

Protection risks of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia

This snapshot documents the experience of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, shedding light on protection risks that negatively impact their safety and well-being. This snapshot is one of a series that focuses on Rohingya journeys and experiences in Southeast Asia,¹ with the key objective of contributing to building a solid evidence base to inform advocacy and protection programming for Rohingya refugees in the region.

Key findings

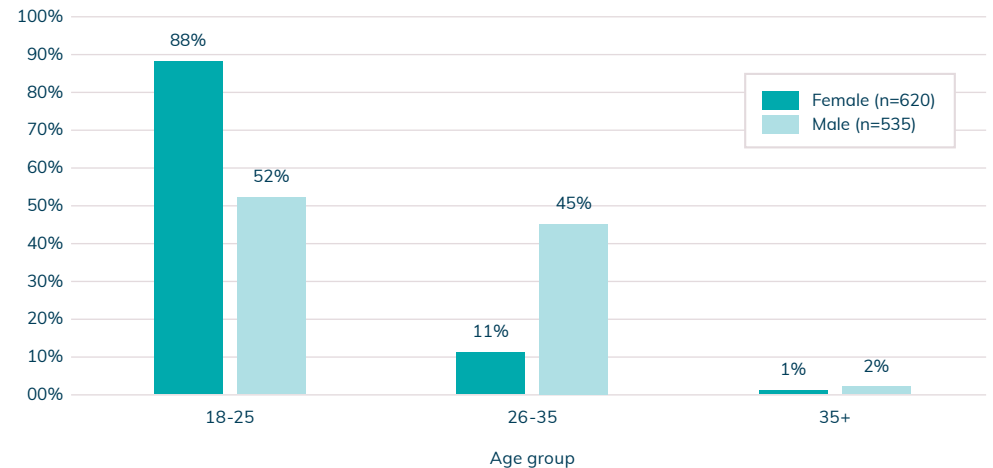
- **Almost one-third of total respondents (28%) reported having encountered risks or threats to their safety while in Malaysia.**
- **Arrest and detention were reported as the biggest risks (by 80% who encountered risks or threats),** followed by exploitation in the workplace (37%).
- Among respondents who encountered risks or threats to their safety, 94% reported **feeling anxious and depressed**, and 67% felt **scared to move freely outside their houses**. Limited support services were available. Only 6% of the respondents who encountered risks or threats to their safety were able to access help for these issues.
- Respondents were engaged in precarious employment and susceptible to exploitation. **Three-quarters of respondents who had an income were engaged in casual or occasional work, and 87% had no work contract.**
- The most common needs reported by respondents were **access to documentation, healthcare, livelihood opportunities, and education.**

Profiles

This snapshot draws on data collected from 1,155 Rohingya refugees across all states in Peninsular Malaysia and Kuala Lumpur between August 2021 and August 2022. A majority of respondents (54%) were female. Almost all respondents (98%) were between

18-35 years old, with an average age of 23. Female respondents were younger in comparison to male respondents: 88% were between 18-25 years old, while 52% of male respondents fell in the same age group.

Figure 1. Age group distribution by gender²



Arrest and detention were the greatest risks perceived by Rohingya refugees in Malaysia

Rohingya are not legally recognised in Malaysia,³ which contributes to their vulnerability to a range of protection risks, as reflected in the 4Mi data. There were 327 respondents (28% of total respondents) who reported having encountered risks or threats to their safety while in Malaysia. The most common risks were arrest and detention reported by 80% of those who encountered risks or threats (see Figure 2).

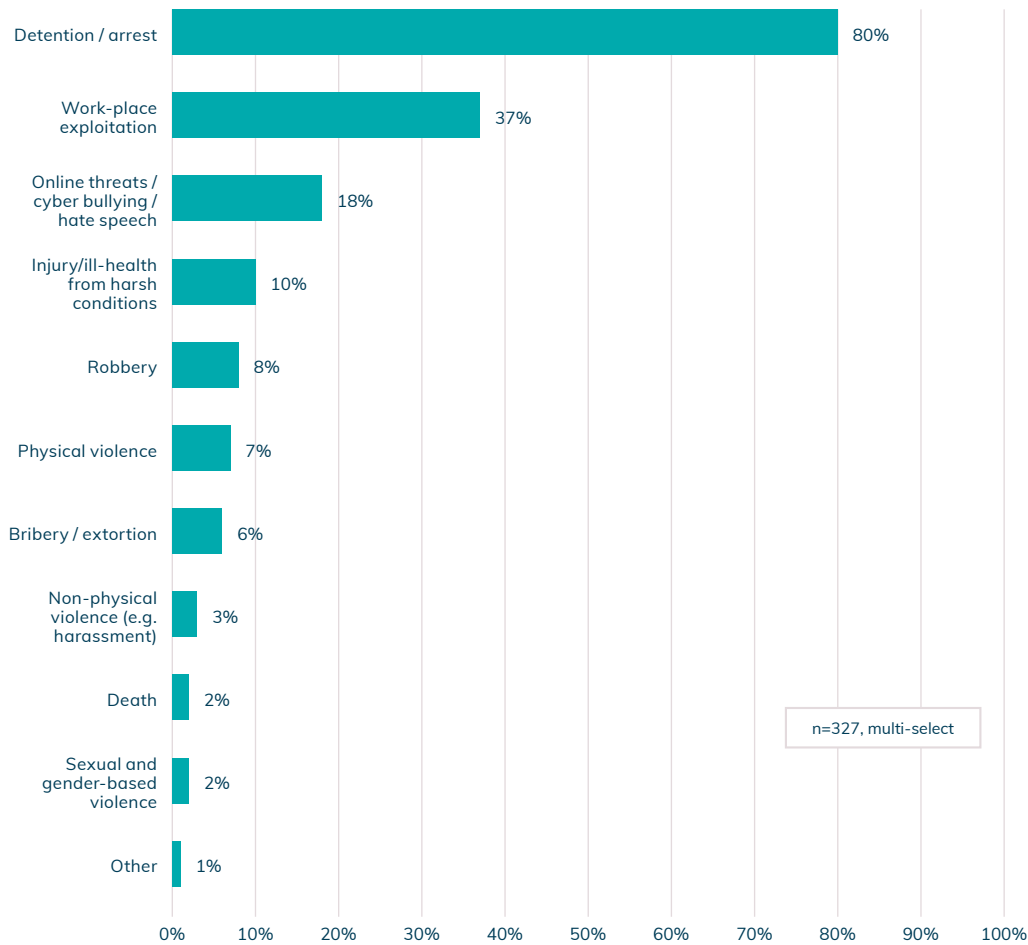
¹ See [MMC-Asia Resources – 4Mi Snapshots](#).

² The total percentage of male respondents does not tally to 100% due to rounding adjustment.

³ Kaur A (2007) [Refugees and Refugee Policy in Malaysia](#)

In the survey, 51 respondents said that they had been detained; 95 respondents said they had family member(s) in detention at the time of the survey. Among the 51 respondents who had been previously detained, 43 were arrested and detained upon arrival in Malaysia. Detention times varied: 20 reported being detained for less than three months; 12 reported being detained between three and six months, and 16 reported being detained between six and 12 months.

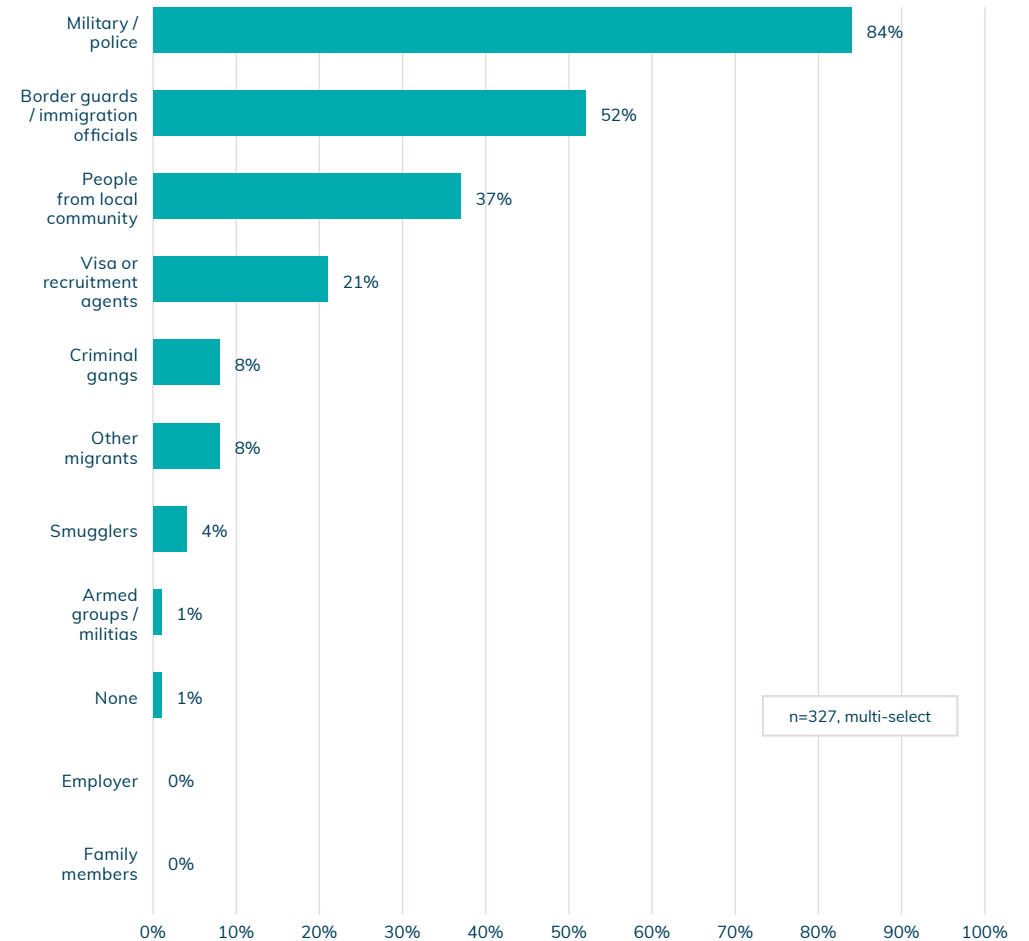
Figure 2. What do you perceive the main risks to be in Malaysia?⁴



⁴ This question is only asked of the 28% of respondents who reported that they encountered risks or threats to their safety.

State authorities, i.e., military or police (84%) and border guards or immigration officials (52%), were considered the main perpetrators of protection incidents, which corresponds to greatest perceived risks: arrest and detention.

Figure 3. Who are likely to be perpetuating protection incidents?⁵

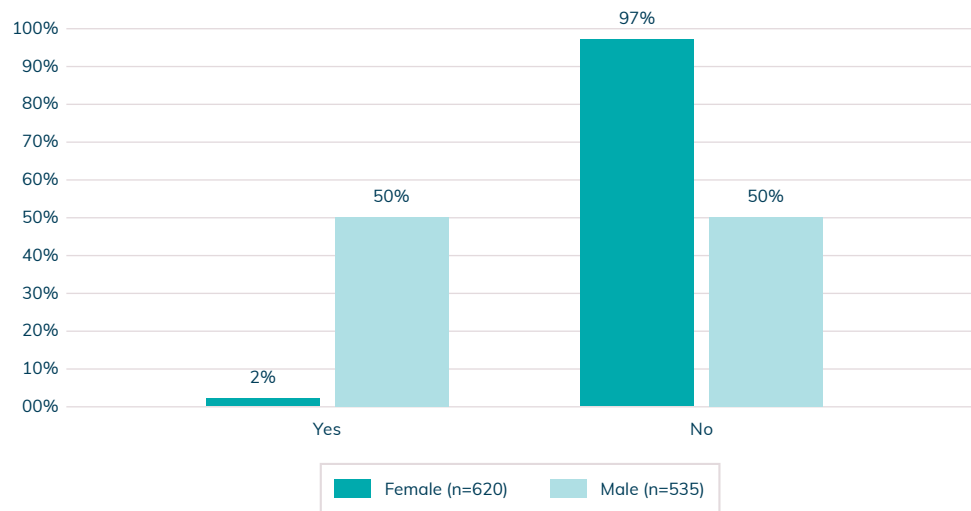


⁵ This question is only asked of the 28% of respondents who reported that they encountered risks or threats to their safety.

Exploitation at work was the second most reported risk

Because they have no legal status, Rohingya are not allowed to participate in the formal labour market. However, the significant size of the informal economy in Malaysia provides an opportunity to earn an income.⁶ Almost one-quarter of respondents (24%) reported an income source in the last 12 months: 50% of men and 2% of women, see Figure 4.

Figure 4. Have you been making money in the last 12 months?⁷



Three-quarters of respondents had an income engaged in casual or occasional work; 87% had no work contract, indicating precarious employment conditions. Workplace exploitation was cited as the second biggest protection risk among the respondents who reported experiencing threats to their safety in Malaysia (see Figure 2). Exploitation was more commonly reported among male respondents, who were more often working (see Figure 4). Almost half of male respondents (43%) who reported risks or threats to their safety perceived workplace exploitation as the main risk, while less than one-third of female respondents (30%) had the same perception.

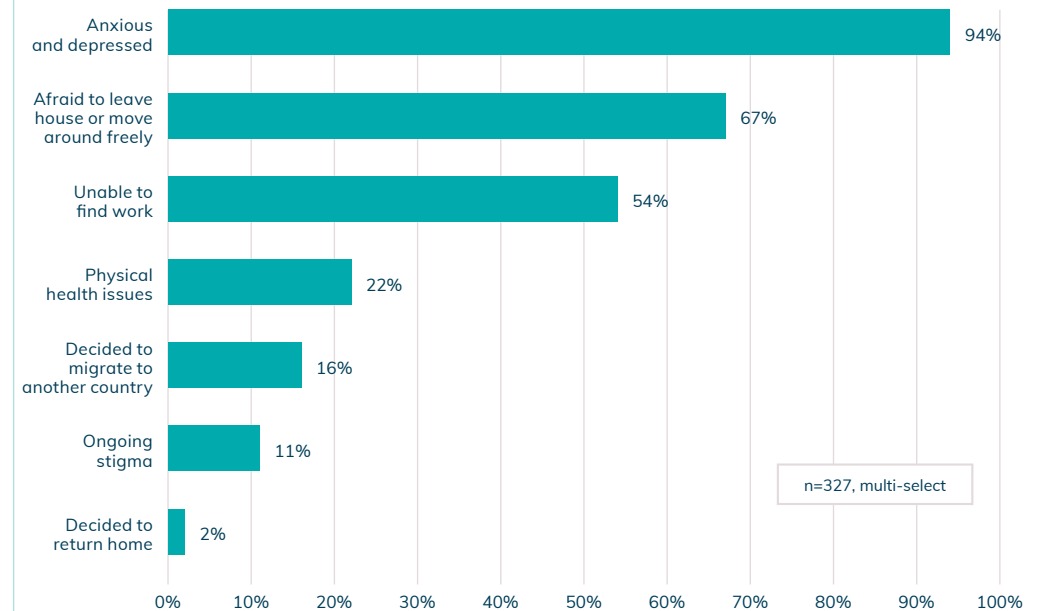
⁶ Wahab A. (2017) [Rethinking Refugees as Economically Isolated: The Rohingyas Participation in Informal Economy in Klang Valley, Malaysia](#)

⁷ The total percentage of female respondents does not tally to 100% due to rounding adjustment and 0.3% who refused to answer.

Mental well-being at risk

Protection risks impacted respondents negatively, particularly in terms of mental well-being. A vast majority of the 327 respondents who encountered risks or threats to their safety reported feeling anxious and depressed (94%), and 67% felt scared to move freely outside their houses (see Figure 5). Despite this, assistance is not easily available for refugees who are affected. Among the 327 respondents who encountered risks or threats to their safety in Malaysia, 6% were able to access support, indicating an urgent need for strengthened support responses on the ground.

Figure 5. How are risks or threats to safety impacting you?⁸

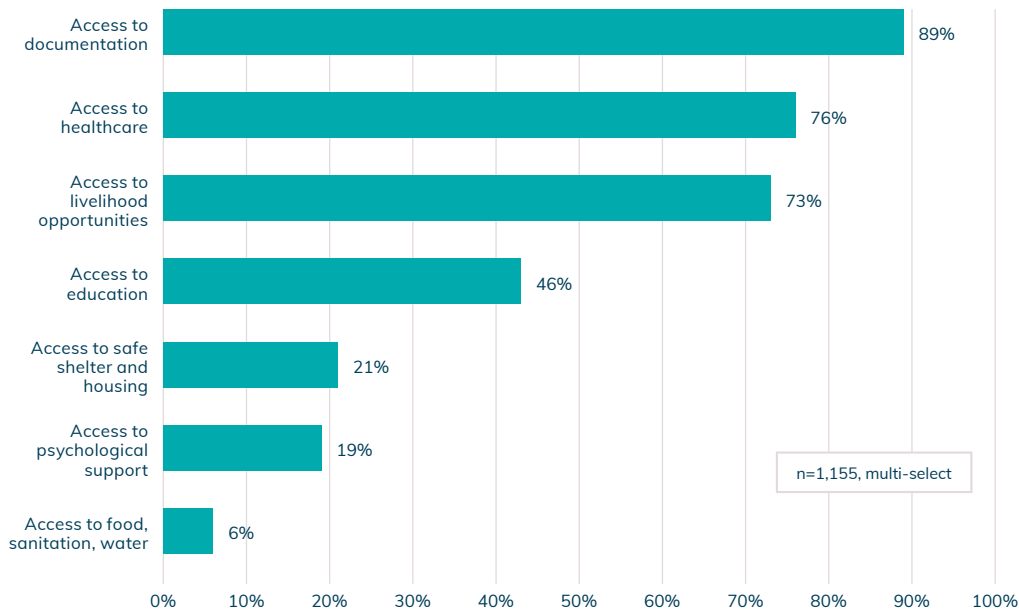


⁸ This question is only asked of the 28% of respondents who reported that they encountered risks or threats to their safety.

Lack of legal status was the key barrier to protection in Malaysia

To a large extent, the risks or threats reported by Rohingya in Malaysia are associated with a lack of documentation. Linked to legal status are protection and access to other basic rights, including rights to work and rights to public services like healthcare and education. Documentation, livelihoods, healthcare, and education were the four top needs reported by respondents. A majority of respondents considered access to documentation (89%) their greatest need in Malaysia, followed by access to healthcare (76%), access to livelihood opportunities (73%), and access to education (46%) (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. What are your greatest needs in Malaysia?



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 Geutanyoë 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. PRRIa targets 54 local, 20 international, and 27 regional organisations with a particular focus on Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.

PRRIa PARTNERS:



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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