borrowed someone else's national registration card since I needed to show it to prove that I was not underage although I actually was. On the day I applied, they asked me to try the task out and I did well. So, they hired me on the spot and I started working 11 hours a day from 7:30 am to 6:30 pm. My job was to add cotton wool to the jackets, and I was paid 4,000 MMK (1.5 GBP) per day. When I worked overtime, I got 5,000 MMK (1.8 GBP). This job is not easy too because standing the whole day made my legs ache and gave me headaches and stiffness in my neck. Now, it's been six months since I started working at the factory and I have built a good relationship with other senior and adult workers because I do my job well.

Before the Covid when I was attending school, I used to dream of becoming a university professor. That was the reason behind why I worked hard during my school days and always managed to secure the top position in class. Even though schools are now open, unfortunately, attending school is currently out of the question for me due to my mother's poor health and my father's ageing.

Although I cannot return to school, at least I want to learn sewing. If I can learn how to sew well, I will make a better living by running a small sewing shop at home and live peacefully with my parents. However, buying a sewing machine requires a significant amount of money, so I will need to save money for it. In the future, I also think of going abroad and working towards a better life for myself and my family, but I am still a minor so it is not possible to do at the moment. Also, leaving my parents behind also worries me. So, for the time being, I will have to continue working at a factory to make ends meet. I understand that my current situation may not allow all of my dreams to come true. But I will always find ways, work hard, and seize any opportunity that comes my way to improve my life.



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