

# Journeys to Indonesia for Rohingya refugees: Routes, risks, assistance and needs

This snapshot traces the journeys of Rohingya refugees traveling to Indonesia. It also presents the needs and risks reported by Rohingya while in Indonesia, as well as their intentions for onward movements. Following two previous snapshots highlighting journeys and risks in transit for Rohingya traveling to Malaysia,<sup>1</sup> this snapshot contributes to building a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses that improve protection for Rohingya refugees and shape advocacy efforts related to movements and protection of Rohingya refugees in Asia.

## Key findings

- **62% of respondents started their journey in Myanmar; 34% set off from Bangladesh; 4% traveled from Malaysia.** For those leaving Myanmar, Bangladesh was a frequent transit country.
- **69% of respondents reported at least one dangerous location along the journey. Most of them reported the risk of physical violence** (67 out of 75 respondents).
- Most respondents who reported protection risks considered **border guards/immigration officials** as the main perpetrator (52 out of 75 respondents), followed by military/police (39 respondents) and criminal gangs (33 respondents).
- **89% of respondents perceived that there are fewer resettlement options since COVID-19.** Nearly half reported being stuck in Indonesia because of the pandemic.
- **96% of respondents were in need of assistance in Indonesia at the time of the survey.** Of those, most said they needed assistance with resettlement, access to work, and cash.

## Profiles

Data presented in this snapshot was collected between 10 December 2021 and 24 May 2022 with Rohingya refugees who had arrived in Indonesia within the past 24 months. Participants were located in Medan, Pekanbaru, Makassar, and Aceh. 109 surveys with Rohingya men (75%) and women (25%) were conducted over the phone (57%) and in person (43%). The share of female respondents in the survey was much lower than male respondents. Despite the small sample size and non-probability sampling method of the 4Mi survey, this potentially suggests a recent change in demographic characteristics of Rohingya refugees engaging in maritime movements compared to 2020-2021, when more than two-thirds of those traveling by boat were women and children.<sup>2</sup>

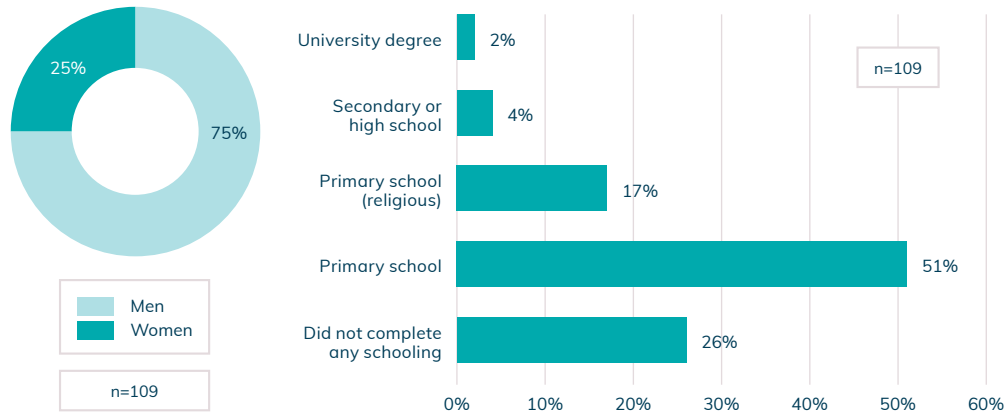
The average age of respondents was 26 years old. 25% arrived in Indonesia less than a year ago. 100% reported holding either refugee status or identified as asylum seekers. 3% self-identified as having a disability. 39% have children and 31% reported living or traveling with children in their care at the time of the survey.

Rohingya's access to education is restricted in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and the majority of survey respondents reported that primary school was the highest level of education they had completed, see Figure 1. 4% reported having completed secondary or high school, and 2% had attained a university degree.

<sup>1</sup> See [MMC-Asia Resources – 4Mi Snapshots](#)

<sup>2</sup> See UNHR (2021). [Left Adrift at Sea: Dangerous Journeys of Refugees across the Bay of Bengal](#).

