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The Thai-Myanmar friendship bridge in Mae Sot, Thailand was built in 1966 to connect with Myawaady in Myanmar. Since then, the bridge has become the main crossing point between the two countries.

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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.

For more information visit: www.mixedmigration.org and follow us at: [@Mixed_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)



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Key findings

Thailand as a host country - Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, Rohingya and other respondents from Myanmar

- **Smuggling patterns:** The majority used a single smuggler for the entire journey (69%), most notably Rohingya (89%), Laotians (87%) and Cambodians (62%).
- **Smuggling fees:** The average smuggling fee among all respondents was USD 704, with Rohingya (USD 961) and Vietnamese respondents (USD 1,276) reporting the highest average smuggling fees, potentially linked to longer journeys involving transit countries before reaching Thailand.
- **Share of journey costs allocated for smuggling:** Smuggling fees constituted 85% of the journey costs among Rohingya and Vietnamese respondents, the highest among all groups. Smuggling fees among Laotian respondents made up the smallest share of their journey costs (38%), compared to other groups.
- **Payment to smugglers and financing for the journey:** Paying smugglers in full at destination was common practice – reported by over half of respondents (54%). The majority of respondents in Thailand financed their journey in a diversity of ways, including using savings, loans, and selling assets. Laotians more often reported financing their migration through their labour, and as a pre-arrangement made with prospective employers.
- **Smuggling market size:** With about 252,000 migrants from Myanmar entering Thailand in 2023, the smuggling market size for this population is estimated at around USD 106.6 million in 2023.

Malaysia as a host country - Afghan, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Chin and Rohingya respondents from Myanmar

- **Smuggling patterns:** 57% used a smuggler for part of or the whole journey, with Rohingya most commonly using several smugglers for different parts of the journey.
- **Smuggling fees:** The average smuggling fee to Malaysia was USD 3,199, with Afghan respondents paying on average the highest (USD 6,293) and Indonesians the lowest (USD 720). A significant difference in smuggling fees was observed between Rohingya (USD 4,302) and Chin (USD 1,320) respondents despite departing from the same country.
- **Share of journey costs allocated for smuggling:** Smuggling fees made up a significant share of journey costs across all groups, ranging from 88% among Bangladeshi to 99% among Indonesian respondents.
- **Payment to smugglers and financing for the journey:** Payment to smugglers was commonly made prior to the journey (63%), but Afghan and Bangladeshi respondents more commonly paid on arrival. Across all groups, family members played a pivotal role in financing the journeys.
- **Smuggling market size:** With an estimated 12,775 people from Myanmar smuggled into Malaysia between February 2021 and February 2024, the market for smuggling migrants from Myanmar into Malaysia over the past three years has an estimated value of USD 43.5 million or an average of USD 14.5 million annually.

Indonesia as a host country - Afghan, Rohingya, and Somali respondents

- **Smuggling patterns:** The majority of respondents (83%) reported relying on a single smuggler for the entire journey, observed across all groups in Indonesia - Afghan (84%), Rohingya (99.5%), and Somali (56%) respondents.
- **Smuggling fees:** The average smuggling fee to Indonesia was USD 2,651. Afghan respondents paid the highest average smuggling fees (USD 5,748), and Somali respondents the lowest (USD 1,356).
- **Share of journey costs allocated for smuggling:** Smuggling fees constituted a relatively lower share of the journey costs among Afghan and Somali respondents, indicating the presence of other additional costs not accounted for as part of the smuggling services, such as domestic travels and documentation fees.
- **Payment to smugglers and financing for the journey:** Respondents reported diverse payment practices, with Afghans often paying upon arrival, likely due to the higher average costs involved and as a guarantee of safe arrival, while full payment prior to departure was more common among Rohingya and Somali respondents.
- **Smuggling market size:** In 2023, Indonesia recorded maritime arrivals of 2,288 Rohingya, which translates into an estimated smuggling market size of USD 3.4 million for Rohingya alone. This does not include those arriving in Indonesia by land or air.

Introduction

The intricate network of human smuggling¹ across Southeast Asia, particularly towards transit and destination countries like Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, unveils a complex and urgent challenge. This report delves into the financial dimension of human smuggling, drawing insights from extensive 4Mi surveys conducted by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) between December 2022 and August 2023. Focusing on the experiences of refugees and migrants from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Somalia, and Myanmar who engaged smugglers during their journeys, the report sheds light on how refugees and migrants finance their smuggling journey. This information is crucial for understanding the complex nature of human smuggling in the region.

Migration within and towards Southeast Asia has been a longstanding phenomenon, with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand serving as common transit and destination countries for migrants from within, as well as outside, of the region. Motivations for migration to and through these countries are diverse; individuals may seek better prospects abroad, to escape persecution, conflict, or human rights abuses, or a combination of both. Malaysia's and Thailand's rapid economic growth, with heavy reliance on migrant labour and relatively higher wages, presents enticing prospects for migrants from neighbouring countries including Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR.² The conflicts in Myanmar and systemic persecution against Rohingya and other groups have also driven many to seek refuge in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, predominantly through irregular pathways, contributing further to the region's migration landscape.³

Similarly, Indonesia has historically served as a transit country for refugees and migrants, including from Afghanistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Somalia, attempting to seek asylum in Australia and elsewhere by sea. However, since the Australian Government tightened its border policy and response through Operation Sovereign Borders in 2013,⁴ few arrivals have been recorded.⁵ Similarly, Indonesia has been a common arrival country for Rohingya, many of whom are trying to reach Malaysia. In 2023, Indonesia witnessed the highest arrivals of Rohingya since 2014-15. While many have taken onward movements to Malaysia and Thailand,⁶ some remain in Indonesia.⁷

Throughout the region, the lack of accessible regular migration pathways compels many refugees and migrants to resort to irregular routes to reach Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. Because of the covert nature of irregular migration, journeys come with potential risks and situations of vulnerability, as some migrants face abuses, including having to pay exorbitant fees, detention, violence and exploitation.⁸ These irregular routes, facilitated by smugglers, operate within both sophisticated transnational networks and also on an ad hoc basis. Financial dynamics play a pivotal role in human smuggling along these routes, with migrants paying fees to smugglers for transportation, documentation, and other forms of assistance, including food, water and shelter, on their journeys to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

However, smuggling fees within and across groups vary, underscoring the complex nature of smuggling journeys within the region. Variance in smuggler fees is influenced by intersecting factors such as how well-developed migration routes are between countries, the distance, and complexity of the journey, including how many countries are transited, and the type of transport taken, among others.

With a focus on Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, the report explores the context of smuggling across different groups of respondents in the three countries and delves into the relatively under-studied area of the financial intricacies of the journey, including the journey costs, smuggling fees, payment practices, and financing approaches.

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- 1 MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', one which encompasses various activities — paid for or otherwise compensated by 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 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. 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.
 - 2 IOM (2023) [International Labour Migration in a Changing Climate: Insights from Malaysia and Thailand](#); IOM Thailand (2024) [Migration Context](#); World Bank (2019) [Malaysia: Estimating the Number of Foreign Workers](#)
 - 3 Greenwalt, P. (2020) [Legislation Factsheet: Rohingya Refugees in Southeast Asia](#)
 - 4 Reilly, A. (2014) [The boats may have stopped, but at what cost to Australia?](#)
 - 5 Wood, R. (2023) [Unauthorised boat arrival: Undetected landing in remote Western Australia](#); Evans, D. & Brennan, A. (2024) [Single boat carried 43 asylum seekers into Western Australia](#)
 - 6 UNHCR (2023) [Indonesia Fact Sheet - July 2023](#)
 - 7 UNHCR (2024) [Emergency update: Rohingya boat arrivals](#)
 - 8 MMC (2022) [Journeys to Indonesia for Rohingya refugees](#); MMC (2023) [Protection risks among Afghan, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Chin and Rohingya people in Malaysia](#); MMC (2023) [Use of smugglers on the journey to Thailand among Cambodians and Laotians](#)

Methodology

MMC conducted 4,966 4Mi surveys and 60 interviews in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia among refugees and migrants from Cambodia, Lao PDR, Viet Nam, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Somalia, and Myanmar between December 2022 and August 2023. (see Figure 1)

Figure 1. Data collection in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia

| Country of data collection | Country of origin | Number of surveys |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Thailand (1,833 surveys) | Cambodia | 277 |
| | Lao PDR | 216 |
| | Myanmar (Rohingya) | 603 |
| | Myanmar (other ethnic minorities) | 369 |
| | Pakistan | 182 |
| | Vietnam | 186 |
| Malaysia (2,047 surveys) | Myanmar (Rohingya) | 949 |
| | Myanmar (Chin) | 321 |
| | Afghanistan | 149 |
| | Bangladesh | 342 |
| | Indonesia | 286 |
| Indonesia (1,086 surveys) | Afghanistan | 360 |
| | Myanmar (Rohingya) | 444 |
| | Somalia | 282 |
| Total number of surveys | | 4,966 |

Out of the total surveys collected, 87% (n=4,162) reported using smugglers. This report focuses on insights drawn from interviews with these respondents who engaged the services of a smuggler. Within this subgroup, a majority (63%) used one smuggler for the entire journey, while a quarter (25%) used several smugglers for different parts of the journey and the rest (12%) used a smuggler for only one part of the journey.

The sampling approach utilises a mix of purposive and snowball sampling methods, targeting refugees and migrants of the aforementioned nationalities and ethnic groups who arrived in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia between 2017 and 2023. While the sampling approach for this research seeks diversity and to provide rich, indicative insights for populations on the move, it is not representative of all migration movements within Southeast Asia. Therefore, it cannot be used to provide estimates of the number or characteristics of the overall population of migrants on the move within and through Southeast Asia.

Respondents were asked about their profiles, their engagement with smugglers, journey costs, and practices around making payments to smugglers for their journeys. Findings are organised based on the country where the respondents were located at the time of survey/interview.

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 migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Eastern and Southern Africa, North Africa, West Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean. 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

Thailand

Respondents' profile, routes taken, and engagement with smugglers

In Thailand, 1,425 respondents who engaged smugglers were from five different groups: Rohingya (40%), other respondents from Myanmar (21%),⁹ Cambodians (19%), Laotians (13%) and Vietnamese (8%). Most respondents were men (61%) between 18-25 years of age (34%) (see Figure 2). There are variations in self-reported migration status among the respondents with Vietnamese respondents predominantly comprised of asylum seekers or refugees (91.1%). Conversely, the majority of Laotian (99.5%), Rohingya (92.7%), and other respondents from Myanmar (64.6%) reported having an irregular migration status. Cambodian respondents self-reported a mix of regular and irregular migration statuses, with 41.2% having expired or no legal documents, 28.5% asylum seekers or refugees, and 28.1% held or had applied for permits or visas.

Figure 2. Profile of respondents in Thailand

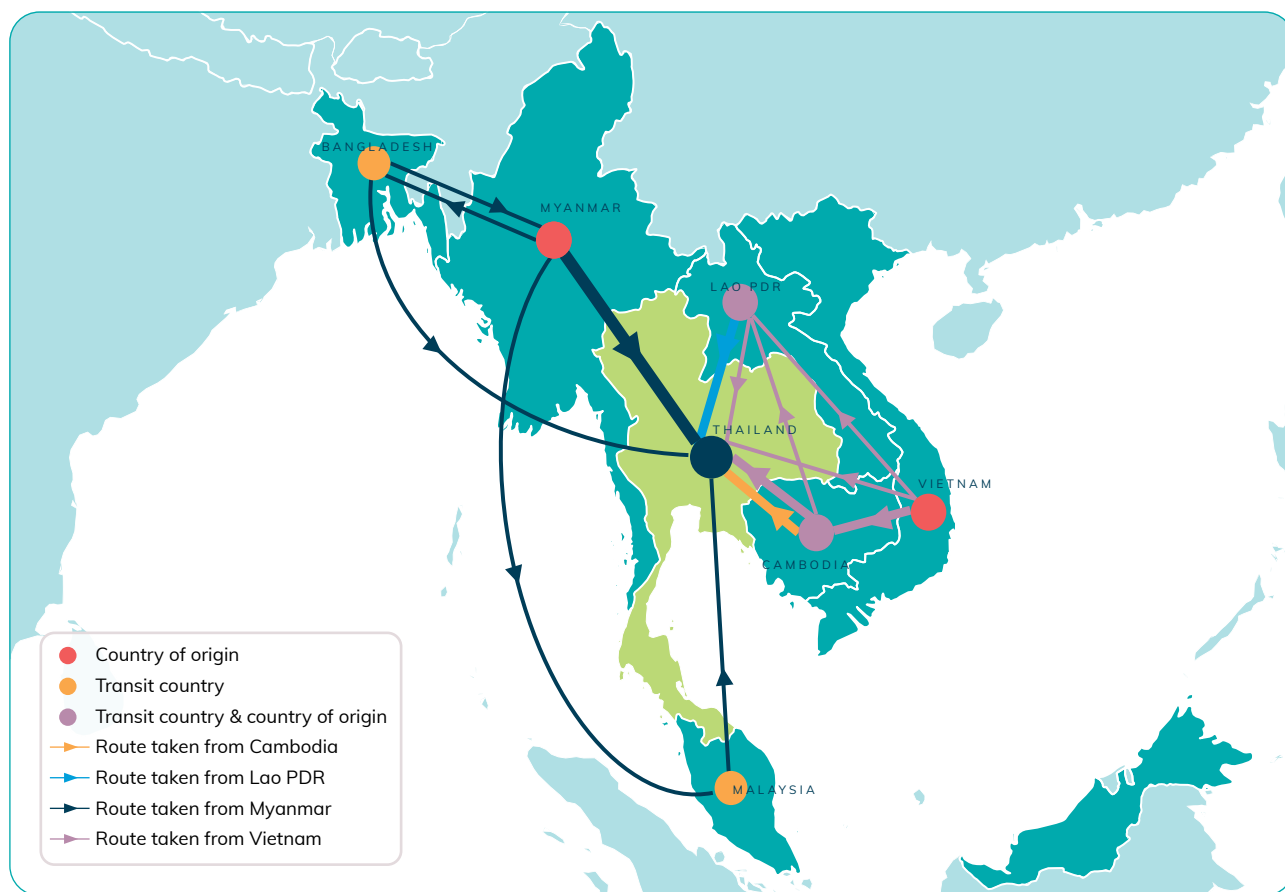
| | | Cambodian (n=267) | Laotian (n=182) | Other respondents from Myanmar (n=297) | Rohingya from Myanmar (n=568) | Vietnamese (n=111) | Overall (n=1,425) |
|------------------|--|----------------------|--------------------|--|--|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Gender | Female | 48% | 27% | 49% | 32% | 43% | 39% |
| | Male | 52% | 73% | 51% | 68% | 57% | 61% |
| | TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Age group | 18-25 | 9.4% | 92.9% | 38.0% | 28.2% | 11.7% | 33.7% |
| | 26-35 | 36.0% | 5.5% | 30.6% | 34.0% | 23.4% | 29.2% |
| | 36-45 | 39.3% | 1.6% | 18.9% | 23.8% | 42.3% | 24.3% |
| | 46-55 | 13.1% | 0% | 8.4% | 9.0% | 16.2% | 9.1% |
| | 55+ | 2.2% | 0% | 4.0% | 5.1% | 6.3% | 3.8% |
| | TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Migration status | Applied for permit/visa | 15.4% | 0% | 25.6% | 1.3% | 0% | 8.8% |
| | Asylum seeker | 16.1% | 0% | 1.3% | 2.1% | 84.7% | 10.8% |
| | Irregular/no legal documents to stay in this country | 34.8% | 99.5% | 64.6% | 92.7% | 0% | 69.5% |
| | Permit is no longer valid/ expired | 6.4% | 0% | 1.7% | 0.4% | 0% | 1.7% |
| | Refugee | 12.4% | 0% | 0% | 2.1% | 14.4% | 4.3% |
| | Regular migrant - no need for permit | 0% | 0% | 1.7% | 0% | 0% | 0.4% |
| | Temporary protection | 0% | 0.5% | 1.3% | 1.1% | 0% | 1% |
| | Temporary resident (with permit/visa) | 12.7% | 0% | 3.7% | 0.4% | 0% | 3.3% |
| | Other | 2.2% | 0% | 0% | 0% | 0.9% | 0.5% |
| | TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

In terms of migration routes, Cambodian, Laotian, and non-Rohingya respondents from Myanmar typically embarked directly from their respective countries to Thailand. Meanwhile, Vietnamese respondents often transited through Cambodia and/or Lao PDR or arrived directly to Thailand. While most Rohingya undertook a direct journey from Myanmar, a portion transited through Bangladesh and/or Malaysia before reaching Thailand, with cars and boats being the primary modes of transport. (see Figure 3). The majority of respondents in Thailand relied on a single smuggler

⁹ This includes respondents from a range of ethnic groups namely Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan.

for the entire journey to Thailand (69%). This was particularly pronounced among Rohingya from Myanmar (89%), Laotian (87%), Cambodian (62%), and Vietnamese respondents (54%). In contrast, over half of other respondents from Myanmar reported a different pattern, engaging a smuggler for only a part of the journey (55%).

Figure 3. Routes taken by the respondents to reach Thailand



Note: This map shows journeys reported by more than 10 respondents, with the thickest lines indicating the most reported routes taken among respondents.

Higher smuggling fees among Rohingya from Myanmar and Vietnamese respondents likely due to longer and more complicated journeys to reach Thailand¹⁰

On average, respondents across all groups in Thailand paid USD 704 for smuggler services to facilitate their journeys, which made up 83% of the total journey costs¹¹ to Thailand. However, smuggling fees¹² varied considerably both within and across groups with Vietnamese and Rohingya respondents reporting the highest average smuggling fees at USD 1,276 and USD 961 respectively, likely linked to the longer and more complicated journeys to reach Thailand. Conversely, other respondents from Myanmar, Cambodia and Lao PDR, who entered Thailand directly, reported relatively lower smuggling fees with an average of USD 529, USD 158, and USD 19 respectively¹³. Corresponding to the smuggling fees, Rohingya and Vietnamese respondents reported smuggling fees as the highest proportion of their journey costs (85%). Smuggling fees comprised 77% and 76% of the journey costs on average among other respondents from Myanmar and Cambodian respectively (see Figure 4).

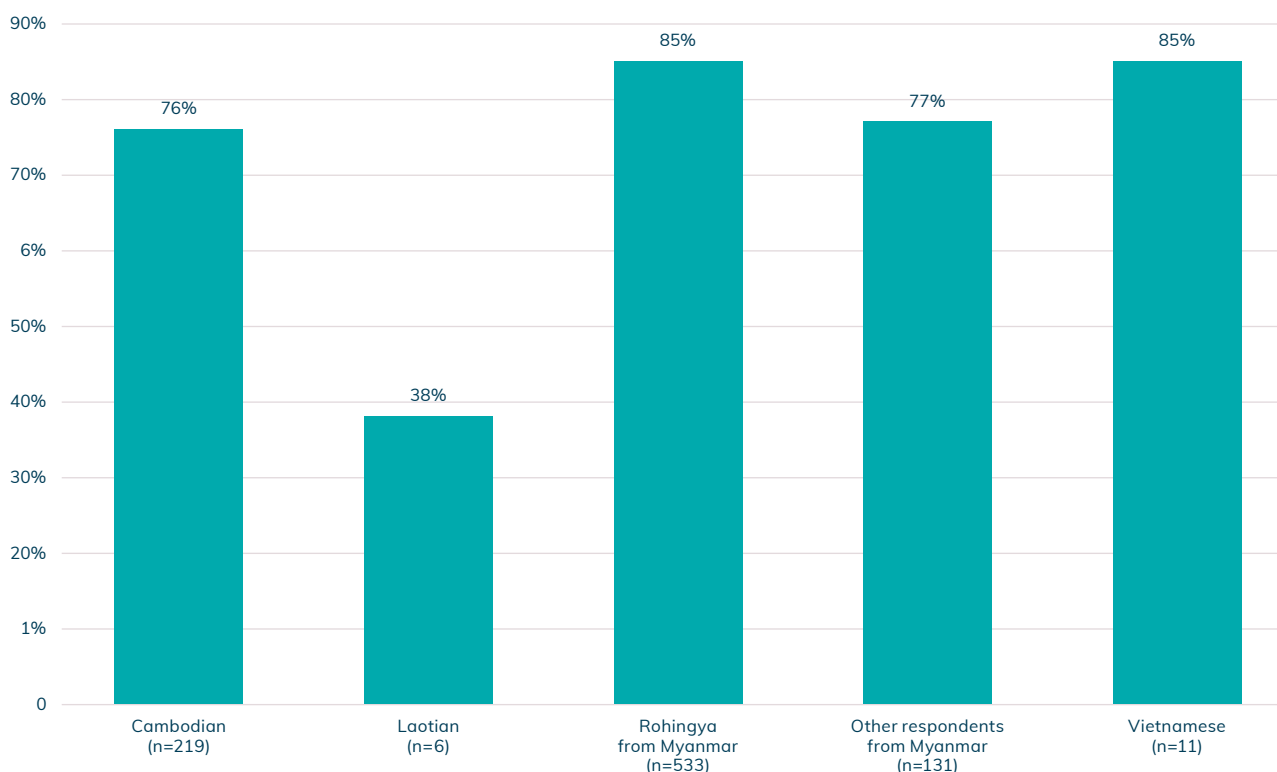
10 This section is based on smuggling costs disclosed by 82% of Cambodian respondents, 3% of Laotian respondents, 44% of other respondents from Myanmar, 96% of Rohingya respondents from Myanmar, and 11% of Vietnamese respondents who reported using smugglers for their journey to Thailand.

11 By journey costs, MMC refers to money spent on smuggling, payment of bribes, on transportation and other pre-departure expenses.

12 Smuggling fees refer to amounts paid to smugglers. The services agreed upon may vary case by case.

13 Only six respondents from Lao PDR provided details regarding the smuggling fees they paid. The average smuggling fees among Laotian respondents was derived from a relatively small sample size and thus should be interpreted with caution.

Figure 4. Smuggling fees as a proportion of journey costs to Thailand



Laotians reported the lowest smuggling fees (38% of their journey costs) which could be attributed to their geographical proximity to Thailand, as well as how their migration to Thailand is usually arranged, including the involvement of their prospective employers in Thailand prior to departure, as elaborated below. However, it is important to highlight that this insight stems from just six Laotian respondents who disclosed information about their journey financing.

Notably, the smuggling fees for Rohingya from Myanmar were almost double those of other respondents from Myanmar. The necessity of engaging smugglers among Rohingya is particularly acute due to their statelessness and restricted movement within the country, as well as primary displacement to Bangladesh. This is underscored in a report by the MMC, which highlights that the majority of Rohingya respondents resort to smugglers' services due to a lack of viable alternatives.¹⁴ Their journeys often involve multiple transits, including onward movements from countries of first displacement, like Bangladesh, which may contribute to the higher smuggling fees incurred.

Some respondents reported exceptionally high smuggling fees, as compared to their co-nationals

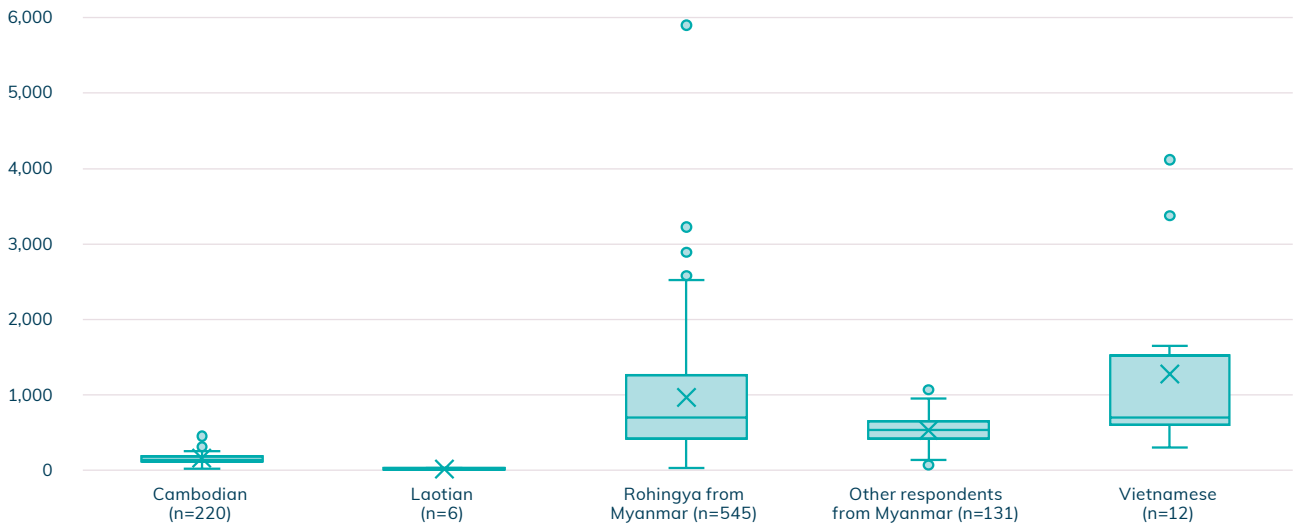
Within each group, the distribution of smuggling fees varied with outliers observed in all groups except for Laotian respondents (see Figure 5). One Rohingya interviewee reported paying USD 5,900, which was more than six times the average smuggling fees among Rohingya respondents. For instance, in one case, the interviewee was extorted and ended up paying beyond the agreed amount, highlighting the vulnerabilities faced by smuggled people during their journey.

"The original deal with the smuggler was that they will take me to Malaysia for 5 million Kyat (USD 2,400)... In Ayeyarwady, the smuggler took us to a forest and started beating us and asked for more money. They called my parents and asked for [another] 5 million Kyat (USD 2,400). They would beat me while they were talking on the phone with my parents so that my parents could hear me scream."

Rohingya man, 21 years old, interviewed in Thailand in 2023

¹⁴ MMC (2023) [Comparing Smuggling Dynamics: Myanmar to Malaysia and Thailand](#)

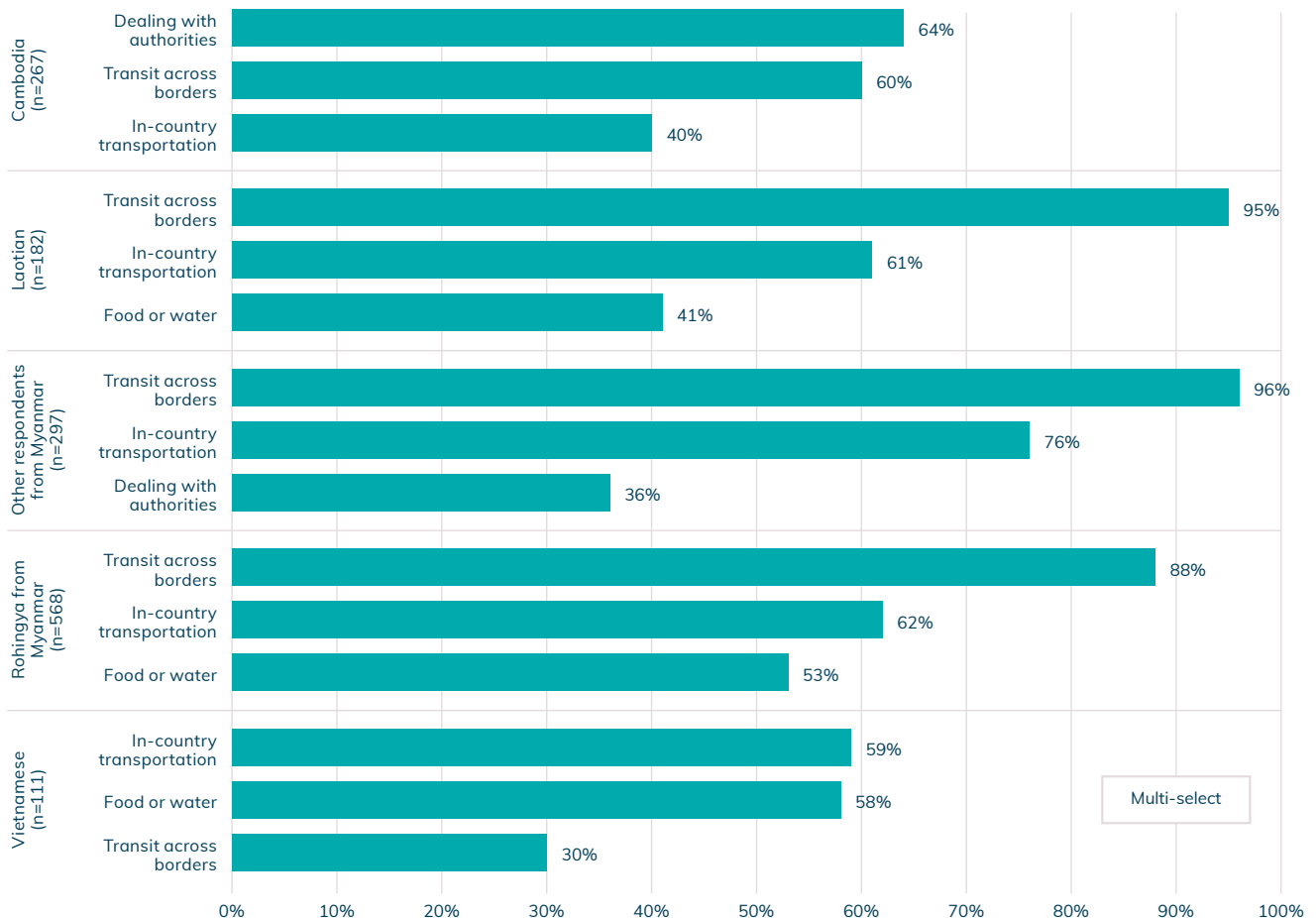
Figure 5. Amount paid for smugglers' services to reach Thailand (in USD)



Key services provided by smugglers were consistent across groups

Despite variations in smuggling fees across all groups, the key services provided by smugglers were consistent. These included facilitating transit across borders, arranging in-country transportation, providing food or water, and dealing with authorities (see Figure 6). Among Rohingya (96%), Laotian (95%), and other respondents from Myanmar (88%), cross-border transit service was the most reported service provided by smugglers. Among Cambodian respondents, dealing with authorities was the most commonly reported service provided by smugglers as reported by 64%. Beyond travel arrangements, smugglers also provided food or water, as reported among Laotians (41%), Rohingya from Myanmar (53%), and Vietnamese (58%).

Figure 6. What did the smuggler provide you with to reach Thailand? (Top 3 most reported)



The majority of respondents made full payment upon reaching Thailand, while Laotian respondents commonly paid for their journey through labour arrangements with their prospective employers.

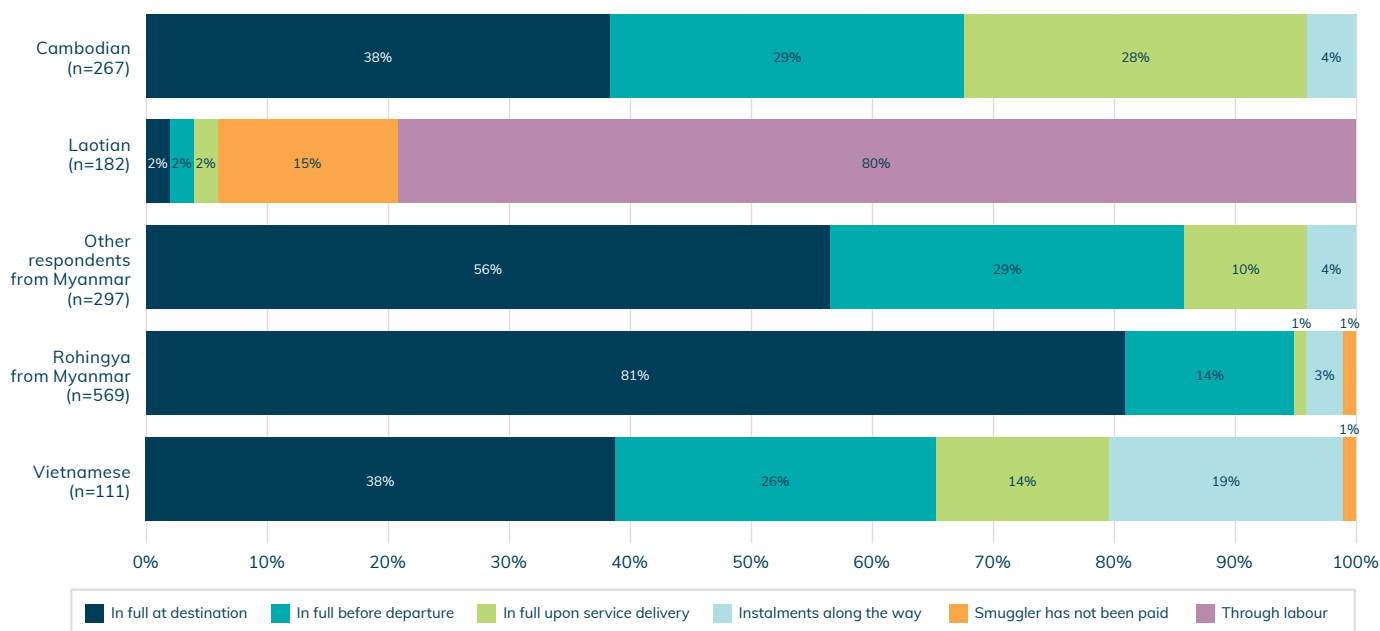
The method of payment for smugglers varied, with the most common approach being full payment upon reaching the destination (54% of respondents across all groups). Payment in full at destination was particularly prevalent among Rohingya respondents (81%), followed by 56% of other respondents from Myanmar, and 38% of Cambodian and Vietnamese respondents (see Figure 7).

Conversely, a majority of Laotian respondents (80%) reported paying their smuggler through labour or indicated that payment for the smuggler had not been made at the time of survey (15%). As highlighted by MMC’s previous research, prospective employers of Laotians play an active role in facilitating access to smugglers and the journey to Thailand prior to departure.¹⁵ In many cases, smuggling costs are initially borne by these employers, with Laotian respondents reimbursing expenses over time through their labour.

“I am not sure about the smuggler, because the employer arranged for this. I only followed the instructions from the employer. I was not in contact with the smuggler, I was only in contact with the employer... I did not have to pay for the smuggler, the employer paid for everything.”

Laotian respondent, female, 36 years old, interviewed in Thailand in 2023

Figure 7. How did you pay the smuggler to reach Thailand?¹⁶



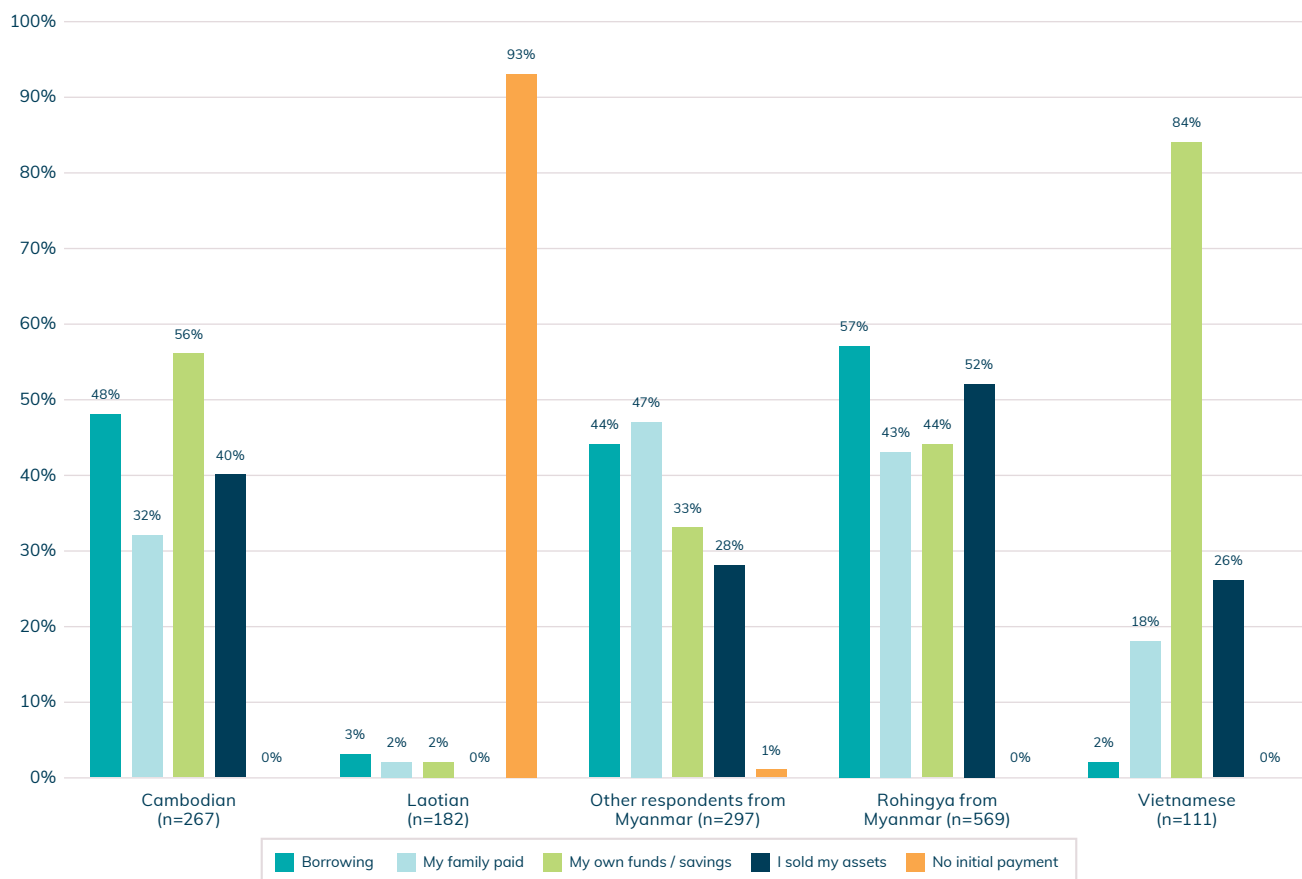
Using savings, borrowing money or selling assets were key means for financing smuggling journeys among all respondents

To fund their journey to Thailand, respondents across all groups primarily relied on three approaches: using their savings (42%), borrowing money (41%), or selling assets (36%) (see Figure 8). It is noteworthy that a majority of Vietnamese reported using personal funds or savings (84%) to finance their journey. This is likely influenced by their socio-economic background as a substantial proportion of Vietnamese respondents (70%) were either business owners or self-employed before migrating. This may have bolstered their capacity to finance their journey, despite incurring the highest average journey costs as compared to other groups interviewed in Thailand. Consistent with the payment practices observed among Laotian respondents (as discussed in the previous section), nearly all respondents (93%) reported no initial payment for the journey was required.

15 MMC (2023) [Use of smugglers on the journey to Thailand among Cambodians and Laotians](#)

16 3% of Vietnamese respondents declined to answer the question. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

Figure 8. How did you initially finance your journey to Thailand?



While the initial finances were sufficient for covering the entire journey costs to Thailand among most respondents (91%), the remaining 9% (n=112) had to resort to alternative mechanisms to secure additional funds. Among these respondents, various strategies were employed, with the top three most common ones including seeking assistance from friends or family (45%), borrowing from other migrants (29%), and engaging in work (25%) to finance their journey.

Summary of all nationalities

Cambodian

Cambodian respondents, constituting 19% of the total respondents in Thailand, displayed a nearly equal gender distribution and were predominantly in the 36-45 age group (39%). Most (35%) reported having an irregular status in Thailand and all arrived directly from Cambodia due to the country's geographical proximity to Thailand. Most Cambodian respondents engaged a single smuggler for their entire journey (62%). On average, the smuggling fees comprised 76% of their journey costs, averaging USD 158. The predominant payment method was paying smugglers in full at destination, as reported by 38% of respondents. In terms of financing, Cambodian respondents most often used their own savings (56%) to cover the journey costs to Thailand.

Laotian

Laotian respondents constituted 13% of respondents in Thailand, were predominantly male (73%), and fell within the 18-25 age group (93%). Almost all (99%) respondents held an irregular status in Thailand. Similar to Cambodian respondents, all Laotian respondents arrived directly in Thailand from Lao PDR, and the majority engaged only one smuggler for the entire journey (87%). Laotian respondents reported the lowest average smuggling fees (USD 19 or 38% of total journey costs) as compared to other groups interviewed in Thailand, likely due to the geographic proximity of Lao PDR to Thailand, and the significant role employers play in organising their travel to Thailand. 80% of respondents reported paying their smuggler through labour, a payment approach not reported by other groups. Furthermore, most respondents (93%) reported no initial payment was made to the smuggler at the onset of the journey, suggesting that other forms of funding, such as an agreement between smugglers and prospective employers in Thailand, were in place.

Vietnamese

Vietnamese respondents comprised 8% of the total group, with a slightly higher representation of men (57%). Nearly half of the respondents fall within the 36-45 age bracket (42%). Almost all respondents reported being asylum seekers (85%) and refugees (14%) in Thailand. They either arrived directly or transited through Cambodia and/or Lao PDR. More than half (54%) engaged a single smuggler for the entire journey, while 32% reported engaging multiple smugglers for different parts of their journey. The multiple transit points and the mode of engaging multiple smugglers likely explain the highest average smuggling fees (USD 1,276) – 85% of total journey costs, incurred by Vietnamese respondents as compared to other groups interviewed in Thailand. While paying the smugglers in full at destination remained the primary payment mode (38%), Vietnamese respondents were more likely to pay in instalments along the journey (19%) in comparison to other groups, suggesting more segment journeys that involved multiple smugglers. Despite the high journey costs, most respondents financed their journey through savings (84%) and by selling their assets (26%), suggesting a lesser reliance on loans or family and friends.

Rohingya from Myanmar

Rohingya respondents constituted 40% of respondents in Thailand, with a majority being men (68%), and a significant portion falling within the age group of 26-35 (34%). Most respondents reported having an irregular status (93%), reflective of the barriers to registration with UNHCR in Thailand for Rohingya. While the majority arrived directly to Thailand, some transit points reported were Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia. 89% of Rohingya reported engaging a single smuggler for their entire journey to Thailand, with the second highest smuggling fees (USD 961) incurred across all groups, which comprised 85% of their journey costs. The payment approach for the smugglers was consistent among Rohingya respondents, with most paying in full at destination (81%) and before departure (14%). In comparison to other groups, financing the journey through borrowing (57%) and selling assets (52%) was common among Rohingya.

Other respondents from Myanmar

Constituting 21% of the respondents in Thailand, individuals from other ethnic groups in Myanmar were fairly evenly distributed by gender, with most in the 26-35 age group (31%). 65% reported having an irregular status in Thailand, while 26% had applied for permit or visa – the highest in this category across all groups interviewed in Thailand. Most (55%) engaged a smuggler for only a part of their journey. Despite using smuggling services for only a part of their journey, this did not translate to respondents paying lower smuggling fees. Respondents paid 76% of their journey costs to smuggling (USD 529).¹⁷ Paying the smuggler in full at destination (56%) or before departure (29%) were the most common payment modes. Most respondents reported that their family funded their journey (47%), which was the highest across all groups, suggesting a significant role of the family in the financing process for Chin and other groups from Myanmar.

17 In this case, the average journey cost was lower than the average smuggling fees due to the larger sample size for the former - 255 respondents disclosed their journey costs, while only 131 respondents disclosed their smuggling fees.

Malaysia

Respondents' profile, routes taken, and engagement with smugglers

In Malaysia, 1,710 respondents engaged smugglers during their journey, representing a diverse mix of backgrounds including Rohingya from Myanmar (49%), Bangladeshi (19%), Chin from Myanmar (19%), Indonesian (7%), and Afghan (6%). Among these groups, the majority of the respondents were men (61%). Over half of the respondents (55%) were within the age group of 18-25 years (see Figure 9). In terms of migration status, most Afghan respondents were asylum seekers (29.6%) or refugees (49.1%). Most Bangladeshi (59.3%), Chin (63.8%), and Rohingya (54.1%) respondents reported having an irregular status, either possessing expired or no documents. Conversely, relatively higher proportion of Indonesian respondents reported having applied for permit or visa (36.3%), likely under the Labour Recalibration Programme¹⁸ implemented in Malaysia in 2021, where Indonesians constituted the largest group of applicants.¹⁹

Figure 9. Profile of respondents in Malaysia

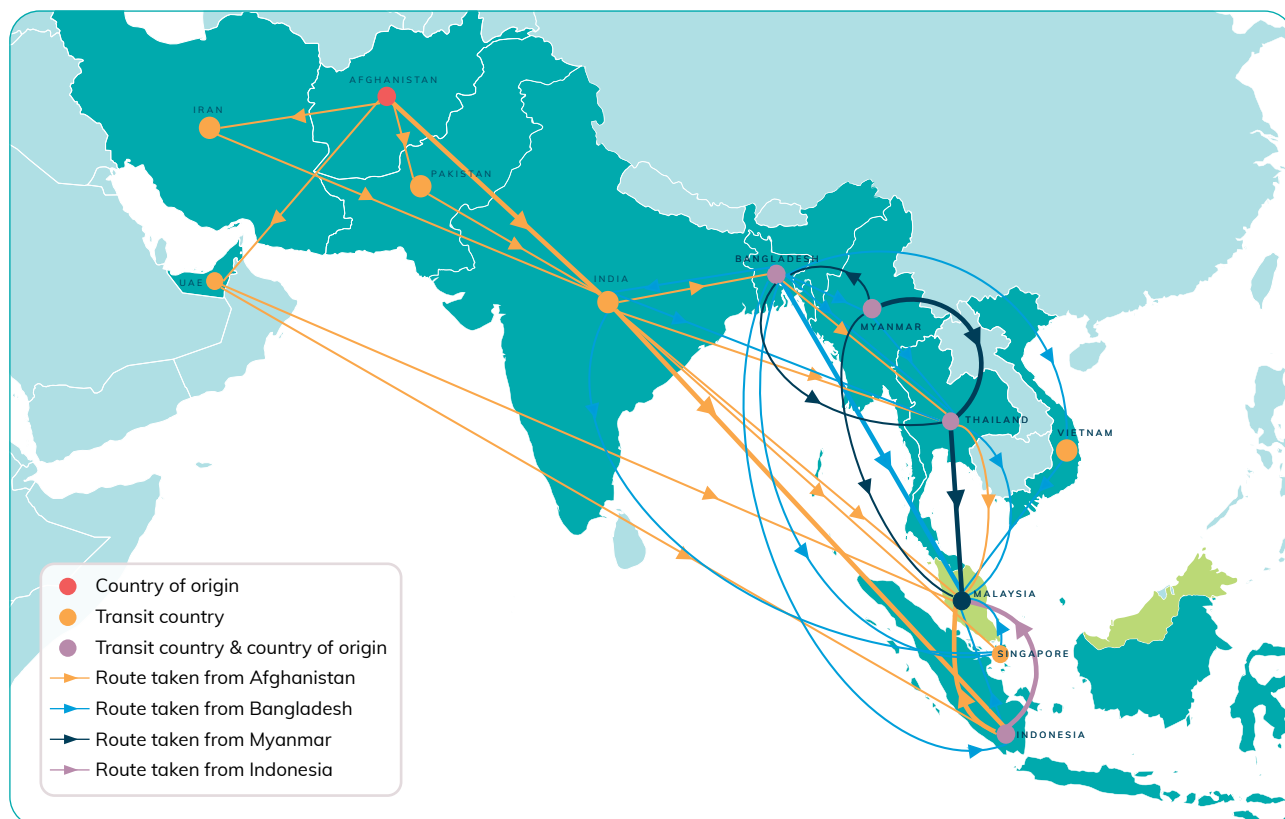
| | | Afghan (n=108) | Bangladeshi (n=317) | Indonesian (n=121) | Chin (n=319) | Rohingya (n=845) | Overall (n=1,710) |
|------------------|--|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Gender | Female | 27% | 3% | 27% | 36% | 56% | 39% |
| | Male | 73% | 97% | 73% | 64% | 44% | 61% |
| | TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Age group | 18-25 | 47.2% | 35.3% | 9.1% | 44.2% | 74.1% | 55.0% |
| | 26-35 | 28.7% | 47.0% | 36.4% | 39.5% | 23.1% | 31.9% |
| | 36-45 | 18.5% | 17.0% | 28.1% | 12.2% | 1.8% | 9.5% |
| | 46-55 | 4.6% | 0.6% | 25.6% | 3.1% | 1.1% | 3.3% |
| | 55+ | 0.9% | 0% | 0.8% | 0.9% | 0% | 0.3% |
| | TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Migration status | Applied for permit/visa | 0% | 8.2% | 36.3% | 0% | 0% | 3.5% |
| | Asylum seeker | 29.6% | 1.3% | 0% | 31.1% | 17.2% | 16.7% |
| | Irregular/no legal documents to stay in this country | 7.4% | 38.2% | 12.1% | 63.2% | 54.1% | 47.6% |
| | Resident (with permit/visa) | 0% | 27.8% | 17.6% | 0% | 0.1% | 6.3% |
| | Permit is no longer valid/ expired | 4.6% | 21.1% | 4.4% | 0.6% | 0% | 4.6% |
| | Refugee | 49.1% | 0% | 0% | 5.0% | 23.0% | 15.7% |
| | Regular migrant - no need for permit | 0% | 0% | 19.8% | 0% | 0% | 1.1% |
| | Temporary protection | 9.3% | 3.5% | 0% | 0% | 5.6% | 4.1% |
| | Other | 0% | 0% | 9.9% | 0% | 0% | 0.5% |
| | TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

18 Labour Recalibration Programme is an initiative by the Malaysian government to regularise undocumented labour migrants for employment in specific industries. See [Recalibration Programme 2.0 FAQ](#) for more info.

19 Sopiah, P. S. (2022) [Tenaga Kerja Indonesia Ilegal Tertinggi di Malaysia. Program Rekalibrasi PATI Diperpanjang 30 Juni](#).

The journeys undertaken by each group of respondents varied (see Figure 10). Afghan respondents transited through numerous countries including India, Pakistan, Islamic Republic of (I.R.) Iran, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Indonesia, and Thailand before arriving in Malaysia. Similarly, while most Bangladeshi respondents arrived in Malaysia via air directly, some reported transiting through India, UAE, Lao PDR, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Thailand, and Singapore. Rohingya respondents from Myanmar also reported transiting through multiple countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Thailand. Most Chin respondents primarily transited through Thailand. In contrast, all Indonesian respondents arrived directly to Malaysia without making any transit, with the majority travelling by airplane.

Figure 10. Routes taken by the respondents to reach Malaysia



Note: This map shows journeys reported by more than 10 respondents, with the thickest lines indicating the most reported routes taken among respondents.

Respondents most commonly reported engaging a smuggler for their entire journey (46%) to Malaysia. This was observed among Indonesian (75%), Chin (55%), Bangladeshi (49%), and Afghan (47%) respondents. However, Rohingya respondents (58%) most commonly used several smugglers for different parts of the journey.

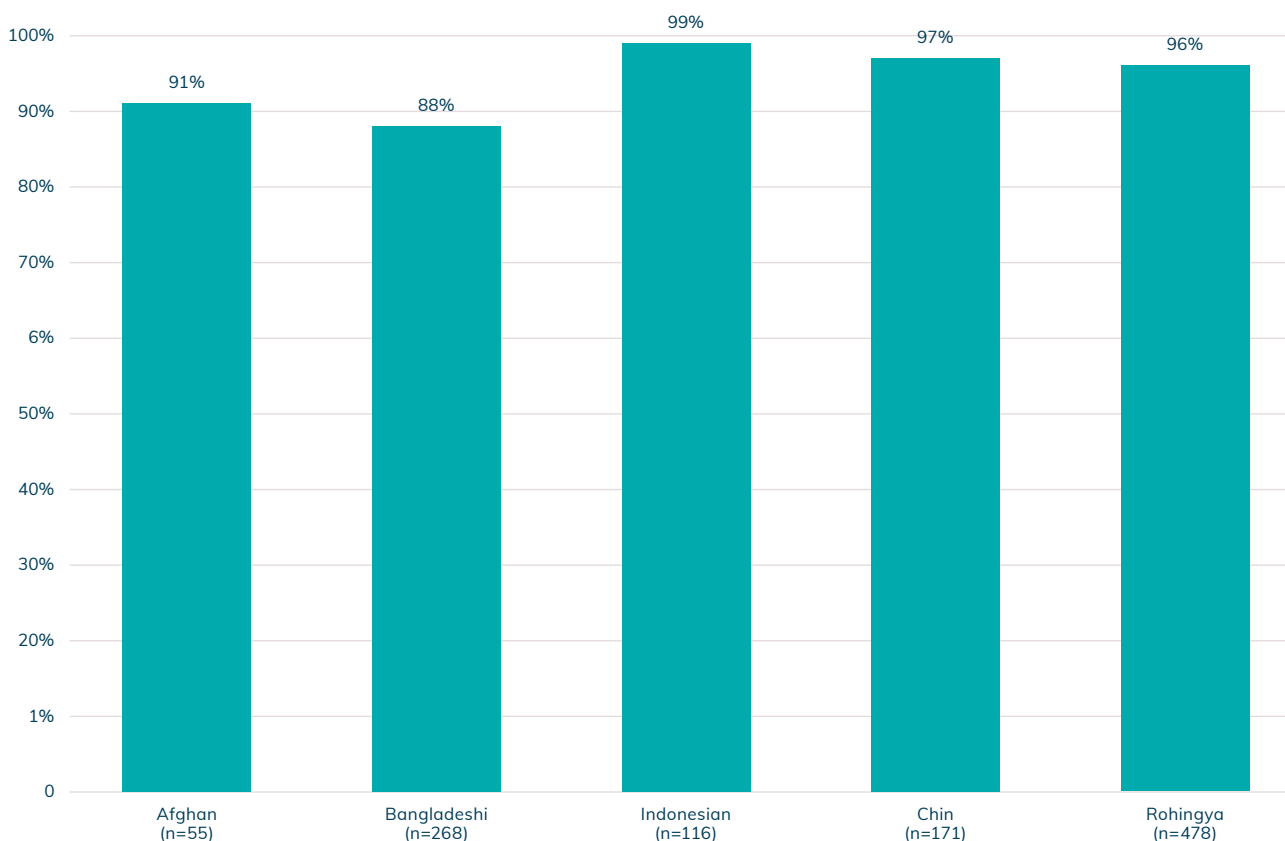
Smuggling fees made up a significant share of journeys costs among respondents

Respondents in Malaysia paid an average of USD 3,199 for their smuggling fees, which made up 94% of the average journey costs. Comparing across groups, Afghan respondents paid the highest average smuggling fees of USD 6,293 (91% of average journey costs), followed by Rohingya from Myanmar with an average of USD 4,302 (96% of average journey costs), and Bangladeshi respondents with an average of USD 3,045 (88% of average journey costs). The average smuggling fees of Chin (USD 1,320) and Indonesian respondents (USD 720) almost made up the entire journey costs, at 97% and 99% respectively (see Figure 11). The significant proportion of journey costs allocated to smuggling services across all groups underscores the presence of well-established smuggling networks directed towards Malaysia, the potential geographical difficulties entering the country, as well as strict border controls.

Unlike in Thailand and Indonesia, the average smuggling fees were slightly higher for women (USD 3,444) than for men (USD 3,083) in Malaysia, a gender disparity observed across all groups except for Afghans. Particularly striking was the difference among Indonesian respondents, with female respondents reported paying 31% more than their male

counterparts. This discrepancy may be attributed to emigration restrictions imposed by the Indonesian Government, compounded by existing barriers to migration faced by women. For instance, bans on the emigration of Indonesian women to Malaysia were implemented in 2021-22 in response to concerns over labour exploitation in key sectors such as domestic work.²⁰ Migration bans likely lead more women to pursue irregular pathways,²¹ due to the unavailability of regular pathways, increasing the demand for smuggling services and leading to a subsequent rise in journey costs to Malaysia for Indonesian women.

Figure 11. Smuggling fees as a proportion of journey costs among respondents in Malaysia



Notably, there were many outliers observed among Chin and Rohingya from Myanmar on both the lower and higher ends, suggesting wide variations in smuggling fees incurred within the groups (see Figure 12). For Rohingya, incidences of extortion by smugglers are commonly reported, and may explain some of the higher smuggling fees reported by Rohingya respondents, along with the differences in routes taken. However, there were also instances where Rohingya respondents incurred lower than average smuggling fees, as highlighted in the quote below.

“I was brought to different smugglers in Yangon, and I got beaten up. Finally, I contacted my brother who was in Malaysia. He still owned a piece of land in Myanmar, and he had to sell the land and borrow money from his friends to pay for me. My brother transferred the money by bank to the smugglers. It was 120 lakh kyat (USD 5,716)... In Thailand, the smuggler asked me to pay again – this time they asked for 20 lakh kyat (USD 952). In total I had to pay 140 lakh kyat (USD 6,669 USD).”

Rohingya respondent, male, 19 years old, interviewed in Malaysia in 2023

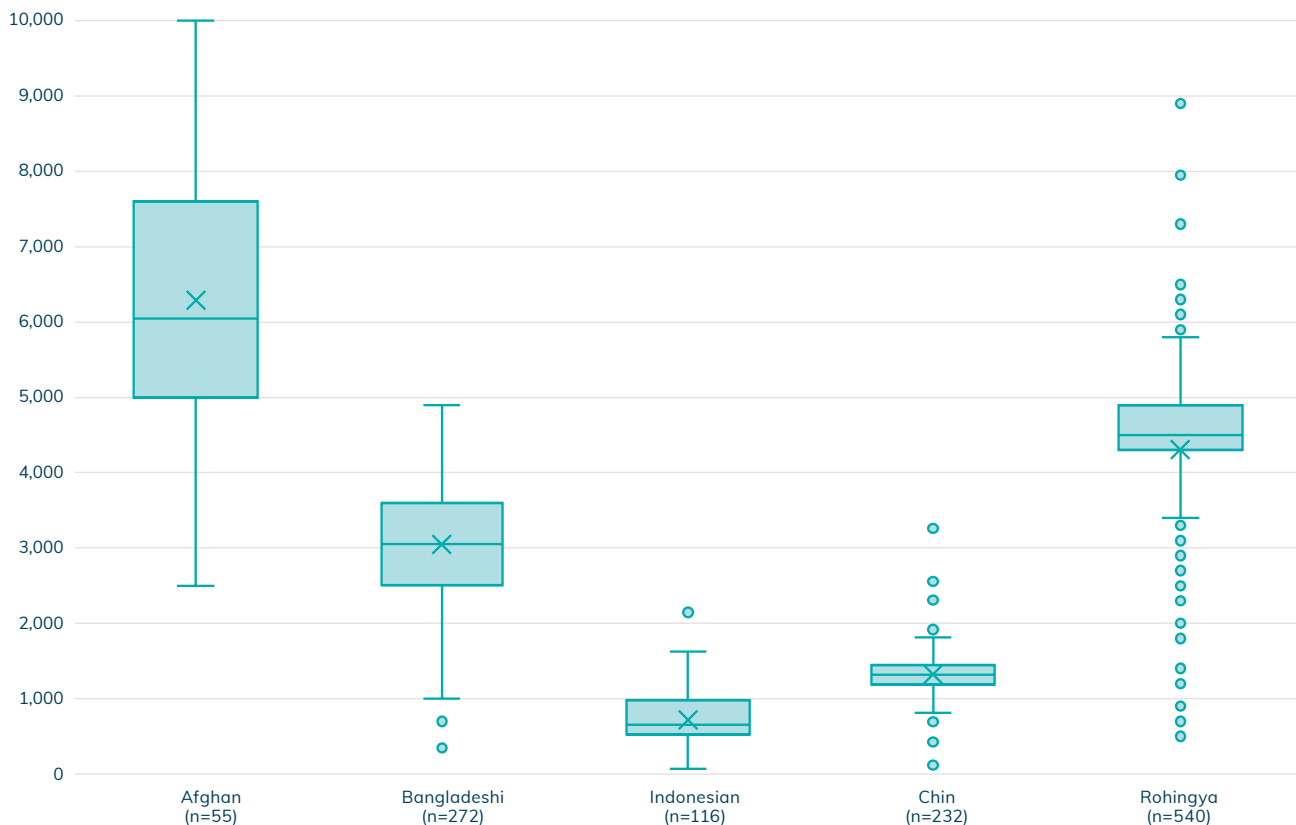
“The total journey cost me around 3 lakh kyat (USD 1,429) and I paid in cash to one of the ‘assistants’ when we were in Myanmar. Just one payment, I didn’t have to pay more afterwards... I think we were lucky because we didn’t need to pay much. This was not the normal rate, some people had to pay more.”

Rohingya respondent, male, 24 years old, interviewed in Malaysia in 2023

20 Firdaus, A. & Mustafa, M. (2022) [Indonesia stops sending workers to Malaysia over alleged breach of labor deal](#)

21 ILO (2017) [Women migrant workers: Protected or put in harm’s way?](#)

Figure 12. Amount paid for smugglers' services to reach Malaysia (in USD)



Significant difference in smuggling fees between Chin and Rohingya respondents despite departing from the same country²²

The smuggling fees reported by Rohingya departing Myanmar amounted to an average cost of USD 4,172²³. This was over three times higher than the average amount paid by Chin (USD 1,314), corresponding to the same trend observed in Thailand. The significant disparity in smuggling fees between the two groups, despite departing from the same country, implies that factors beyond the geographical origin point, such as access to information²⁴ and exposure to protection incidents like extortion during the journey, may shape the smuggling journey undertaken and elevate smuggling costs. As illustrated below, systemic abuse against Rohingya in Myanmar which deprives them of citizenship and freedom of movement, leaving them in a state of confinement within Rakhine state, also added to the barriers to migration.²⁵

“To make fake documents I would require 50 lakh kyat/person (2,382 USD/person). These documents will help me to travel within Myanmar, from Rakhine to Yangon. And then we would need another 35-40 lakh kyat (1,600-1,900 USD) for making fake passports. Most people come by boat because they don't have money for making legal documents.”

Rohingya respondent, female, 62 years old, interviewed in Malaysia in 2023

As noted previously, a majority of Rohingya from Myanmar respondents also mentioned using several internal travel facilitators and smugglers throughout their journey, including within Myanmar, as compared to Chin respondents. The difference in engagement with internal travel facilitators and smugglers might have contributed to higher smuggling costs among Rohingya respondents.

²² This section draws from the smuggling costs disclosed by 51% of Afghan respondents, 86% of Bangladeshi respondents, 96% of Indonesian respondents, 73% of other respondents from Myanmar, and 67% of Rohingya respondents who reported using smugglers for their journey to Malaysia.

²³ The average smuggling fees here only considered Rohingya respondents who departed from Myanmar and hence excluded Rohingya respondents who began their journey from other countries including Bangladesh and Indonesia.

²⁴ MMC (2023) [Afghan, Chin and Rohingya refugees in Malaysia](#)

²⁵ Bauchner, S. (2022) [A Decade of Detention for Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine State](#); Human Rights Watch (2022) [Myanmar: No Justice, No Freedom for Rohingya 5 Years On](#).

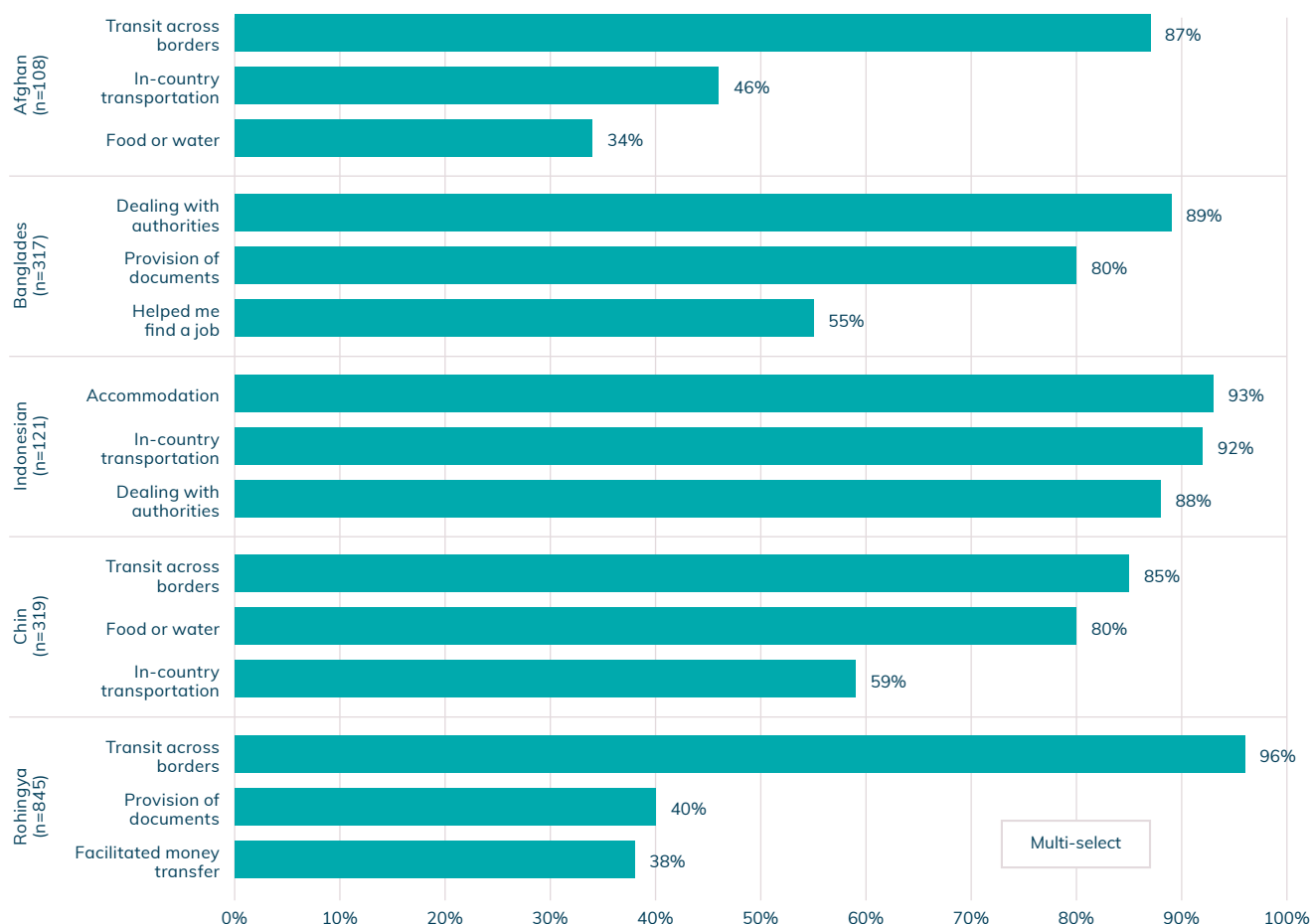
Smugglers provided a range of services tailored to the needs of different groups of respondents

Smugglers played a crucial role in assisting respondents to transit borders, a service reported by the majority of Afghan (87%), Chin (85%), and Rohingya (96%) respondents (see Figure 13). In the case of Bangladeshi and Indonesian respondents who self-reported primarily migrating to Malaysia for economic reasons (93% and 99% respectively),²⁶ services such as dealing with authorities, aiding in job search, and assisting with accommodation were reported as among the key services provided by smugglers. This highlights the diverse functions provided by smugglers across different groups. Among Bangladeshi respondents, the provision of documents (80%) was commonly cited as one of the key services provided by the smugglers. Additionally, interviews revealed instances of fraud, whereby some “agents”, posing as legitimate travel agencies, deceived individuals by falsely offering regular migration pathways with travel documentation. Instead of fulfilling these promises, agents instead engaged in smuggling activities.

“I was told to pass my passport to the agent [smuggler],²⁷ who promised to get me other required documents: visa, permit, etc... I expected to travel by direct flight to Malaysia. However, the agent [smuggler] took us to Cox’s Bazar and took me to Malaysia by boat.”

Bangladeshi respondent, male, 30 years old, interviewed in Malaysia in 2023

Figure 13. What did the smuggler provide you with to reach Malaysia? (Top 3 most reported)



26 Economic reasons were cited as one of the drivers for leaving the country of origin by 33% Afghan, 26% Rohingya respondents, and 16% Chin, significantly lower than Bangladeshi and Indonesian respondents.

27 Interviewees often refer to individuals who facilitated their irregular migration as “agents”, as translated from the local languages, which also refer to “smugglers”, 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. This is a broader interpretation than the definition of smuggling according to international law (UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol).

Payment methods likely attributed to differences in smuggling fees, modes of engaging smugglers, and the length of journeys

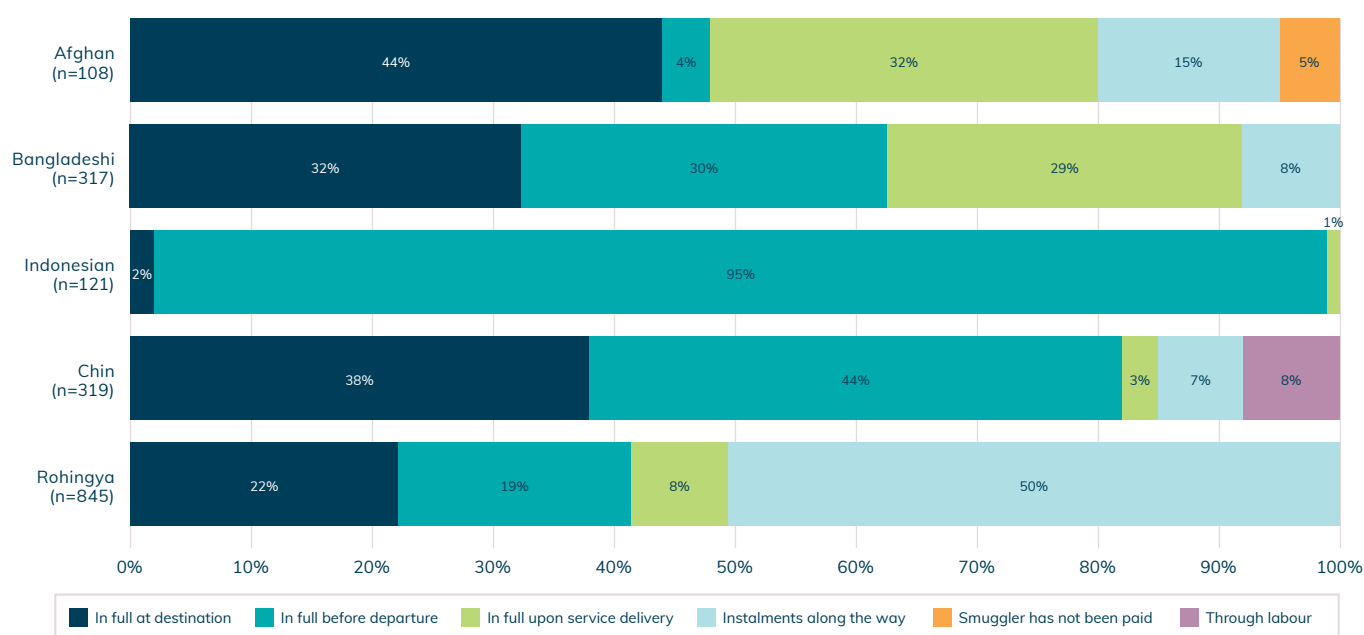
Overall, respondents most commonly paid their smuggler before the journey (30%), in instalments (29%) or upon arriving in Malaysia (27%). Across all groups, payment practices varied. Afghan (44%) and Bangladeshi (32%) respondents commonly paid upon arrival to Malaysia (see Figure 14), whereas half of Rohingya from Myanmar respondents (50%) paid in instalments. Conversely, almost all Indonesian (95%) and less than half Chin (44%) respondents paid before the journey, with a few Chin respondents (8%) also paying through the exchange of labour.

These differences in payment practices might be linked to differences in smuggling fees, modes of engaging smugglers, and the length of journey. Afghan and Bangladeshi respondents reported relatively higher smuggling fees as compared to Indonesian or Chin respondents. This likely led the former groups to prefer payment upon completion of journey to mitigate risk of financial loss and as a guarantee of arriving safely at the destination. Afghans and Bangladeshis also more commonly use *hawala/hundi* informal money transfer services, allowing them to pay out the fee only after arrival.²⁸ On the other hand, a greater share of Rohingya respondents paid in instalments throughout their journeys, likely a result of more commonly using multiple smugglers.

"I paid a third or maximum half of the money in advance and the rest after I arrived to make sure that they [smugglers] don't get rid of me or just leave me on the sea."

Afghan respondent, male, 33 years old, interviewed in Malaysia in 2023

Figure 14. How did you pay the smuggler to reach Malaysia?²⁹



28 Hassan, M. (2022) [Why hundi is so popular in Bangladesh](#); UNODC (2023) [The Hawala System: Its operations and misuse by opiate traffickers and migrant smugglers](#); Mahadevan, P., Khoruk, M., and Mohmandzai, A. M. (2023) [A New Exodus: Migrant Smuggling from Afghanistan after the Return of the Taliban](#)

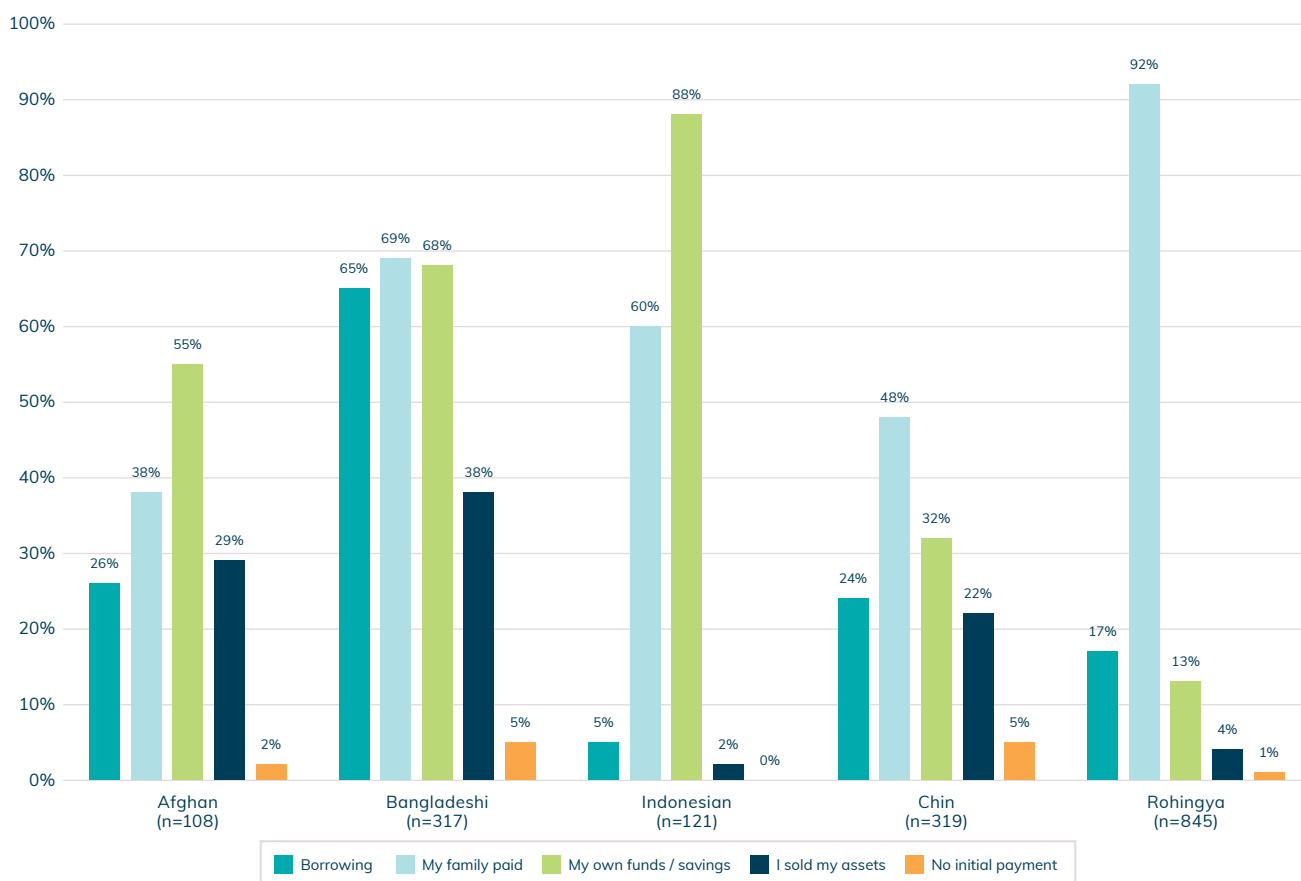
29 Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Funding from family, personal savings, and borrowing are among the most common methods of financing journeys

Respondents across all groups primarily relied on various sources to finance their journey, with the most common being funding from family (74%), personal savings (35%), borrowing money (27%), and selling assets (15%). Over half of Afghan respondents (55%) and the majority of Indonesians (88%) reported using their savings (see Figure 15). The role of family members in financing journeys was most prominent among Rohingya from Myanmar (92%). This reliance on family financing could be attributed to the cultural norms and practices within Rohingya communities, as well as the specific circumstances driving migration, such as marriage and family reunification, which was identified as one of the key drivers for migration according to 4Mi data.³⁰ In some cases, Rohingya men already residing in Malaysia may enlist smugglers to facilitate the journey of Rohingya women and girls into Malaysia for marriage or family reunification, as evidenced by one of the interviews conducted in Malaysia below.³¹

"I guess we paid around RM5,000-5,500 per person (USD 1,000-1,192). My cousin paid the smuggler in person in cash when he picked me up at the Malaysian border. Now I am repaying him RM500/month (USD 100)."
Rohingya respondent, female, 31 years old, interviewed in Malaysia in 2023.

Figure 15. How did you initially finance your journey to reach Malaysia?



30 MMC (2021) [Profiles and Drivers of Rohingya moving to Malaysia](#)

31 Fortify Rights (2019) [Malaysia: End Child Marriage, Protect Rohingya Refugee Girls](#); Ahmed, K. (2019). [Rohingya women, girls being trafficked to Malaysia for marriage](#); Gelineau, K. (2023). [Scores of underage Rohingya girls forced into abusive marriages in Malaysia](#)

Although the majority of respondents (87%) across all groups reported having sufficient finances to cover their entire journey to Malaysia, 13% faced financial constraints to finance their journey, with a slightly higher proportion observed among Afghans (32%) and Bangladeshis (20%). Among respondents across all groups who reported having insufficient finances (n=240), the three most common means of covering the remaining costs of their journey included requesting friends or family to send more money (38%), borrowing money from other migrants (30%), and coming to an agreement with the smuggler to pay later (22%). While requesting assistance from friends or family and borrowing money from other migrants were also common coping mechanisms in Thailand and Indonesia, a significantly higher proportion of respondents reported coming to an agreement with the smuggler to pay later in Malaysia as compared to in Thailand and Indonesia.

Summary of all nationalities

Afghan

Afghan respondents constituted 6% of the total respondents in Malaysia. A majority were men (73%), and most fell within the 18-25 age group (47%). The majority self-reported being refugees (49%) and asylum seekers (30%). Afghans took diverse migration routes to reach Malaysia, with the most common transits being through India and Indonesia before arriving in Malaysia. Almost half (47%) engaged one smuggler for the entire journey despite having to make multiple transits, suggesting the operation of transnational smuggling networks. They reported the highest average smuggling fee of USD 6,293, which made up 91% of their average journey costs. Afghan respondents reported paying their smugglers in full at destination (44%) or upon service delivery (32%), more commonly than other groups interviewed in Malaysia. Respondents most often financed their journey using their own funds or savings (55%) and with support from family members (38%).

Bangladeshi

Bangladeshi respondents comprised 19% of the total respondents interviewed in Malaysia. Respondents were predominantly men (97%) and fell within the 26-35 age group (47%). Most had an irregular status (38%). Notably, almost a quarter (21%) reported overstaying their permit, which was less common for other groups of respondents. This reflects one of the key services provided by smugglers in facilitating the procurement of travel documents, enabling entry to Malaysia via air on a temporary visa, but subsequently results in migrants falling into irregular status. While their journey to Malaysia involved multiple transits, most respondents arrived directly to Malaysia, aligning with the prevalent practice of engaging only one smuggler for the entire journey (49%). The average smuggling fees reported by Bangladeshi respondents was USD 3,045, which constituted 88% of their total journey costs. Modes of payment to smugglers were mixed among Bangladeshi respondents, with most paying in full at destination (32%), before departure (30%), or upon service delivery (29%). Financing for the journey was mixed as well – journeys were funded with support from family members (69%), through own funds or savings (68%), and by borrowing money (65%).

Rohingya

Rohingya respondents from Myanmar constituted the largest group at 49% of the total, with a slightly higher female representation (56%). Most fell within the 18-25 age group (74%), and over half reported having an irregular status (54%) in Malaysia. Like the two groups above, Rohingya transited through multiple countries such as Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Thailand, with the majority transiting through Thailand to reach Malaysia. Over half of Rohingya (58%) reported engaging multiple smugglers for different parts of their journey, highest across all groups. Rohingya respondents reported having to pay an average of USD 4,302 for the smuggling fees, equivalent to 96% of their journey costs. 50% of Rohingya paid their smugglers in instalments along the way, a payment mode reported less often by other groups. The reliance on family members to finance the journey was most prominent among Rohingya (92%), possibly motivated by marriage and family reunification.

Chin

Chin respondents from Myanmar made up 19% of the total respondents in Malaysia, with the majority being men (64%) and within the 18-25 age group (44%). Almost two-thirds (63%) had an irregular status in Malaysia. They mostly transited through Thailand, with more than half (55%) engaging a smuggler for the entire journey. On average, Chin respondents allocated almost all of their journey costs (97%) to smuggling services averaging USD 1,320. The majority paid in full before departure (44%) or at destination (38%). Similar to all four groups above, family members (48%) were the key source of finances for the journey, followed by their own funds or savings (32%).

Indonesian

Constituting 7% of respondents in Malaysia, Indonesia respondents were mostly men (73%) and within the 26-35 age group (36%). Most were in the process of applying for permit or visa (36%) in Malaysia, likely under the labour migrant regularisation initiatives. Given Indonesia's geographical proximity to Malaysia, all arrived in Malaysia directly and most engaged only one smuggler for the entire journey (75%). Indonesian respondents reported paying the lowest average smuggling fees to Malaysia at USD 720. The smuggling fees constituted almost all of their journey costs (99%), indicating the comprehensive services provided by the smugglers to facilitate their journey Malaysia. Paying the smuggler in full prior to departure (95%) was the predominant payment mode reported by Indonesian respondents. Most Indonesian respondents reported using their own funds or saving (88%) to finance the journey.

Indonesia

Respondents' profile, routes taken, and engagement with smugglers

In Indonesia, 1,024 respondents engaged smugglers for their journey, of which 40% were Rohingya, 34% from Afghanistan and 26% from Somalia. A majority of the respondents were men (68%), with most aged 26-35 (49%) (see Figure 16). All of the respondents were registered as asylum seekers or refugees in Indonesia.

Figure 16. Profile of respondents in Indonesia

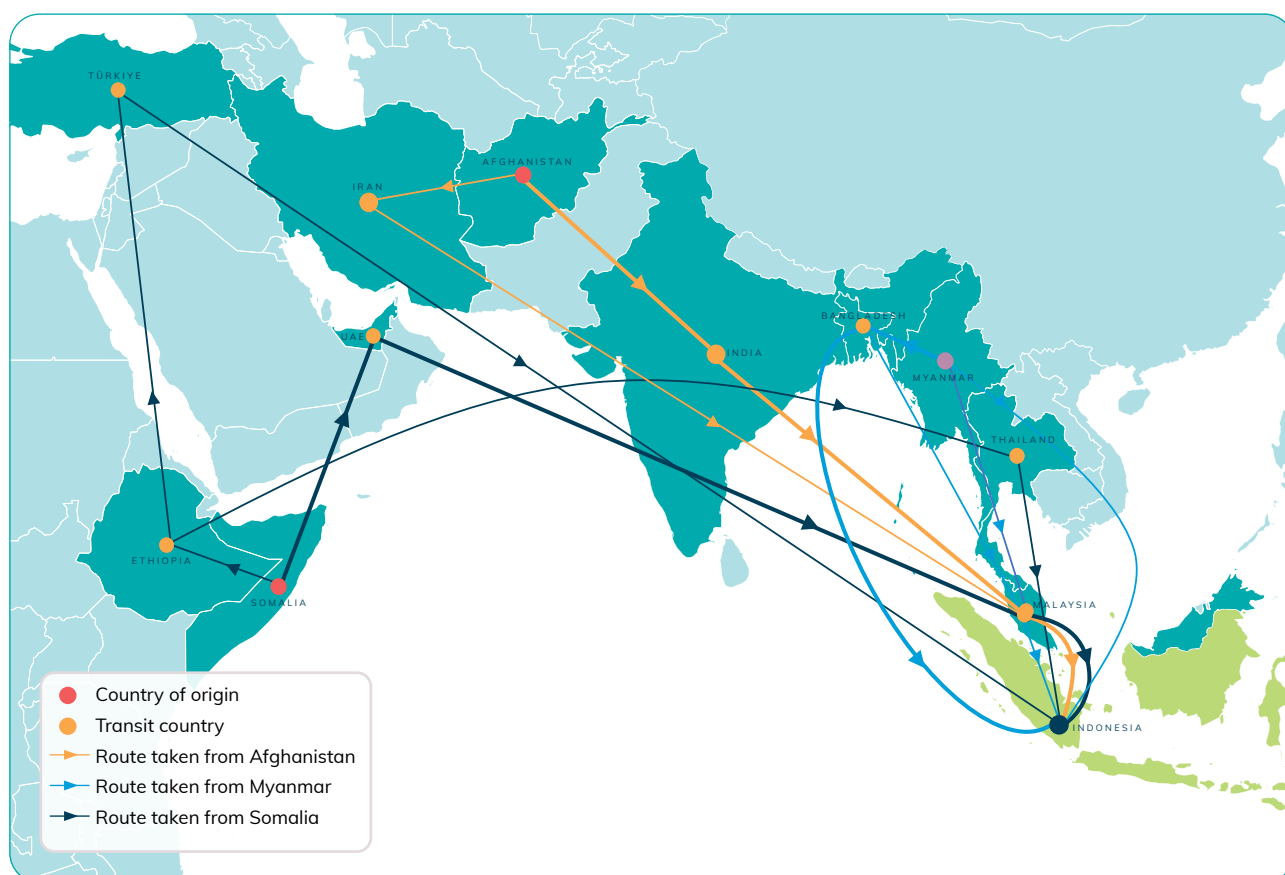
| | | Afghan (n=345) | Rohingya (n=410) | Somali (n=269) | Overall (n=1,024) |
|------------------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Gender | Female | 23% | 33% | 42% | 32% |
| | Male | 77% | 67% | 58% | 68% |
| | TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Age group | 18-25 | 23.5% | 42.9% | 12.6% | 28.4% |
| | 26-35 | 51.9% | 36.3% | 64.3% | 48.9% |
| | 36-45 | 16.5% | 16.3% | 21.9% | 17.9% |
| | 46-55 | 7.2% | 3.9% | 1.1% | 4.3% |
| | 55+ | 0.9% | 0.5% | 0% | 0.5% |
| | TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| Migration status | Asylum seeker | 42% | 0% | 58% | 29% |
| | Refugee | 58% | 100% | 42% | 71% |
| | TOTAL | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

In terms of migration routes, Afghan respondents primarily transited through India via air and Malaysia via air or boat on their journey to Indonesia. While over a quarter of Rohingya respondents arrived in Indonesia from Myanmar

directly via sea, the remaining transited Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand. Somali respondents predominantly travelled by air via UAE and Malaysia before reaching Indonesia (see Figure 17).

Overall, respondents predominantly engaged only one smuggler for the entire journey to Indonesia (83%). This was especially prevalent among Rohingya respondents (99.5%), likely due to the maritime smuggling route taken to reach Indonesia which restricts the use of multiple smugglers along the journey. Similarly, the majority of Afghan (84%) and Somali respondents (56%) reported using one smuggler for their entire journey to Indonesia, despite the circuitous route taken to reach Indonesia. This indicates the presence of well-organised transnational smuggling networks originating from Afghanistan and Somalia.

Figure 17. Routes taken by the respondents to reach Indonesia



Note: This map shows journeys reported by more than 10 respondents, with the thickest lines indicating the most reported routes taken by respondents.

Smuggling fees made up a lower share of total journey costs among Afghan and Somali respondents³²

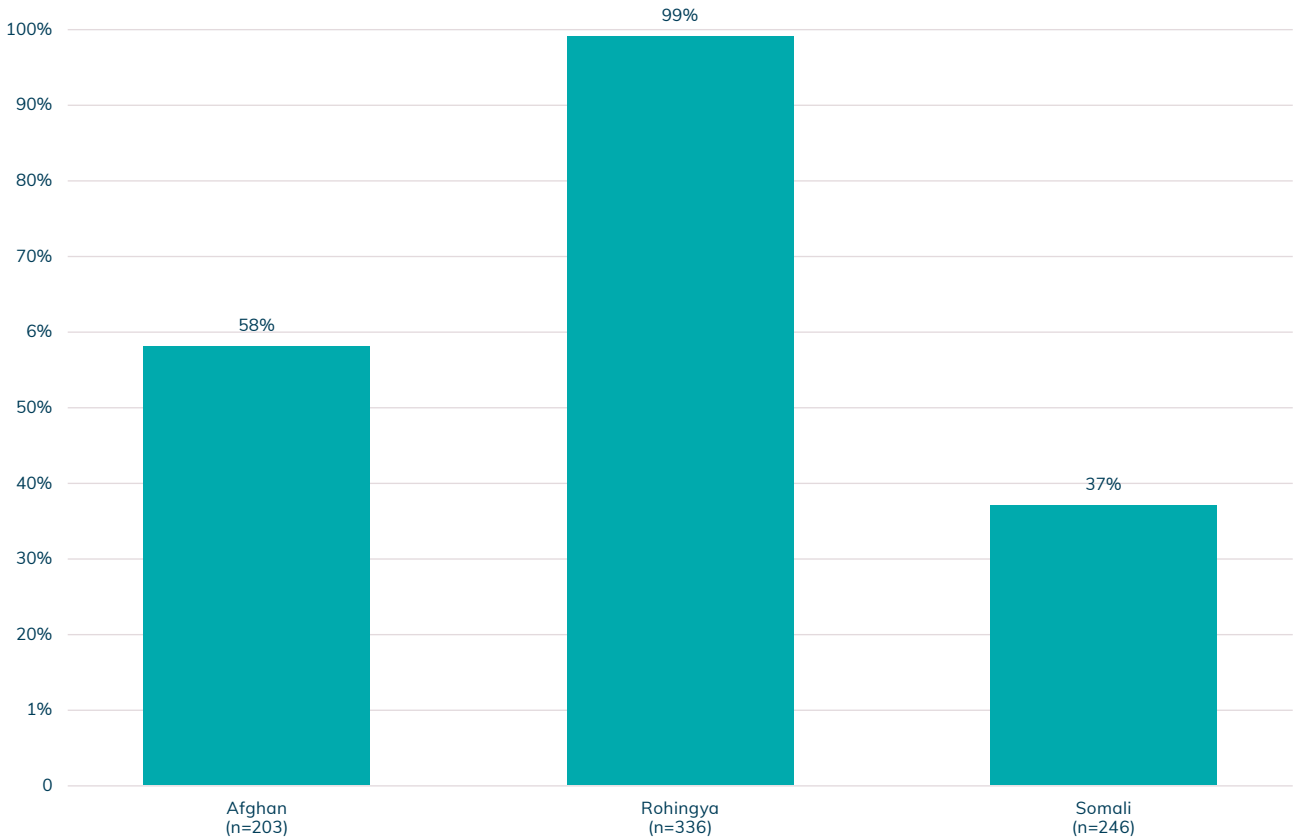
Overall, the average smuggling fees to Indonesia was USD 2,651. Afghan respondents reported the highest costs incurred for smuggling services at an average of USD 5,748, which made up 58% of journey costs (see Figure 18). In contrast, Somali respondents, despite the country of origin being geographically located the furthest from Indonesia, paid an average of USD 1,356 for smuggling services, the lowest among all respondents in Indonesia. However, these smuggling fees only constituted a small share (37%) of their average journey costs, indicating the presence of other additional costs not accounted for as part of the smuggling services as illustrated below.

³² This section draws from the smuggling costs disclosed by 68% of Afghan respondents, 82% of Rohingya respondents, and 96% of Somali respondents who reported using smugglers for their journey to Indonesia.

“The smuggler helped us arrange for passports and visa. For this itself, we had to pay a total of USD 3,000. The costs of the flight tickets were not included in this amount, but I don’t remember how much we paid for the flight tickets. After getting all this, my husband, my three kids and me, we travelled.”

Somali respondent, female, 34 years old, interviewed in Indonesia in 2023

Figure 18. Smuggling fees as a proportion of journey costs among respondents in Indonesia



Extreme outliers were observed across all groups (see Figure 19). This was especially the case for Rohingya, where the highest outlier (USD 15,000) was approximately 10 times the average smuggling fees (USD 1,493) reported by all Rohingya respondents. These outliers could be attributed to incidents of extortion often faced en route, as mentioned in previous sections,³³ significantly inflating the total journey expenses for some individuals, as noted by one of the Rohingya interviewee below.

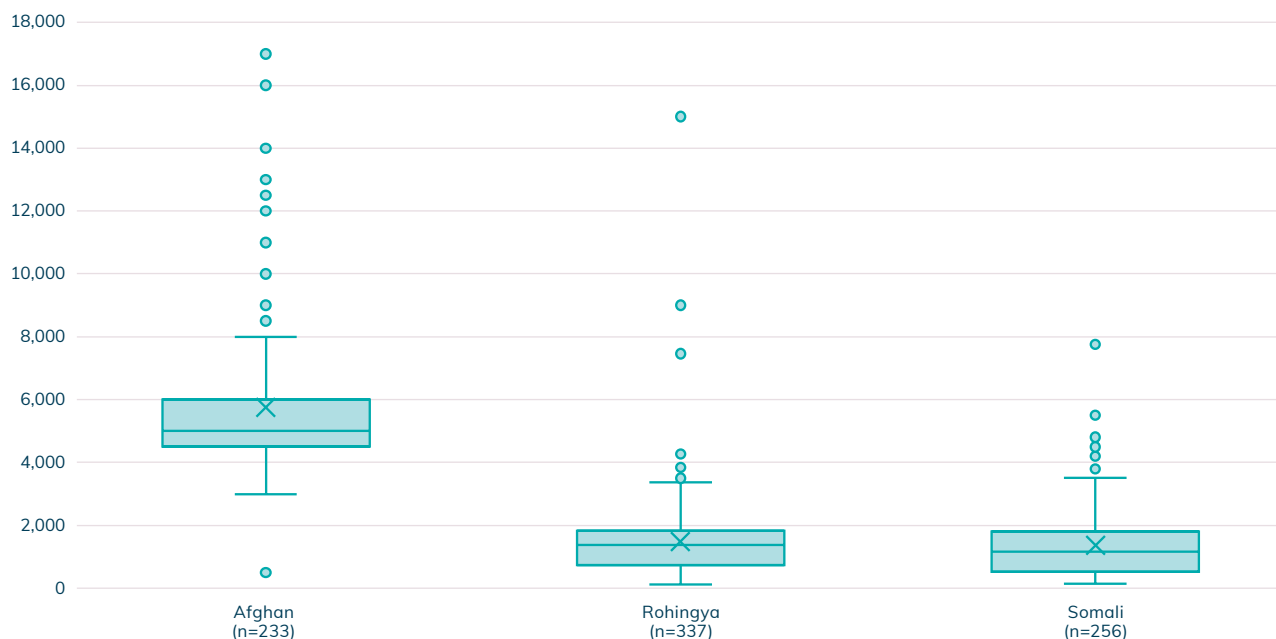
“The agents [smugglers] are bad. The agent [smuggler] used to beat us up when we were stuck for six months. If anyone is not able to pay the agent, they would beat the person and threaten to throw them into the water.”

Rohingya respondent, male, 25 years old, interviewed in Indonesia in 2023

The allocation of smuggling fees across different respondent groups can be linked to the range of services provided by smugglers. Rohingya typically rely on smugglers for comprehensive arrangements, often involving direct maritime routes from Bangladesh to Indonesia. Consequently, a significant portion of their journey costs is comprised of smuggling fees, often constituting nearly the entire expense (99%). Conversely, Afghans and Somalis typically engage smugglers for specific services as required, resulting in a smaller proportion of their journey costs being allocated to smuggling fees.

33 Galache, C. S. (2015) [Deceived and ransomed: Rohingya refugees huddle in Indonesia](#), Ahmed, K. & Hölzl, V. (2024) [Death, abuse and torture: traffickers hold fleeing Rohingya to ransom for up to £3,000 a time](#)

Figure 19. Amount paid for smugglers' services to reach Indonesia (in USD)



Facilitating border crossings and providing documents key smuggler services among Afghan and Somali, but less so for Rohingya respondents

Some of the key services provided by smugglers for Afghan and Somali respondents were facilitating transit across and within borders and providing documents (see Figure 12). In contrast, among Rohingya respondents, the most frequently reported services were related to meeting basic needs such as provision of food or water (97%) and medicine (24%). This could be because most Rohingya respondents undertake maritime routes that often span days, or in some cases, months, making necessities like food and water the most important needs. Additionally, as they cross invisible maritime borders to arrive in Indonesia, they might also not recognise transiting across borders as being facilitated by smugglers (reported by 1% among all Rohingya respondents).

"When we wanted to start the journey, we paid 1 lakh Kyat (47.5 USD) in cash for each person. After arriving closer to Thailand (still at sea), we paid RM6,000 (1,312 USD) for each person. That's it, we didn't pay anything more. The food and water on the ship, the agent gave us. We didn't have to pay for that."

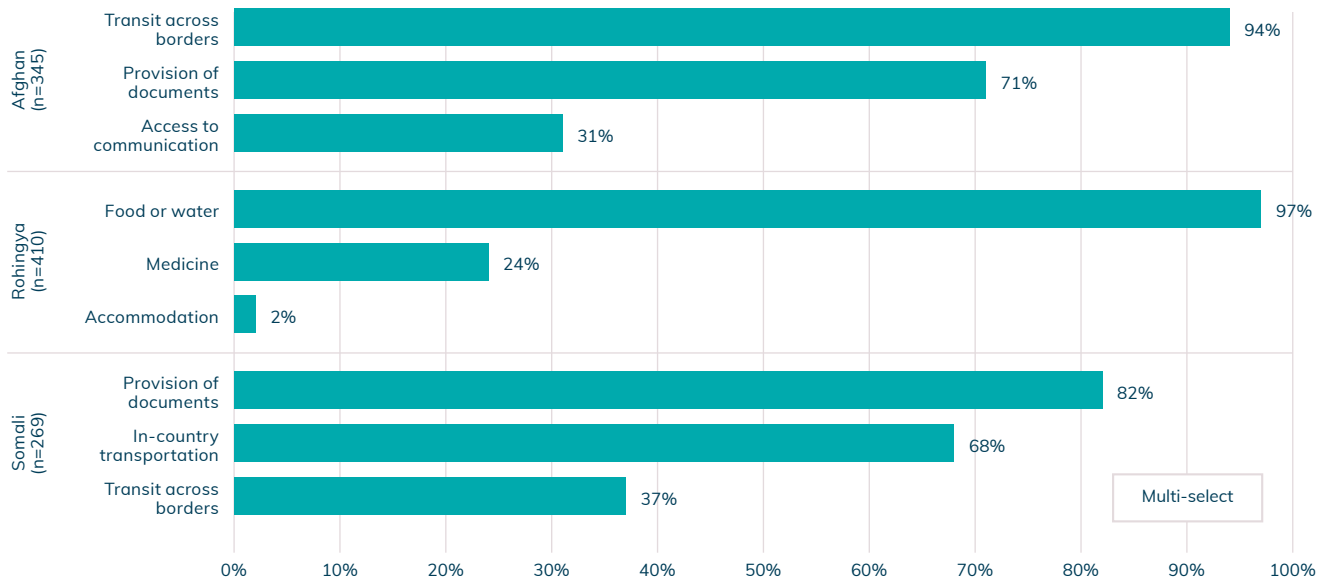
Rohingya respondent, female, 25 years old, interviewed in Indonesia in 2023

Respondents also highlighted a connection between the services offered and the fees charged for smuggling, potentially explaining the wide-ranging variation of smuggling fees within Afghan and Somali groups (see Figure 20). For example, one interviewee shared how he and his family successfully entered Indonesia using regular channels via air, facilitated by a smuggler who procured valid visas for them, albeit at a higher cost.

"The smuggler arranged for the visa for Malaysia and for Indonesia. He also arranged for all the flight tickets. The visas for Malaysia and Indonesia were student visas. Yes, even for my mother. Nobody asks or questions this because money can buy everything, they [immigration] just stamp you through... if you pay a lot of money for the service, you can get through [border controls] without any issues. Money is important here. We were treated like VIP [Very Important Person]... It's very very expensive, but because we paid this big amount, we were able to travel safely. Most Afghans cannot afford this."

Afghan respondent, male, 26 years old, interviewed in Indonesia in 2023

Figure 20. What did the smuggler provide you with to reach Indonesia?



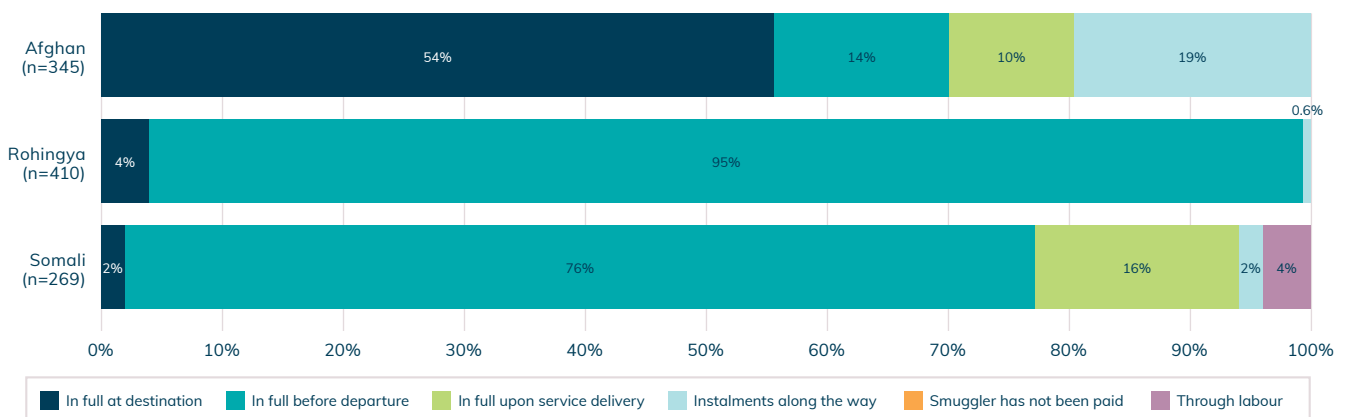
Afghan respondents less likely to pay smugglers in full prior to starting the journey as compared to Rohingya and Somali respondents

Overall, the majority of respondents (63%) reported paying the smuggler prior to the journey. This practice was particularly common among almost all Rohingya (95%) and about three-quarters of Somali respondents (76%) (see Figure 21). However, among Afghan respondents, it was more common to pay the smuggler upon arrival to Indonesia, as reported by over half of the respondents (54%). In comparison to Rohingya respondents, payment upon service delivery or in instalments was a common payment approach reported among Afghan and Somali respondents. This may be due to higher smuggling fees for Afghans which may lead respondents to exercise caution before making full payments to smugglers. Additionally, the long journey that Afghan and Somali respondents must make to reach Indonesia may also contribute to these dynamics, as payment upon arrival is frequently utilised as leverage to ensure safe arrival, as illustrated in the case in Malaysia and the quote below.

“The money was locked in Afghanistan, and only after I arrived [safely] in Indonesia, they [friend in Afghanistan] released the money.”

Afghan respondent, male, 42 years old, interviewed in Indonesia in 2023

Figure 21. How did you pay the smuggler to reach Indonesia?³⁴



34 Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

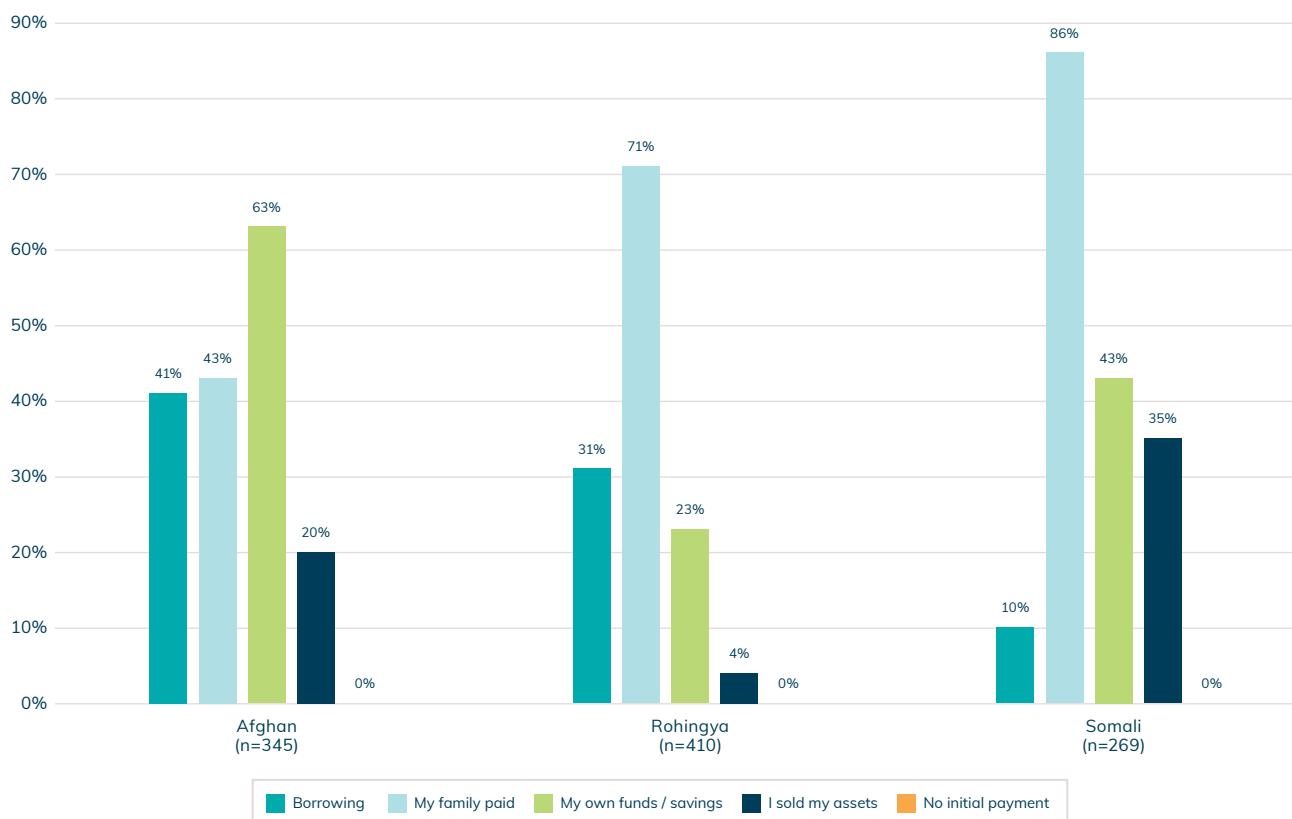
Friends or family often financed journeys, while respondents also used their own savings or borrowed money

In terms of financing, the majority of respondents reported that their family funded their journey to Indonesia (65%). The influence of friends or family was significant in respondents' migration decisions – previous research by MMC has shown friends or family were the biggest influence on the decision to migrate among respondents in Indonesia, suggesting that migration could be a collective decision.³⁵ Other reported sources of funding for the journey included personal savings (42%) and borrowing money (29%). Among different groups, Afghan respondents predominantly used their savings (63%), while Rohingya (71%) and Somali (86%) respondents were more likely to have their family finance the journey (see Figure 22).

“All of my siblings pitched in to cover for the costs of the journey. As my sister and I had worked for many years in well-paying organisations, we had some savings we could use. Plus, my siblings who live in Canada and Australia also contributed. Without them, we wouldn't be here.”

Afghan respondent, male, 26 years old, interviewed in Indonesia in 2023

Figure 22. How did you initially finance your journey to reach Indonesia?



Slightly more than a quarter (26%) of respondents reported insufficient financing for their journey, which was the highest among the three destination countries of focus in this report. This issue was especially significant among Afghan and Somali respondents, with 51% and 27% respectively reporting that their initial funding was insufficient to cover their journey expenses. Among respondents who reported their finances were insufficient (n=266), the most common strategies to address this shortfall included requesting additional funds from family or friends (63%), borrowing money from other migrants (36%) and/or finding employment (17%). Afghan (65%) and Somali (63%) respondents often relied on friends or family, while Rohingya respondents (41%) borrowed money to make up for insufficient finances.

35 MMC (2023) [Use of smugglers on the journey to Indonesia among Rohingya, Afghan and Somali refugees](#)

Summary of all nationalities

Afghan

Afghan respondents constituted 34% of those interviewed in Indonesia and were mostly men (77%) and aged 26-35 (52%). All identified as either refugees (58%) or asylum seekers (42%). They transited through multiple countries, primarily through India and Malaysia to reach Indonesia. The majority of Afghan respondents engaged only one smuggler throughout their journey (84%) to Indonesia, indicating the presence of well-established transnational smuggling networks between Afghanistan and Indonesia. Notably, Afghans reported the highest average smuggling fees (USD 5,748). Payment methods to smugglers varied, with over half paying in full at destination (54%). Financing for the journey primarily involved utilising personal savings (63%) and funding by family (43%).

Somali

Somali respondents comprised 26% of respondents in Indonesia, with slightly higher representation of men (58%), and the majority fell into the 26-35 age group. Among them, 58% identified as asylum seekers, while the rest were refugees. Similar to Afghan respondents, the long distance between Somalia and Indonesia necessitated multiple transits and sections of air travel. Despite this, the most common approach remained engaging only one smuggler for the entire journey (56%). Somali respondents paid USD 1,356 on average for their smuggling fees, which made up 37% of their total journey costs. The majority paid their fees in full (76%) before departure. There was a high reliance on family (86%) for financing their journeys.

Rohingya from Myanmar

In Indonesia, 40% of respondents were Rohingya from Myanmar, with a majority being men (67%) and almost half in the age group of 18-25 years (43%). All of them identified as refugees. While over a quarter of Rohingya respondents arrived in Indonesia directly, the remaining transited Bangladesh, India, UAE, Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand. Almost all engaged a smuggler for the entire journey (99.5%). As compared to the two groups above, they reported the lowest average smuggling fees of USD 1,493. Their journey was predominantly financed by family members (71%) and almost all paid in full prior to departure (95%).

Conclusion

Based on the extensive surveys conducted by MMC from December 2022 to August 2023, this report sheds light on the intricate financial dynamics involved in human smuggling journeys. Insights drawn directly from the experience of refugees and migrants who engaged smugglers in their journeys to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia contribute to a deeper understanding of human smuggling and underscore the imperative for nuanced understanding and strategic intervention on the issue.

The financial dimension of human smuggling is pivotal, with refugees and migrants bearing substantial fees for transportation, documentation, irregular border crossings, bribery, and other forms of services offered by the smugglers. These expenses vary significantly across different groups and countries, influenced by factors such as the length and complexity of the journey, mode of engagement with smugglers, and mode of transport. Payment practices also vary, highlighting the diverse strategies refugees and migrants employ to finance their journey, including reliance on family, personal savings, and borrowing.

The scale of the smuggling market, involving millions of dollars in illicit profit annually, underscores the reliance of refugees and migrants on smugglers, the significant economic impact of the smuggling industry, and the financial incentives motivating smugglers – broadly defined – to engage in human smuggling. Drawing from the findings above and the limited data available on recent arrivals in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand,³⁶ we have attempted to estimate the size of the smuggling market. However, due to the clandestine nature of human smuggling, challenges in monitoring smuggling routes and movements, and subsequent limitations in terms of sampling, this estimate is unavoidably rough and is likely to be conservative.

Given Thailand's significance as a primary destination for migrants from Myanmar, where approximately 252,000 migrants entered in 2023,³⁷ the smuggling market (total smuggling fees) for migrants from Myanmar can be estimated at USD 106.6 million in 2023.³⁸ Similarly, the boat arrivals of 2,288 Rohingya in Indonesia in 2023³⁹ alone translate to a smuggling market size of USD 3.4 million for Rohingya refugees in Indonesia.⁴⁰ This does not include those arriving in Indonesia by land or air. In the case of Malaysia, an estimated 13,886 refugees and asylum seekers have fled to Malaysia from Myanmar between February 2021 and February 2024.⁴¹ According to 4Mi data, 92% of Chin and Rohingya respondents who arrived in Malaysia engaged in smuggling services. Considering this, the smuggling of individuals from Myanmar in the last three years generated revenue amounting to USD 43.5 million or an average of USD 14.5 million annually.⁴²

Moreover, it is essential to highlight that for certain groups of respondents, particularly among Afghan, Bangladeshi, and Rohingya, the reported smuggling fees were significantly higher than what could be incurred through regular travel via flights. This challenges the assumption that irregular migration is inherently less costly than regular pathways and therefore a preferred option for migrants.

This report highlights that smuggling fees, contingent upon factors such as the migration routes, distance, and journey complexity – including the number of countries transited and the mode of transport – mirror the inherent complexity of smuggling. Addressing irregular migration demands a comprehensive approach that goes beyond border security and law enforcement, which often oversimplifies the issue by solely focusing on the criminalisation of smuggling. It is imperative to prioritise initiatives that foster safe and regular migration for refugees and migrants while tackling the underlying structural vulnerabilities that compel individuals to resort to irregular routes.

36 Due to data constraints on the mobility tracking, we cannot estimate the smuggling market size for all respondent groups in this study. The estimates provided here are derived from the estimated annual number of migrants from Myanmar into Thailand; refugee movements from Myanmar into Malaysia since the military takeover in Feb 2021, and Rohingya maritime arrivals in Indonesia in 2023.

37 The annual figure is derived from IOM's estimate of 21,000 longer-term migrants entering Thailand from Myanmar each month in 2023. See IOM (2023) [Flow Monitoring Myanmar Migrants: November-December 2023](#)

38 Based on 4Mi data, the average smuggling fees for respondents from Myanmar in Thailand (excluding Rohingya) was USD 529, with estimated 80% or 201,600 individuals engaging smugglers.

39 All individuals undertaking the maritime route are presumed to have engaged smugglers for their journey. UNHCR Indonesia (2024) [Emergency update: Rohingya boat arrivals as of 22 Jan 2024](#)

40 Based on 4Mi data, the average smuggling fees reported by Rohingya respondents in Indonesia was USD 1,493.

41 UNHCR (2024) [Myanmar Situation as of 29 February 2024](#)

42 Based on 4Mi data, the average smuggling fees reported by Rohingya and Chin respondents in Malaysia was USD 3,406, with estimated 92% or 12,775 individuals engaging smugglers.



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).

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