

Protection risks faced by Rohingya and Bangladeshis in Malaysia amid the COVID-19 crisis

Since May 2020, MMC Asia has been interviewing Rohingya and Bangladeshis in Malaysia to better understand their migration experiences and needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the crisis continues to evolve, the secondary impacts of COVID-19, including widespread loss of livelihoods, shrinking protection spaces, increased restrictions on movement and rising levels of discrimination become more apparent.

This snapshot focuses on the protection risks facing Bangladeshis and Rohingya in Malaysia amid the crisis. These include rising xenophobia, arrest, detention and deportation. It aims to contribute towards building a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to the challenges facing Bangladeshis and Rohingya in Malaysia.

Recommendations

- Stop the arrest, detention, and deportation of refugees and migrants in Malaysia;
- Facilitate documentation renewal for migrants and asylum registration for refugees in Malaysia;
- Mitigate labor exploitation, bribery, and extortion amid the COVID-19 crisis by granting refugees the legal right to work and regulating the work situations of migrant workers;
- Facilitate access to income-generating activities for Bangladeshis and Rohingya while addressing the impacts of income loss on their living conditions, access to basic goods and psychological well-being.

Profile

Information in this snapshot was collected between 3 and 25 July 2020 in Johor, Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, Pahang, Pulau Pinang, and Selangor, in Malaysia. 65 phone interviews were conducted - 45 with Rohingya and 20 with Bangladeshi respondents.¹ More than half of Rohingya respondents were women, while Bangladeshi respondents were all men.² The average age of Rohingya respondents was 23, compared with 32 for Bangladeshi respondents. Findings in this snapshot are representative only of those interviewed and cannot be generalized to the wider Rohingya and Bangladeshi populations in Malaysia.

Lack of rights and freedom were the most common motivators for migration to Malaysia

A lack of rights and freedoms were the most commonly cited reason for migration to Malaysia among both Rohingya and Bangladeshi survey respondents (14 out of 20 Bangladeshi respondents and 37 out of 45 Rohingya respondents). Among Rohingya respondents, violence (19 responses, n=45) was another major factor influencing migration, compared with Bangladeshi respondents (1 response, n=20). The large share of Rohingya reporting violence and a lack of rights and freedoms, as motivators for migration is a result of the ongoing persecution Rohingya face in Myanmar. This has led to the forced displacement of close to 1 million people – the largest refugee movement seen in in Asia in decades.³

- 1 Since July 2020, MMC have implemented a revised COVID-19 4Mi survey with an increased emphasis on the impact of COVID-19 on migration journeys and protection risks. Data from the revised survey has not been merged with the previous COVID-19 4Mi survey, however where possible comparisons across data sets have been made.
- 2 The high proportion of male respondents from Bangladesh is likely to reflect the high number of Bangladeshi migrant men, compared to women, in Malaysia. See <http://www.data.gov.my/data/dataset/jumlah-pekerja-asing-plks-aktif-mengikut-jantina-dan-negara-sumber/resource/e5353b72-0b63-4f3a-9b39-047c513952c5>
- 3 See <https://reliefweb.int/topics/refugeesmigrants-south-east-asia>

Access to employment and services such as health and education, were cited as other major factors motivating migration by 23 respondents (n=65), with a larger share among Bangladeshi respondents (14 respondents, n=20).

Access to documentation is cited as one of the greatest needs under COVID-19

The majority of survey respondents reported holding precarious legal status at the time of being interviewed. 30 out of 45 Rohingya reported they were seeking asylum, 1 reported having refugee status by UNHCR and 14 reported having no legal documentation granting them stay in Malaysia. Of Bangladeshi respondents, half held temporary resident status with a work permit or visa, 6 had either expired documents or were reportedly undocumented, and 4 reported they were refugees.

In Malaysia, refugees continue to be classified as illegal migrants despite being owed protection under international law.⁴ Furthermore, COVID-19 has left many migrant workers uncertain whether they can renew their documents or not, leading to increased risk of irregularity.⁵ Consequently, when asked about what additional assistance was needed most in light of the pandemic, over a third of all respondents (22 Rohingya, 4 Bangladeshis) cited legal documentation as one of their greatest needs.

Lack of legal rights, fear of arrest, and the inability to pay are common barriers to healthcare

Similar to the last update,⁶ and reflecting the problems referred to above, the lack of legal rights and documentation (40 responses, n=65) remain one of the main barriers to accessing healthcare, along with the inability to afford services (40 responses). The lack of legal rights and documentation was reported by a larger share of Rohingya respondents (two-thirds of all respondents) compared with Bangladeshi (half of all respondents), see Figure 1.

4 See <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/05/25/Malaysia-coronavirus-refugees-asy-lum-seekers-xenophobia>

5 See https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/briefingnote/wcms_746881.pdf

6 See <http://www.mixedmigration.org/resource/4mi-snapshot-understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-rohingya-and-bangladeshis-in-malaysia-update2/>

This may be due to the larger proportion of Bangladeshi respondents who reported holding resident status in Malaysia, likely allowing them greater access to health services.

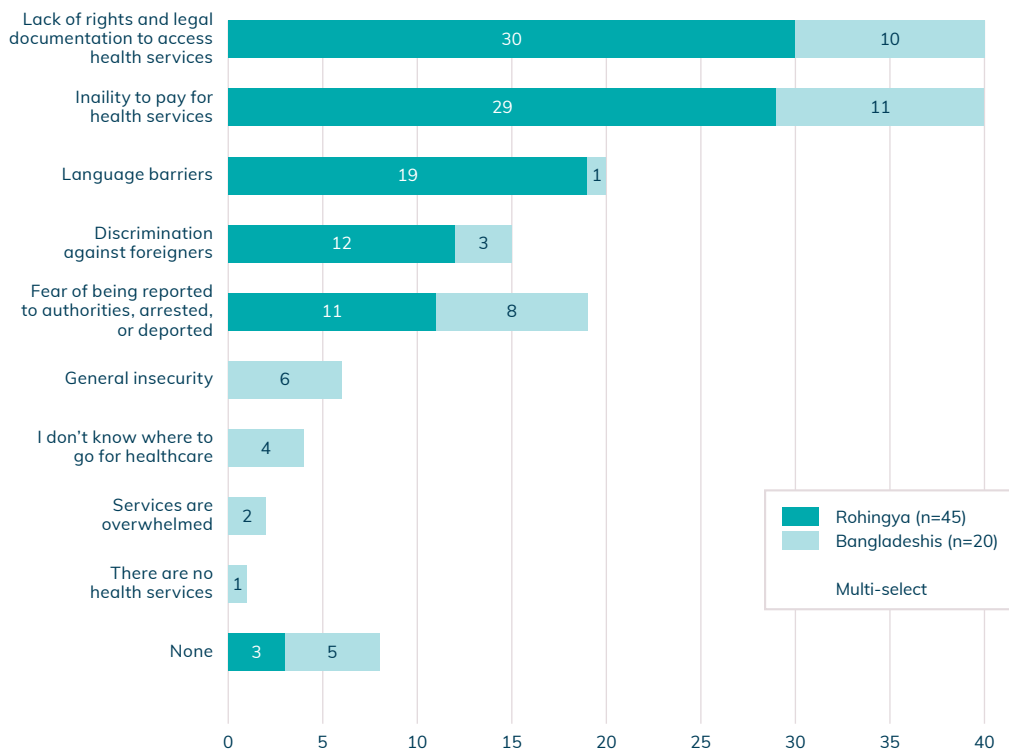
In addition, 19 respondents (11 Rohingya and 8 Bangladeshis) were afraid of being reported to authorities, arrested, or deported as a result of accessing healthcare, preventing them from seeking support. In addition, language and discrimination against foreigners were reported as barriers to accessing health services specifically among Rohingya participants (19 and 12 respondents, respectively, n=45). This is in line with reports of rising xenophobia amid the pandemic as mentioned in previous MMC snapshots.⁷

“During the coronavirus situation, the Malaysian government should allow all migrants and refugees to access free COVID-19 testing without harassment.”

31-year-old Bangladeshi man, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

7 See <http://www.mixedmigration.org/resource/4mi-snapshot-understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-rohingya-and-bangladeshis-in-malaysia-update2/>

Figure 1. What are the barriers to accessing health services?



COVID-19 has significantly increased protection risks

Most respondents agreed that COVID-19 has increased the risk of arbitrary arrest and detention, bribery and extortion, and labor exploitation, see Figure 2. This increased risk reported by respondents is set against the increased incidence of the arrest and detention of refugees and undocumented migrants in Malaysia since the COVID-19 outbreak.⁸

8 See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/malaysia-stop-plans-to-cane-rohingya-refugees-and-release-those-already-imprisoned/>

Concern about the increasing risk of arbitrary arrest and detention was reported more by Rohingya respondents (82%, n=45) compared with Bangladeshi (65%, n=20), see Figure 2.1. This higher proportion may be due to a larger number of Rohingya reporting irregular legal status compared with Bangladeshi respondents, as mentioned above.

"I left Myanmar due to persecution and the unstable situation in our village. There was always fighting going on between the Rakhine insurgency and the Myanmar military [...] However, after I reached here [Malaysia], I felt the same as I did in my country due to fear of arrest and deportation."

35-year-old Rohingya woman, interviewed in Selangor, Malaysia

While the risk of arbitrary arrest and detention was reported as higher among Rohingya participants, the increased risk of deportation was reported higher among Bangladeshi respondents (80% of Bangladeshi, n=20, compared with 53% of Rohingya, n=45), see Figure 2.2. This proportional difference is likely to have been triggered by the pending deportation of many undocumented Bangladeshi migrant workers arrested in recent months, including a Bangladeshi advocate who publicly spoke out about the treatment of undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia.⁹

In previous updates Bangladeshi respondents reported they were more likely to be able to continue working, compared with Rohingya respondents who reported higher levels of job loss amid the pandemic.¹⁰ During this data collection period 100% of Bangladeshi respondents (n=20) believe their risk of labor exploitation has increased during the pandemic. This is compared with just over a quarter of Rohingya respondents, see Figure 2.3.

Furthermore, a higher proportion of Bangladeshi respondents (90%, n=20) reported increased risk of bribery and extortion since the pandemic, compared with Rohingya respondents (56%, n=45), see Figure 2.4. This risk is in line with the corruption and fraud

9 See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/07/malaysia-expel-bangladeshi-featured-al-jazeera-report-200725085008073.html>

10 In the last update in July 2020, 11 out of 40 Bangladeshi respondents reported being able to continue working amid COVID-19 restrictions. See <http://www.mixedmigration.org/resource/4mi-snapshot-understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-rohingya-and-bangladeshis-in-malaysia-update2/>

that contributes to the undocumented status of migrant workers in Malaysia.¹¹

Figure 2. Protection risk perception

Figure 2.1 There is an increased risk of arbitrary arrest and detention since the COVID-19 pandemic began*

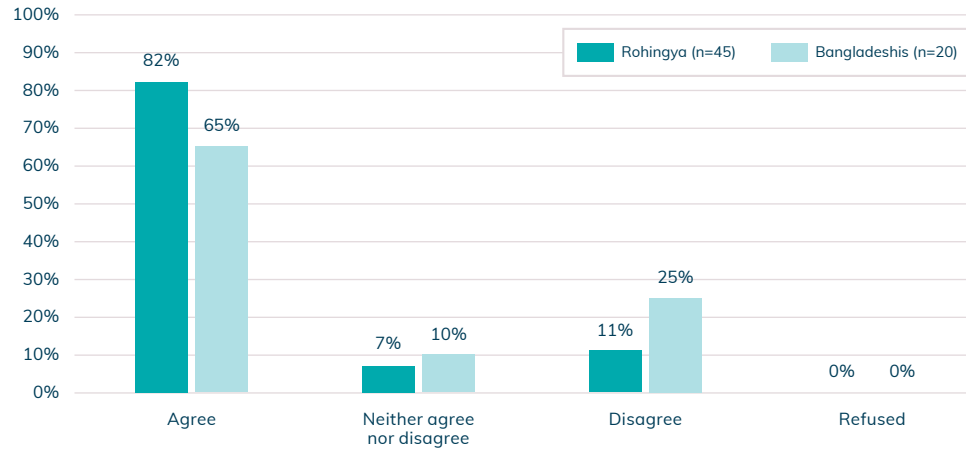


Figure 2.2 There is an increased risk of deportation since the COVID-19 pandemic began*

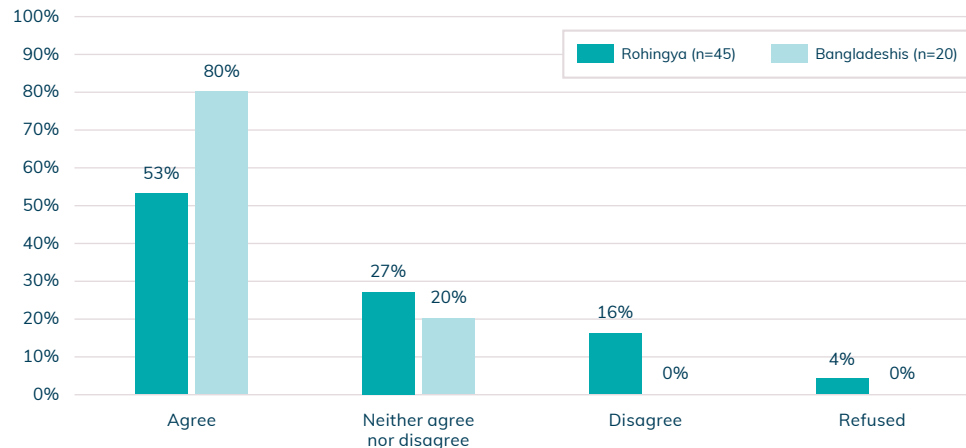


Figure 2.3 There is an increased risk of labour exploitation since the COVID-19 pandemic began*

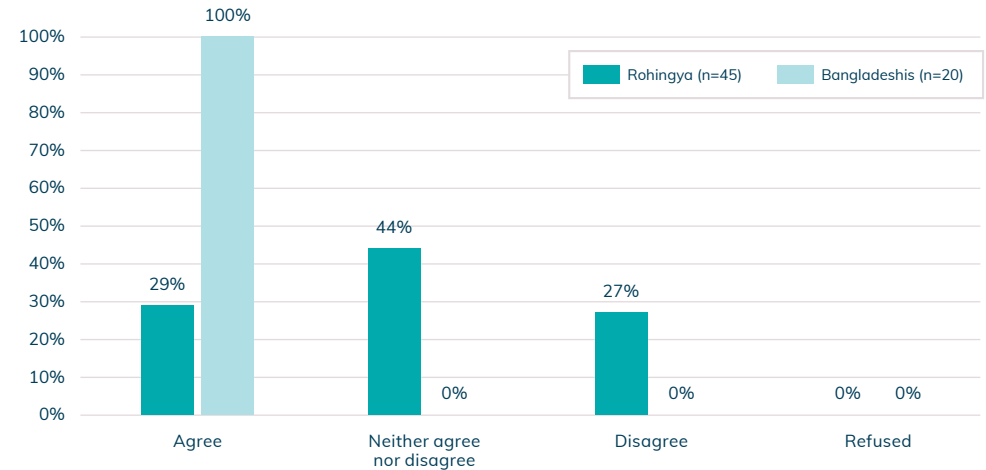
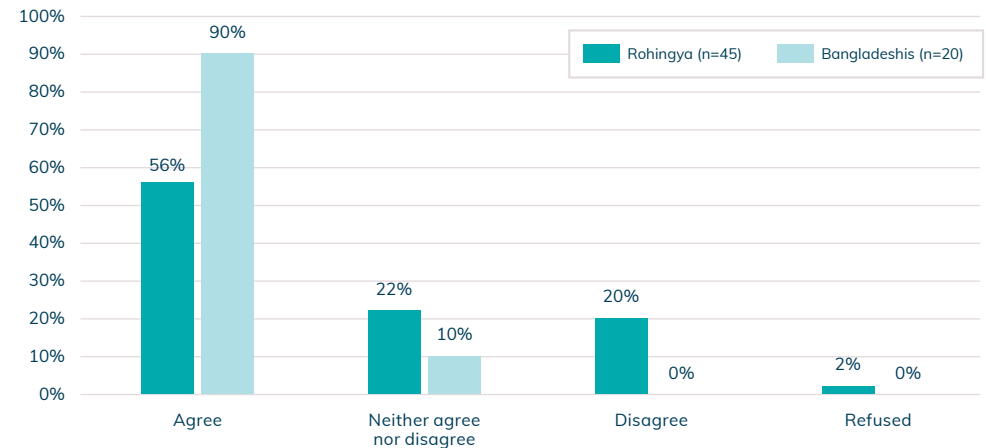


Figure 2.2 There is an increased risk of bribery and extortion since the COVID-19 pandemic began*



*The graphs use % in order to make easy comparisons between risks and between Bangladeshi and Rohingya respondents despite the small number of observations (n=65).

11 See <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/524608>

"The current coronavirus situation makes me suffer from inexpressible difficulties. While Malaysia has begun its crackdown on migrants and refugees, I couldn't manage to get any protection and I'm unable to seek asylum as the UNHCR office has been closed due to the virus crisis. I was once stopped by a local authority official and I was asked to pay RM 500 (approximately USD 120) in order to be released."

32-year-old Rohingya woman, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

COVID-19 related income loss has resulted in greater insecurity for respondents

Among those earning income prior to COVID-19 (n=50), 45 respondents (13 Bangladeshi, 32 Rohingya) reported having lost income due to the pandemic. 6 out of 50 (4 Rohingya, 2 Bangladeshi) also reported having lost financial support from family. Only 3 respondents (all Bangladeshi) continued to earn the same income they had received prior to the pandemic, despite COVID-19 restrictions.¹²

The inability to afford basic goods and homelessness continue to be the most commonly reported impacts of income loss (41 and 27 respondents, respectively, n=47). Among respondents who reported losing their housing, the majority were Rohingya (24 respondents out of 27 - more than half of all Rohingya respondents). These findings are set against the backdrop of housing raids targeting migrants and refugees carried out since early July, and increased government action against landlords who rent their property to people without documentation, including refugees.¹³ Over three-quarters of Rohingya respondents reported living in conditions that do not allow them to practice the recommended 1.5 meter physical distancing.

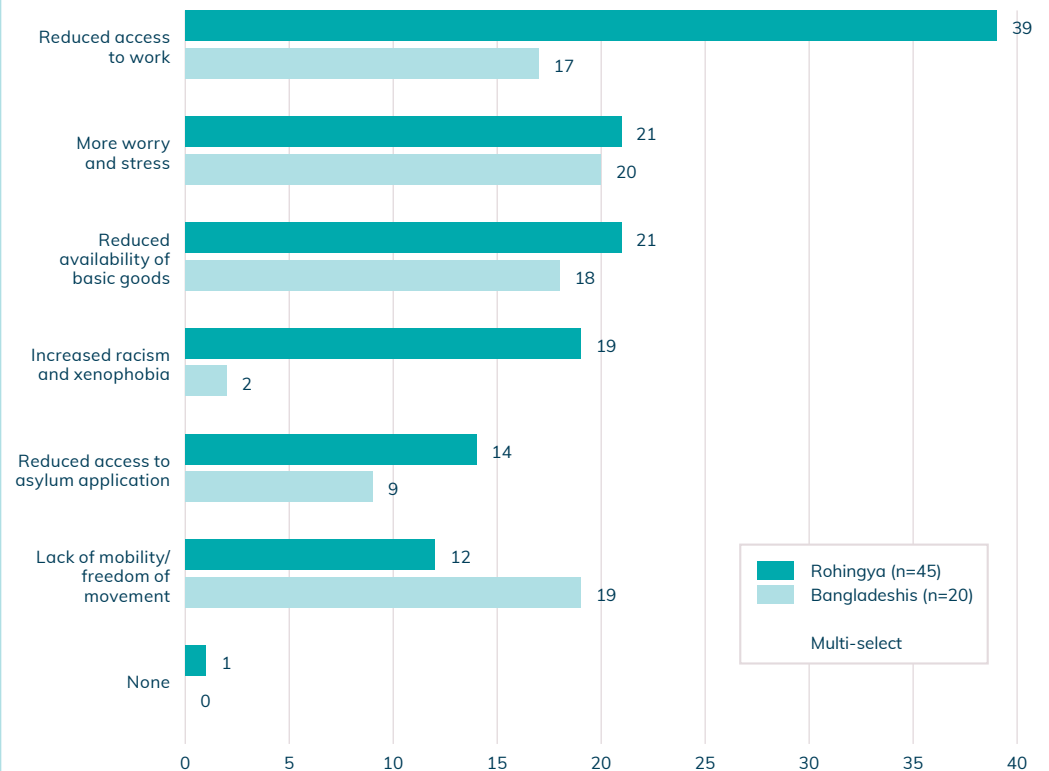
"As I am an undocumented refugee, I am having difficulties in my daily life such as working, renting a house because there have been increasing immigration raids and the authorities have been urging house owners not to rent the house to undocumented."

20-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Selangor, Malaysia

"During the coronavirus situation, my working conditions are very challenging because all 8 members of my family depend on my income."

25-year-old Bangladeshi man, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Figure 3. What impacts has the crisis had on your day-to-day life?



¹² This question is multi-select.

¹³ See <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2020/07/11/over-100-un-cardholder-refugees-in-kl-facing-eviction-amid-immigration-crack/1883580>

When respondents were asked about how COVID-19 has impacted their day-to-day lives, respondents cited reduced availability of basic good (39 responses, n=65) and increased worry and stress (31 responses), in addition to reduced access to work (56 responses), see Figure 3. These findings are similar to those reported in previous updates.¹⁴

A new concern in this update is that 31 respondents also cited the lack of freedom of movement as an impact of COVID-19. This is likely related to movement restrictions, as well as increased concern among participants about arbitrary arrest, detention and deportation, as mentioned previously in this snapshot.

"I'm dependent on my husband and he used to support us (me and our two children) before the virus crisis. Now, he hasn't been able to work for months. So, we don't know how long we can survive in this situation. Fear and stress have been rising day by day and my children also couldn't go to school anymore."

35-year-old Rohingya woman, interviewed in Selangor, Malaysia

¹⁴ See <http://www.mixedmigration.org/resource/4mi-snapshot-understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-rohingya-and-bangladeshis-in-malaysia/> for Update #1, June 2020, and <http://www.mixedmigration.org/resource/4mi-snapshot-understanding-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-rohingya-and-bangladeshis-in-malaysia-update2/> for Update #2, July 2020



4Mi & COVID-19

The [Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative](#) (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. Normally, the recruitment of respondents and interviews take place face-to-face. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face recruitment and data collection has been suspended in all countries.

MMC has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by changing the data it collects and the way it collects it. Respondents are recruited through a number of remote or third-party mechanisms; sampling is through a mixture of purposive and snowball approaches. A new survey focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants, and the surveys are administered by telephone, by the 4Mi monitors in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia and Latin America. Findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make inferences about the total population of refugees and migrants, as the sample is not representative. The switch to remote recruitment and data collection results in additional potential bias and risks, which cannot be completely avoided. Further measures have been put in place to check and – to the extent possible – control for bias and to protect personal data. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi