



## Diaspora Humanitarians

*How Australia-based migrants help in crises abroad*

### Myanmar Briefing

- Following the Tatmadaw’s military coup in early 2021, the Myanmar diaspora in Australia mobilised to provide material, economic, social and political assistance. From our survey of the diaspora in Australia:
  - › 78% of respondents communicated directly with those in Myanmar to provide support.
  - › 61% engaged in advocacy in response to the crisis.
  - › 38% volunteered or were employed as part of aid efforts.
  - › 36% provided information on migration pathways to Australia.
- Myanmar received approximately US\$1.9 billion in remittances in 2022, which constituted 2% of the country’s GDP that year. Limited connections between the Myanmar diaspora and the Government of Myanmar exist.
- As of 2022, approximately 42,820 Myanmar-born migrants resided in Australia. The Myanmar-born diaspora in Australia increased by approximately 30,000 individuals (256%) between 2002 and 2022.

### Responding to Crisis

Following the seizure of power by the Tatmadaw (Myanmar’s military) on the first of February 2021, the country has experienced a worsening humanitarian situation. Ongoing violence has resulted in the destruction of at least 500,000 houses and there is now a significant number of landmines spread throughout the country. According to the UN’s Special Envoy to Myanmar, more than 2.6 million Myanmar were displaced as of December 2023.

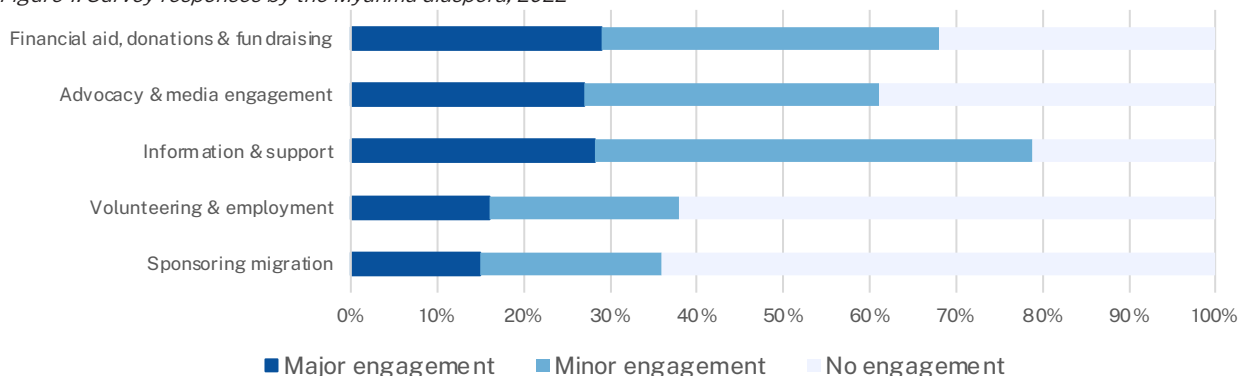
By 2023, the international humanitarian response to the crisis faced a US\$600 million deficit and by January 2024, a third of the country’s population (18.6 million people) required humanitarian assistance. The ongoing political crisis has restricted access to healthcare, education, employment and personal safety across the country.

### Diaspora Humanitarians Survey

As part of the Diaspora Humanitarians project, 64 members of the Myanmar diaspora (30 women, 33 men, 1 undisclosed) in Australia were surveyed about their humanitarian engagement following the coup. The survey asked individuals about their range of responses to the humanitarian crisis.

These responses were grouped into five categories: (1) the provision of financial aid, donations or fundraising, (2) advocacy and media engagement, (3) direct communication with Myanmar to provide support and information (4) volunteering and employment in the humanitarian sector and (5) the sponsorship of migration to Australia. Our survey relied on snowball sampling of engaged diaspora members. It therefore provides a multi-level vision of the range of responses by the Myanmar diaspora in Australia to the crisis.

Figure 1: Survey responses by the Myanmar diaspora, 2022



The most popular form of humanitarian engagement was to provide support over the phone to those directly impacted by the crisis, with 78% of respondents indicating that they had done so. Providing financial aid, or fundraising for humanitarian organisations directly responding to the crisis was also popular, with 68% of respondents indicating that they had done so. Among respondents, 29% made major contributions.

Approximately 61% of respondents indicated that they had either engaged in advocacy work (such as speaking to the media) following the coup. Here, 27% of respondents reported significant engagement. A lower proportion of the diaspora directly engaged with aid efforts through volunteer or paid work: 38% of respondents reported taking on this form of humanitarian response. Providing information on migration pathways to Australia was the least common humanitarian response of the Myanmar diaspora, with 64% of respondents reporting no engagement. However, 15% reported significant engagement with this action, and 21% reported minor engagement.

### Homeland Connections

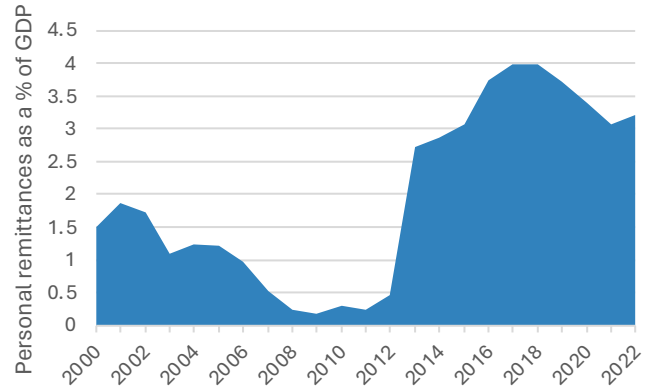
Myanmar has experienced a series of political crises which has limited the Myanmar diaspora’s homeland connections and has influenced their responses to the 2021 military coup. While personal remittances are sent to the country, Myanmar does not have formal diasporic institutions.

### Remittances

In 2022, Myanmar received US\$1.9 billion in personal remittances. The value of remittances sent to Myanmar has varied considerably over the last 20 years, likely due to the evolving international sanction regime against the military government. After 2011, the value of remittances sent to Myanmar grew steadily for several years, reaching a peak in 2018. While the share of Myanmar’s GDP being remittances has since decreased, the 2021 coup increased the importance of remittances to the country’s economy.

In 2021, personal remittances sent from Australia were valued at US\$30 million, making Australia the 6th largest sender of remittances to Myanmar. However, significant disparities between Australia and larger sending countries existed: US\$975 million was sent from Thailand, US\$398 million was sent from Bangladesh, US\$207 million was sent from Malaysia, US\$185 million was sent from Saudi Arabia and US\$125 million was sent from the United States.

Figure 2: Personal remittances as a percentage of Myanmar’s total GDP, 2000-2022



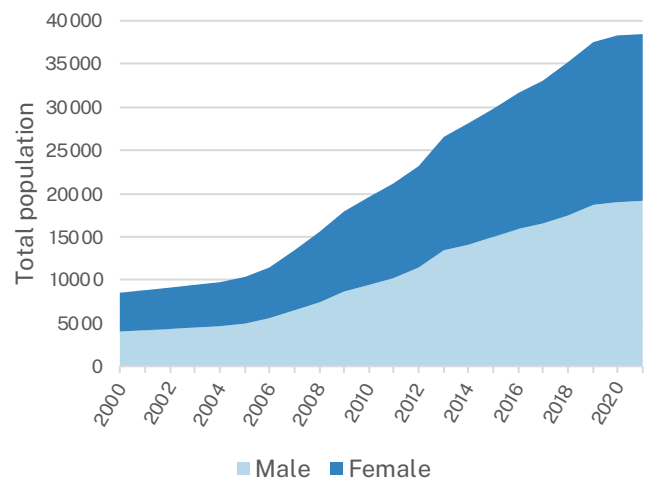
### Diaspora Institutions

Since the Tatmadaw first gained control of Myanmar in 1988, the country’s government has been wary of anything perceived to be foreign, including the diaspora. As a result, the country lacks a dedicated agency to oversee connections with ‘its’ diaspora. The lack of formal connections between Myanmar’s government and the country’s diaspora is exacerbated by the diaspora’s own resistance. Many of those from Myanmar’s educated diaspora are political refugees and are likely to be opposed to the ruling government. Other members of the diaspora often lack sufficient human capital (such as technical expertise or tertiary education) to incentivise the establishment of official diasporic institutions. As a result, remittances received by the country come through informal channels.

### The Australia-Based Diaspora

The diaspora’s humanitarian responses to the 2021 coup were shaped by their continuing connections to their homeland, by their dynamics of migration, and by their experiences of settlement in Australia. To analyse the experiences of the Myanmar diaspora in Australia, this section primarily uses data from the August 10, 2021 Australian census.

Figure 3: Total Myanmar-born population in Australia, 2000-2021

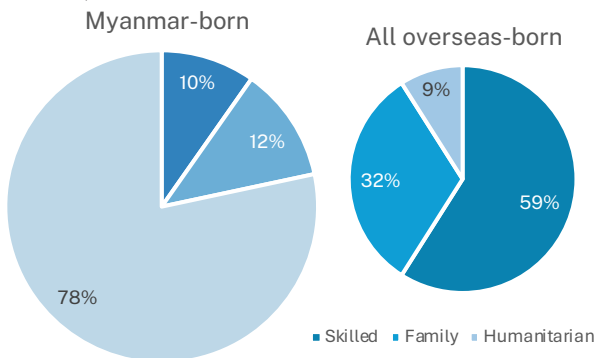


## Dynamics of Migration

As of June 2022, approximately 42,820 Myanmar-born migrants resided in Australia. Of this population, 49.9% were male and 50.1% were female. While migration from Myanmar to Australia has occurred since the 1960s, rate of migration has increased since 2006. In 2000, just 12,100 Myanmar-born individuals resided in Australia. In 2021, 49.9% of the Myanmar-born population in Australia were citizens. Of migrants without Australian citizenship, 66% had arrived in the five years prior to the census.

