

### Summary

This Snapshot uses the findings from a 4Mi survey of 202 Rohingya refugees and migrants in Malaysia to explore a range of migration dynamics related to journeys from Myanmar. The findings suggest most Rohingya flee Myanmar for two main reasons: lack of rights, and violence and/or insecurity. All respondents travelled by land and sea with the help of smugglers. The survey revealed various protection risks en route, with most reported incidents taking place in Thailand, through which most Rohingya transit to reach Malaysia.

### Background

Longstanding persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar peaked in an unprecedented surge of violence in 2017, with villages destroyed and at least 700,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> The severity of the humanitarian crisis and the scale of human rights violations were described by the UN's top human rights official as a text book case of ethnic cleansing.<sup>2</sup>

Currently, more than 900,000 Rohingya are living in Bangladesh, mostly in unofficial refugee camps.<sup>3</sup> Lack of freedom of movement and access to livelihoods continues to be a challenge for Rohingya who are living in the Rakhine state of Myanmar. Faced with these conditions, many Rohingya from within Myanmar and those already in Bangladesh desire to move seeking asylum and/or more stable living and working conditions in other countries. India, Thailand, and Malaysia are both key destination and transit countries for Rohingya.

### Rohingya refugees in Malaysia

As of the end April 2019, there were 170,460 refugees and asylum seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, of whom more than 90,200 were Rohingya.<sup>4</sup> Within Malaysia, the Rohingya are mostly concentrated around Kuala Lumpur, Klang Valley, and Pulau Pinang.<sup>5</sup> The country has ratified neither the 1951 Refugee Convention nor the 1967 New York Protocol.

Under the Malaysian Immigration Act 1959/63, refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia are designated as “illegal migrants” and may be subject to arrest, detention, and deportation.<sup>6</sup> The Rohingya in Malaysia, like other refugees and migrants, have no right to employment or access to free healthcare or education.<sup>7</sup> The Malaysian government has considered some initiatives, such as issuing temporary work permits for Rohingya refugees and migrants, but the adoption and implementation of these schemes have not been successful.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Rohingya refugees and migrants are vulnerable to various work-related abuses and exploitation, which in most cases are not reported.<sup>9</sup> While those with UNHCR registration cards have some access to healthcare – they are able to receive treatment at government health facilities – the financial costs are very high.<sup>10</sup>

Rohingya children usually go to non-governmental schools or learning centres run by their communities with the help of UNHCR and local NGOs. Little data is available about the rate of school enrolment among these children, but some reports have stressed that the already low level of attendance drops

1 OCHA (2019) [Rohingya Refugee Crisis](#)

2 OHCHR (2017) [Darker and More Dangerous: High Commissioner updates the Human Rights Council on human rights issues in 40 countries](#)

3 UNHCR (2019) [Refugee Response in Bangladesh](#)

4 UNHCR (2019) [Figures at a Glance in Malaysia](#)

5 Wake, C. & Cheung T. (2016) [Livelihood Strategies of Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia – ‘We Want to Live in Dignity’](#) Humanitarian Policy Group (p6)

6 Health Equity Initiatives (undated) [Life as a Refugee - Uprooted, replanted and sprouting new leaves](#)

7 Letchamanan, H. (2013) [Myanmar's Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia: Education and the Way Forward](#) Journal of International and Comparative Education (p86)

8 Wake, C. & Cheung, T op. cit. (p7)

9 Smith, A. (2012) [In Search of Survival and Sanctuary in the City: Refugees from Myanmar/Burma in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia](#) International Rescue Committee

10 Wake, C. & Cheung, T op. cit. (p7)

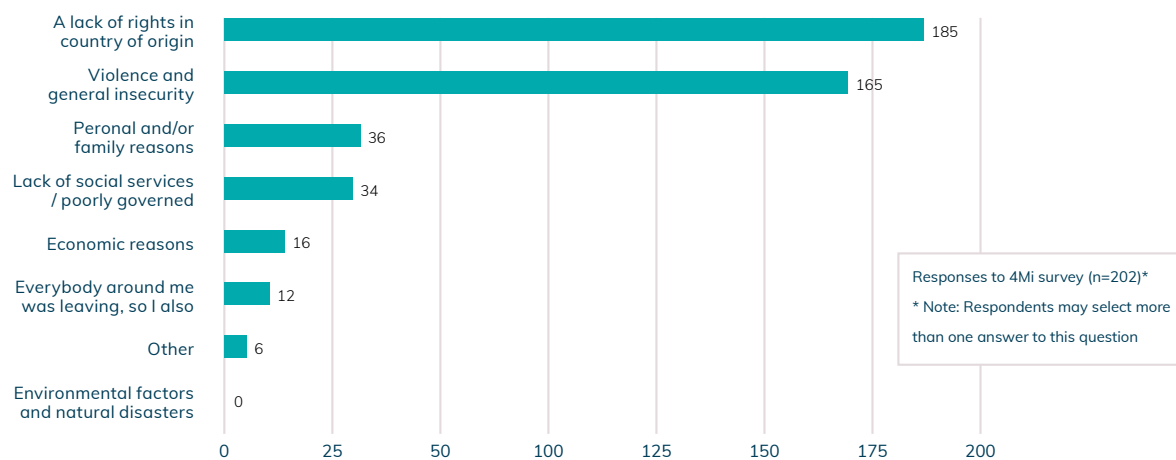
even further among the older children.<sup>11</sup> Boys are asked to work and contribute to the livelihood of the family, while girls are expected to marry as soon as they come of age.<sup>12</sup>

## Rohingya 4Mi respondents

The majority of Rohingya surveyed for this report were men, both single and married, and originated from rural areas in Myanmar (65%). Access to education was limited: most respondents reported having a primary level of education (38%) or no education (25%). Respondents reported working as farmers (40%) or being unemployed (30%) before initiating their migration journeys. The respondents are mainly asylum seekers with pending applications (90%).

**Figure 1. Migration motivations for Rohingya in Malaysia**

Why did you leave your home country?



## Malaysia as a destination: why and how

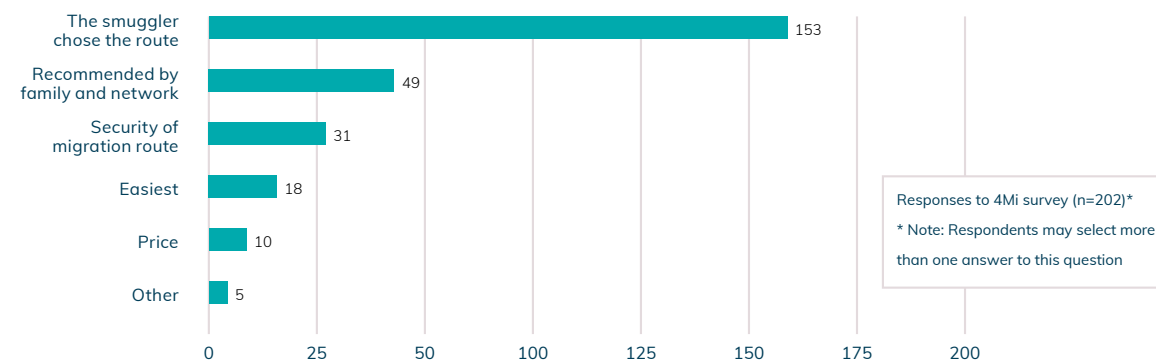
As illustrated in Figure 1, the primary motivations survey respondents cited for leaving Myanmar were linked to lack of rights (185 respondents), and violence and general insecurity (165). Only 16 Rohingya respondents mentioned economic factors as their primary reason for migration. Almost half of the respondents (45%) reported Malaysia to be their final destination, while the rest were undecided about whether they would continue to another location, noting their plans depended on responses to their asylum applications. The majority of respondents indicated they chose Malaysia as a destination country because they see it as place with the opportunity to access personal freedom (178).

In order to reach Malaysia, two-thirds of the Rohingya respondents first travelled to Thailand, and with the help of smugglers then crossed the border to Malaysia. The other third first travelled to Bangladesh or India, continuing to Malaysia using two main routes: some took a sea route directly from Bangladesh or India to Malaysia, while others made their way back to Yangon, Myanmar's largest city and former capital, and

from there continued their journey to Malaysia through land or by sea. Respondents indicated Thailand and Singapore were used for short stops on the journey. Thailand was reported as a main location to seek out and hire smugglers to organize the next stretch of the journey. As illustrated in Figure 2, it was smugglers who chose the routes taken by most (153) respondents.

**Figure 2. Route choice motivations for Rohingya in Malaysia**

Why did you choose the route you have travelled so far?



11 Ibid (p6)

12 Xing Hui, K. (2018) [Rohingya refugees find uneasy solace in Malaysia](#) CNN

## Protection risks en route

As shown in Figure 3, leaving Myanmar does not guarantee an end to experiencing violence for the Rohingya; they have also faced severe protection violations on their migration journey, mostly in Thailand and Bangladesh.

**Figure 3. Protection risks en route**  
Incidents witnessed or experienced by Rohingya between Myanmar and Malaysia

	Thailand	Bangladesh	Myanmar	India	Indonesia	Malaysia
<b>Death</b>	16	5	6	1	0	0
<b>Sexual assault</b>	14	3	8	0	2	0
<b>Physical assault</b>	39	4	0	1	3	2
<b>Kidnapping</b>	1	1	2	0	0	1
<b>Robbery</b>	7	3	5	0	0	1
<b>Bribery</b>	2	12	8	1	0	0
<b>Detention</b>	3	7	2	2	0	2

The 4Mi survey recorded a total of 28 incidents of death reportedly witnessed by 19 respondents. The victims were children (10), men (9), women (3) and six adults where gender was not specified. Causes of death included starvation (6), sickness/lack of access to essential medical care (5), excessive physical abuse (4), harsh weather (3), sexual abuse (2), and shot or stabbed (2). Most cases were reported in Thailand.

Sexual assault is a common protection risk, with 27 cases reported by respondents. These cases consisted of 16 incidents of assault or touching, seven cases of rape and four cases in which the nature of violation was unspecified. Again, Thailand was identified as the location with the majority of assault or touching cases (14). The perpetrators were identified as smugglers (19) as well as members of security forces/police/military (8).

Physical assaults were the predominant protection violation occurring en route, according to the respondents: 49 cases were reported by 46 interviewees. Of these, 39 took place in Thailand. The nature of the assault was reported as both mild and excessive bodily harm. The perpetrators were identified as smugglers (20), members of security forces/police/military (12) and single unknown individuals (9).

Other types of vulnerabilities were identified, such as detention and robbery: 16 incidents of detention and 16 incidents of robbery were recorded, in Thailand and Bangladesh. In the cases of robbery, money and personal belongings were taken by smugglers (10), groups of gangs/criminals (3), immigration officials/border guards (2), and other uncategorised persons (1). Cases of detention were carried out by police (12) and immigration officials/border guards (5).

### 4Mi Asia

The Mixed Migration Monitoring Initiative (4Mi) in Asia region gathers data on regional mixed migration flows. Data is currently collected in Afghanistan as well as with Afghans on the move toward the East and West. 4Mi has expanded to include data collection of the onward movements of Rohingya and other migrant and refugee groups in South East Asia. The purpose is to increase knowledge about drivers of movement and protection risks faced by migrants and refugees on the move. For more information, go to <http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi/>