

Rohingya refugees in Indonesia: a focus on smuggling, information, and financing

This snapshot explores the experience of smuggling among Rohingya refugees en route to Indonesia, with the key objective of contributing to evidence-based advocacy efforts and protection responses for Rohingya refugees.

The Myanmar government and non-state actors have displaced Rohingya populations for decades through persecution and systemic discrimination. This displacement has reached new heights since 2017, with close to a million¹ Rohingya refugees now in Bangladesh, and many others braving sea and land routes to Southeast Asia² - particularly to Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. Since 2021, MMC has been conducting surveys with Rohingya refugees in the region in order to better understand regional movements, experiences, demographics, and other elements of displacement.

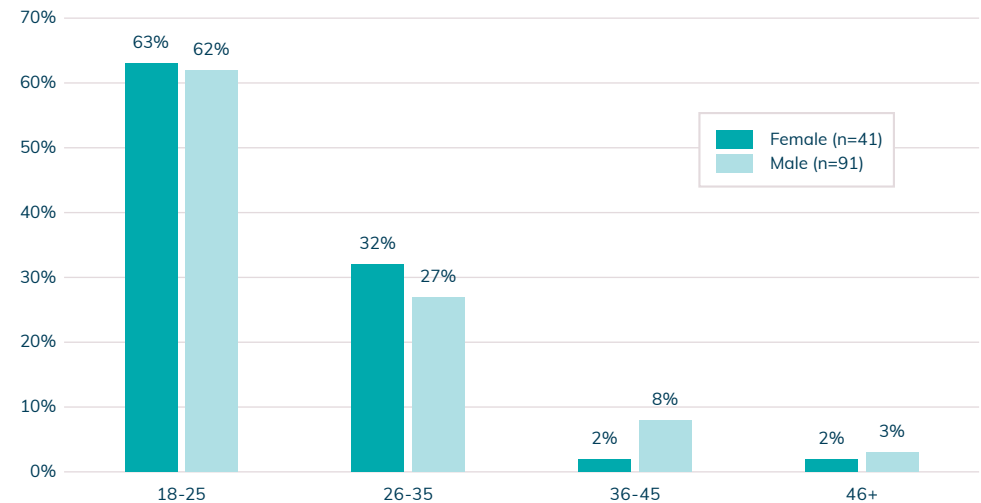
Key findings

- 96% of respondents used smuggler(s) at some point in their journey to Indonesia.
- Most of the respondents embarked on their journeys despite not having the information they need about the journey, demonstrating an information gap that serves to increase protection risks.
- Almost two-thirds of the respondents (65%) who used a smuggler or multiple smugglers at some point in their journey agreed that they were intentionally misled about the journey by smugglers in advance of and during the journey.
- Family and friends played a crucial role in supporting the respondents' journey financially.

Profiles

This snapshot draws on data collected between December 2021 and May 2022 from 132 Rohingya refugees in Indonesia. Respondents were surveyed in cities across Sumatra and Sulawesi islands, including Medan (76%), Lhokseumawe (20%), Pekanbaru (3%) and Makassar (1%). Majority of the respondents were male (69%). The average age of respondents was 26 years old: 91% of total respondents were between 18-35 years old, 6% were between 36-45 years old and 3% were above 45 years old.

Figure 1. Age group distribution by gender³



Nearly all respondents' movement to Indonesia was wholly or partially facilitated by smugglers

A multitude of barriers to travel within Myanmar and to neighbouring countries, including denial of free movement rights by the de facto authorities in Myanmar, lack of appropriate

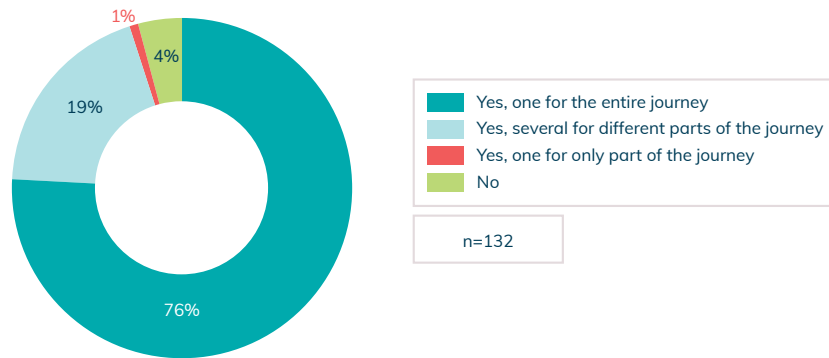
¹ See [UNHCR - Rohingya emergency](#).

² See Albert and Maizland (2020) [What Forces Are Fueling Myanmar's Rohingya Crisis?](#)

³ The total percentage of female respondents does not tally to 100% due to rounding adjustment.

documentation, insecurity and other risks, severely restrict the options for many Rohingya to seek safety from continued discrimination and persecution.⁴ Human smuggling has provided an avenue, however problematic, for many to seek international protection. As reflected in the 4Mi data, almost all respondents (96%) used one or more smugglers at some point during their journeys; only five respondents (4%) did not use smugglers at all. Among those who engaged smugglers, about one-third (34%) went to Indonesia directly from Myanmar, while more than half (55%) first transited through Bangladesh, and the rest through other countries including Thailand (6%), India (2%), and Malaysia (2%).

Figure 2. Did you use a smuggler for your journey?



There is a pressing need for accurate information about the journey

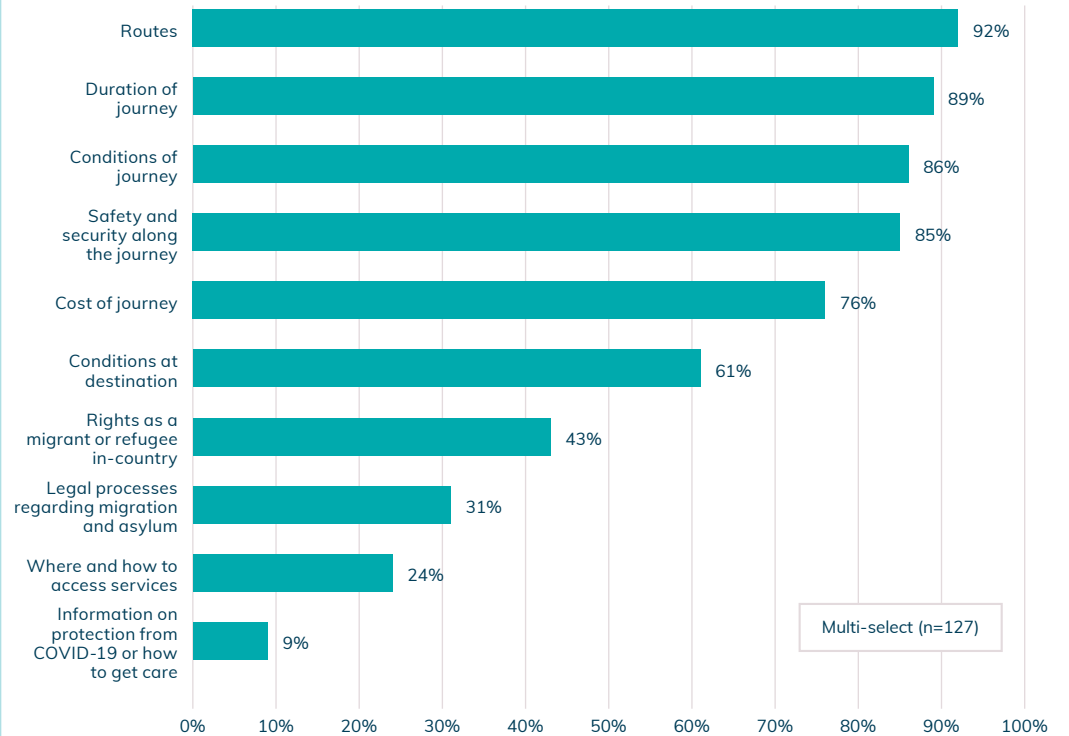
Most of the respondents engaged smugglers despite not having the information they need about the journey. Information about the routes (92%), duration (89%), conditions (86%), safety and security along the journey (85%), and journey costs (76%) were perceived as the top five most needed types of information among the 127 respondents who used smuggler(s). This could be attributed to the constant changes in smuggling routes⁵ in response to strengthened border controls across the region and the reluctance of smugglers to disclose specific information⁶ about the smuggling arrangements.

4 See HRW (2022) [Myanmar: No Justice, No Freedom for Rohingya 5 Years On](#).

5 See UNODC (2015) [Migrant smuggling in Asia increasingly complex and dynamic](#).

6 See Wahab and Khairi (2020) [Smuggling of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Malaysia: A Threat to Human Security](#).

Figure 3. What information would have been most useful that you did not receive?



Smugglers as key information sources

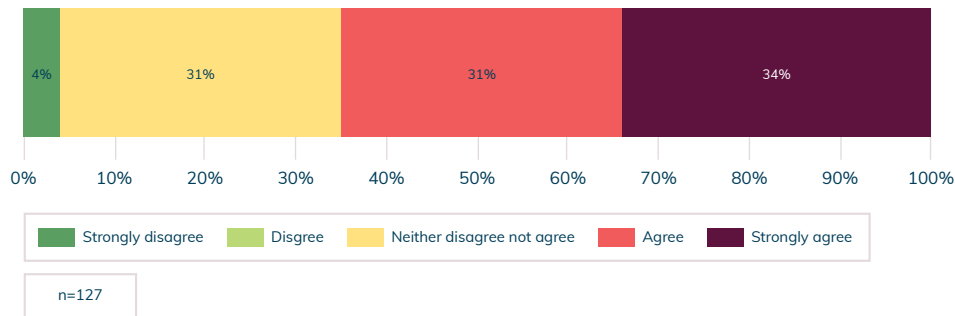
Only 18 respondents (14%) had obtained information about routes, destinations, costs, and risks before their journey, and eight (6%) had accessed this information during travel. Among respondents who accessed information about routes, destinations, costs, and risks before the journey, half (50%) sourced this information from smugglers. Access to information was more challenging during the journey as 80% of the respondents did not have access to a functional phone during their journey,⁷ and smugglers were the primary source of information for all respondents that managed to access information en route.

7 Studies have shown the critical role of the smartphone in the refugees' journey, not just for connectivity with the social networks but also for navigation en route and as a source of information. See Kaufmann (2016) [The Empowered Refugee: The Smartphone as a Tool of Resistance on the Journey to Europe](#); Alencar et. al. (2019) [The smartphone as a lifeline: an exploration of refugees' use of mobile communication technologies during their flight](#); Gillespie et. al. (2018) [Syrian Refugees and the Digital Passage to Europe: Smartphone Infrastructures and Affordances](#).

More than half of respondents reported being intentionally misled by smugglers

About two-thirds of the respondents (65%) who used a smuggler at some point of their journey agreed that they were intentionally misled about the journey by their smuggler or smugglers. This suggests that the information obtained from smuggler(s) is unreliable and supports other findings that smugglers commonly use deception and false promises⁸ to recruit Rohingya. In some instances, Rohingya are subject to exploitation and abuses during the journey, and fall in the situations of 'aggravated smuggling'⁹ or trafficking in persons.¹⁰

Figure 4. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers'

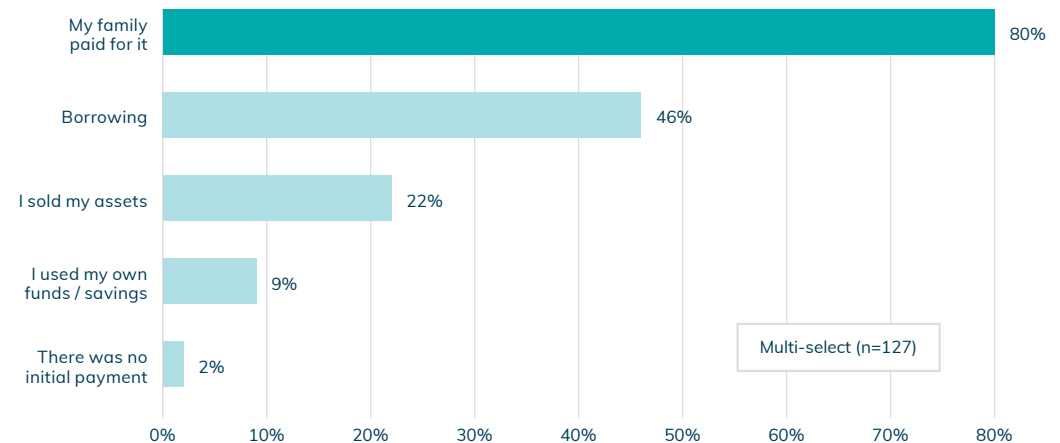


8 Wahab, A. (2018) [The Colours of Exploitation Smuggling of Rohingyas from Myanmar to Malaysia](#).
 9 According to Article 6 (3) of the [UNODC Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants](#), this refers to circumstances "(a) That endanger, or are likely to endanger, the lives or safety of the migrants concerned; or (b) That entail inhuman or degrading treatment, including for exploitation, of such migrants."
 10 Shishir, N. N. (2021) [Human traffickers prey on Rohingya refugees](#); Freedom Collective (2022) [Mapping Rohingya Movement](#)

Family was a major factor in financing journeys

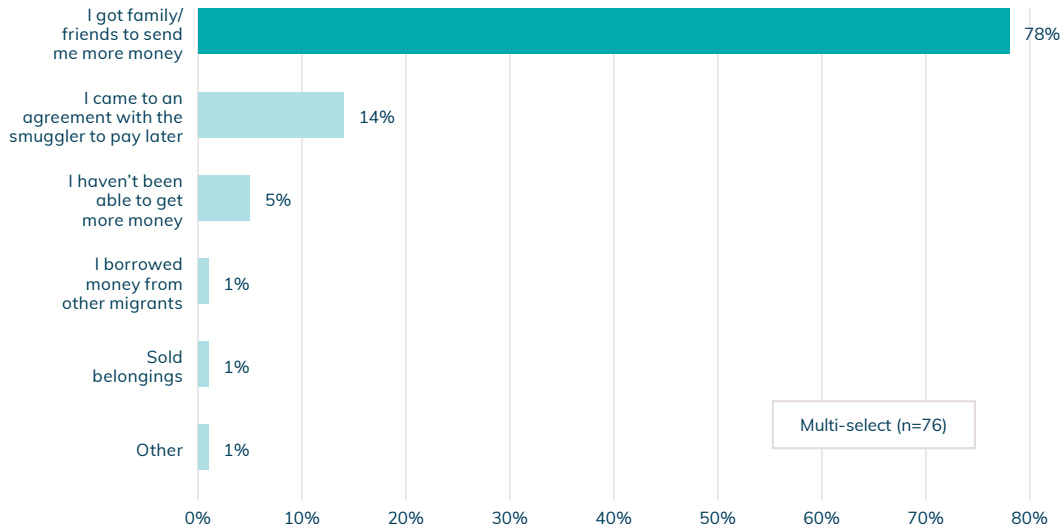
Among respondents who used a smuggler or multiple smugglers, more than half (59%) paid in installments during the journey. In terms of financing, 80% (n=102) relied on their family to pay for their journey, which suggests that family is a major factor in financing the journey. In instances when the respondents (n=76) ran out of funds en route, 78% (n=59) sought more financial support from their family and friends to continue their journey. The dependence on pre-established social networks throughout the journey and beyond is highlighted in other studies which establish the critical role of social networks to Rohingya after they reached Indonesia¹¹ and Malaysia.¹² In addition to financial support for the journey, social networks play a role in helping Rohingya to adapt to a new environment upon arrival at countries of asylum, and in some instances, provide them a sense of identity and belonging away from home.

Figure 5. How did you initially finance your journey?



11 See Grönlund (2016) [Refugees in Exodus: Statelessness and Identity](#).
 12 Wake and Cheung (2016) [Livelihood strategies of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia](#).

Figure 6. How have you paid for the journey since then?



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

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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 Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

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