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Protection risks for Rohingya women and children: from departure country to arrival in Malaysia

Despite high risks en route and upon arrival, Rohingya movement to Malaysia continues. This snapshot focuses on the specific risks facing Rohingya women and children¹ before leaving Myanmar or Bangladesh, during their journey, and upon arrival in Malaysia. MMC Asia has been conducting survey with Rohingya in Malaysia since January 2019 in order to better understand their migration experiences. This snapshot contributes to building a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses that improve protection for Rohingya refugees and inform advocacy efforts related to movements to Malaysia.

Key findings

- A majority of Rohingya women surveyed left Myanmar or Bangladesh due to **violence, insecurity, and conflict** (83%) and a **lack of rights and freedom** (80%).
- **Detention and physical violence** were the two primary risks reported for women en route. Younger Rohingya women more often reported risks of **sexual violence, death, and kidnapping**.
- Almost all Rohingya women surveyed **were not making any money** before departure and upon arrival in Malaysia. Meanwhile, 57% report having **accumulated new debts** in Malaysia, mostly relating to living expenses (53%), medical costs (42%), immigration-related fees (7%) and school fees (7%).
- Rohingya women face greater marginalization in Malaysia, as many fear leaving their houses or moving around freely due to risks of arrest and detention (27%).
- **Police (86%) and immigration officials (64%) are cited as the main perpetrators** of abuses in Malaysia and were considered among the top three likely perpetrators of abuse en route, underscoring that female Rohingya refugees face threats from state authorities at departure, in transit and upon arrival in Malaysia.

Profiles

Data presented in this snapshot was collected between 4 March 2021 and 25 January 2022 in Johor Bahru, Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, Pahang, Pulau Pinang and Selangor in Malaysia. 445 surveys with Rohingya women were conducted over the phone and 38 surveys were conducted in person. In addition, from 8 August 2021, MMC Asia added a question on disability and implemented an additional module looking at protection risks facing Rohingya refugees living in Malaysia, making up a subsample of 331 surveys with Rohingya women.

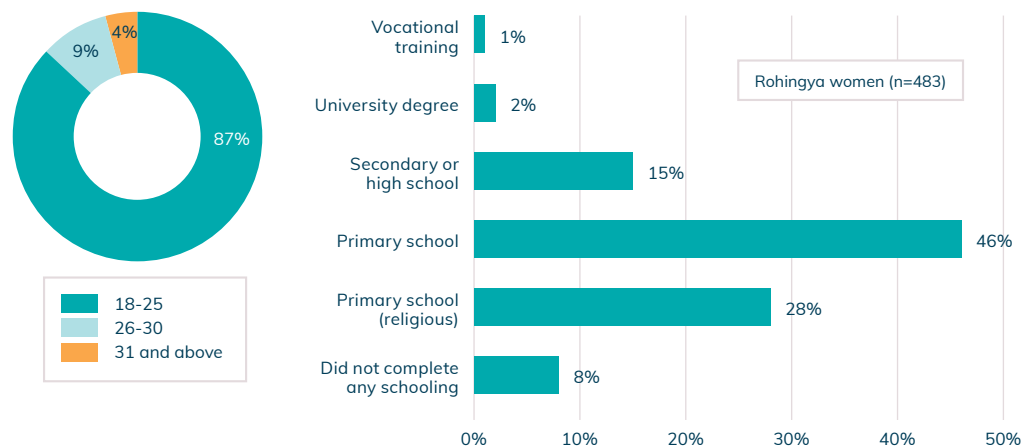
The average age of Rohingya women surveyed is 22 years old. 16% self-identify as having a disability, the majority of which relate to difficulties hearing, seeing, and/or moving. Nearly half of the respondents (48%) are seeking asylum in Malaysia, 23% are registered as refugees with UNHCR, 29% have not yet sought asylum nor hold any legal documents in Malaysia.

Due to restricted access to education in Myanmar and Bangladesh, where more than 920,000 Rohingya refugees are currently living,² the majority of women surveyed (74%) report that primary school was the highest level of education they had completed, see Figure 1. 15% report having completed secondary or high school, and 2% had attained a university degree.

1 MMC Asia does not survey children under 18 years old. However, there are questions in the survey that address children and child protection issues.

2 See <https://www.orfonline.org/research/children-left-behind-challenges-in-providing-education-to-the-rohingya-children-in-bangladesh/>

Figure 1. Age range and educational attainment

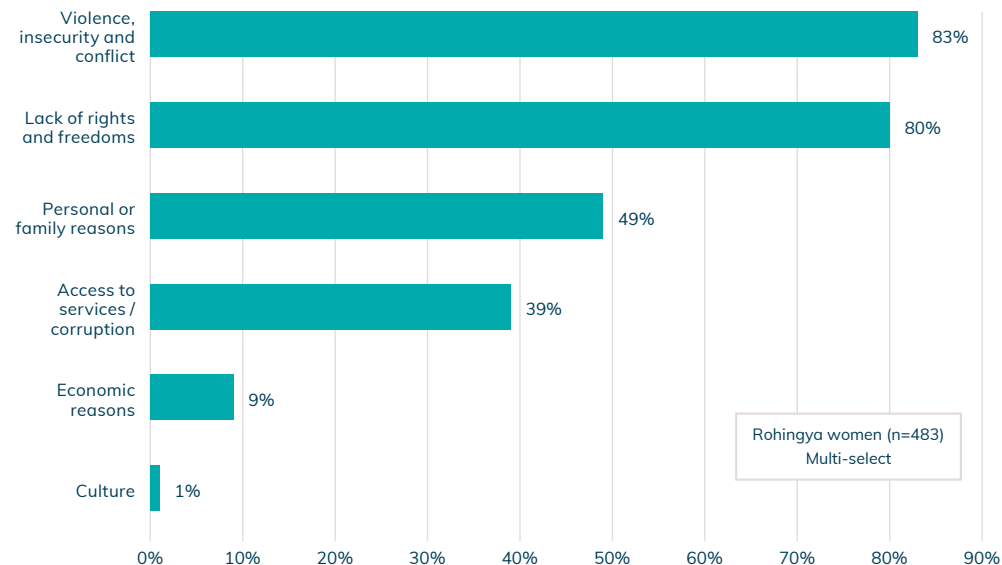


39% of the Rohingya women have children. 43% report living or traveling with children in their care at the time of the survey, much higher than Rohingya men, 14% of whom report traveling or living with children. This implies a greater role for Rohingya women in childcare and children's education.

Protection risks prior to departure

93% of respondents started their journey from Myanmar and 7% from Bangladesh. A majority of Rohingya women report having left their country of departure due to violence, insecurity, and conflict (83%) and a lack of rights and freedom (80%) (see Figure 2). Types of violence and insecurity reported (n=399) include political unrest/riots (95%), crime and general insecurity (95%), war/armed conflict/terrorism (87%), and sexual and gender-based violence (64%). Similarly, a majority of those reporting a lack of rights and freedom (n=388) cite multiple protection-related issues: repressive government (96%), religious discrimination (96%), and sexual discrimination (65%).

Figure 2. For what reasons did you leave your country?



While the Myanmar political system has structurally marginalized Rohingya people, social and cultural norms also shape the experiences of Rohingya women. In the survey, 98% of Rohingya women report not making any money in the 12 months prior to their departure, comparing to 81% of men, emphasizing the home-bound traditional role of Rohingya women and the general difficulty for Rohingya people to earn livelihoods in Myanmar and Bangladesh.

Rohingya women surveyed also report that they had limited alternatives to relocating to another country. 85% of the Rohingya women said that they see no alternative to traveling to Malaysia by irregular means. Among those who did see other options (n=74, more frequently among Rohingya women aged 25 years and above), most had tried to flee to another place of safety within Myanmar or Bangladesh (64%).

Protection risks en route to Malaysia

99% of the Rohingya women report having transited in at least one country before arriving in Malaysia. The most common was Thailand (84%), followed by Bangladesh (40%) and Indonesia (13%), which is in line with available reporting on common Rohingya travel routes to Malaysia.⁵ Walking was cited as the most common means of transportation (90%), followed by boat (66%), car (66%), truck (26%), and bus (23%), among others (motorbike, plane, and train).

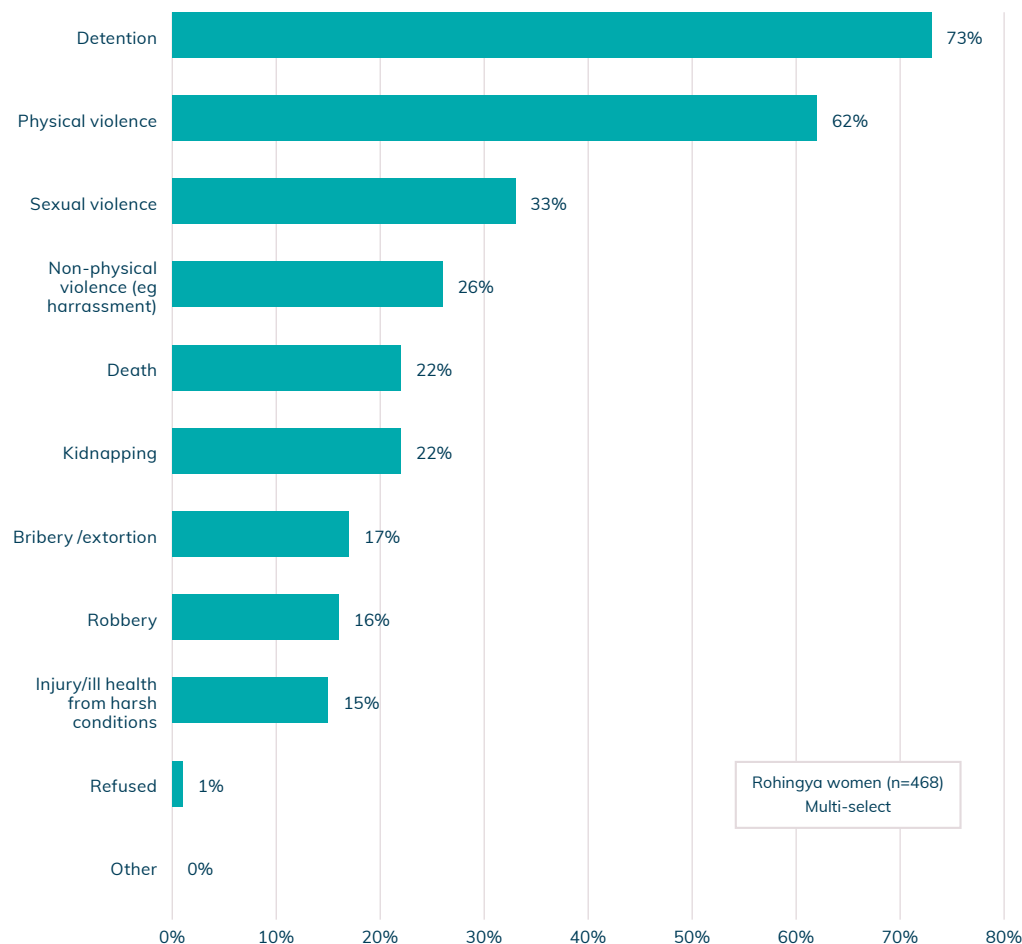
“While I was traveling from Yangon to Thailand, I had to walk for days without food and water. The smuggler I hired got arrested, so I had to find another smuggler to continue the journey. It took me six months to reach Malaysia.”

21-year-old Rohingya woman, surveyed in Perak, Malaysia

The journey to Malaysia was perilous for nearly all Rohingya women surveyed. 97% report at least one dangerous location along the journey and 47% consider more than one. 88% of Rohingya women who transited in Thailand (n=405) report at least one dangerous location in Thailand and 28% who transited in Bangladesh (n=195) report at least one dangerous location in the country. Detention (73%) and physical violence (62%) were the two primary threats en route, see Figure 3. In addition, a third of Rohingya women surveyed report risks of sexual violence.

Different age groups report levels of risk differently. For instance, a greater share of young Rohingya women cite risks of detention (75% among women aged 18-25 and – 27/44 among women aged 26-30), physical violence (62% among women aged 18-25, 27/44 among women aged 26-30), and sexual violence (34% among women aged 18-25 and 15/44 among women aged 26-30) than women of older age group (respectively 9, 8, and 2 out of 17 women aged 31 and above). Meanwhile, a larger share of women aged 31 and above cite risks of non-physical violence (10/17).

Figure 3. Protection risks en route



76% of Rohingya women who report dangerous locations en route (n=468) say they personally experienced protection violations. The most common violations reported were physical violence (48%) followed by non-physical violence (18%) and detention (18%), see Figure 4. Younger women more often experienced physical violence (49% among women aged 18-25, n=407). This share was slightly lower among women aged 26-30, (19/44) and much lower among those aged 31 and over (4/17). Non-physical violence, such as harassment, is more commonly reported by women participants aged 26-30 and 31 and above (15/44 and 6/17).

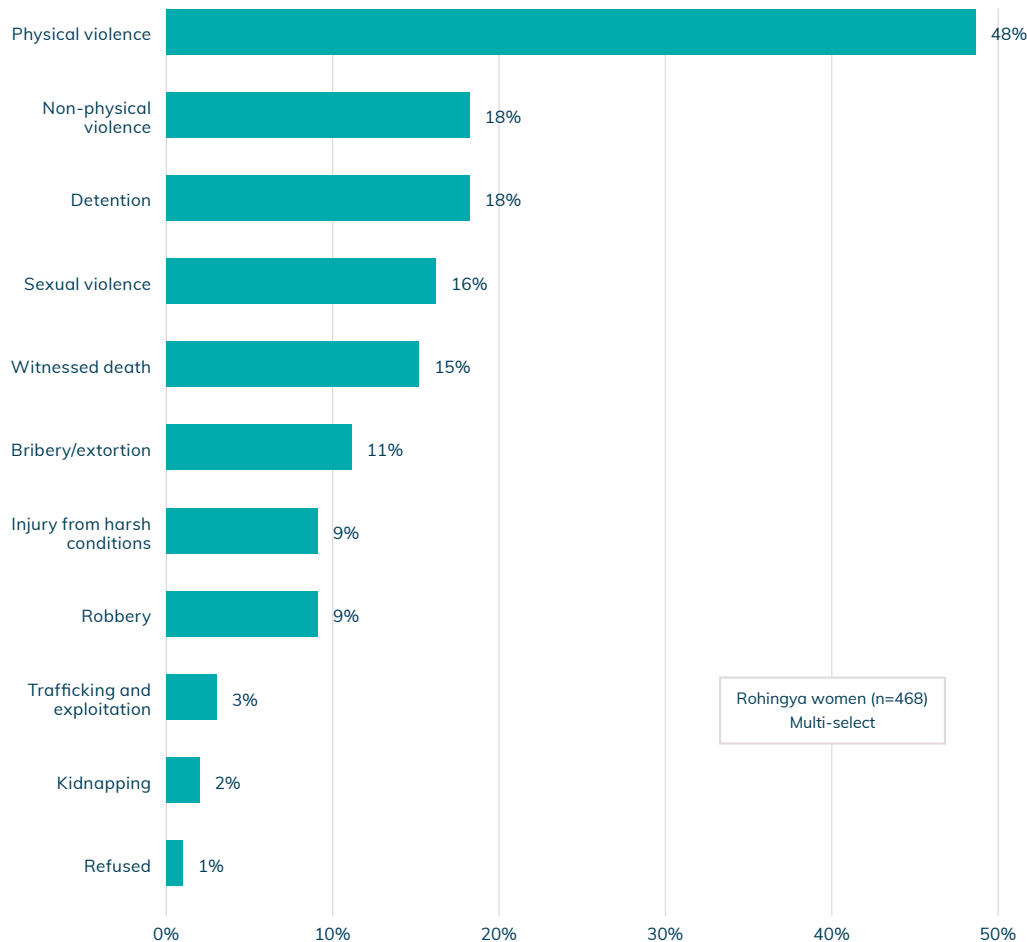
"On the way to Malaysia other migrants tried to harass me. I even got threatened when I rejected them."

24-year-old Rohingya woman, surveyed in Johor Bahru, Malaysia

"The journey was not as I expected and not as the smuggler told us. We were at risk of losing our lives many times. I witnessed people dying of starvation all along the way".

30-year-old Rohingya woman, surveyed in Penang, Malaysia

Figure 4. Have you personally experienced any such incidents?



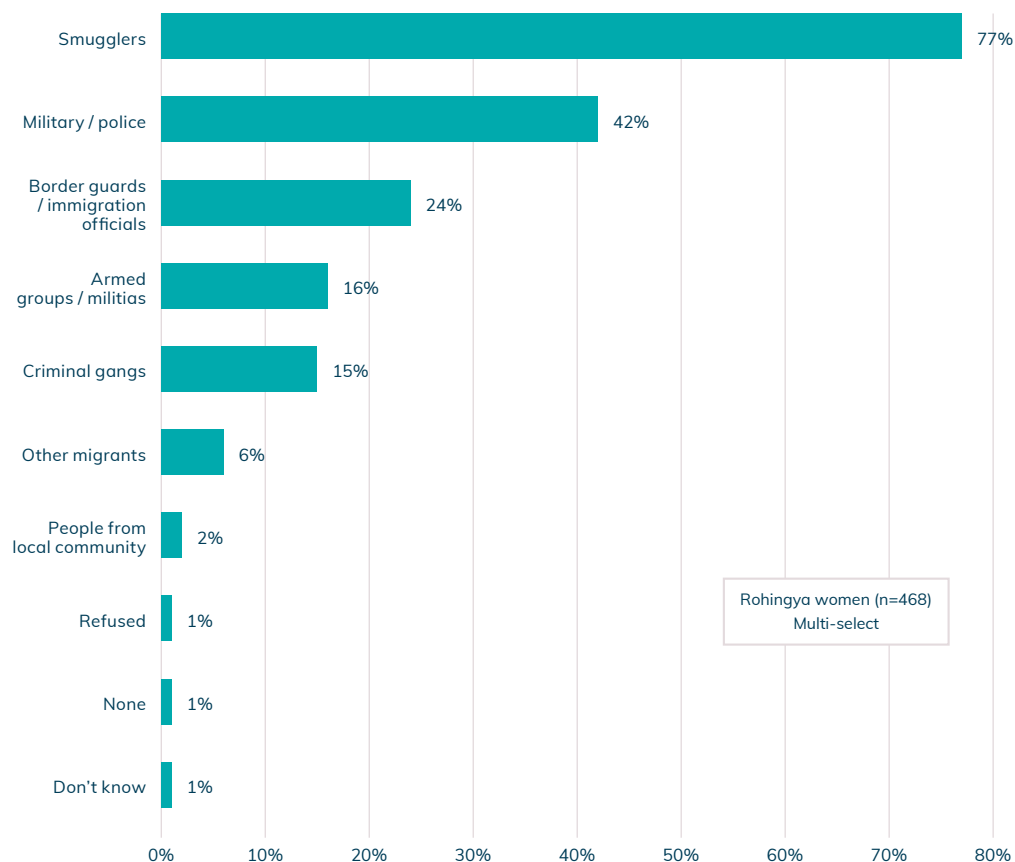
94% of women respondents traveling with children (n=208) reported that children face dangers during the journey. 40% of women consider the risk of a child experiencing abuse or a violation to be high. The most commonly reported risks include detention (36%), physical violence (34%), death (29%) and trafficking (23%).

"I would now tell other women not to bring your children with you for boat journeys. It was very dangerous for kids. I myself almost lost my baby boy. Thank God we made it safe to Malaysia."

20-year-old Rohingya woman, surveyed in Penang, Malaysia

77% of Rohingya women surveyed who report protection risks en route considered smugglers as the main perpetrator, followed by military/police (47%) and border guards/immigration officers (24%), see Figure 5. This reporting of smugglers as the main perpetrator of risk is within the context where Rohingya women have to rely on smugglers to reach Malaysia due to their lack of legal documentation in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Furthermore, 46% agreed that they were intentionally misled about the journey by smugglers.

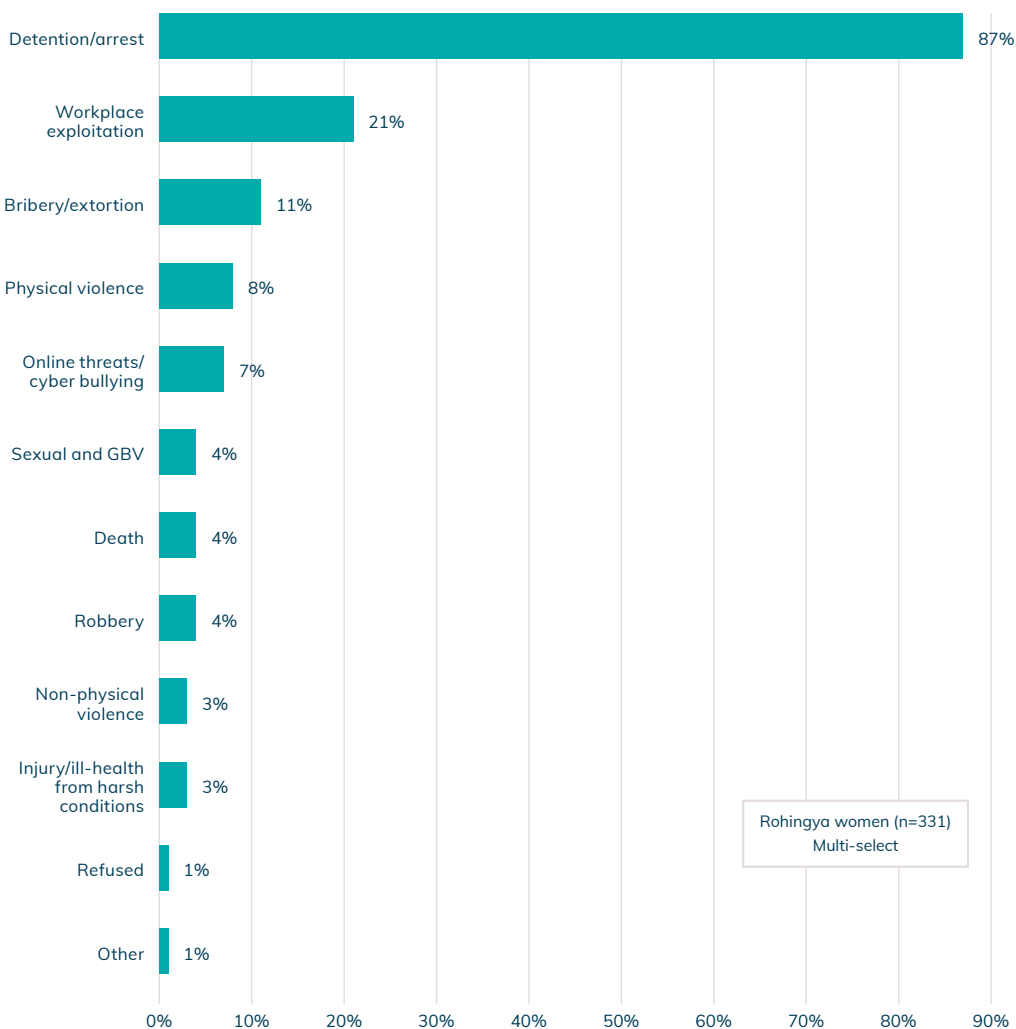
Figure 5. Who were the perpetrators of protection violations en route?



Protection risks in Malaysia

Nearly 27% of the Rohingya women report risks in Malaysia, primarily related to arrest and detention (87%, n=91). Police (86%) and immigration officials (64%) are cited as the main perpetrators of those risks. This finding underscores a continuation of threat from state authorities against female Rohingya refugees, from departure country, en route to, and upon arriving in, Malaysia.

Figure 6. What do you perceive as the main risks in this country?



Mental health concerns (feelings of anxiety and depression, 93%) and a fear of leaving the house and moving around freely (77%) are two primary effects of risk exposure in Malaysia. As mentioned previously, Rohingya women are already marginalized by political, social, and cultural norms. The additional risks in Malaysia further restrict their opportunities to create independent livelihoods.

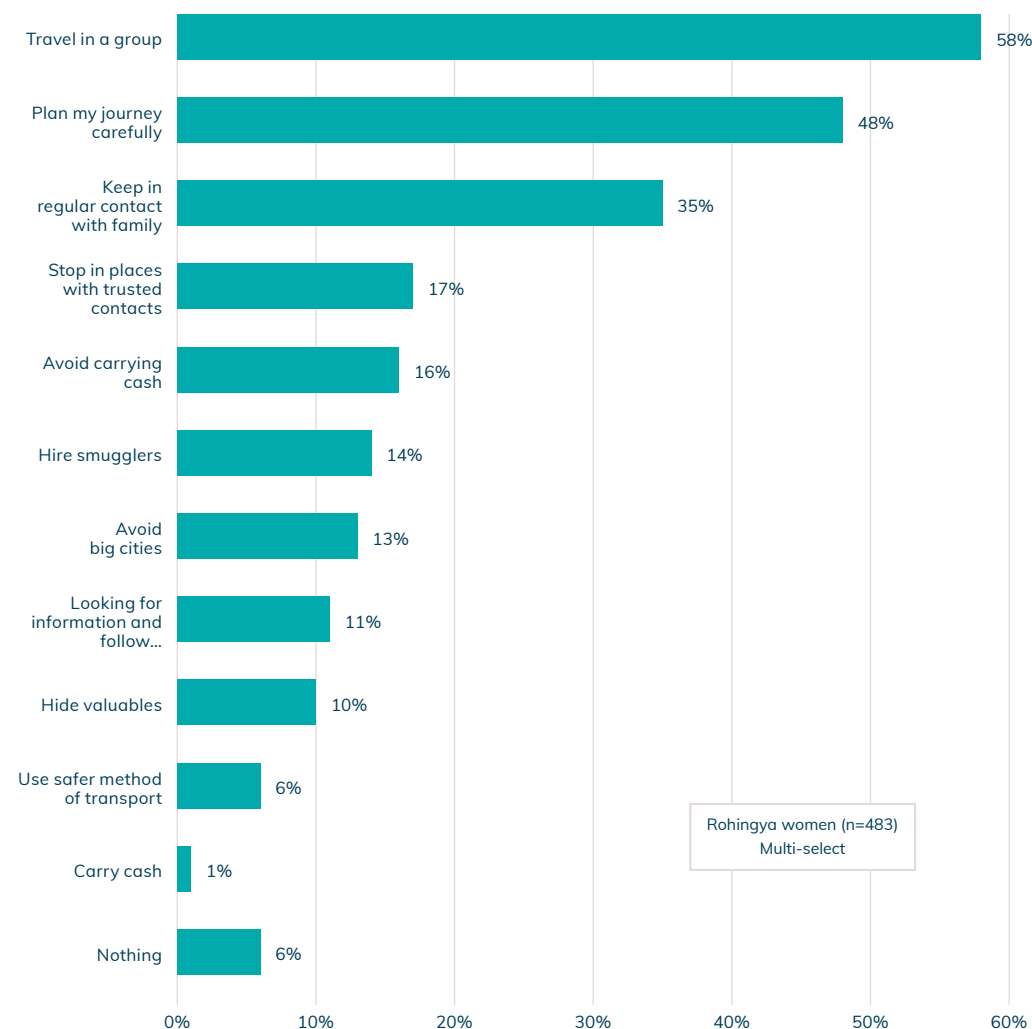
While 70% of the respondents report having no debt related to their journey when arriving in Malaysia, 57% say there have accumulated new debts in Malaysia, mostly relating to living expenses (53%), medical costs (42%), immigration-related fees (7%) and school fees (7%), and in a context where almost all are not making any money. Among the very few women who report any income (15 respondents), most worked in the domestic sector.

Protection responses to women and children

The majority of Rohingya women surveyed (81%) did not receive assistance during their journey to Malaysia. Among those who received assistance (n=89) - mostly food and water - half were assisted by smugglers, while 22% were assisted by fellow refugees and migrants. Assistance from the UN, NGOs, the local population, and the government was reportedly minimal.

The survey also asked women about self-protection measures during their journeys to Malaysia. The most common included traveling in a group (58%), planning the journey carefully (48%), and keeping regular contact with family (35%).

Figure 7. What did you do to protect yourself?



81% of the surveyed Rohingya women say they are currently in need of assistance in Malaysia. Legal aid is the most significant need among those who said they needed assistance (n=392; 76%), followed by medical assistance (63%), cash (57%), and other basic needs.

Protecting Rohingya refugees in Asia - towards a coordinated regional approach

Protecting Rohingya Refugees in Asia (PRRIa) is a two-year ECHO-funded initiative launched in 2021 to address protection risks and needs of Rohingya refugees in Southeast Asia. The joint project of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP), the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) and Geutanyoe Foundation combines evidence-based research, programmatic and advocacy expertise to inform integrated regional protection responses in support of Rohingya refugees as the world's largest stateless population. PRRIa targets 54 local, 20 international, and 27 regional organisations with a particular focus on Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.

PRRIa Partners:



PROJECT DONOR:



4Mi data collection

[4Mi](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi