

Profiles and drivers of Rohingya moving to Malaysia

Despite Malaysia tightening border controls amid the COVID-19 pandemic,¹ the movement of Rohingya to Malaysia continues, and risks en route and upon arrival remain high.² Since January 2019, MMC Asia has been interviewing Rohingya in Malaysia to better understand their migration experiences, including protection risks and needs. This snapshot focuses on the profiles and drivers of Rohingya refugees moving to Malaysia, as well as their future migration intentions. It aims to contribute to a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses that improve protection for Rohingya refugees, as well as advocacy efforts related to migration movements to Malaysia.

Recommendations

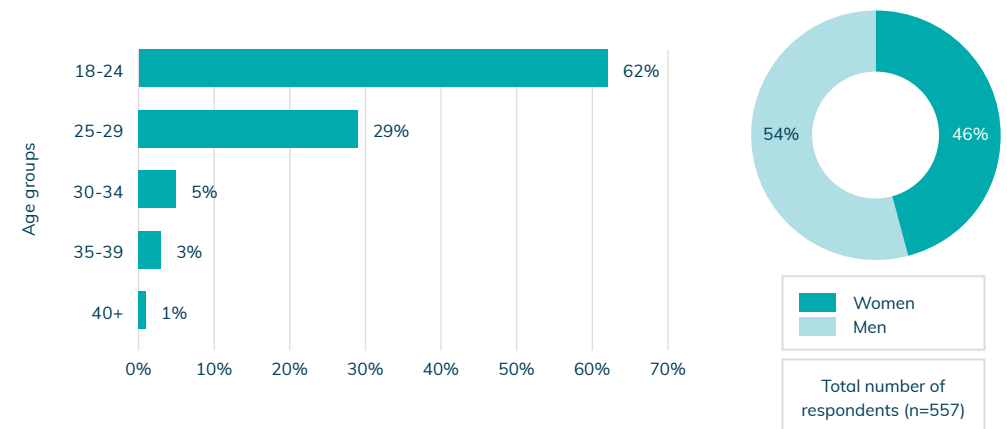
- In consultation with relevant stakeholders, the Government of Malaysia should develop a comprehensive legal framework for refugee protection in Malaysia.
- Donor countries and UN agencies should reinforce existing mechanisms of the Government of Malaysia to provide legal documentation to refugees in a timely manner to allow them to access basic services and realize their fundamental human rights.
- In collaboration with relevant Malaysian authorities and civil society actors, UNHCR should develop a national screening mechanism in Malaysia that identifies refugees and asylum seekers, victims of human trafficking, unaccompanied children, and persons with disabilities, as well as a referral system to connect those with specific needs to agencies that can assist with their protection and welfare needs.
- Governments and civil society actors in Myanmar, as well as in host and destination countries should facilitate access to education and livelihood opportunities for Rohingya people, including for women and girls.

Profiles

Information in this snapshot was collected between 4 March and 30 September 2021 in Johor Bahru, Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, Pahang, Pulau Pinang, and Selangor, in Malaysia. 557 interviews were conducted over the phone and in person.³ Findings in this snapshot are indicative of the situation for Rohingya respondents interviewed but should not be generalized to the wider Rohingya population in Malaysia.

46% of respondents are women and 54% men. The average age of respondents is 23. 28% of respondents report living or traveling with children in their care at the time of interview. 16% of respondents are self-identified as having a disability, the majority of which relate to difficulties hearing, seeing, and moving.⁴

Figure 1. Age range and gender



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

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

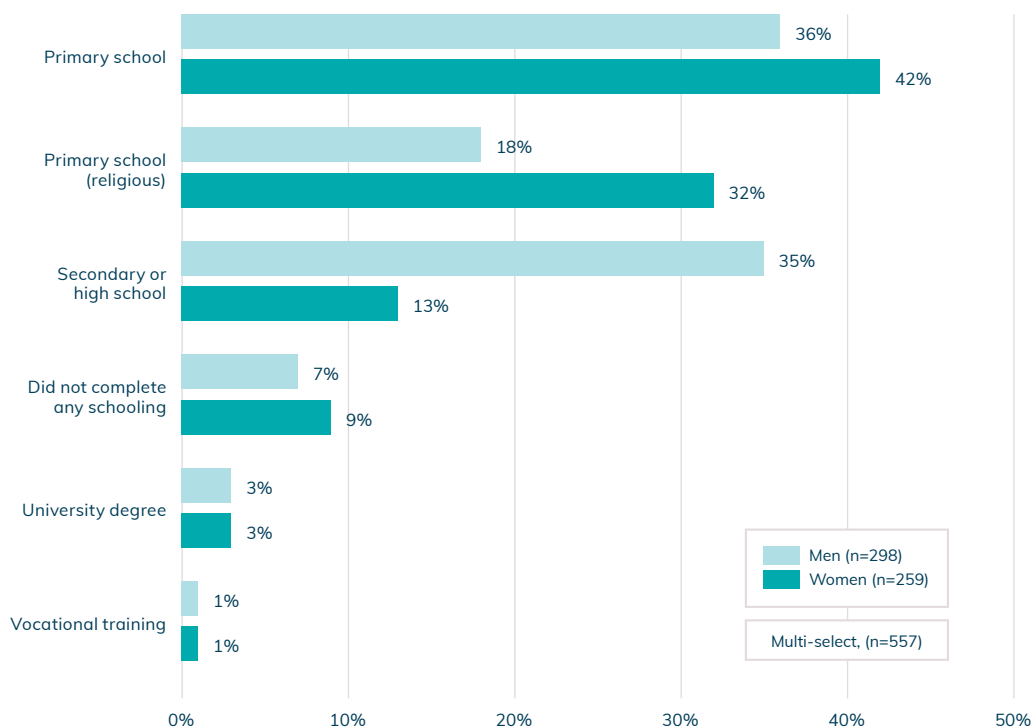
3 MMC Asia continues to collect data in Malaysia primarily over the phone, however, as the COVID-19 situation in the country has stabilized, in-person data collection has resumed in certain locations in 2021, with the observance of strict safety protocols.

4 From 8 August 2021, MMC Asia added a new question on disability to identify groups that needs special assistance and referral. The identification of people with disability and their types of disability will help inform humanitarian responses in Malaysia.

More than half of respondents (53%) are in the process of seeking asylum in Malaysia, 29% are registered as refugees with UNHCR, 17% cited they had not yet sought asylum nor held any legal documents for Malaysia and 1% did not know their legal status.

Due to restricted access to education in Myanmar and Bangladesh where more than 800,000 Rohingya refugees are currently living,⁵ the highest level of education completed was primary school for the majority of respondents (71%). Rohingya women reported less access to education than men, with 83% having completed primary school and below only, including 9% not completing any schooling at all.

Figure 2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

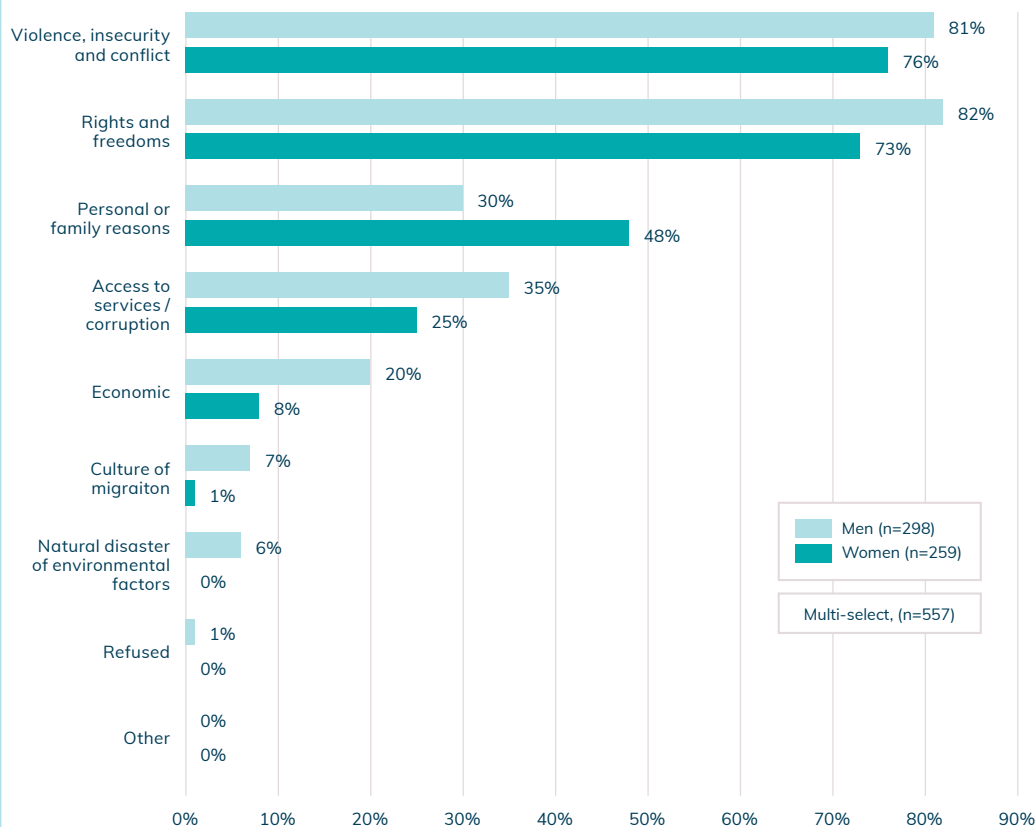


5 See <https://www.orfonline.org/research/children-left-behind-challenges-in-providing-education-to-the-rohingya-children-in-bangladesh/>

Violence, insecurity and conflicts are the main reasons for leaving for Malaysia

Consistent with MMC's findings since 2019,⁶ Rohingya respondents continue to identify violence, insecurity, and conflict (79%) as the main reasons for leaving Myanmar, followed by a lack of rights and freedoms (78%). These reasons were reported slightly more often by men compared to women, who were likely to move due to personal and family reasons, see Figure 3. Further, more men than women mentioned access to services and economic reasons as key reasons for leaving (35% and 19% respectively). This finding correlates with the fact that men were more likely to report being fully financially responsible for their households (59%) compared to Rohingya women (17%).

Figure 3. For what reasons did you leave your country?



6 See https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Mixed_Migration_Review_2019.pdf

“Due to deep-rooted racism, we Rohingya have been facing the worst discrimination and ill treatment in Rakhine state. We have no freedom of movement. We need permission to travel from one village to another, even within Rakhine state. Access to higher education and health care is also very limited.”

20-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Gombak, Selangor, Malaysia

Reasons for leaving are complex and multiple and vary across gender. For instance, among women in the survey who mentioned violence, insecurity, and conflict as drivers (n=195), 60% reported sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) when asked to provide further details. Meanwhile, a smaller but significant share of men (47%, n=242) mentioned SGBV. Similarly, when clarifying reasons related to rights and freedoms, 55% of women (n=190) mentioned sexual discrimination, compared to 50% of men (n=243).

“During the (2017) violence in Maungdaw, my village was set on fire by the military. I witnessed so many villagers being killed and raped by the military. So, our family had to escape and seek refuge in Bangladesh before coming to Malaysia”.

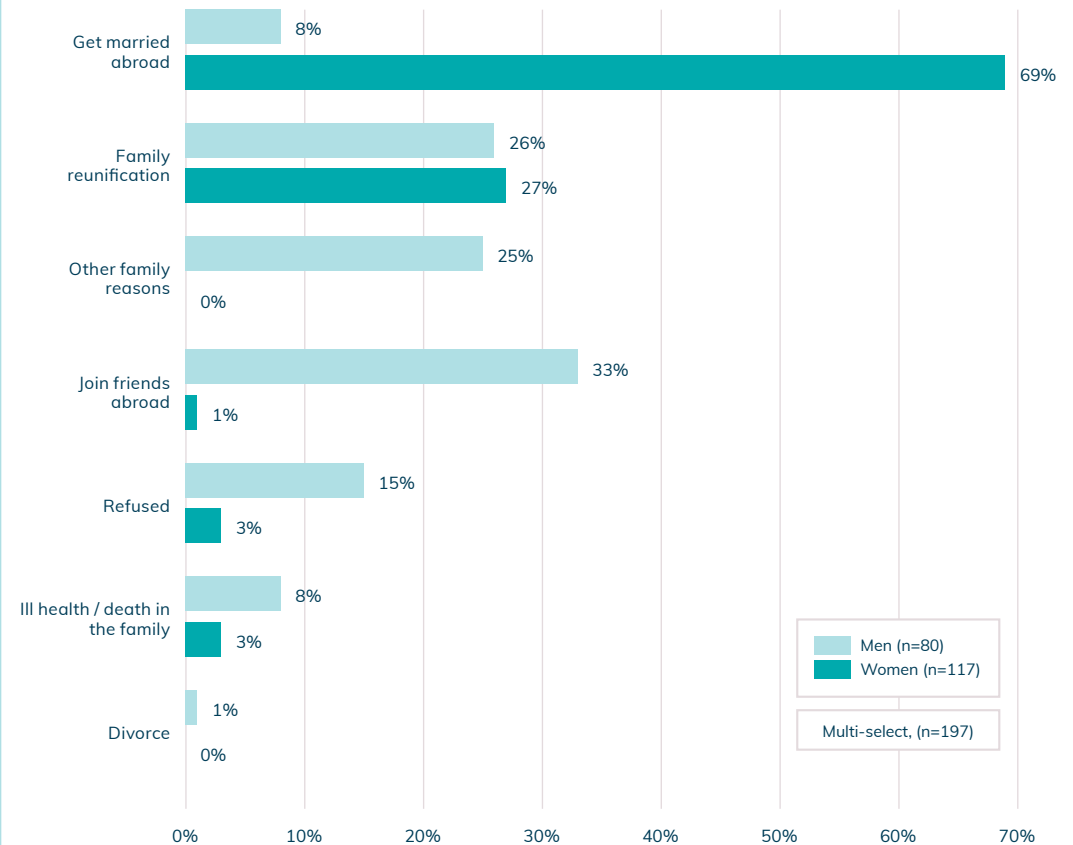
21-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Perak, Malaysia

Marriage and family reunification are among key drivers for Rohingya women en route to Malaysia

Nearly half of interviewed Rohingya women (48%) mentioned personal and family reasons as a key driver for moving to Malaysia, compared to only 30% of men, see Figure 3 above. Among the 48% of women who mentioned family and personal reasons (n=117), 69% said that they moved to Malaysia to get married, see Figure 4.

According to a recent report by UNHCR, from 2020 to 2021, two-thirds of Rohingya who embarked on maritime movements were women and children; most of the children were girls.⁷ This is in part due to the increasing prevalence of arranged marriages with Rohingya men already in countries such as Malaysia – a practice perceived by the Rohingya community as a pathway to help women and girls escape from harsh conditions in their homes or in exile, as well as a means to support their families through remittances.

Figure 4. What kind of reasons relate to personal and family issues?



“My father was shot dead during the conflict in Myanmar, leaving me with four younger siblings. Therefore, I have to come here to support my family and I hope my siblings can get an education”.

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

7 See <https://www.unhcr.org/asia/611e15284>

More women than men were influenced by others to travel to Malaysia

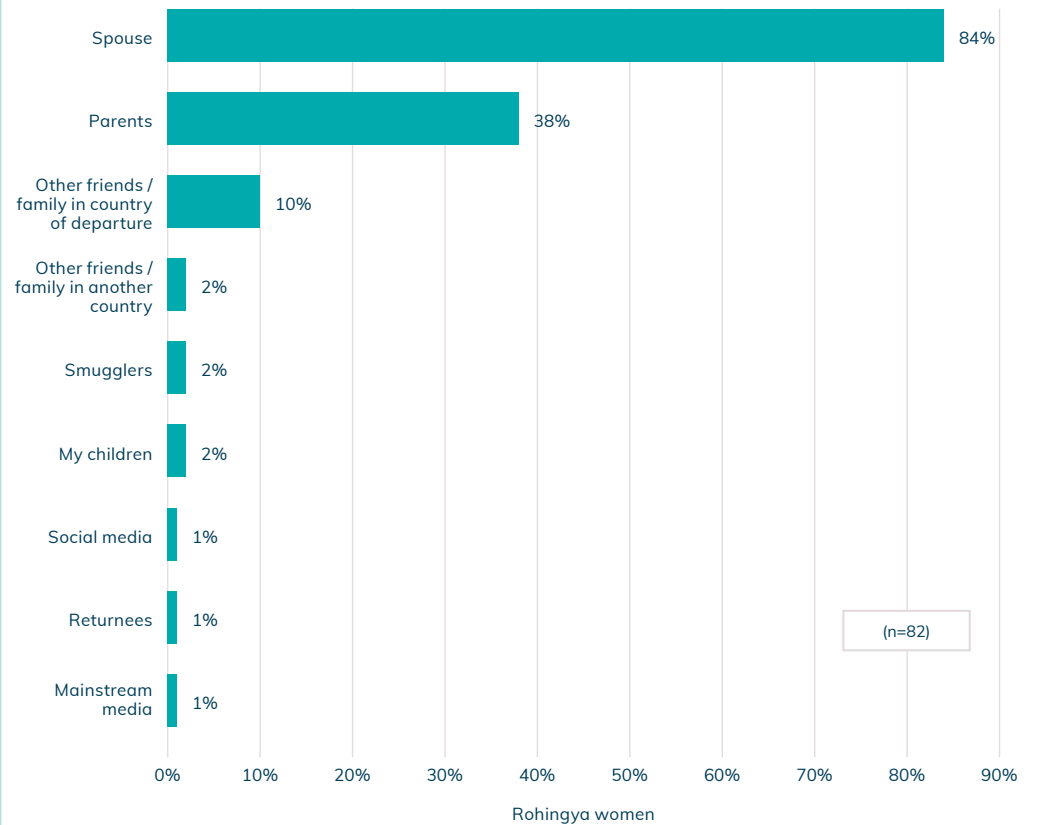
Almost all Rohingya men interviewed reported they decided to migrate of their own accord (91%) compared to 32% of Rohingya women who reported their decision was influenced by others. Of those women who reported being influenced by others (n=82), the majority (84%) mentioned their spouse as the main influencer, followed by their parents (38%), see Figure 5.

"I migrated to Malaysia because my husband called my family and asked me to come here. However, migrating through many countries was very dangerous".

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

These findings are in line with the fact that a large share of Rohingya women were traveling due to family and personal reasons, predominantly to get married abroad, as presented in the previous section. Further, this reliance on parents and spouses can be attributed to the fact that only 2% of Rohingya women were earning income prior to migrating to Malaysia, compared to 21% of Rohingya men.

Figure 5. Can you choose the biggest influences on your decision to migrate? (Name up to three)



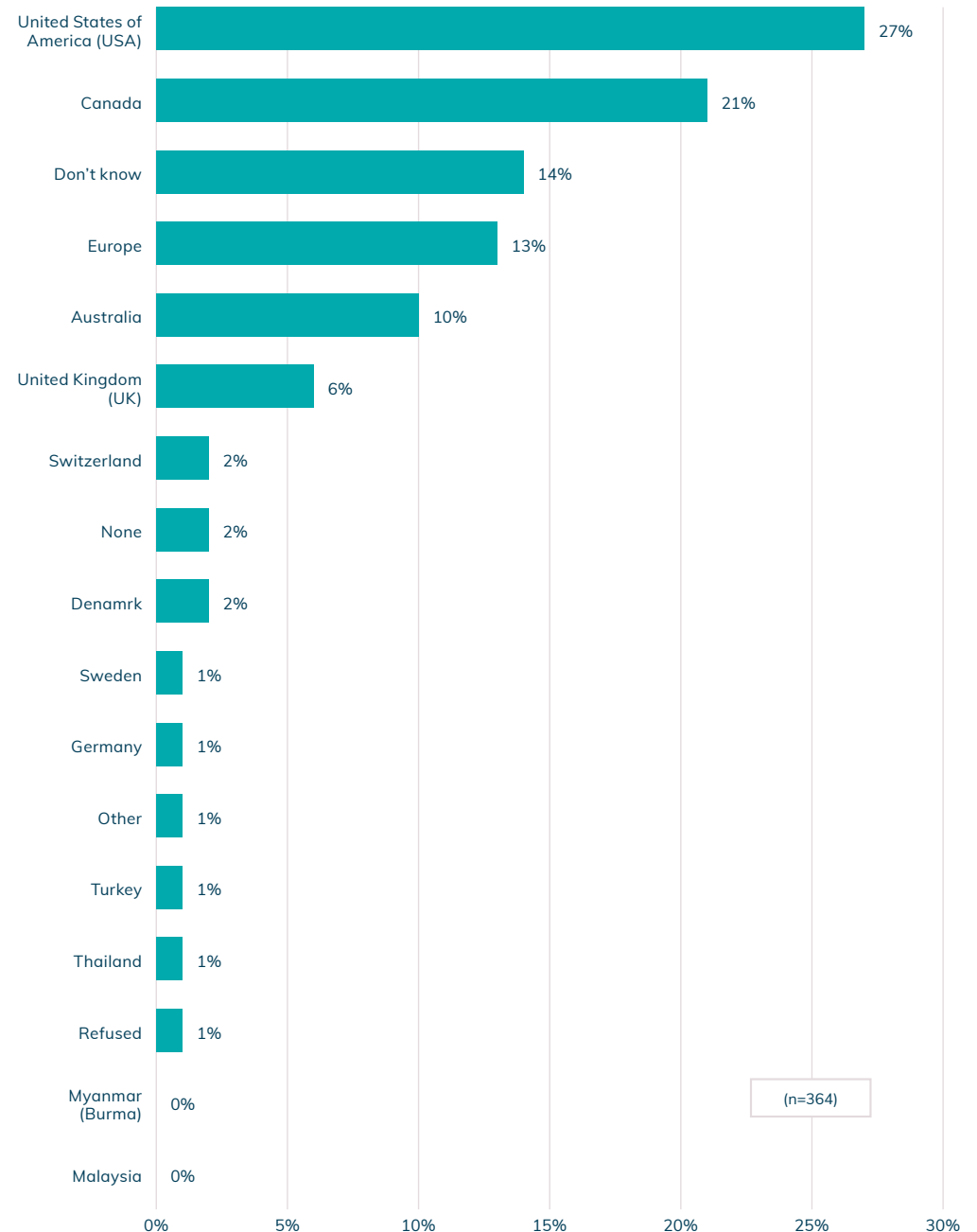
48% have not reached their desired final destination, with many aspiring to move to the US, Canada and Europe

Almost half of all respondents interviewed in Malaysia (48%) reported that they had not reached the end of their migration journeys, compared to 35% who said they had. Among the 35% who reported having reached the end of their journeys (n=193), only 10% (19) had initially preferred Malaysia as a destination before migrating (the United States and Canada were more popular options; Malaysia was listed third). This change in final destination is potentially due to the lengthy resettlement waits to third countries, as well as opportunities that keep Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.⁸

Among the 48% of respondents who reported not having reached the end of their journeys (n=364), Canada (31%) and the United States (27%) were the top two preferred destinations for Rohingya, followed by Europe (13%), then Australia (13%). Nearly 14% of the respondents said they did not yet know their preferred destination. When asked why they had selected Malaysia as a transit/host country, the main reasons were better access to services, such as education (82%) and medical care (73%), as well as a better respect for human rights (73%) and generally higher living standard (65%), among other reasons.

No respondents said that they were planning to return home currently, unsurprisingly amid the increasing instability in Myanmar, as well as the continued persecution of Rohingya.⁹ The survey data therefore suggests that until durable solutions are in place to address factors that have forced Rohingya to leave Myanmar, including violence, conflict, and lack of rights and freedoms, respondents will either remain in Malaysia or move onward to other preferred destinations when possible.

Figure 6. What country is your preferred destination?



8 See https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/149_urban_case_study_KualaLumpur.pdf

9 See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/10/1103482>

COVID-19 has exacerbated the risks of migration for Rohingya

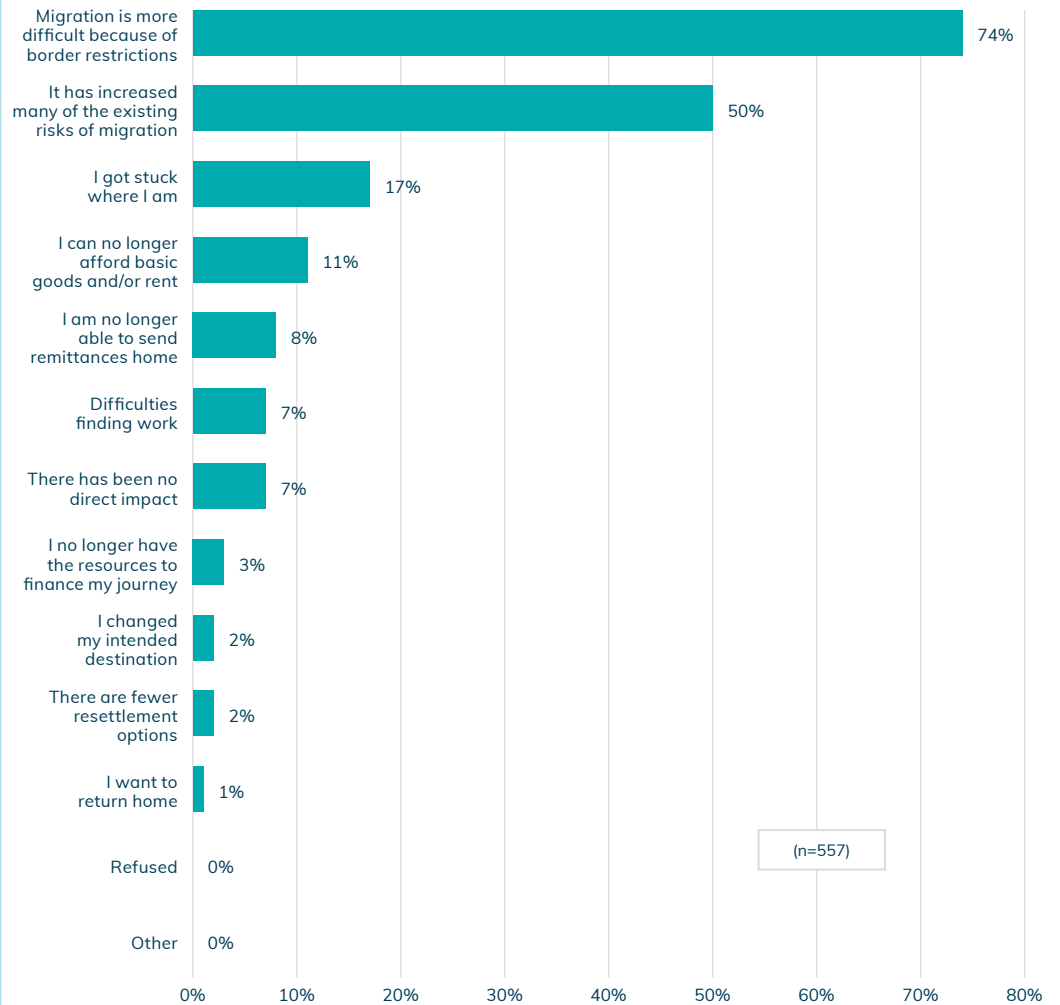
59% of the respondents started their journey after March 2020, the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in the region. While the majority of the respondents (85%) do not consider COVID-19 as a factor in their decision to leave their country of departure, a large proportion reported that COVID-19 has impacted their daily life and migration experiences. Specifically, 74% of the survey respondents cited border restrictions as a major impact of COVID-19, see Figure 7.

Further, 50% said COVID-19 has increased the existing risks of migration which might include the risks of arrest, detention, and deportation as shown in MMC's research conducted in 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on protection risks facing Rohingya in Malaysia.¹⁰ In addition, 17% reported that COVID-19 left them stuck in Malaysia, which is likely due to the pandemic impact on resettlement processes and human mobility.

"Because of the COVID 19 situation, the borders became restricted and we faced a lot of difficulties along the journey."

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

Figure 7. How has COVID-19 and measures to contain it impacted your life and migration experience?



¹⁰ See https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/130_covid_snapshot_Asia.pdf

Protecting Rohingya refugees in Asia - towards a coordinated regional approach

Protecting Rohingya Refugees in Asia (PRRIa) is a two-year ECHO-funded initiative launched in 2021 to address protection risks and needs of Rohingya refugees in Southeast Asia. The joint project of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP), the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) and Geutanyoe Foundation combines evidence-based research, programmatic and advocacy expertise to inform integrated regional protection responses in support of Rohingya refugees as the world's largest stateless population and fourth largest group of refugees. PRRIa targets 54 local, 20 international, and 27 regional organisations with a particular focus on Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.

PRRIa Partners:



PROJECT DONOR:



4Mi data collection

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 enumerators 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