In the 2021 census, 26,944 Myanmar-born migrants were in Australia's permanent migration scheme. Of this group, 10% were in the skilled visa stream, 12% were in the family visa stream and 78% were in the humanitarian visa stream. Comparatively, 59% of all permanent residents in Australia are skilled visa holders, 32% are family visa holders and just 9% are humanitarian visa holders.

Figure 4: Myanmar and all overseas-born permanent residents in Australia, 2021



A relatively low number of Myanmar-born migrants (4,506 people) possessed temporary Australian visas in 2021. Of those who did, 2.5% held temporary skilled visas, 27% held student visas and 66.5% held other temporary visas. Notably, 4% of Myanmar-born temporary migrants were Special Category Visa holders. A visa exclusively for citizens of New Zealand, this indicates onwards migration.

## Population Dynamics

Characteristics of Australia's Myanmar diaspora reflect the dominant humanitarian migration flow from the country. The diaspora primarily resides in Australia's capital cities, and employment is concentrated in the healthcare and manufacturing industries.

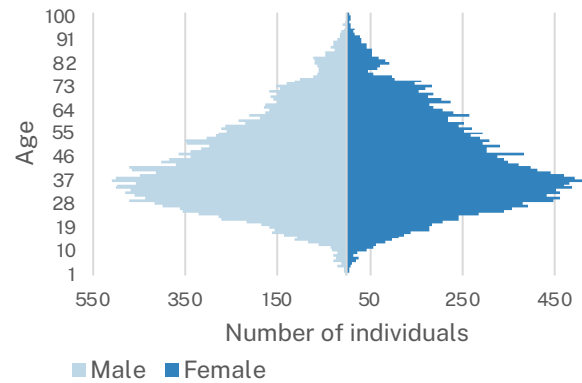
## Demography

In 2021, the median age of Myanmar-born migrants in Australia was 40, older than the nation-wide average of 38. Unlike other migrant groups from Southeast Asia, the gender ratio of the population is relatively even across all age groups.

Migrants between the ages of 30 and 39 formed the largest cohort of the diaspora. They constituted 24% of

Australia's Myanmar-born population. The Myanmar diaspora has relatively few children. In 2021, just 7% of Myanmar-born migrants in Australia were under the age of 20. Comparatively, 14% of the Australian population was between 30 and 39 years, and 24% of the population were under 20 years in 2021.

Figure 5: Population pyramid for the Myanmar-born population in Australia, 2021

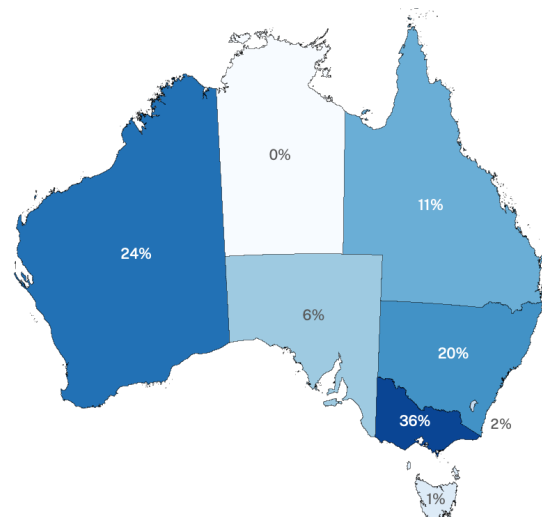


The Myanmar diaspora in Australia is evolving as the number of 2nd and 3rd generation Australians grows. At least 19,474 Australian-born individuals had at least one Myanmar-born parent in 2021. Additionally, 16,634 Australian-born individuals identified Burmese (12,249 people), Karen (2,415 people) or Chin (1,970 people) ancestry.

## Geography

The Myanmar diaspora overwhelmingly resides in Australia's capital cities, with 87% doing so. Compared to nationwide averages, the geographies of residence of the Myanmar diaspora are unique. In 2021, Greater Melbourne was home to 32% of the Myanmar-born population, 23% resided in Greater Perth and 16% resided in Greater Sydney. Comparatively, 19% of all Australian residents lived in Greater Melbourne, 8% lived in Greater Perth and 21% lived in Greater Sydney.

Figure 6: Geographies of residence of the Myanmar-born population in Australia, 2021

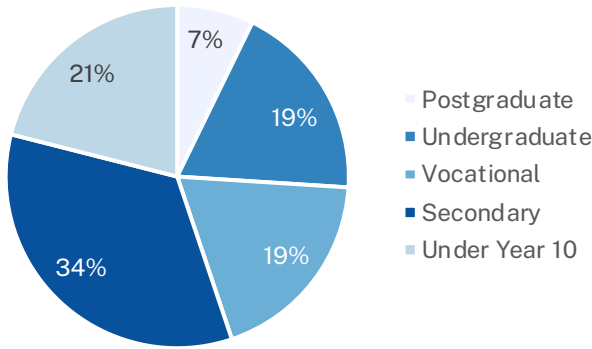




### Education

In 2021, 79% of adult Myanmar-born migrants residing in Australia had completed secondary education. Approximately half of these people also possessed post-secondary qualifications: 19% had vocational qualifications (certificate III or IV, advanced diploma) and 26% were university-educated (19% undergraduate, 7% postgraduate).

Figure 7: Highest level of educational achievement of the Myanmar-born population in Australia, 2021



### Economic Activity

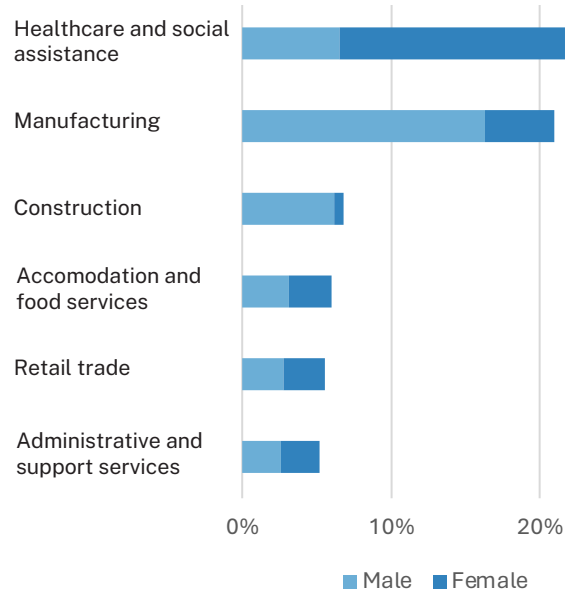
In 2021, 57% of adult Myanmar-born migrants were in Australia’s labour force. Leading sectors of employment included healthcare (21.7% of the working population), manufacturing (21%), construction (6%), accommodation (6%) and retail (6%).

The Myanmar diaspora’s employment dynamics are gendered. Female migrants predominately work in healthcare, with 36% of working Myanmar-born women employed in this sector. Comparatively, 11% of employed Myanmar-born men work in healthcare. 28% of working Myanmar-born men are employed in the manufacturing industry, and 11% of men are employed in the construction industry. Only 11% of the working female diaspora are employed in the manufacturing

industry, and 1% are employed in the construction industry. A similar proportion of the working Myanmar-born population were employed in the accommodation sector compared to the Australian average (6% of Myanmar-born, 7% of all Australian workers), whereas a lower proportion were employed in retail (6% compared to 10%) and construction (6% compared to 9%).

Compared to the national workforce, the Myanmar diaspora is more likely to be employed in the healthcare and manufacturing industries. While 15% of all workers were employed in the healthcare sector in 2021, 22% of the working Myanmar diaspora was. Likewise, 6% of all workers were employed in Australia’s manufacturing industry while 21% of the working diaspora was.

Figure 8: Leading sectors of employment for Myanmar-born migrants in Australia, 2021



#### Sources:

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022a), Census of Population and Housing, 2021; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022b), Permanent Migrants in Australia; Australian Department of Home Affairs (2024a), Permanent Migration Program (Skilled & Family) Outcomes Snapshot – Annual Statistics; Australian Department of Home Affairs (2024b), Temporary visa holders in Australia; The World Bank (2022a), Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) Remittances Data; The World Bank (2022b), Personal remittances, received (% of GDP); United Nations (2023), “More than two years on, impact of Myanmar military coup ‘devastating’,” UN News, accessed 10 April 2024.

**Author:** Cecily Reid **Editors:** Alan Gamlen, Anurug Chakma & Laurence Brown

This research is partially supported by the Australian Government through the ARC’s Linkage Projects funding scheme (project LP200200817). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or the ARC.



**Australian Government**  
**Australian Research Council**



The Diaspora Humanitarians project aims to map the extensive humanitarian activities and contributions of Australia-based migrants to crises abroad. For more information see [www.diasporahumanitarians.com](http://www.diasporahumanitarians.com)