

MMC Research Report,
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About MMC

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based mixed migration responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector.

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Summary

Mixed migration from Myanmar to countries in South and Southeast Asia has become a common phenomenon driven by various factors, including violence, insecurity, conflict, deprivation of rights, and economic reasons. The complexity of migration journeys is evident, often involving transit through multiple locations over extended periods. This report reveals distinctions in smuggling dynamics between Rohingya and other nationals from Myanmar on their journeys to Malaysia and Thailand.

The findings suggest that the differences in the journey and routes taken, and the presence of a diaspora, are key factors influencing the engagement with and reliance on smugglers. A complex journey to Malaysia more often involves multiple smugglers, while Thailand-bound journeys typically involve reliance on a single smuggler, potentially influenced by proximity to Myanmar. Rohingya respondents predominantly leverage the substantial Rohingya diaspora in Malaysia to mediate their use of smugglers. In contrast, Rohingya heading to Thailand tend to have a more direct engagement approach with smugglers.

Smugglers have a considerable influence over route selection, particularly to Malaysia. However, in Thailand, other factors such as diaspora networks and familiarity with the region likely due to the history of labour migration between Myanmar and Thailand play a more substantial role in route selection, especially among other respondents from Myanmar. Across all groups, the role of smugglers shifts throughout the journey, with reliance on them as sources of information increasing en route, particularly among Rohingya respondents. Smugglers also remain the primary source of assistance during the journey, providing essentials like food, water, and shelter, particularly among Rohingya respondents, suggesting a lack of access to or availability of other sources of information and assistance.

This report underscores the integral role of smugglers in facilitating migration from Myanmar to Malaysia and Thailand, influenced by a complex interplay of factors that result in considerable variation in the dynamics of smuggling among different population groups and on different routes. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing targeted interventions aimed at addressing the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by refugees and migrants in the region.

Introduction

Mixed migration from Myanmar to countries in South and Southeast Asia is common. According to 4Mi data collected with refugees and migrants from Myanmar, the drivers of migration are multiple and intersecting, with people leaving to escape violence, insecurity and conflict, and deprivation of rights and freedoms, as well as for economic reasons. Specific events have accelerated large-scale forced displacement from Myanmar, such as the escalation of violent persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar in 2017, which pushed over 742,000 Rohingya to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh, and others to Thailand, Malaysia and India.¹

Migration journeys from Myanmar are often complex and circuitous, sometimes involving transit in multiple locations over extended periods of time. This is particularly the case for Rohingya, who due to the protracted nature of their displacement and their inability to safely return to Myanmar, often engage in onward movements from countries of first asylum, such as Bangladesh, India and Thailand.

At the same time, people of other ethnicities from Myanmar commonly migrate via regular and irregular means to Thailand and Malaysia to escape persecution, conflict and/or in search of livelihood opportunities, particularly as the country grapples with economic insecurity amidst political unrest. Cross-border movements from Myanmar to neighbouring countries have increased since the military's seizure of power in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 and ensuing escalation of violence against civilians and airstrikes on villages.²

"I left Myanmar because after the military took control, a lot of soldiers came to my hometown. They started recruiting people for forced labour, especially women who were forced to be porters. They were forced to carry things to other villages. Some got sexually abused by the soldiers during these journeys. As I was a teenager, my parents got worried that I might be recruited too into forced labour and get abused. So, they asked me to go to Malaysia and stay with my sister for my safety."

Woman from Myanmar, 20 years old, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2023

As the human rights and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar deepens,³ these irregular cross-border movements from Myanmar into neighbouring Thailand, as well as onward to Malaysia, are expected to continue, alongside increasing onward movements of Rohingya refugees as the situation in the camps in Bangladesh continues to deteriorate. In the absence of affordable and accessible regular pathways, Rohingya and others from Myanmar who are seeking to enter Malaysia and Thailand have little choice but to embark on risky, irregular journeys, many facilitated by the services of smugglers.⁴

Shifts in the scale and nature of mixed migration from Myanmar is reflected in smuggler dynamics. This report explores the use of smugglers among refugees and migrants from Myanmar, and the dynamics of smuggling between different groups from Myanmar (Rohingya and other respondents) and the routes they take (to Malaysia and to Thailand).

1 UNHCR (2023) [Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained](#)

2 UNHCR (2023) [Myanmar Emergency Update](#); Oo, M Z & Tønnesson, S (2023) [Counting Myanmar's Dead: Reported Civilian Casualties since the 2021 Military Coup](#). PRIO.

3 UNHR (2023) [Myanmar: UN expert urges Member States to strengthen "growing trend" of coordinated action as human rights and humanitarian crisis deepens](#)

4 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.

Methodology

MMC conducted 2,130 4Mi surveys in Malaysia and Thailand with refugees and migrants from Myanmar between December 2022 and August 2023. This report analyses the responses of 1,922 participants who used a smuggler. Respondents were asked about their profiles, their engagement with smugglers, access to information before and during the journey, and access to assistance en route.

The sampling approach was purposive, targeting people from Myanmar who had arrived in Malaysia and Thailand within 24 months of the time of interview. Data was disaggregated to enable comparison between smuggling dynamics from Myanmar to Malaysia and Thailand, as well as between 'Rohingya respondents' and 'other respondents' from Myanmar. Qualitative insights from 19 semi-structured interviews (10 in Thailand and 9 in Malaysia) with Rohingya and other respondents from Myanmar were incorporated to triangulate and corroborate the 4Mi survey findings.

Respondents' profiles

The majority of respondents in both Malaysia and Thailand were Rohingya (71% and 70%, respectively), while the rest of the respondents were Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine, or Shan. The proportion of men and women varied within each group (see Figure 1). The majority of respondents from both groups in Malaysia and Thailand had irregular status at the time of interview.

Figure 1. Profiles of respondents

		Malaysia (n=1,106)		Thailand (n=816)	
		Rohingya (n=788)	Other respondents (n=318)	Rohingya (n=568)	Other respondents (n=248)
Gender	Women	56%	36%	33%	48%
	Men	44%	64%	67%	52%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%
Age group	18-25	74%	44%	26%	42%
	26-35	23%	40%	33%	31%
	36-46	1%	12%	24%	18%
	46-55	1%	3%	10%	6%
	55+	0%	1%	6%	2%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%
Migration status	Applied for permit/visa	0%	0%	1%	30%
	Asylum seeker	19%	31%	1%	2%
	Irregular/no legal documents to stay in this country	53%	63%	97%	55%
	Permit is no longer valid/ expired	0%	1%	0%	2%
	Refugee	25%	5%	1%	0%
	Regular migrant with no need for permit	0%	0%	0%	2%
	Temporary protection	4%	0%	0%	4%
	Temporary resident (with permit/ visa)	0%	0%	0%	4%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%

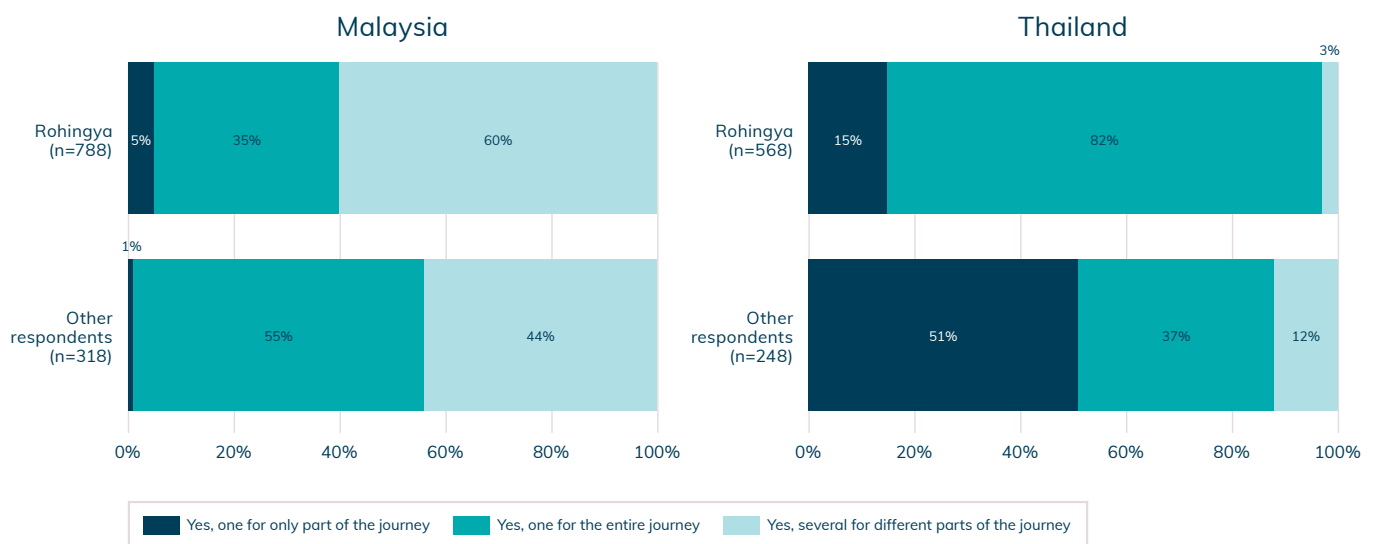
Findings

The different routes to each country may explain different use of smugglers

The dynamics around engaging smugglers varied between Malaysia and Thailand. Respondents in Malaysia more often reported using several smugglers on the journey (55%) compared to in Thailand, where respondents more commonly reported using only one smuggler, either for part (26%) or all of their journey (68%). This difference could be due to Thailand's close proximity to Myanmar, versus the circuitous routes respondents often need to take to reach Malaysia, involving transit, sometimes for prolonged periods of time, in countries such as Bangladesh, Thailand and Indonesia.⁵ This is particularly the case for Rohingya embarking on onward movements from refugee camps in Bangladesh and aiming to reach destinations including Malaysia.

There are differences between Rohingya and other respondents from Myanmar, however, that nuance this picture. On the journey to Malaysia, 60% of Rohingya respondents used several smugglers for different parts of the journey, whereas other respondents more often used only one smuggler for the entire journey (55%) (see Figure 2). In Thailand, the majority of Rohingya respondents (82%) had used one smuggler for the entire journey, in contrast to others, who had more often used one smuggler for only part of the journey (51%).

Figure 2. Use of smuggler(s)



People are using smugglers on the recommendation of family and friends, because it is considered the only way, and because it is easier

The use of smugglers among many Rohingya respondents interviewed in Malaysia, was influenced by recommendations from their friends or family, both in Myanmar (66%), and in the diaspora (52%) (see Figure 3). Other respondents from Myanmar in Malaysia also commonly reported recommendations from family or friends in Myanmar (50%) and in the diaspora (44%) played a role in the use of smugglers. Malaysia hosts 184,220 refugees and asylum seekers, of whom 58% are Rohingya and 29% are refugees from other ethnic groups in Myanmar.⁶ There are well-established community networks among Rohingya and other migrant and refugee groups from Myanmar in Malaysia, which may explain the reported influence of diaspora on the use of smugglers among both groups. However, other respondents who had

⁵ MMC (2021) [Protection risks facing Rohingya refugees en route to Malaysia](#)

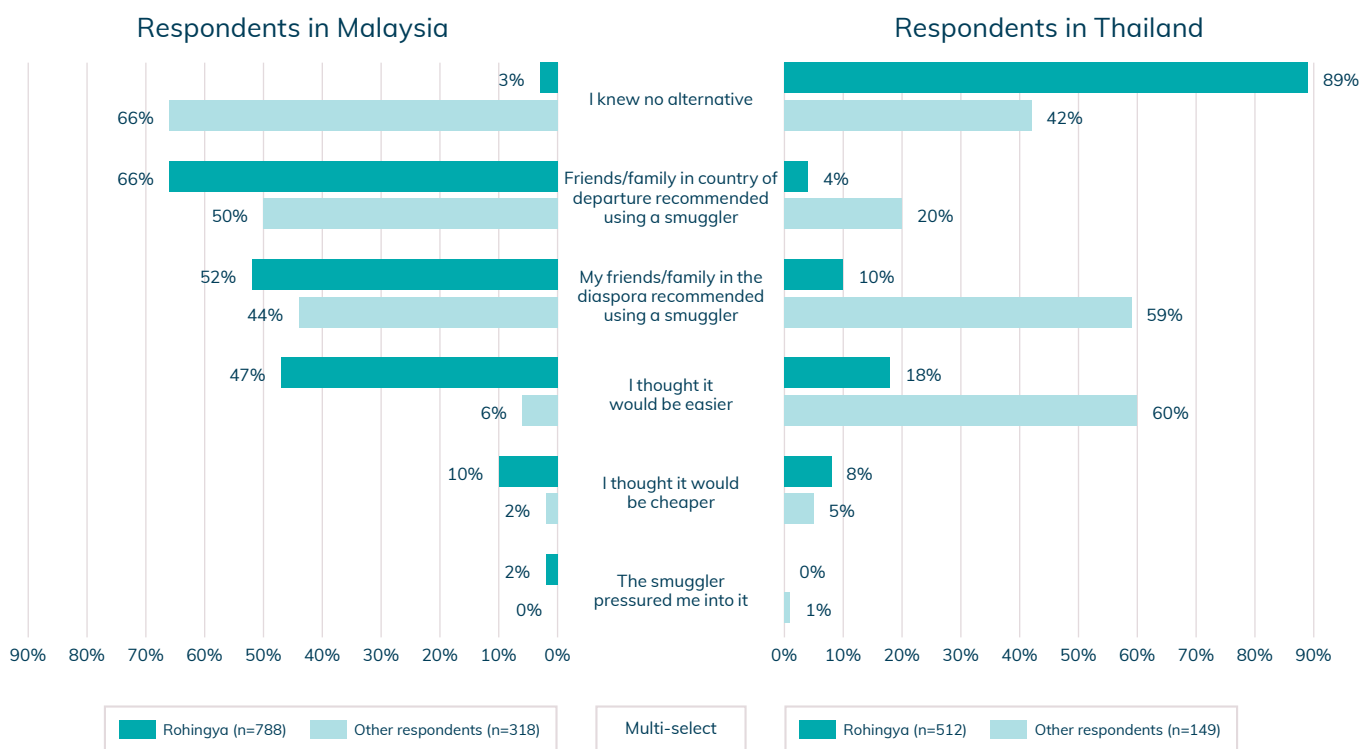
⁶ UNHCR Malaysia (2023) [Figures at a glance in Malaysia](#), accessed on 19 November 2023.

reached Malaysia mainly used a smuggler for lack of any other alternative (66%). Very few Rohingya respondents and none among other respondents reported being pressured by the smuggler to engage with their services.

"I contacted people from my village who had some experience of such a journey [to Malaysia]. They were the parents of people who had travelled to Malaysia through agents [smugglers].⁷ They knew about the journey and gave me contact details of the agent [smuggler] their children had used. If you have connections with people who know some agents [smugglers], it is easy. If you don't, it is difficult."

Man from Myanmar, 19 years old, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2023

Figure 3. Why did you use the services of a smuggler?



Among Rohingya respondents who had reached Thailand, the influence of friends or family in Myanmar (4%) and the diaspora (10%) on use of smugglers was significantly less than among Rohingya respondents reaching Malaysia.⁸ This may be the result of Thailand hosting a smaller Rohingya population than Malaysia,⁸ resulting in less developed diaspora networks able to influence decision making. Instead, a majority of Rohingya respondents in Thailand reported they used smugglers because there was no alternative way to facilitate their journey (89%) (see Figure 3). Other respondents from Myanmar interviewed in Thailand often reported that friends and family in the diaspora (59%) advised them to use smuggler services, likely corresponding to the larger presence of diaspora for these groups in Thailand. Thailand hosts about 100,000 refugees from multiple ethnic groups from Myanmar⁹ and is also a key destination for approximately one million migrant workers from Myanmar.¹⁰

7 Interviewees typically refer to individuals who facilitated their irregular migration as "agents", as translated from the local language, which also refer to "smuggler", in line with MMC's broader 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.

8 According to the UNHCR, Rohingya refugees in Thailand live in urban areas and constitute part of the 4,799 urban refugees from 36 countries, as of [June 2023](#). However, there is no publicly available data on the exact Rohingya population in Thailand.

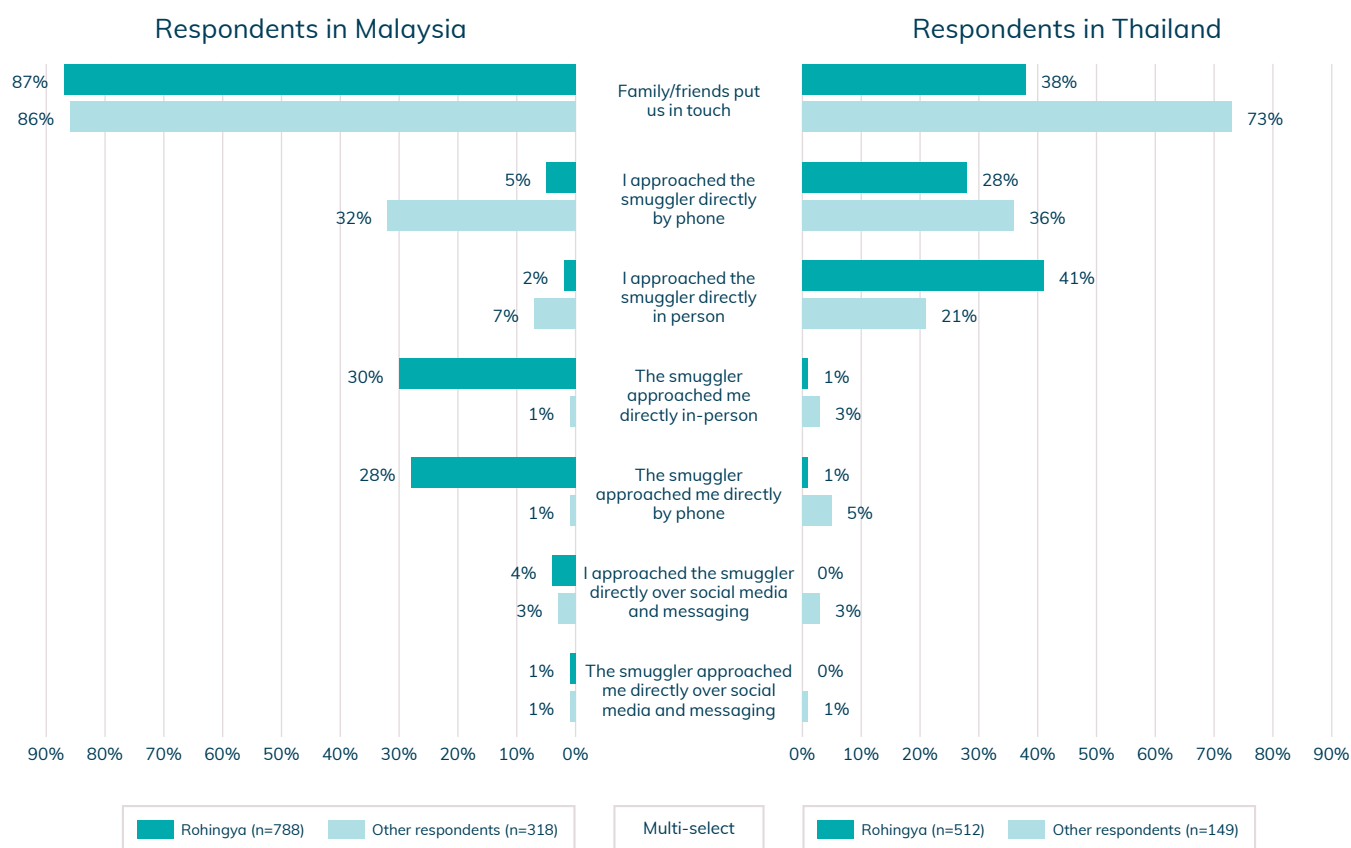
9 In Thailand, different approaches are applied in managing refugees from Myanmar. Rohingya refugees are deemed "illegal" and subject to arrest and detention, while other refugees from Myanmar are hosted in nine refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. See MMC (2023) [Rohingya in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand: Refugee protection, human smuggling and trafficking](#)

10 Ministry of Labour (2023) [Labour Statistics Yearbook 2022](#)

Family or friends commonly initiated respondents' contact with smugglers, particularly for the journey to Malaysia

Friends and family also play an important role in facilitating contact between smugglers and respondents (87% among Rohingya, and 86% among other respondents from Myanmar) who had reached Malaysia (see Figure 4). Other respondents also reported contacting the smuggler directly (32% by phone, 7% in-person, 3% via social media and messaging platforms), and Rohingya respondents in Malaysia reported being approached by smugglers (30% in-person and 28% by phone) more often than other respondents (1% in-person and 1% by phone). This is potentially due to the existence of well-established networks of smugglers operating in common departure points in Bangladesh and in Rakhine state, Myanmar, to facilitate the journey to Malaysia.¹¹

Figure 4. How did you get in contact with your initial smuggler?



In Thailand, Rohingya respondents most often said they approached the smuggler directly (41% in-person and 28% by phone), and somewhat less through friends and family than respondents interviewed in Malaysia. In contrast, 73% of other respondents from Myanmar contacted smugglers through friends and family (only 38% of Rohingya said this happened). This echoes the lesser role of social networks in the reasons for using a smuggler among those interviewed in Thailand, especially among Rohingya respondents.

Smugglers had a greater influence on the route to Malaysia

On journeys to Malaysia, smugglers most commonly chose the route for both Rohingya (73%) and other respondents from Myanmar (88%) (see Figure 5). Influence on route selection may include whether to embark on maritime or land routes, which countries to transit and even country of destination. Over half of Rohingya respondents (58%) also said they selected their route to Malaysia as it was the only possible option, and half reported friends or family had

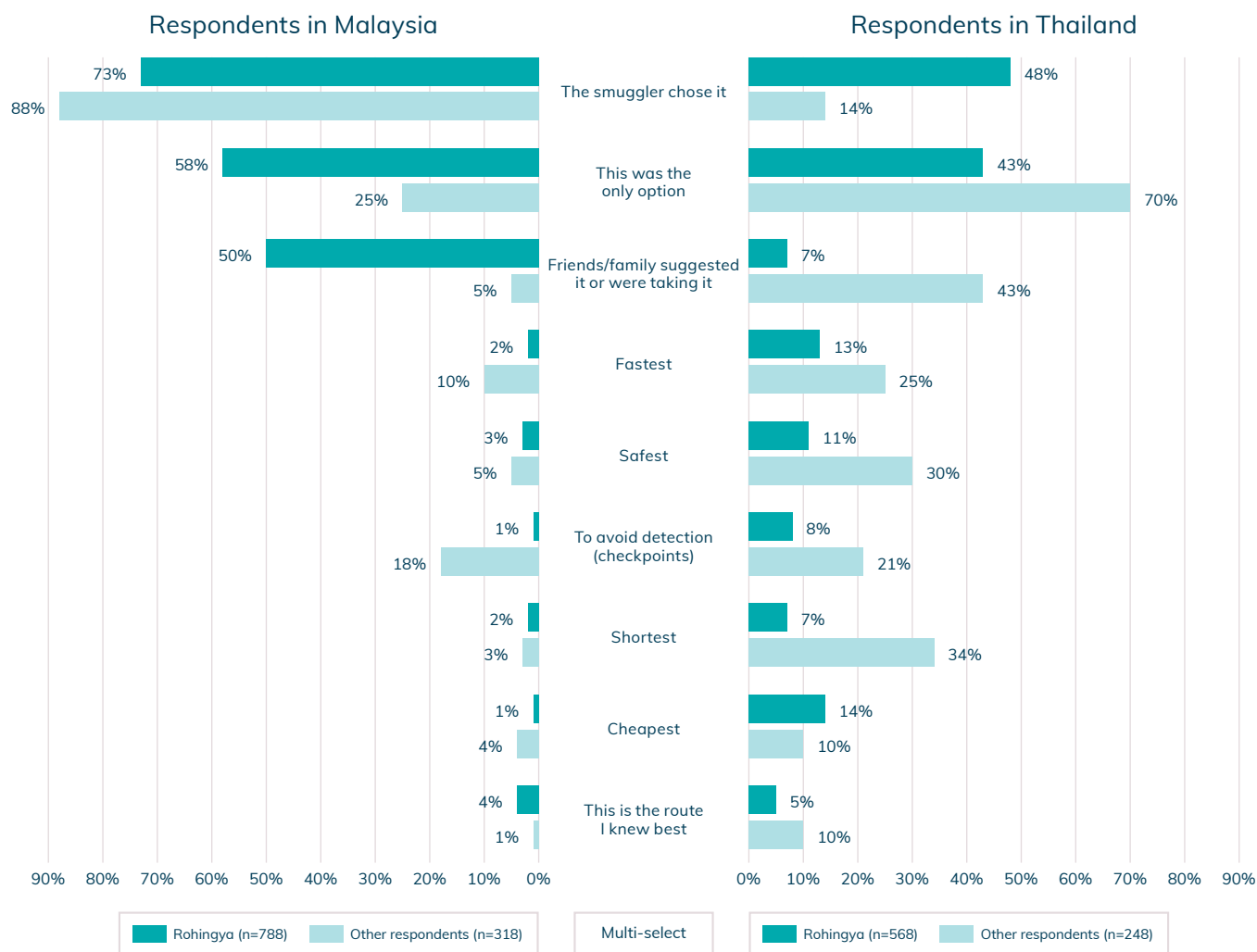
11 DRC (2022) [Refugee protection, human smuggling, and trafficking in Bangladesh and Southeast Asia](#); ACAPS (2023) [Briefing Note: Rising violence, insecurity, and protection concerns in Cox's Bazar refugee camps](#); US Department of State (2023) [2023 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bangladesh](#)

suggested the route or were taking it themselves, reinforcing the key role friends and family play in migration decision-making. Among other respondents, some also said that this was the only route available to them (25%), or they took it to avoid detection (18%).

“We didn’t have any intended destination. The agent [smuggler] persuaded us that Thailand is a Buddhist country, they practice a different religion, and I can’t stay in peace and stability there. Whereas in Malaysia, there are many Rohingya, and we were told by the agent [smuggler] that once we arrive in Malaysia, we can even get resettled to a third country. The agent [smuggler] was the one who chose our destination.”

Rohingya woman, 31 years old, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2023

Figure 5. Why did you take this route?



On the journey to Thailand, smugglers played a prominent role in route selection among Rohingya respondents (48%). However, they played a much lesser role among other respondents (14%), who most commonly chose a route because it was the only available option that they knew of (70%), because friends or family suggested it (43%), or because it was the shortest (34%) or safest (30%). The reduced role of smugglers in route selection among other respondents could be influenced by a history of more prevalent labour migration movements between Myanmar and Thailand resulting in greater familiarity of the journey and region, possibly reducing the dependence on smugglers.

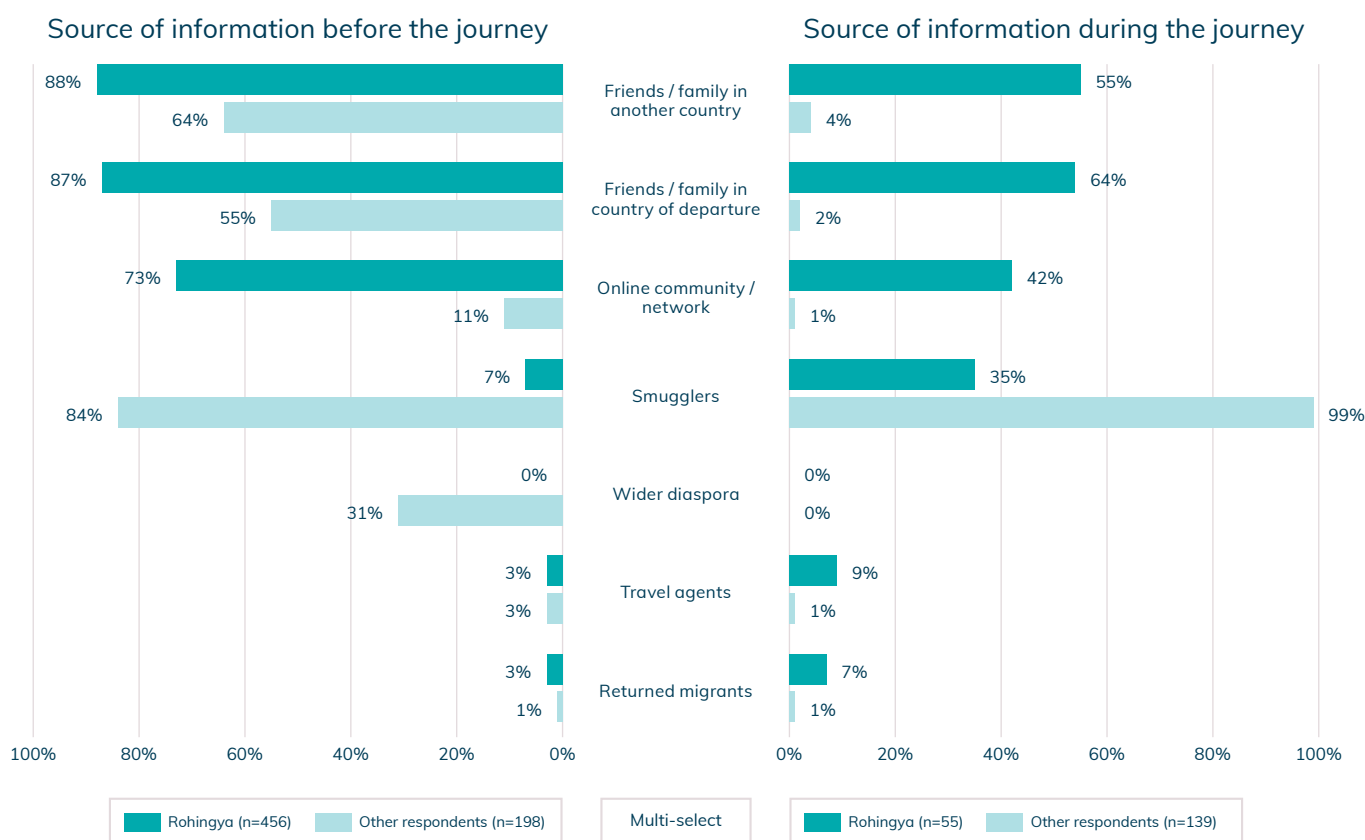
Respondents became more reliant on smugglers for information on journeys to both Thailand and Malaysia, though smugglers' role before the journey varies

A majority of both Rohingya (58%, n=456) and other respondents from Myanmar (62%, n=198) interviewed in Malaysia reported having obtained information about routes, destination, costs, and risks prior to the journey. The sources of information varied. Among Rohingya, friends or family in the diaspora (88%) and in Myanmar (87%) were the most commonly reported sources, prior to departure, followed by online communities and social networks (73%). Smugglers play a very minor role. In contrast, other respondents mostly relied on smugglers (84%) for information before the journey, followed by family or friends in the diaspora (64%) and in Myanmar (55%) (see Figure 6).

Sources of information changed significantly during the journey, compared to prior to departure. Among Rohingya respondents, the number obtaining information during their journey was considerably lower with only 55 individuals reporting to have accessed information during their journey - a significant decrease from the 456 respondents who had acquired information prior to departure. This stark difference could be due to decreased access to external information sources (for example family and friends) during lengthy maritime journeys commonly undertaken by Rohingya reaching Malaysia.¹² Among the 55 respondents who reported accessing information en route, friends or family in the diaspora and Myanmar, as well as online communities and networks, and smugglers were reported as common sources of information en route (see Figure 6).

For other respondents interviewed from Myanmar slightly fewer people reported accessing information en route as compared to prior to their departure. Among those who reported accessing information en route (n=139), 99% reported that smugglers were their primary information source, with other sources falling considerably - the share of respondents reporting family or friends in the diaspora dropped from 64% to 4%, family or friends from Myanmar dropped from 55% to 2%, and online communities and networks from 11% to 1%.

Figure 6. Sources of information before and during the journey to Malaysia¹³



¹² See: MMC (2023) [Understanding information sources and gaps among Afghan, Chin and Rohingya refugees in Malaysia](#)

¹³ This graph excludes categories which are 3% or below, including other migrants, private employment agency, national government or authorities, foreign embassies or consulates, local people I met on my journey, and NGOs or UN.

Prior to the journey to Thailand, Rohingya (63%) more commonly reported accessing information compared to other respondents from Myanmar (35%). Among Rohingya who accessed information, friends or family in the diaspora (62%) and in Myanmar (42%) were common sources, just like those interviewed in Malaysia. Smugglers, however, were also a common source of information (42%, see Figure 7).

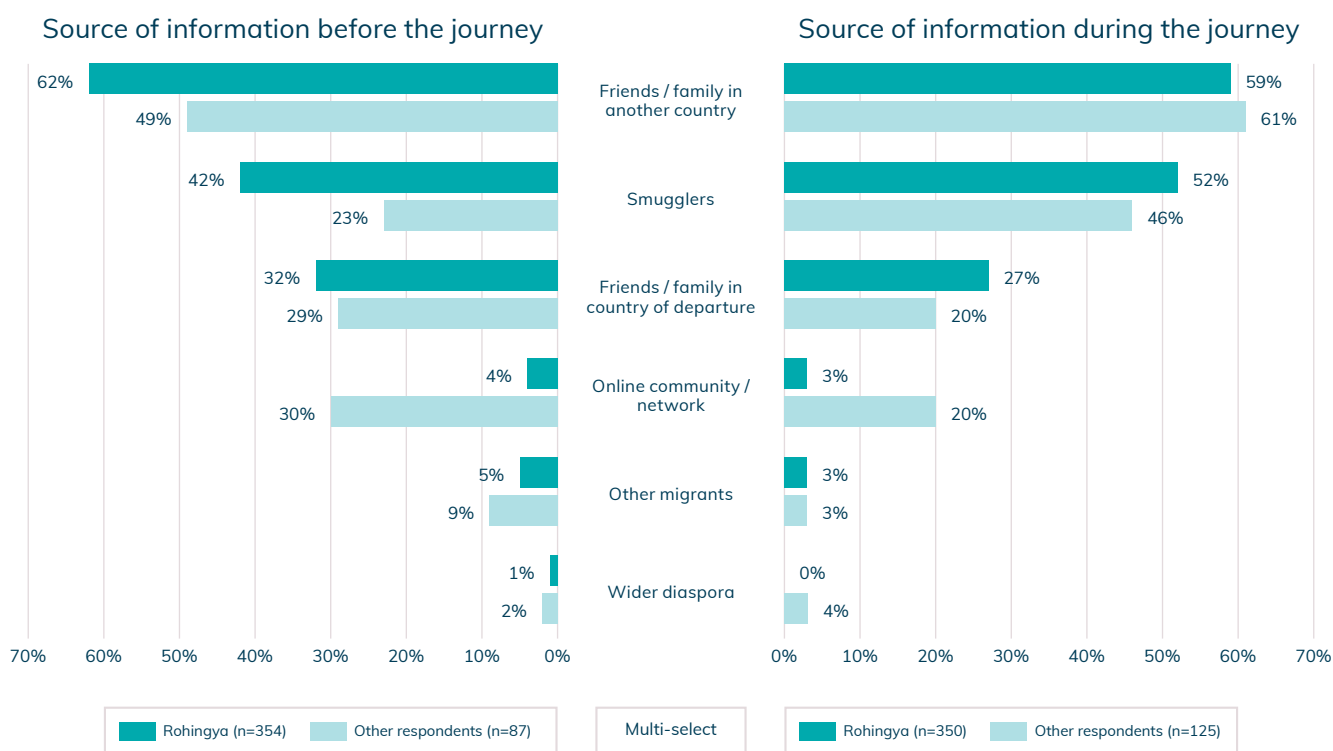
In comparison, other respondents from Myanmar who accessed information prior to their journeys still gained information from smugglers, friends or family in the diaspora and in Myanmar, but to a lesser degree (see Figure 7), possibly due to respondents' existing familiarity with Thailand. Online sources were reported by 30% of respondents, playing a much larger role than for Rohingya who access information before the journey.

During the journey to Thailand, a similar proportion of Rohingya respondents reported accessing information as did before the journey. In contrast, the proportion of other respondents accessing information during the journey was larger than the share doing so before setting out.

En route, the diaspora remains an important source and reliance on smugglers for information increased among both groups – reported by 52% of Rohingya respondents and 46% of other respondents. This increased reliance on smugglers is similar to findings in Malaysia and is again possibly due to limited access to alternative information sources en route, as indicated by an interviewee for this research:

“We were not allowed to use our phones when we were walking through the forest as the light would attract attention. Anyway, my phone was not working because my SIM card didn’t have any signal.”
Woman from Myanmar, 21 years old, interviewed in Bangkok, Thailand in 2023.

Figure 7. Sources of information before and during the journey to Thailand¹⁴

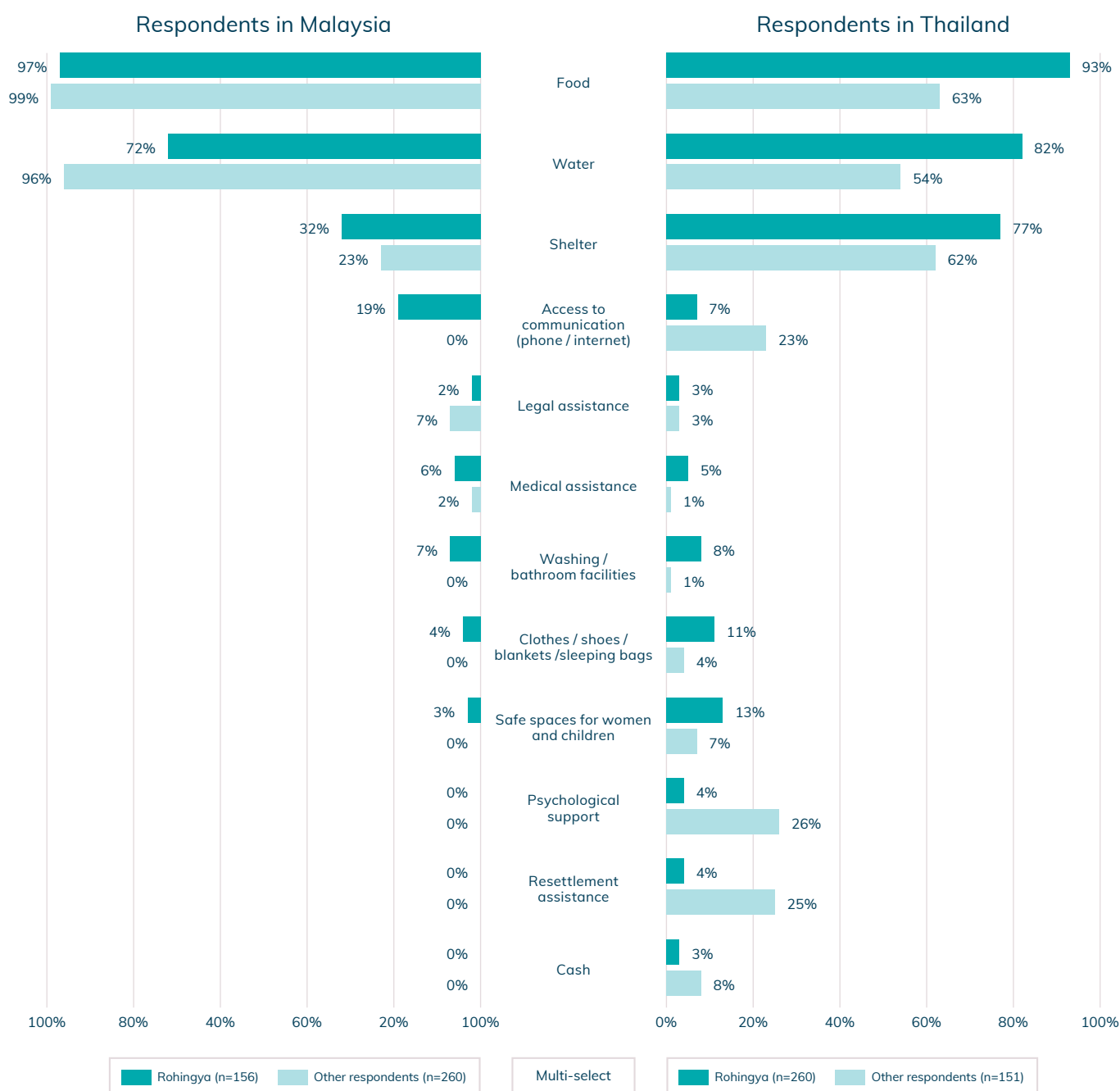


14 This graph excludes categories which are 3% or below, including “returned migrants, travel agents, private employment agency, NGOs or UN, national government or authorities, foreign embassies or consulates, and local people I met on my journey.”

Rohingya less often reported receiving assistance than other respondents; smugglers were the most frequent source of assistance across both groups

In the survey, respondents were also asked about the assistance (if any) they received during the journey, which refers to goods or services received free of charge, excluding those already covered in any fees. On the journey to Malaysia, only 20% of Rohingya respondents (n=156) reported receiving assistance, in contrast to 82% of other respondents from Myanmar (n=260). Among those who did receive assistance, it was of a similar kind: food, water, and shelter. Almost all (99% of Rohingya respondents and 99% of other respondents) reported receiving this assistance from smugglers (see Figure 9). The only other providers reported were fellow migrants – reported by 3% of Rohingya respondents and 9% of other respondents (see Figure 9).

Figure 8. What kind of assistance did you receive? (as a percentage of total respondents who received assistance)¹⁵

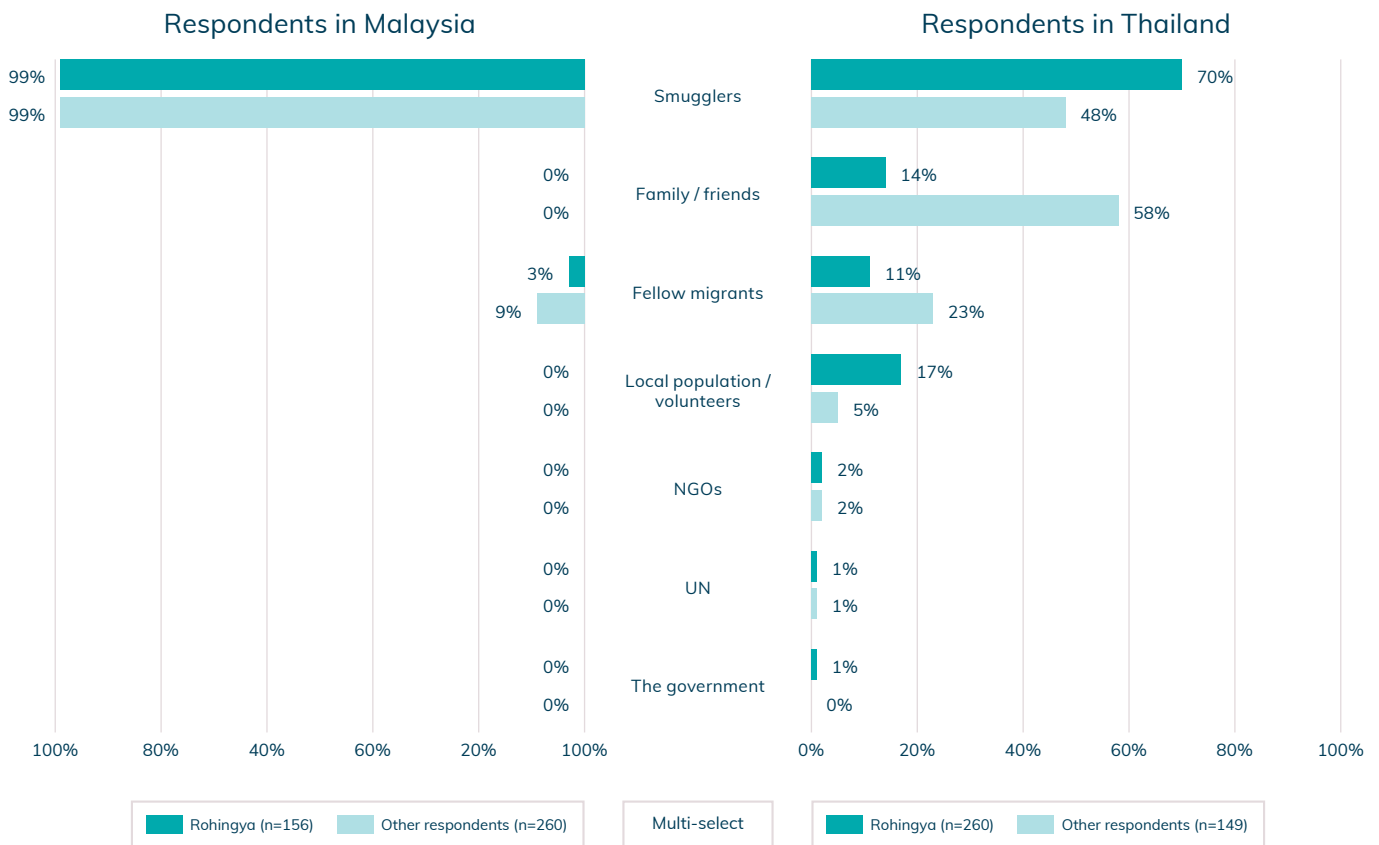


¹⁵ This graph excludes categories which are 3% or below, including “access to work, assistance to return, and spiritual guidance.”

On the journey to Thailand, a higher proportion of Rohingya respondents (46%) reported receiving assistance compared to those on the journey to Malaysia. In contrast, a smaller percentage of other respondents from Myanmar (61%) reported receiving assistance. While food, water, and shelter remained the most reported forms of assistance, respondents more often reported receiving other forms of assistance as well (see Figure 8), particularly among other respondents from Myanmar.

Again, the most common source of assistance was smugglers, particularly for Rohingya. Other respondents from Myanmar who were interviewed in Thailand reported family and friends (58%) more often than smugglers (48%), see Figure 9.

Figure 9. Who did you receive assistance from?



Conclusion

This report reveals distinct dynamics in the use of smugglers between diverse groups of respondents, and depending on their countries of destination. On the journey to Malaysia, a greater reliance on multiple smugglers was observed, possibly influenced by lengthier and more complex routes, often involving lengthy transit through Bangladesh, Thailand, and Indonesia. In contrast, the vast majority of respondents heading to Thailand predominantly employed a single smuggler for either part or all of their journey, potentially due to Thailand's proximity to Myanmar, and the resulting shorter journeys.

Among Rohingya, the strong diaspora network in Malaysia significantly shapes the smuggling experience of respondents heading there. In Thailand, in the absence of such an established diaspora, Rohingya respondents less frequently use social networks, including family and friends, to mediate their use of smugglers and more often took a direct approach. Regardless of the destination, dependence on smugglers grew among Rohingya respondents once journeys began, with smugglers choosing the route, and respondents increasingly relying on smugglers for information and assistance with necessities.

For other respondents from Myanmar, friends, family and diaspora networks more consistently played a role in the decision to use a smuggler, and in making contact with a smuggler, with diaspora networks being particularly influential for those who were heading to Thailand. This may be accounted for by a history of labour migration between Myanmar and Thailand, and respondents from this group being more familiar with migration routes. The diaspora was also a common source of information about the journey to Thailand for this group. However, smugglers dominated as an information source among other respondents from Myanmar interviewed in Malaysia, even before the journey. The dependence on smugglers increased both on the journey to Thailand and to Malaysia. Smugglers were also the most frequent providers of assistance to this group heading to Malaysia, though less dominant on the route to Thailand.

In summary, this report underscores that while dependence on smugglers increases dramatically during the migration journey, suggesting a lack of access to or availability of other sources of information and assistance, the dynamics of smuggling among different population groups and on different routes are multifaceted. Factors such as geographical proximity, diaspora, and the availability of alternative information sources contribute to variations in the patterns of using smugglers.



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