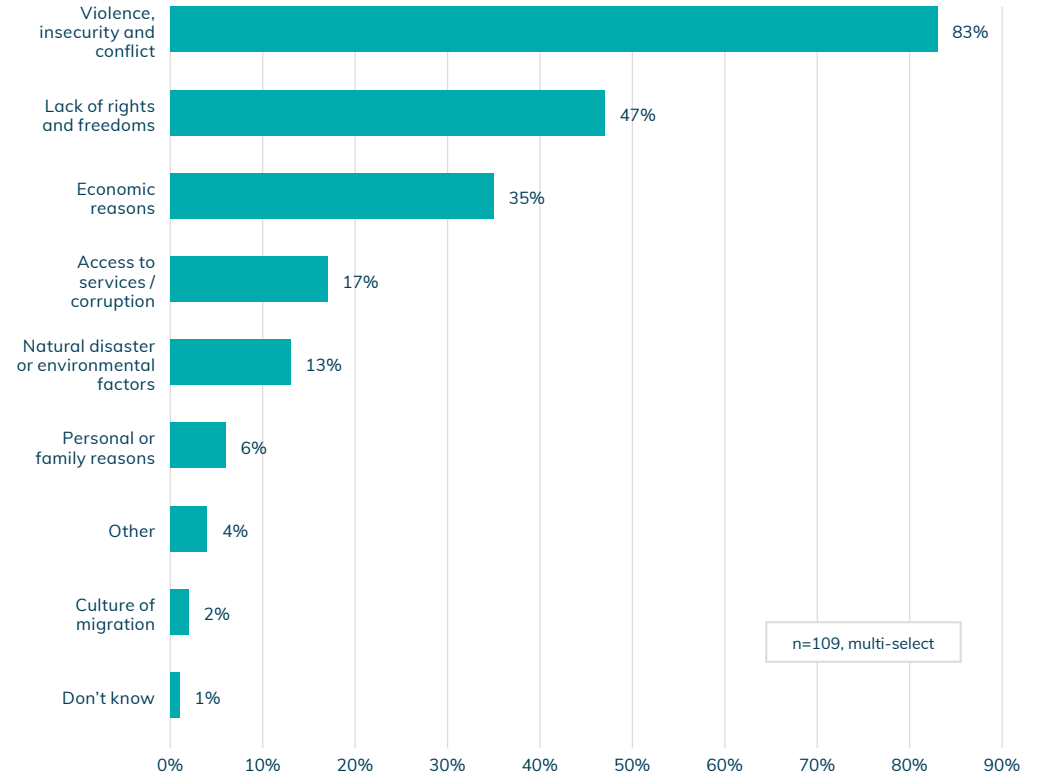
**Figure 1. Gender and educational attainment**



The majority of respondents left their country of departure due to violence, insecurity, and conflict (83%) and a lack of rights and freedoms (47%), see Figure 2. 35% mentioned economic reasons as a driver. This proportion was higher than among Rohingya 4Mi respondents in Malaysia,<sup>3</sup> and is likely due to the sample in Indonesia comprising far more men than the sample in Malaysia, as men are more likely to have responsibility for household income.

*"I had to make a decision to leave in pursuit of safety and security. It was a life-or-death decision."*  
**23-year-old Rohingya man, surveyed in Medan, Indonesia**

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



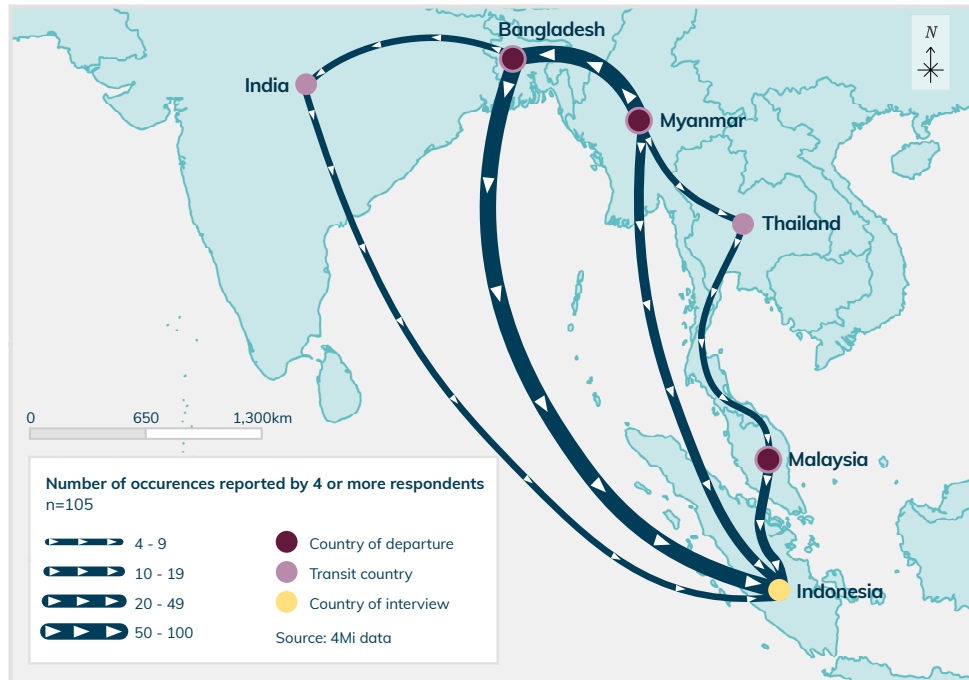
## Journeys to Indonesia

While the majority of Rohingya respondents surveyed started their journey from Myanmar (62%), 34% traveled from Bangladesh, and 4% traveled from Malaysia. While onward movements from Indonesia to Malaysia have prevailed among Rohingya refugees over the past few years, the small share of people in this survey who traveled to Indonesia from Malaysia suggested that there are now movements in the opposite direction. 96% of journeys were facilitated by one or more smugglers.

Unlike the route to Malaysia, where 99% of the Rohingya respondents reported having transited in at least one country before arriving, 43% of respondents in Indonesia traveled directly to Indonesia. This is particularly true of respondents traveling from Bangladesh and Malaysia, see Map 1.

<sup>3</sup> See MMC Snapshot (2021) [Profiles and drivers of Rohingya moving to Malaysia](#).

## Map 1. Respondents' routes to Indonesia



The large share of respondents who reported traveling directly to Indonesia is likely linked to the higher risks and complexities of multiple transits during the COVID-19 pandemic, including harsh responses from police and border guards in transit countries like Thailand. 50/68 respondents who started their journey in Myanmar transited Bangladesh, and 6 transited Thailand. 12 traveled directly to Indonesia.

99% of survey respondents used a boat, and 55% only traveled by boat. Other common means of transportation included walking (46%), bus (46%), motorbike (45%), and car/pick-up (40%).

## Risks en route to Indonesia

69% of respondents reported at least one dangerous location along the journey. Physical violence was the most commonly reported risk, mentioned by 67 out of 75 people reporting at least one dangerous location. Other risks included injury/ill-health from harsh conditions (48 respondents), and bribery/extortion (46 respondents), see Figure 3.

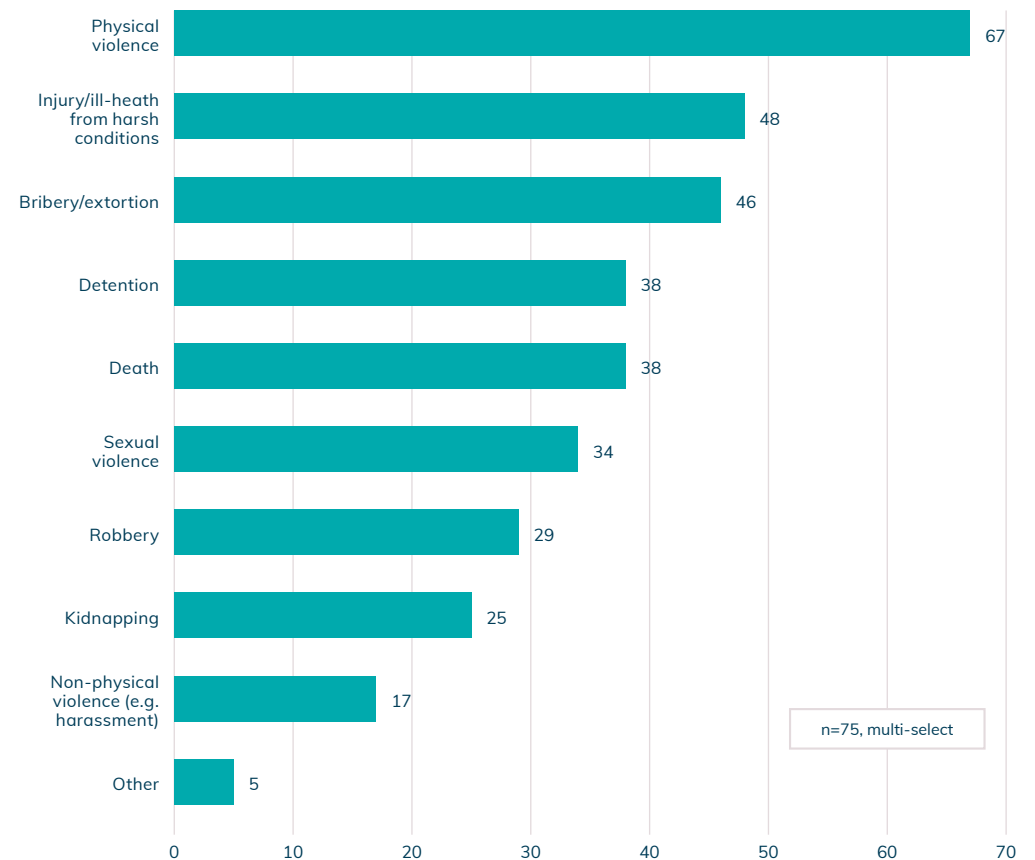
*"I didn't have any food to eat or any water to drink on the boat. I had to drink salty water from the ocean to survive."*

**27-year-old Rohingya woman, surveyed in Medan, Indonesia**

*"I witness death and torture during my journey. I would not suggest anyone reach Indonesia by boat."*

**20-year-old Rohingya man, surveyed in Medan, Indonesia**

**Figure 3. Protection risks en route**



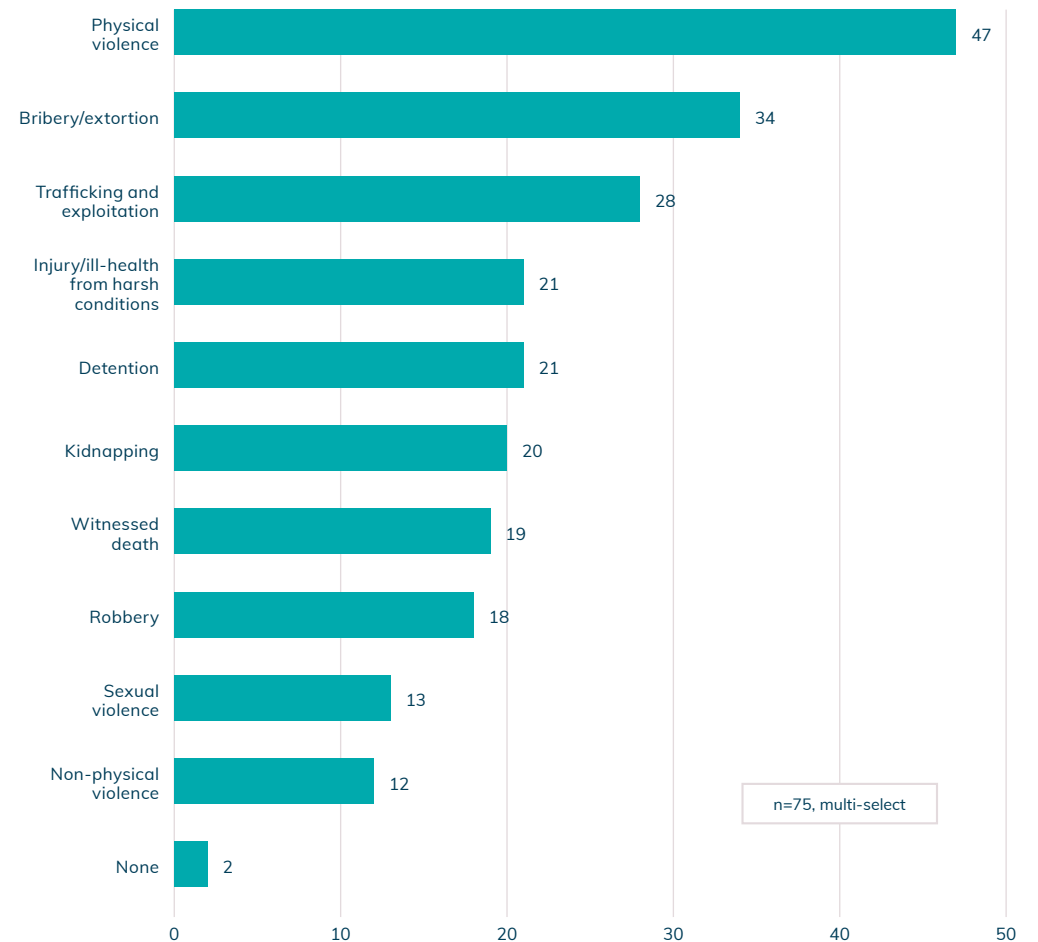
Respondents traveling with children (n=38) reported that children were also exposed to risks during the journey. The two main risks for children identified by Rohingya respondents were physical violence (21 respondents) and trafficking and exploitation (17 respondents).

*“It was extremely difficult and challenging for women and children on the boat. Please don’t make the same journey as we did.”*

**30-year-old Rohingya woman, surveyed in Medan, Indonesia**

73/75 respondents who reported dangerous locations en route (n=75) said they personally experienced protection violations. The kinds of incidents experienced were in line with the risks reported, including physical violence (47 respondents), bribery and extortion (34 respondents), and injury/ill-health from harsh conditions (21 respondents). In addition, 28 people cited trafficking and exploitation, including half of all women who reported experiencing protection incidents en route (n=19).

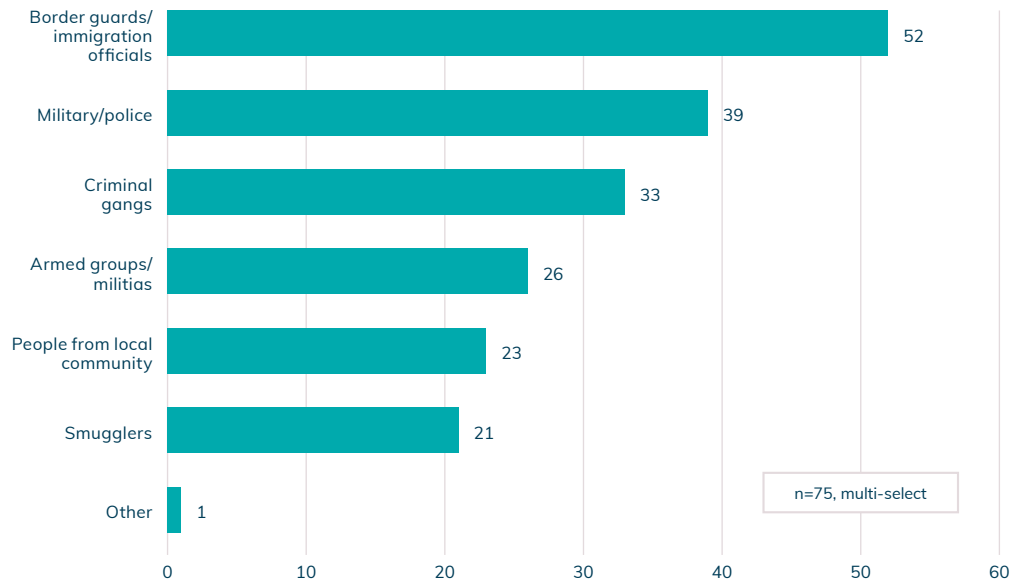
**Figure 4. Have you personally experienced any of these types of incidents on your journey?**



Border guards/immigration officials were most often considered the perpetrators of abuse (52 out of 75 respondents), followed by military/police (39 respondents) and criminal gangs (33 respondents), see Figure 5. This contrasts with findings in Malaysia, where two-thirds of Rohingya respondents cited smugglers as the main perpetrators of abuses on the journey.<sup>4</sup> Together the findings underscore that Rohingya refugees face threats from state authorities both in the country of departure and on their journeys.

<sup>4</sup> See MMC (2022). [Protection Risks for Rohingya Women and Children from Departure Country to Arrival in Malaysia.](#)

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



## Migration intentions: journeys have not ended

Only 16% of respondents reported that they had reached the end of their journeys, indicating that many refugees continue to regard Indonesia as a transit country. Among the remaining 84% (n=91), the most frequently cited end destinations were the United States (24 respondents) and Europe (17 respondents), although many respondents either did not know or did not provide an answer.

*“I would like to find another country for resettlement so that we could live a normal and humane life and my children can get a proper education.”*

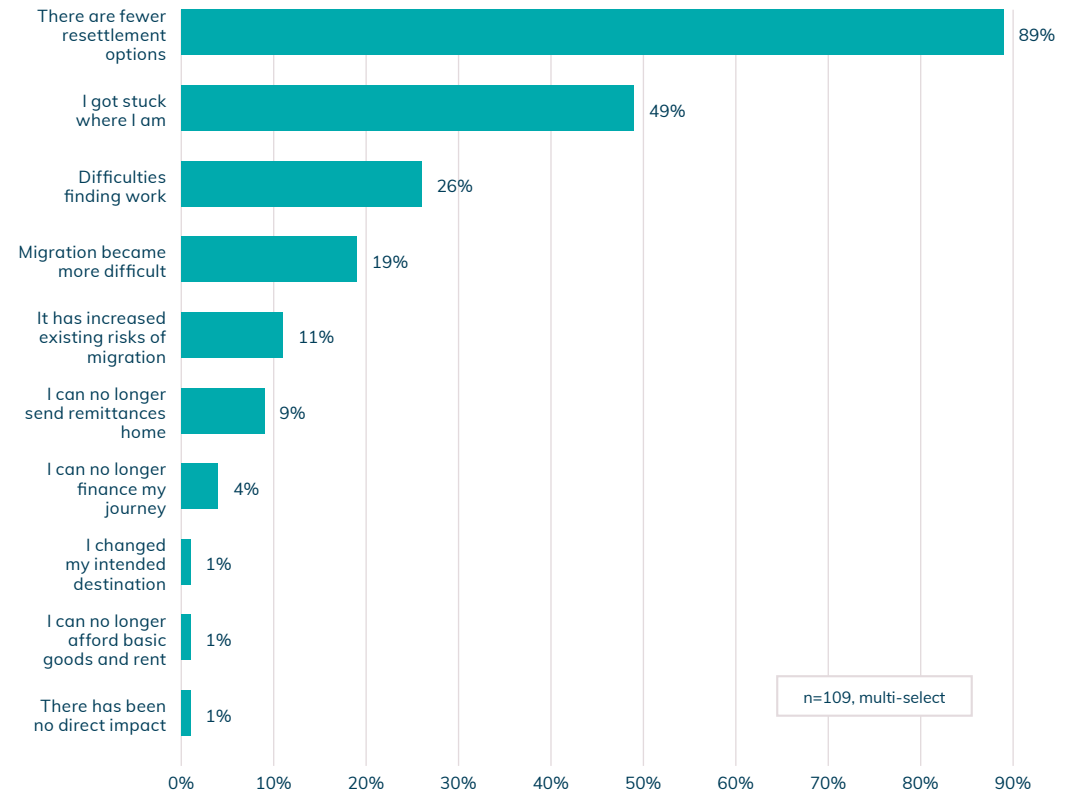
**32-year-old Rohingya woman, surveyed in Medan, Indonesia**

89% of respondents perceived that there are fewer resettlement options since the COVID-19 pandemic, see Figure 6. Nearly half reported being stuck in Indonesia since COVID-19, generating a cohort of involuntarily immobile populations as previously reported by MMC.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See MMC (2021). [A Transit Country No More: Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Indonesia](#).

Continuing instability and risk of persecution means that return to Myanmar is not a viable solution in the short- and medium-terms. Findings in this snapshot emphasize the need to ensure a dignified life in transit in Indonesia, as well as elsewhere.

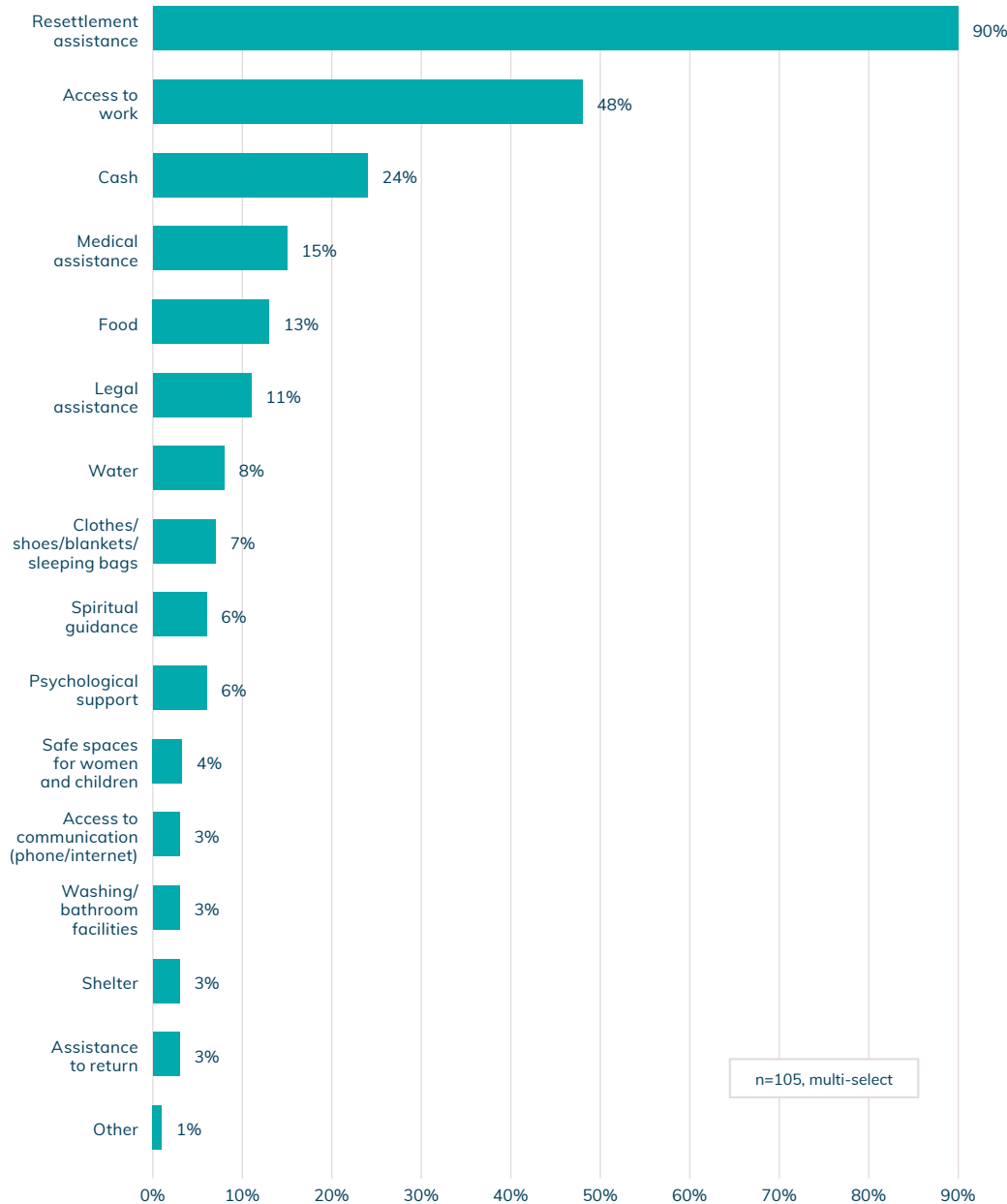
**Figure 6. How has the COVID-19 pandemic and measures to contain it impacted your life and migration experience?**



## Assistance needed for Rohingya refugees in transit

The large share of respondents who wished to continue their journey but remained “stuck” in Indonesia shows that support is needed for the Rohingya population in the country. 96% of survey respondents reported that they were in need of assistance in Indonesia at the time of the survey. Of those (n=105), most cited resettlement, see Figure 7. This was followed by access to work (48%), cash (24%), and other basic needs.

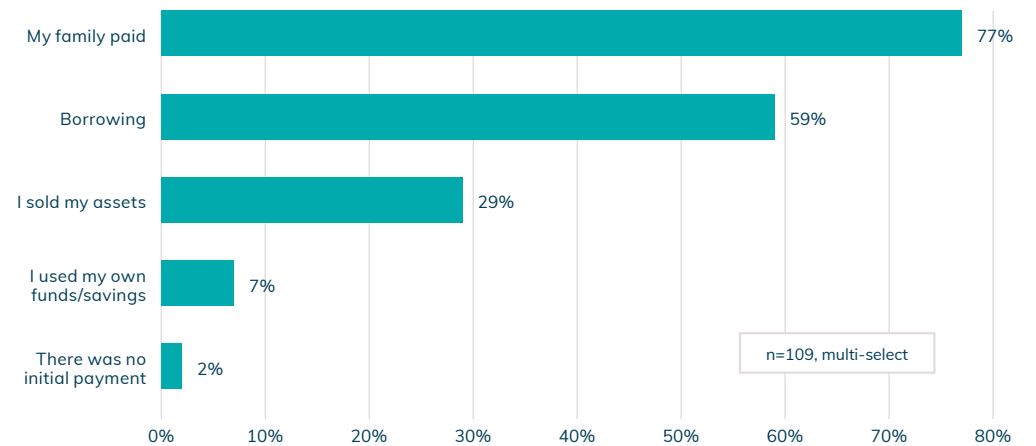
**Figure 7. What kind of assistance do you need in Indonesia?**



The need for cash and access to work in Indonesia may be related to debts incurred by respondents to finance their journeys. On average, survey respondents paid USD 2,630 to reach Indonesia. While most initially relied on their families to pay for their journeys (77%), more than half had to borrow money to finance their trips, see Figure 8. Nearly half of the respondents (49%) reported that the money was not enough to pay for their journeys.

*"I left Bangladesh refugee camps because I was not able to support my family. Now I am in Indonesia, but my family is still under pressure of debt which we took before my travel."*  
**23-year-old Rohingya man, surveyed in Medan, Indonesia**

**Figure 8. How did you initially finance your journey?**



## 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 Geutanyoë 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 Asia and the Pacific, East and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

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

[www.mixedmigration.org/4mi](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)