

Protection risks facing Rohingya refugees en route to Malaysia

Since January 2019, MMC Asia has been interviewing Rohingya in Malaysia to better understand their migration experiences as well as protection risks and needs.¹ Despite Malaysia tightening border controls amid the COVID-19 pandemic,² the movement of Rohingya to Malaysia continues, and risks en route and upon arrival are high.³ This snapshot focuses on the protection risks facing Rohingya refugees en route to Malaysia including the risk of detention, bribery, and physical violence, among others. It aims to contribute towards building a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to migration movements to Malaysia.

Recommendations

- Provide assistance for Rohingya refugees, especially women and children, during their journeys, including access to information, basic items such as food, water, and shelter, legal assistance, and psycho-social support.
- Engage authorities in major transit countries, including Thailand, Bangladesh and Indonesia, to uphold legal and institutional frameworks which make accountable the perpetrators of protection violations, particularly smugglers and state officials.
- Facilitate access to healthcare and psychological support for Rohingya women, men and children, especially those who are victims of sexual and physical violence.
- Advocate for the regional prioritization of legal pathways for Rohingya refugees, including labor migration and family reunification, as well as refugee resettlement.

1 Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, in April 2020, MMC shifted the focus of its survey to understand refugees and migrants' experiences and needs during the pandemic. From 1 March 2021, MMC Asia has resumed data collection with refugees and migrants focusing on their migration journey and needs.

2 See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-rohingya-malaysia-idUSKBN23P1F7>

3 See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-malaysia-rohingya-idUSKBN2A709B>

Profile

Information in this snapshot was collected between 4 March and 10 May 2021 in Johor, Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, Pahang, Pulau Pinang, and Selangor, in Malaysia. 142 interviews were conducted (124 over the phone and 18 in-person).⁴ 45% of respondents were women and 55% men. The average age of respondents was 23. More than half of the respondents (55%) were in the process of seeking asylum, 30% were registered as refugees with UNHCR, 14% cited they had not sought asylum nor held any legal documents for Malaysia and 1% did not know their legal status. Findings in this snapshot are indicative of the situation for Rohingya interviewed but cannot be generalized to the wider Rohingya population in Malaysia.

Thailand and Bangladesh are the most common transit countries

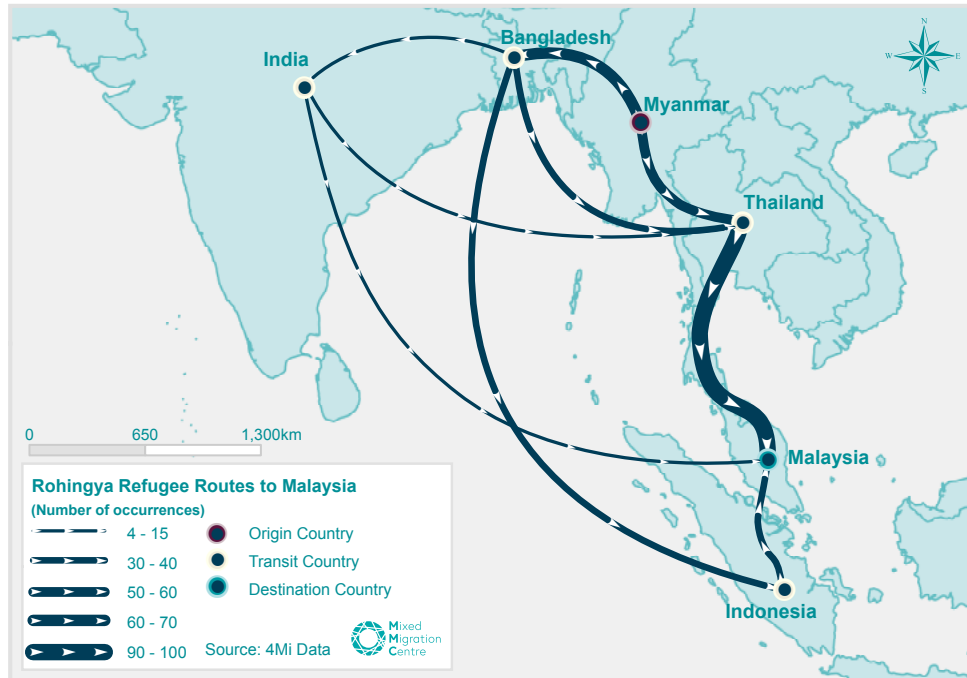
99% of respondents reported having transited in at least one country on the way to Malaysia. The most common transit country reported was Thailand (72%), followed by Bangladesh (44%) and Indonesia (25%). However, Bangladesh was only cited as a first transit country, while Thailand and Indonesia were also cited as transit countries at different stages on migration journeys.

Reports have found that Rohingya refugees mainly reach Malaysia by crossing the Andaman Sea by boat from Bangladesh, or via the land border with Thailand.⁵ 4Mi findings support this, but offer additional nuance, as many reported journeys involve multiple transit countries, see Map 1. Among modes of transport used, walking was cited as the most common means of transportation (87%), followed by boat (69%), car (54%), truck (30%), plane (27%), bus (24%), among others.

4 MMC Asia continues to collect data in Malaysia primarily over the phone, however, as the COVID-19 situation in the country has stabilized, in-person data collection has resumed in certain locations in 2021, with the observance of strict safety protocols.

5 See <http://xchange.org/reports/RohingyainMalaysia2019.html>

Map 1. Respondents' routes to Malaysia



Locations in Thailand and Myanmar reported as the most dangerous

Survey respondents were asked to identify the countries and specific locations that they considered to be the most dangerous on their migration route. Thailand was the most frequently indicated dangerous country with 39% of all mentions (n = 133), followed by Myanmar (27%), Indonesia (12%) and Bangladesh (11%).

However, the large number of people reporting Thailand as the most dangerous location is likely attributed to the fact that Thailand was also cited as the most common transit country by survey respondents. Meanwhile, Myanmar is likely mentioned as another significant hotspot due to the ongoing persecution faced by Rohingya, including harsh movement restrictions, leading them to take risky routes within Myanmar to get to the borders.⁶

6 See <https://www.routedmagazine.com/omc21-5rohingya-restrictions#:~:text=The%20persecution%20of%20Rohingya%20in,confined%20within%20the%20camp%20boundaries>

“When moving from Rakhine to Yangon, the smuggler took us through mountain routes to avoid checkpoints. We had to walk for days and my legs were swollen. The smuggler also beat those who couldn't pay money.”

19-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Selangor, Malaysia

Map 2. What was the most dangerous location on your journey?



The specific locations most frequently indicated as dangerous by respondents were Ranong - Thailand (25 responses), Yangon – Myanmar (17 responses), Mae Hong Son – Thailand (14 responses), and Pattani - Thailand (13 responses), see Map 2. In addition, 20 respondents reported there were dangerous locations that they could not specify the name of.

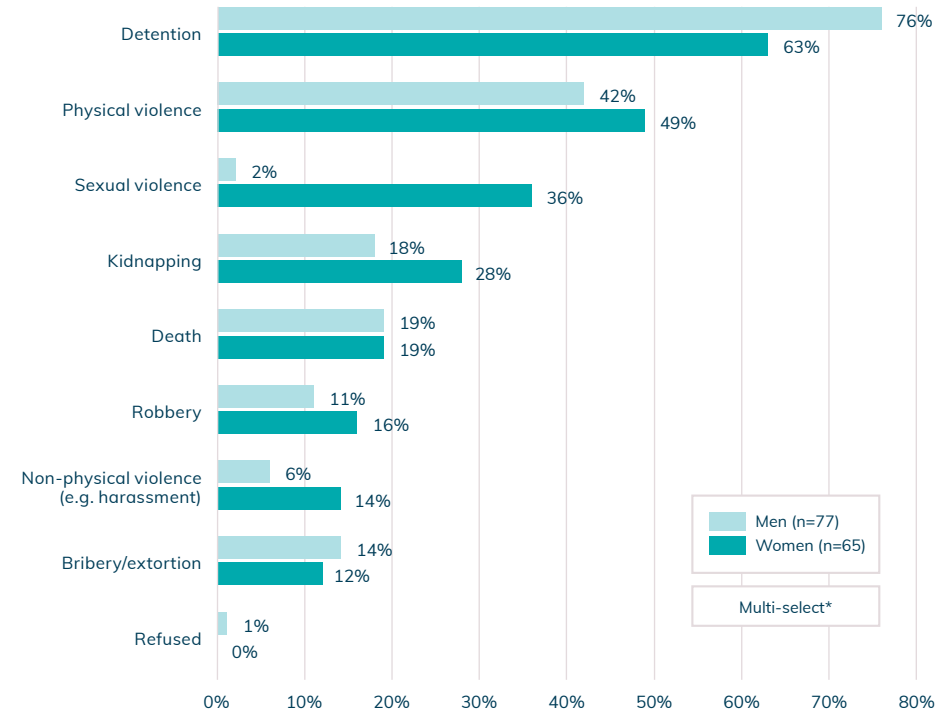
Women report experiencing greater risks en route

Among survey respondents, detention and physical violence were reported as the two main risks en route. However, men and women reported levels of risk differently, see Figure 1. For instance, a greater share of Rohingya women cited risks of physical violence (49%), sexual violence (36%), kidnapping (28%), robbery (16%) and non-physical violence (14%) than men. Meanwhile, a greater share of men reported risks of detention (76%) and bribery/extortion (14%) than women. The greatest difference between women and men was the reported risk of sexual violence, which was cited by 36% of women, compared to only 2% of men.

Regarding child protection issues, respondents traveling with children (n=38) were asked about the main risks present for children en route. The greatest risks reported included detention (16 responses), kidnapping (14 responses) physical violence (13 responses), death (12 responses) and trafficking (12 responses).

As well as asking about perceived risks en route, survey participants were also asked whether they had personally experienced any protection violations. 78% of respondents reported personally having experienced some form of protection violation en route. Overall a greater proportion of women reported having experienced protection incidents compared to men, with the only exception being detention (reported by 21% of male respondents and 15% of female respondents) and witnessing death (reported 13% of men and 8% of women), see Figure 2.

Figure 1. Kinds of risks reported

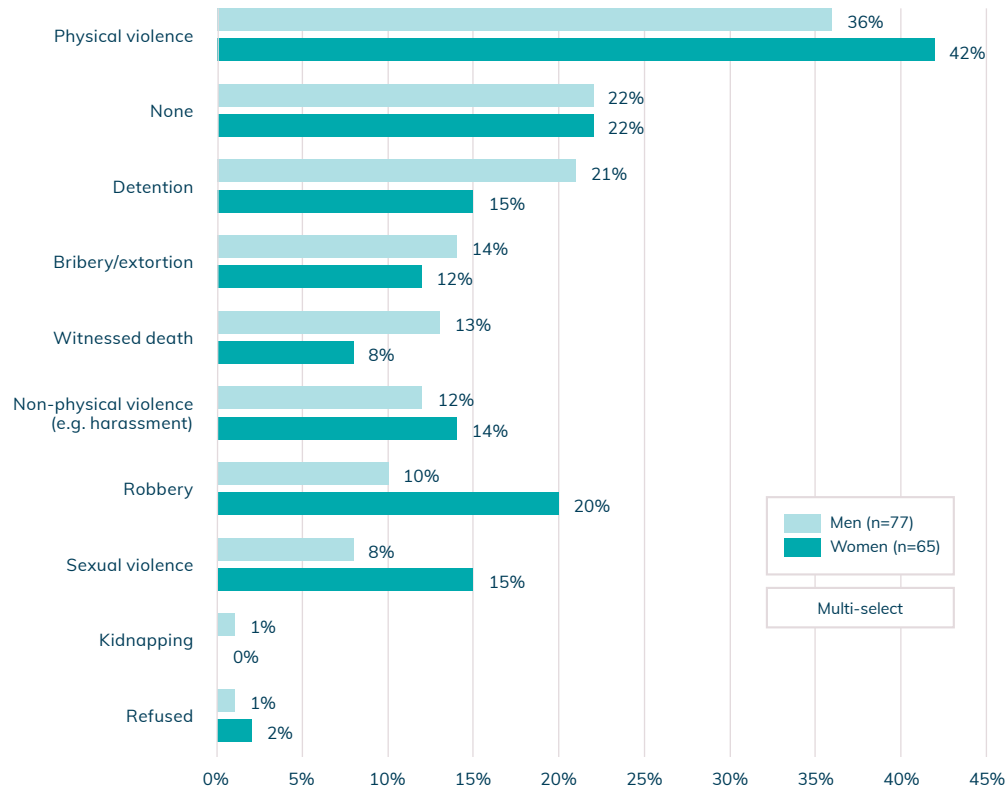


* Respondents can name multiple dangerous locations, and multiple risks in each location. This sample indicated 227 risks in total for 133 locations. The chart shows each report of a specific kind of risk, disaggregated by gender.

The experience of physical violence was reportedly high among Rohingya women (n=65), with nearly half of all interviewed women (42%) reporting they personally experienced physical violence en route. Women were twice as likely to experience incidents of sexual violence and robbery as men, reported by 15% and 20% of female respondents respectively. However, given the high number of women reporting sexual violence as a major risk en route (36%), as well as the taboo nature of the topic, it is likely that personally experienced incidents of sexual violence may be underreported by female respondents in the survey.⁷

7 See <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7750012/>

Figure 2. Have you personally experienced any of such incidents?



Smugglers considered the main perpetrators of incidents

Respondents appear to be reliant on the assistance of smugglers to reach Malaysia. According to the survey data, 94% of the respondents said that they used smugglers, of which 44% reported using multiple smugglers for different parts of the journey. Among respondents who used smugglers (n=134), half cited they were engaged to assist with transit across borders (51%) and a third to provide documents (36%).

Despite the widespread use of smugglers, 52% of respondents agreed that they were intentionally misled about the journey by smugglers, and 66% of respondents considered smugglers as the main perpetrator of incidents en route, followed by military/police (30%) and border guards/immigration officers (29%), see Figure 3.

“The journey was not like what the smuggler told me. You risked your lives the whole time and you can be dead anytime as well. I saw people dying of starvation.”

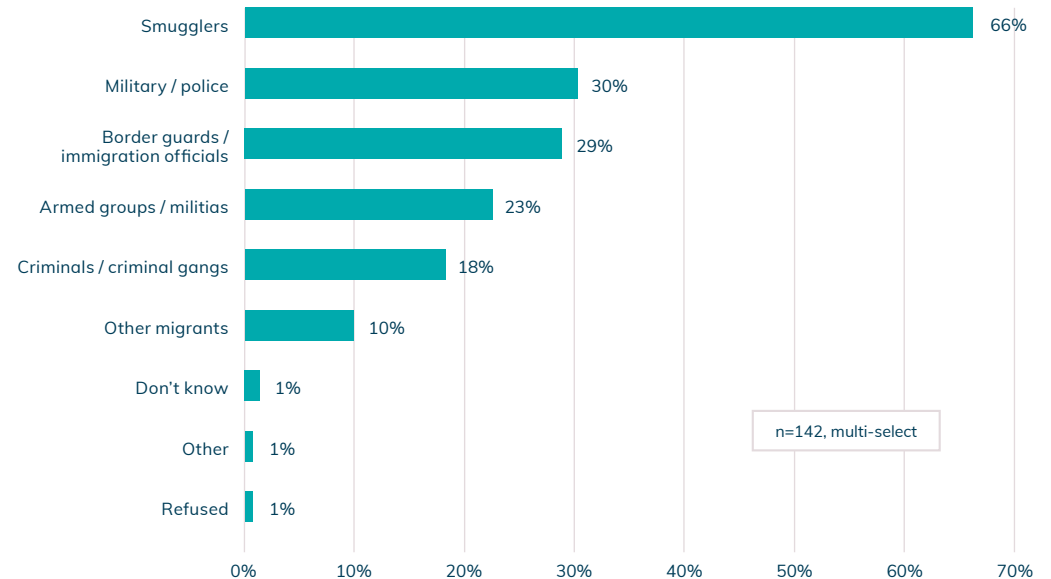
19-year-old Rohingya woman, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

These findings reflect reports of exploitation, kidnapping and trafficking alongside of torture and murder at the hands of unscrupulous smugglers, which have long raised international concerns.⁸

“When they [smugglers] saw that they could demand more money, they changed and asked us for double amount of payment. You had to fulfil their demand, or they would kill you. It was very difficult for me, but I was so scared of being killed by smugglers”.

26-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Johor, Malaysia

Figure 3. Who were the perpetrators of protection violations en route?

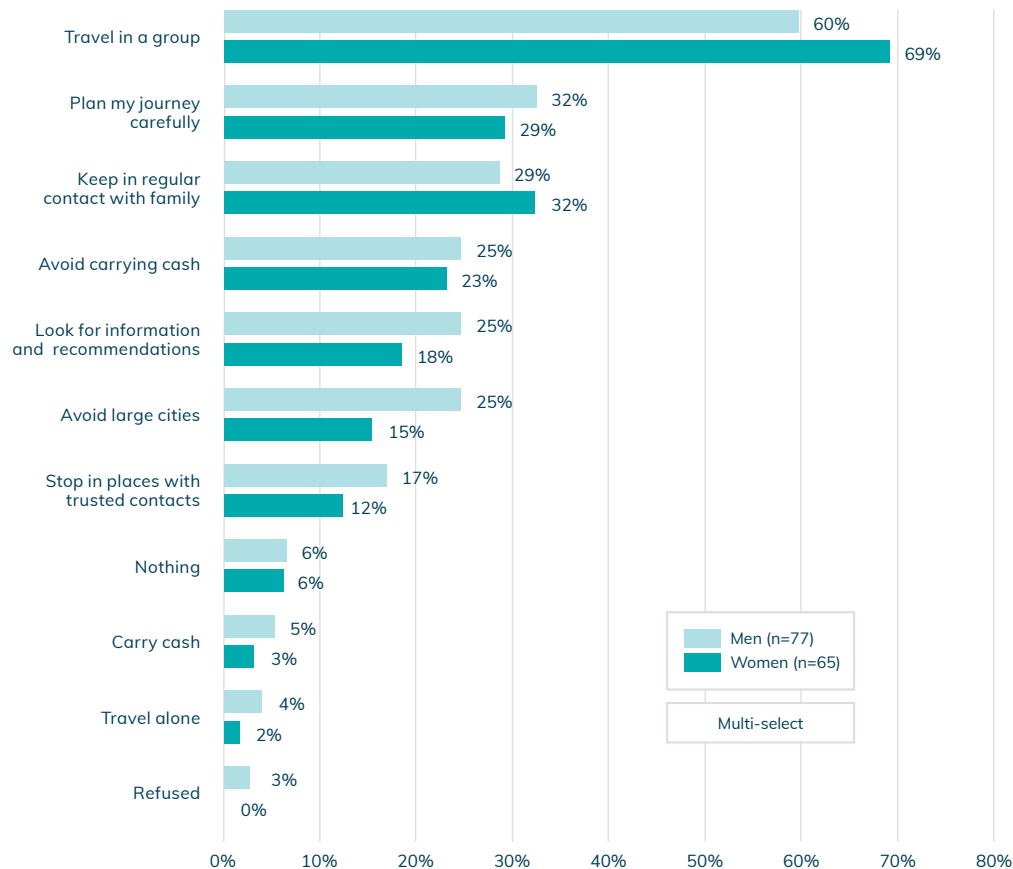


⁸ See <https://kontinentalist.com/stories/the-rohingya-in-myanmar-a-refugee-crisis-at-sea>

Traveling in a group was cited as the main measure to mitigate protection risks en route

Travelling in a group was commonly cited as a measure to mitigate protection risks en route by both genders (60% men and 69% women). Slightly more men cited that they planned their journey more carefully, avoided carrying cash, looked for recommendations and information, avoided big cities and stopped in places with trusted contacts to reduce the risks. Meanwhile, more women cited that they kept in regular contact with family during the journey, see Figure 4.

Figure 4. What do you do to protect yourself?



More information and assistance is needed en route

When asked what information would have been most useful for their migration journey to Malaysia, most mentioned conditions of the journey (57%), safety and security along the journey (56%), conditions at destination (50%) and duration of the journey (49%). 61% of respondents said that they would not have started the journey knowing what they know now.

Alongside the need for more information prior to migration, most respondents reported the need for assistance en route. Among those interviewed, 20% (30 respondents) reported that they received support mainly in the form of basic needs such as food, water, and shelter. The main providers of assistance were smugglers (47%) and other migrants (43%). The remaining 80% reported having received no assistance during the journey.

“The smugglers did not provide food during the journey and if we asked for water or food, they would beat us”

26-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Johor, Malaysia

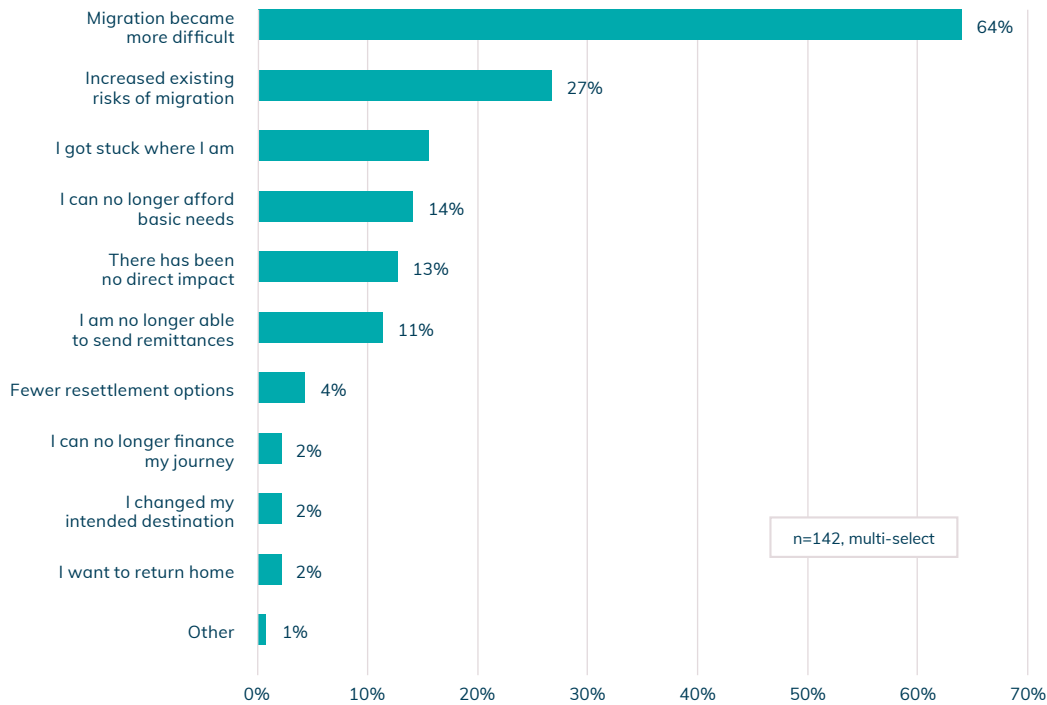
COVID-19 has significantly increased migration risks

Most respondents agreed that COVID-19 has made migration more difficult (64%), see Figure 5. In addition, 27% of respondents said that COVID-19, and measures to contain it, increased the existing risks of migration.

Other impacts of COVID-19 included increasing difficulty in Malaysia, such as being stuck in the country (15%), inability to afford basic items (14%) and inability to send remittances (11%). MMC has reported in previous 4Mi snapshots covering Rohingya in Malaysia, the impact of COVID-19 on protection risks, including widespread loss of livelihoods, rising levels of discrimination, and increased arbitrary arrest and detention.⁹

⁹ See https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/130_covid_snapshot_Asia.pdf

Figure 5. How has the Covid-19 pandemic and measures to contain it impacted your life and migration experience?



**MINISTRY OF
FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK**

**DRC DANISH
REFUGEE
COUNCIL**



4Mi data collection

The [Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative](#) (4Mi) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field monitors are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi