

Protection risks among Afghan, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Chin and Rohingya people in Malaysia

This snapshot highlights abuse or rights violations experienced and witnessed by Afghan, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, and Myanmar Chin and Rohingya refugees and migrants in Malaysia, especially relating to their use of migrant smugglers.¹ It examines the motivations for using smugglers, perception of risks and incidents experienced en route, as well as the role of public officials and smugglers in their journeys.

This snapshot is produced in the context of a partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#).



Key findings

- The majority of respondents (87%) used smuggler(s) during their journey to Malaysia; Indonesian respondents were the only group where a minority used smugglers (37%).
- Half of Bangladeshi (50%) and a majority of Myanmar Rohingya (65%) respondents reported experiencing physical violence on the journey, and 39% of Myanmar Chin respondents reported injury or ill-health caused by harsh conditions. Indonesian respondents did not report experiencing any incidents of abuse or violations.
- Public officials' involvement in smuggling of migrants was higher among Indonesian (98%), Afghan (51%) and Rohingya (51%) respondents who used a smuggler, in comparison to Bangladeshi (25%) and Myanmar Chin (9%) respondents.

1 MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', one which encompasses various activities — paid for or otherwise compensated by refugees and migrants — that facilitate irregular migration. These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation, and accommodation. This approach reflects refugees' and migrants' perceptions of smuggling and the facilitation of irregular movement. Our interpretation is deliberately broader than the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants definition. However, this does not imply that MMC considers all activities it includes in its broad understanding of smuggling to be criminal offences. MMC prefers to use the term 'human smuggling' instead of 'migrant smuggling' as smuggling involves both refugees and migrants. This publication is produced in partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#). The Observatory uses the word 'smuggler' when it can reasonably be assumed that the crime of migrant smuggling is constituted, as per Article 3 of the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, while the word 'facilitator' is used whenever the elements of (a) irregular entry and/or (b) financial or material benefit, could reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence.

- Though smugglers were reported as the main perpetrators of abuse or violations by 64% of respondents, using smugglers was also considered a safety measure, according to 79% of Myanmar Chin, 45% of Bangladeshi, 36% of Afghan and 11% of Rohingya respondents.
- Most respondents (71%) did not receive any assistance along the journey. Among those who did, 93% of respondents relied on smugglers for assistance related to food, water, and shelter, as well as information about the journey.

Profiles

This snapshot draws on data from 1,666 4Mi surveys conducted between December 2022 and May 2023 among Afghan (9%), Bangladeshi (17%), Indonesian (10%), Myanmar Chin (14%), and Rohingya (49%) refugees and migrants across Malaysia, including in Johor, Kedah, Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur, Pahang, Penang, Selangor, Seremban, and Terengganu. All Chin and Rohingya respondents had left from Myanmar.

Respondents were mainly recruited for surveys through referrals by community leaders (48%) and referrals by acquaintances or friends (25%). The main criterion for recruitment was respondents' date of arrival in Malaysia - all respondents had arrived within the previous three years. A majority of respondents (85%) were aged 18-35 years, although the majority of Indonesian respondents (63%) were over 35 years old. More than half of Rohingya respondents were women (57%), while a majority of respondents from the other four groups were men (see Figure 1). Most Afghan (49%), Bangladeshi (36%) and Myanmar Chin (52%) respondents had completed secondary or high school, while primary school was the highest level of education completed by a majority of Indonesian (69%) and Rohingya respondents (51%).

Figure 1. Profile of respondents

Profile		Afghan (n=150)	Bangladeshi (n=289)	Chin (n=241)	Indonesian (n=167)	Rohingya (n=819)
Age group	18-25	45%	38%	44%	14%	75%
	26-35	29%	45%	39%	23%	23%
	36-45	17%	17%	12%	26%	1%
	46-55	7%	1%	3%	34%	1%
	55+	1%	0%	1%	3%	0%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Gender	Male	75%	96%	63%	62%	43%
	Female	25%	4% ²	37%	38%	57%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Education	No schooling completed	9%	2%	0%	3%	27%
	Primary school	34%	25%	13%	69%	51%
	Secondary or high school	49%	36%	52%	1%	21%
	University degree	7%	8%	29%	18%	0%
	Vocational training	1%	29%	5%	9%	0%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

² The proportion of female respondents for Bangladesh is low, as Malaysia is not a key destination country for Bangladeshi migrant women. The main destination countries for Bangladeshi migrant women are Saudi Arabia, Jordan and UAE. BMET Overseas Employment of Female Workers from 1991-2023, accessed on 17 July 2023.

A range of reasons for leaving

Respondents across all groups reported leaving their country of origin for a multiplicity of reasons. A majority of Bangladeshi (92%) respondents left for economic reasons, as well as being driven to leave by violence, insecurity, and conflict (62%), lack of access to services or corruption (47%), and/or lack of rights and freedoms (44%). Bangladeshis also more commonly reported “a culture of migration” (26%) as a reason than other groups. Rohingya respondents also left for more than one reason – most often violence, insecurity and conflict (94%), but also lack of rights and freedoms (88%), lack of access to services or corruption (60%), personal or family reasons (46%) and economic reasons (28%). Among Afghan respondents, violence, insecurity and conflict (53%) and lack of rights and freedoms (45%) were most commonly cited, followed by economic reasons (38%), personal or family reasons (21%) and lack of access to services or corruption (10%). Among Myanmar Chin respondents, most left for reasons of violence, insecurity and conflict (92%), and lack of rights and freedoms (71%), with fewer citing economic factors (17%). In contrast, 90% of Indonesian respondents reported economic reasons, while fewer reported personal or family reasons (19%), and a “culture of migration” (8%).

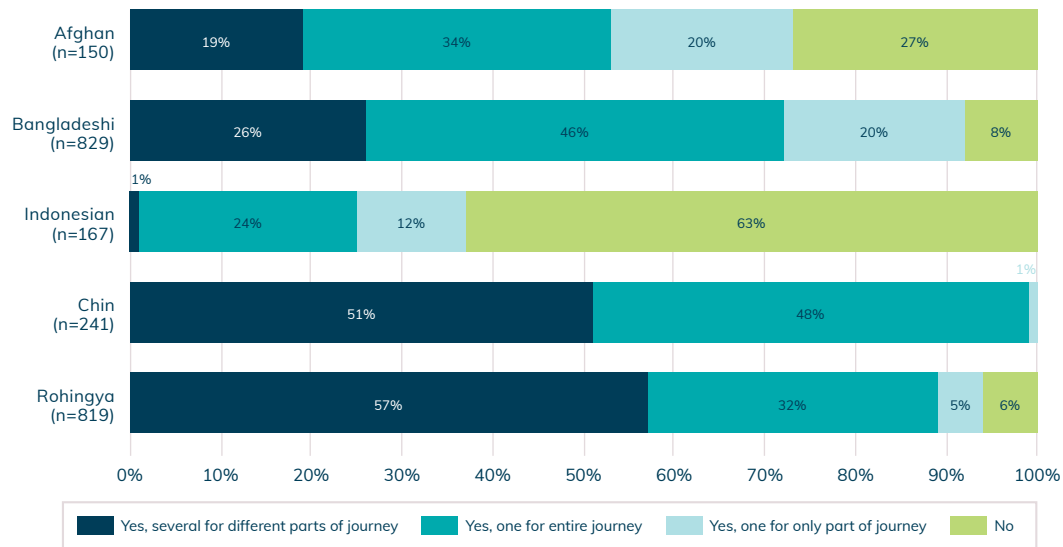
Use of smugglers most commonly reported by Afghan, Bangladeshi, Chin and Rohingya respondents

A majority of respondents (87%) used smugglers in their journey to Malaysia (see Figure 2). However, far fewer Indonesian respondents (37%) used smugglers. This is likely due both to the geographical proximity between Indonesia and Malaysia and visa-free entry into Malaysia for Indonesians, for a stay of up to 30 days.³ All other groups surveyed are required to apply for a Malaysian visa in advance of travel.⁴

³ Spaan, E. & Naerssen, T. (2018) [Migration decision-making and migration industry in the Indonesia-Malaysia corridor](#). Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies.

⁴ MAMPU (2023) [Entry Requirements into Malaysia](#).

Figure 2. Did you use a smuggler?



The most cited reason for using smuggling services among Afghan (51%), Bangladeshi (69%), and Indonesian (97%) respondents was that they thought it would be easier. For Bangladeshi and Indonesian migrant workers, the official recruitment process in Malaysia is often inaccessible, complicated and lengthy, pushing them to rely on smugglers.⁵ A majority of Myanmar Chin respondents (63%) used smuggling services because they did not know about any alternative. For Rohingya respondents (65%), their friends or family in the country of departure recommended the use of a smuggler.

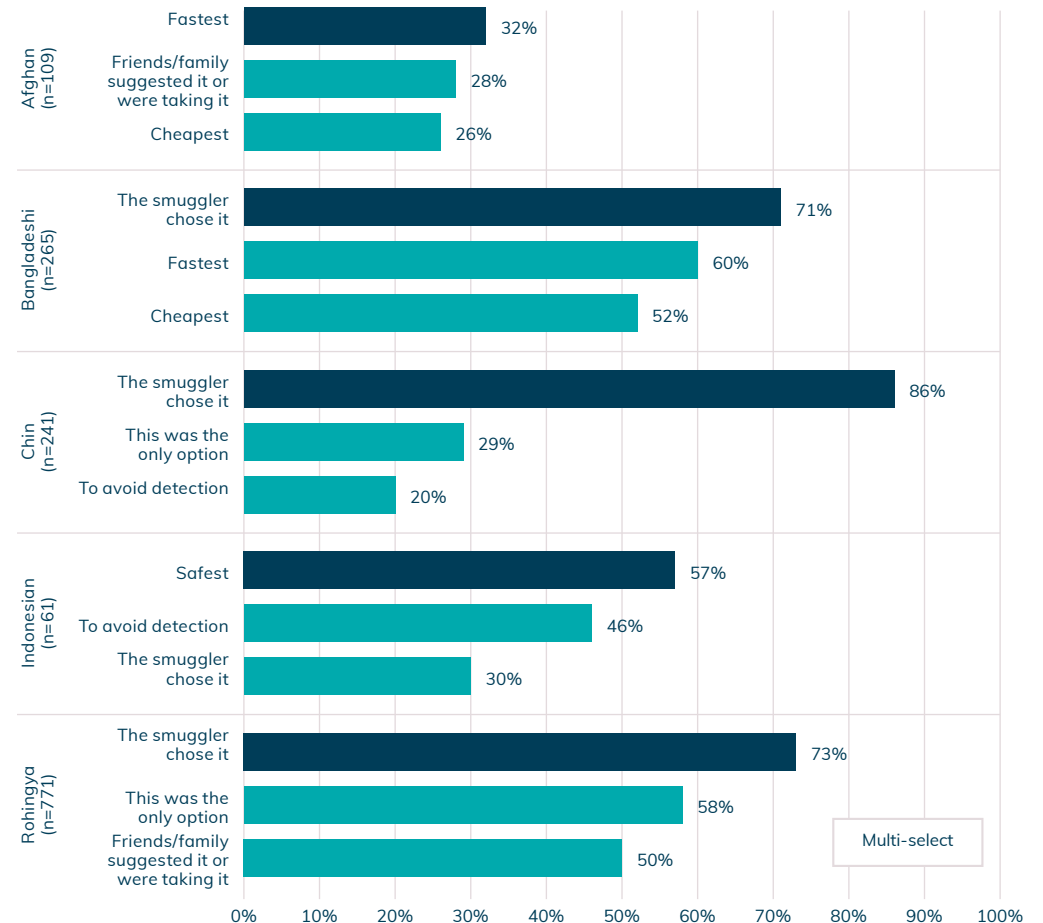
Safety of route less of a consideration for Afghan, Chin and Rohingya respondents

The primary reason for taking a route among Bangladeshi (71%), Chin (86%), and Rohingya (73%) respondents was because it was chosen by the smuggler. 32% of Afghan respondents took a route because it was the fastest, whereas the safety factor was the main consideration for most Indonesian respondents (57%). Safety of the route was

5 ILO (2020) [Malaysia: Review of admission and recruitment practices of Indonesian workers in the plantation and domestic work sectors and related recommendations](#); Juliawan B. H. (2018) [View of Seeing Migration like a State: The case of irregular Indonesian migrant workers deported from Malaysia](#). Anti-trafficking Review; Lee & Idris (2018) [Overhauling the billion-ringggit migrant worker industry](#). The Edge

also one of the key considerations for Bangladeshis (44%), but less so for Afghan (14%), Myanmar Chin (5%) and Rohingya (2%) respondents, suggesting that the need to flee violence and conflict in the country of origin took precedence for some over considerations around safety during the journey.

Figure 3. Why did you take this route? Three most common answers



Perception of dangers en route in Myanmar and Thailand

A higher proportion of Afghan (62%), Myanmar Chin (90%) and Rohingya (91%) respondents reported encountering risks en route to Malaysia, as compared to Bangladeshi (37%) and Indonesian (11%) respondents. The length and complexity of the journey,

including the types of means of transportation, likely influence the risks respondents encountered en route. For respondents who used smugglers, across all groups, 11% of respondents travelled by plane for the whole journey. This was seen most among Bangladeshi (36%), Afghan (35%) and Indonesian (33%) respondents. In comparison, very few Myanmar Chin (2%) and none of the Rohingya respondents travelled by plane.

Among Afghan respondents, dangers were spread across the route. 16% reported experiencing dangers somewhere in Pakistan, 13% somewhere in India, and 11% somewhere in Indonesia. Rohingya respondents most often reported the journey while still in Myanmar as dangerous (56%), particularly in the city of Yangon, Myanmar (27%). Rohingya people need permission to move within and outside of Rakhine state.⁶ Their transit through Myanmar without permission is therefore risky. When they transit through hubs like Yangon, the largest city in Myanmar, their reliance on facilitators and smugglers increases, and this brings greater risks of detention and abuse by smuggling networks operating in the region, as explained by a Rohingya respondent:

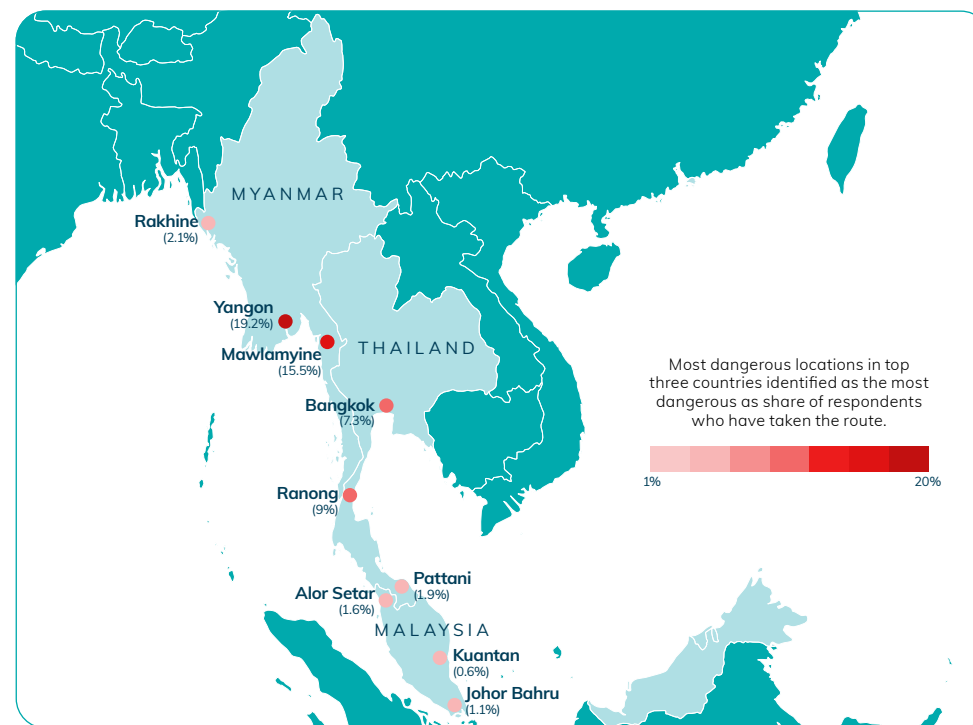
“When we started the journey, I was not sure about the route to Malaysia. During the three months in Yangon, I got beaten up a lot because I couldn’t pay. I was not given food or water.”

Male Rohingya respondent, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Almost all Myanmar Chin (98%) and Rohingya (99%) respondents transited Thailand. Among these, 37% of Myanmar Chin respondents and 33% of Rohingya respondents reported Thailand as the most dangerous location. The locations in Thailand most often cited as dangerous were Chiang Mai (n=24) and Ranong (n=81) – two districts along the Myanmar-Thailand border.

Among Bangladeshi respondents, 26% transited Thailand and 14% transited Indonesia. Among them, 35% cited places in Thailand (n=24) as dangerous, and 49% places in Indonesia (n=18).

Figure 4. Three countries and locations within each country most reported as dangerous



What were the main risks on the journey*	Female (n=485)	Male (n=602)	Grand total (n=1,087)
Detention	74%	69%	71%
Physical violence	57%	64%	61%
Bribery/extortion	21%	27%	24%
Injury/ill-health from harsh conditions	22%	24%	23%
Death	19%	20%	20%
Non-physical violence (e.g. harassment)	14%	17%	16%
Robbery	11%	16%	14%
Sexual violence	22%	5%	13%
Kidnapping	11%	11%	11%

*Respondents are asked to name dangerous places on the journey and then to report the kinds of danger in each location. This table summarizes the frequency with which each type of danger is reported.

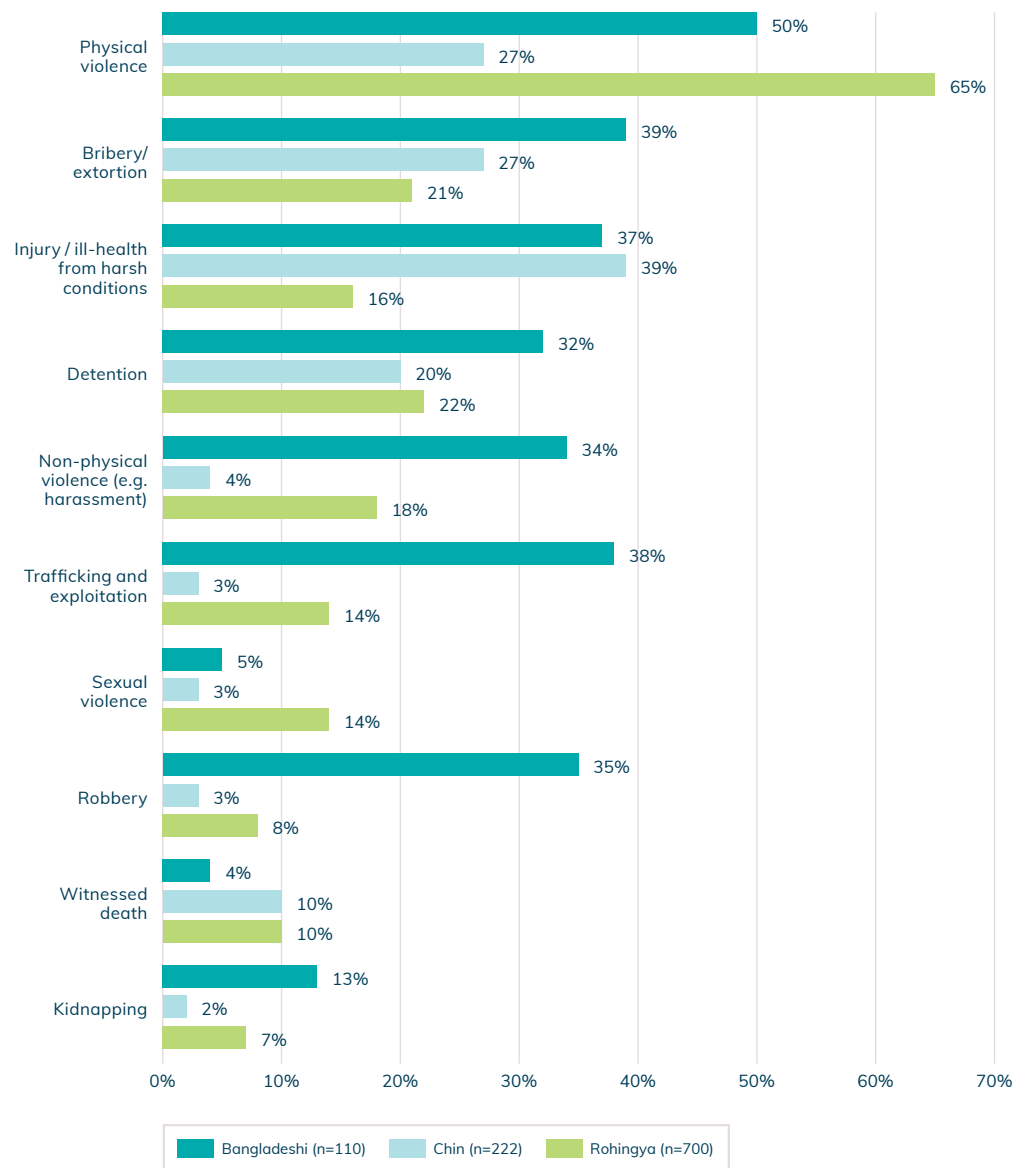
Detention was the main perceived protection risk; physical violence was more often experienced

Among respondents who reported Myanmar as the most dangerous location (n=511), the main risks reported were detention (90%) and physical violence (81%). Similarly, in Thailand (n=370) the main risks were detention (59%) and physical violence (41%). In Malaysia (n=90), respondents most often reported bribery or extortion (51%) and injury or ill-health caused by harsh conditions (41%).

72% (n=1,040) of respondents who used smugglers reported experiencing protection incidents en route (92% among Myanmar Chin, 91% among Rohingya, 42% among Bangladeshi and 11% among Indonesian respondents). Detention, despite being a frequently perceived risk among Bangladeshi (54%), Myanmar Chin (55%) and Rohingya (82%) respondents, was less frequently experienced. Nonetheless, 32% of Bangladeshi, 20% of Myanmar Chin and 22% of Rohingya respondents reported that they had experienced detention. Physical violence was more often reported as experienced, by a half of Bangladeshi (50%) and majority of Rohingya (65%) respondents. For Myanmar Chin respondents, injury or ill-health caused by harsh conditions (39%) was the most commonly reported incident (see Figure 5).

Indonesian respondents rarely reported facing risks en route. Of those who did, none reported personally experiencing any incidents. Across all groups, exposure to protection incidents was highest among Bangladeshi respondents. Bangladeshi migrants and refugees' experiences of being subjected to physical violence, abuse, and extortion by smugglers en route to Malaysia, particularly through Thailand, has been widely reported.⁷

Figure 5. Have you personally experienced any of these types of incidents on your journey?



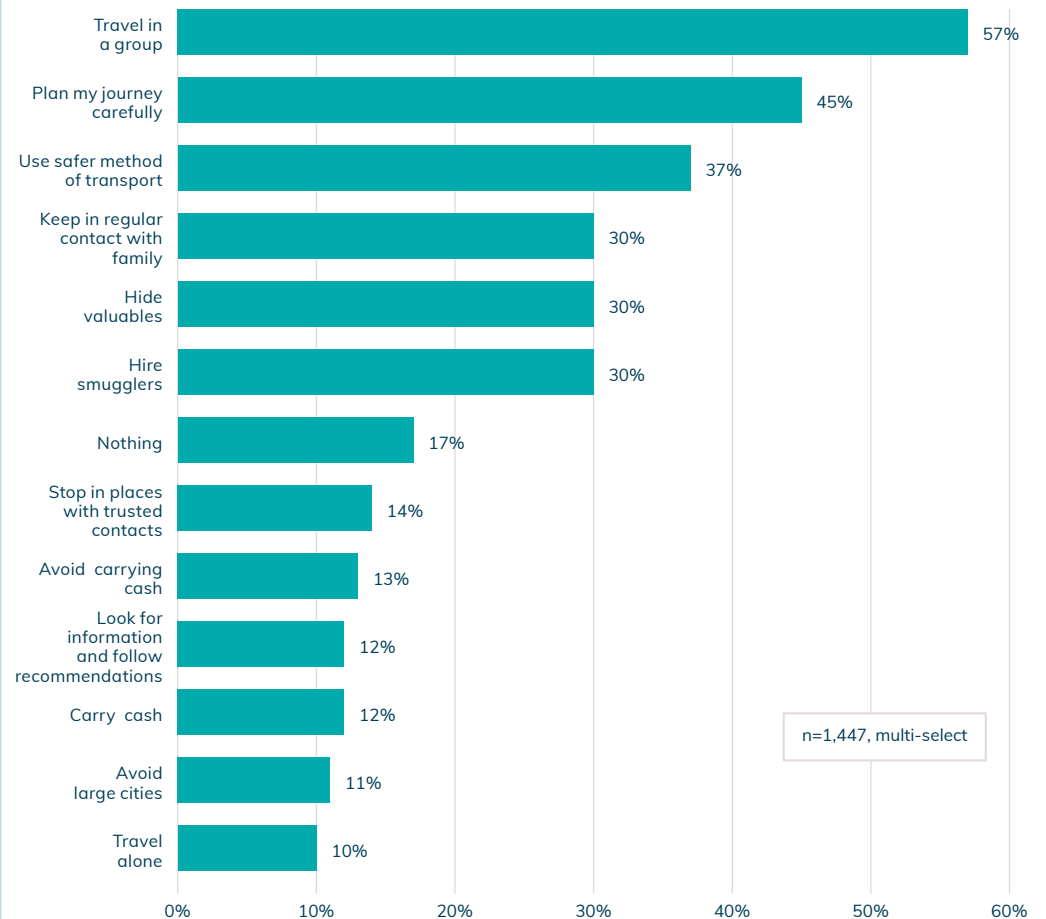
⁷ UNODC and the Government of Bangladesh (2022) [First National Study on Trafficking in Persons in Bangladesh](#)

Though smugglers were perceived to be perpetrators of abuse en route, they also provided protection

Respondents who perceived risks during their journey most often reported that perpetrators were likely to be smugglers (64%). This was reported by a large majority of Rohingya (84%) respondents, as compared to 26% of Afghan, 42% of Bangladeshi, and 21% of Myanmar Chin respondents. Overall, military or police (52%), and border guards or immigration officials (25%) were the next most commonly cited. This was more common among Afghan and Myanmar Chin respondents (57% of each group reported military or police as perceived perpetrators). More than half of Bangladeshi respondents (53%) reported criminal gangs as the most common perpetrators.

Despite the perception of smugglers as perpetrators of abuse and violations en route, 30% mentioned hiring smugglers as a way to protect themselves on the journey. The difference between groups may reflect the perception of smugglers as perpetrators of abuse: a majority of Myanmar Chin respondents (79%) considered hiring smugglers as a means of protection, compared to 45% of Bangladeshi, 36% of Afghan, and 11% of Rohingya. However, some who reported smugglers as perpetrators of abuse also reported using smugglers to protect themselves (e.g. 39 Myanmar Chin respondents). For the full sample, other frequently cited protection measures en route were traveling in a group (57%), planning the journey carefully (45%), and using safer methods of transport (37%) (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. What do you do to protect yourself from abuse and crime on your journey?



Smugglers played a key role in providing assistance and information en route

The journey is evidently risky, but most respondents had not received any assistance: only 29% reported receiving assistance during their journey. This was most often food (93% of those who received assistance), water (77%), and shelter (25%). (Provision of assistance and necessities is considered as anything that goes beyond any goods and services that have been paid for.)

Of those who received assistance, 93% of respondents reported receiving assistance

from smugglers (in addition to smuggling services), 8% from family or friends, and 10% from fellow migrants, indicating a significant role for smugglers in providing necessities during the journey.

Of the 63% of respondents who used smugglers and accessed information before embarking on the journey, smugglers were the primary source, especially for Myanmar Chin (84%) and Indonesian (88%) respondents. The share fell to 34% among Bangladeshi, and 6% among Rohingya.

Only 22% said they obtained information during the journey, suggesting a lack of access to information. Among that minority, smugglers appear to be a very important source of information, mentioned by 83% of Bangladeshi, 99% of Myanmar Chin, 100% of Indonesian, and 34% of Rohingya who used smugglers and accessed information. Afghan respondents were an exception: 29% reported smugglers as a source of information during the journey as compared to 41% prior to the journey.

Reporting of involvement of public officials in smuggling was higher among Afghan, Indonesian, and Rohingya respondents

Public officials were involved in smuggling, according to 98% of Indonesians, and half of Afghan (51%) and Rohingya (51%) respondents who used smugglers. They were less often perceived to be involved by Bangladeshi (25%) and Myanmar Chin (9%) respondents.

Across all groups, more than half of respondents (48%) reported being in contact with public officials during their journey. This was seen more often among Indonesian respondents (87%), as compared to 57% of Rohingya, 44% of Bangladeshi, 30% of Afghan, and 22% of Chin respondents.

However, only 7% (n=4/61) of Indonesians who used a smuggler reported having to pay a bribe themselves. Collaboration between smugglers and immigration officers has been central to the workings of the smuggling network along the Indonesia-Malaysia migration corridor, and our results support this, indicating that smugglers work directly with officials (49/61 of Indonesian respondents said smugglers dealt with authorities).⁸ Respondents

⁸ Tan (2020) [Johor cops nab immigration, marine officers over migrant smugglings](#). Malay Mail; Bernama (2020) [25 enforcement officers arrested for abetting in smuggling illegal immigrants](#). New Straits Times; Bernama (2022) [Immigration detains 5, including 2 officers, in undercover sting](#). The Malaysia Insight; FMT (2023) [5 immigration officers among 9 nabbed for alleged human smuggling](#). Free Malaysia Today.

from other groups reported bribing different officials en route. 6% of Afghan respondents reported having to bribe other immigration officials (for issues not related to visa or passport), while 5% of Bangladeshi and 2% of Myanmar Chin respondents had to bribe police at a border. In contrast, almost half of Rohingya (47%) respondents reported having to give the military a gift, or money, or some kind of favour, in return for a service en route.

Conclusion

Use of smugglers en route to Malaysia was common among Afghan, Bangladeshi, Chin and Rohingya respondents, whereas Indonesian respondents were more likely to organise the journey independently. Those groups who more commonly used smugglers also more often reported risks en route, and all groups except for Indonesian respondents reported smugglers as perpetrators of abuse. At the same time, all groups also turned at least to some extent to smugglers for protection, and smugglers were a key source of assistance and information during their journey.



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