

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on Rohingya and Bangladeshis in Malaysia

Since May 2020, MMC Asia has been interviewing Rohingya and Bangladeshis residing in Malaysia, to better understand their migration experiences and protection needs under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. This snapshot focuses on the day-to-day impacts of COVID-19, and 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 Rohingya and Bangladeshi refugees and migrants in Malaysia.

Recommendations

- Immediately stop the arrest, detention, and pushbacks of refugees and migrants in Malaysia;
- Facilitate advocacy campaigns countering anti-migrant and refugee sentiments and rising xenophobia;
- Continue providing critical emergency relief supports, including food, shelter and cash to refugees and migrants in need.

Profiles

Information in this snapshot was collected between 1 and 22 May in Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Malacca, and Johor in Malaysia. 64 phone interviews were conducted - 44 with Rohingya respondents and 20 with Bangladeshi respondents. 23 Rohingya respondents were women, while Bangladeshi respondents were primarily men (16 respondents out of 20 interviewed). The high proportion of male respondents from Bangladesh likely reflects the high number of male Bangladeshi migrants, compared to females, in Malaysia.¹ Due to the small sample size, findings in this snapshot should be considered with caution. As data collection continues, so too will the sample size in future reporting.

¹ According to the [Malaysian government statistics](#), the numbers of registered male and female migrants from Bangladesh as of 30 June 2019 were 567,684 and 1,245 respectively.

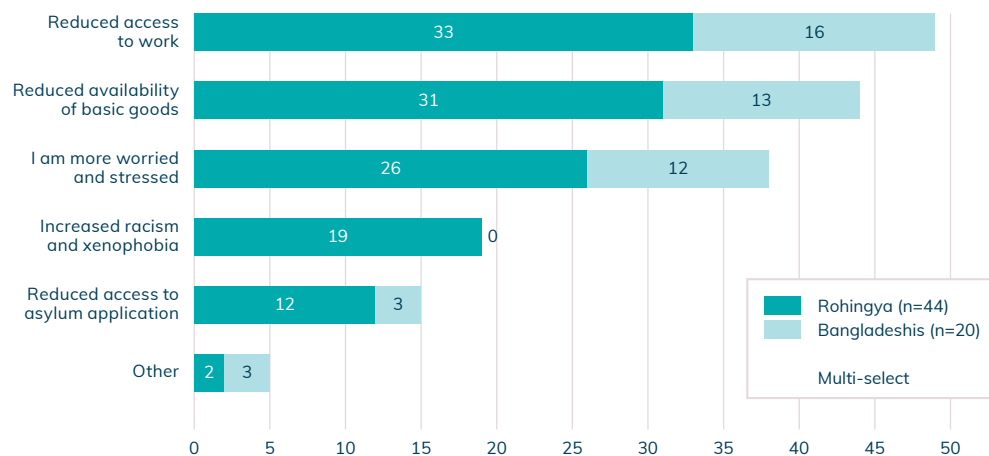
The survey targeted Bangladeshis and Rohingya who arrived in Malaysia within the past 24 months. 26 participants reported having arrived within the past year. Rohingya respondents were primarily under 30 years old (84%) whereas Bangladeshis were slightly older, with 55% aged 18-30 and 45% aged 31-40. 100% of Rohingya respondents reported having attained high-school-level education or below compared with 65% of Bangladeshi respondents, the rest of whom had completed tertiary education or vocational training.²

COVID-19 has reduced access to work and basic goods, and increased psychological distress

The crisis has significantly impacted the day-to-day lives of Rohingya and Bangladeshi respondents. According to respondents (n=64), the biggest impacts of COVID-19 included reduced access to work (49 responses), reduced availability of basic goods (44 responses), and increased psychological distress (38 responses), as outlined in Figure 1.

² 5 out of 20 Bangladeshi respondents reported having obtained a university degree while 2 reported having received vocational training.

Figure 1. What impacts has the crisis had on your day-to-day life?



COVID-19 has led to increased xenophobia and racism against Rohingya in Malaysia

Among Rohingya respondents (n=44), 19 reported experiencing increased racism and xenophobia since the outbreak of the pandemic (see Figure 1). This supports widespread and concerning reports of rising hate speech against Rohingya in Malaysia, both on social media and in government rhetoric, fueling mass raids, resulting in the arrest and detention of refugees and migrants.³ This has also occurred alongside the pushback of Rohingya refugees trying to reach Malaysia by boat in recent weeks.⁴

"I feel very sad and scared due to the recent anti-Rohingya or anti-migrant sentiments that have been circulating, targeting vulnerable people on social media."

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

³ See <https://www.fortifyrights.org/mly-inv-2020-05-11/> and <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=31672>

⁴ See <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/5/5eb15b804/joint-statement-unhcr-iom-unodc-protection-sea-bay-bengal-andaman-sea.html>

"Ever since coronavirus outbreak begun in Malaysia, some locals have been against us and see us as threat. This makes me feel so stressed and fearful. We don't know what's going to happen next."

26 year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Most respondents have lost income due to COVID-19

Strict lockdown measures in Malaysia have led to widespread job losses, particularly among casual workers and those engaged in the informal sectors. Among respondents, 31 Rohingya (n=44) and 10 Bangladeshi (n=20) reported having lost income due to COVID-19. Three quarters of all men (26 responses, n=36) and just over half of all women (15 responses, n=28) reported losing income as a result of COVID-19.

6 Bangladeshi respondents and 1 Rohingya respondent reported that they were able to continue working, despite COVID-19 restrictions. While the remaining respondents reported they were not earning any income prior to the crisis (see Figure 2). The higher number of Bangladeshis who reported continuing to work is potentially due to differences in migration status, as well as differing industries of employment⁵, although the small sample size means the results must be interpreted with caution.

"So many migrants are afraid they will lose their jobs because of coronavirus."

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

"As a family man and a daily worker, I am feeling more worried day by day. We were told we will not be able to work anymore."

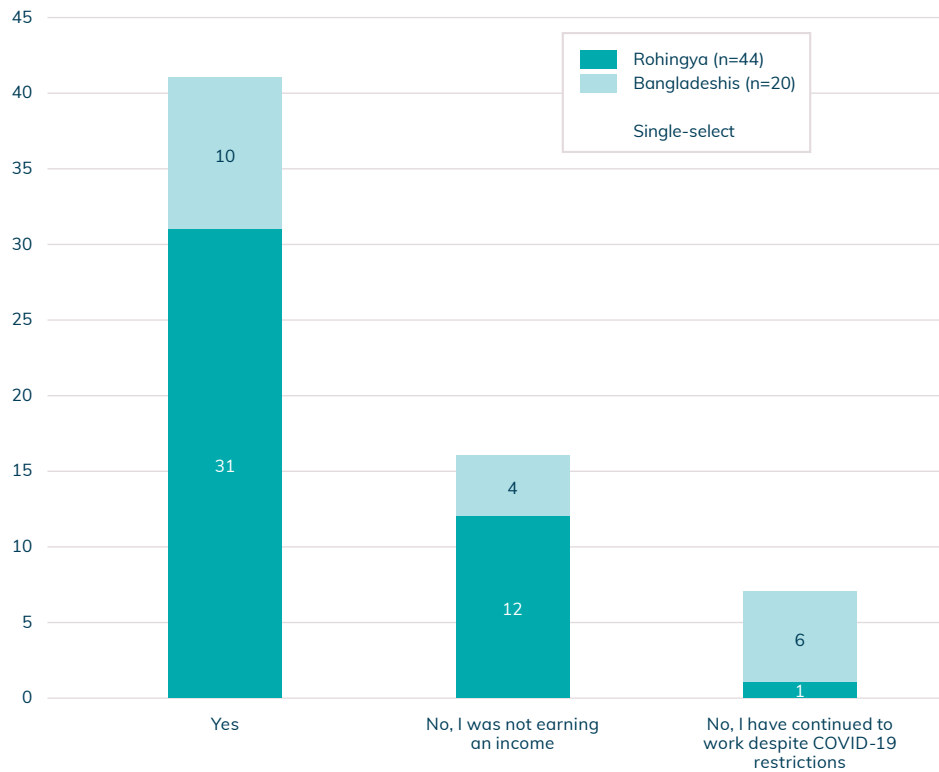
26 year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

⁵ A high number of Bangladeshis are working in the plantation industries in Malaysia which continued operating after the Movement Control Order. See <https://focusmalaysia.my/mainstream/plantation-commodity-sectors-exempted-from-movement-control-order/>

"There are so many difficulties staying in Malaysia and so much negative news coming out. People have difficulties working and earning money."

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

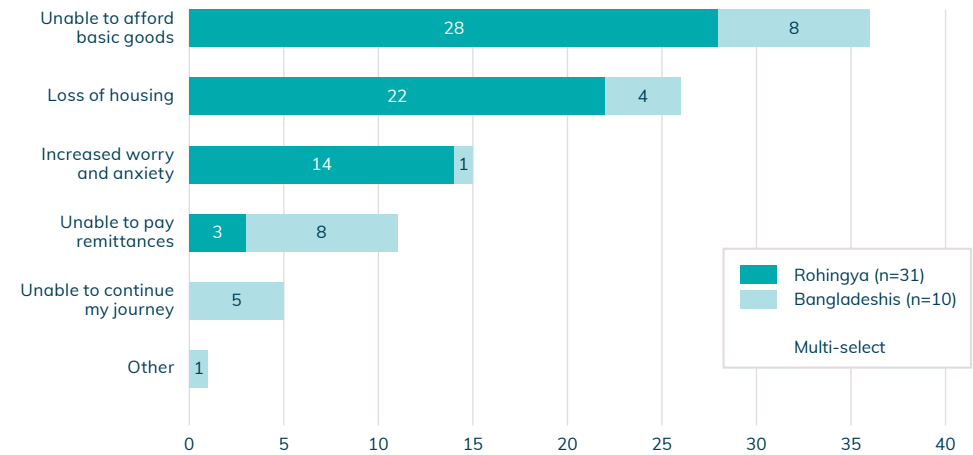
Figure 2. Have you lost income due to coronavirus restrictions?



COVID-19 has led to destitution, homelessness and distress

A majority of respondents (n=41) reported that loss of income had led to the inability to afford basic goods (36 responses), and loss of housing (26 responses). 14 people reported increased worry and stress (14 responses), see Figure 3.

Figure 3. What impact has the loss of income had?



Half of all Rohingya participants (22 respondents) and 4 Bangladeshis reported losing their housing due to income reduction, highlighting the growing risk of homelessness as people struggle to pay rent. Additionally 4 other Bangladeshis who were surveyed reported living on the streets at the time of interview. 8 out of 10 surveyed Bangladeshis also reported that due to income loss they were unable to continuing paying remittances.

"I have not been working since the beginning of the lockdown. Now, I feel worried that I have been unable to pay the rent for almost 3 months already. I feel worried that if I cannot work, I may face a lot of difficulties."

24-year-old Rohingya man, interviewed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Because of the pandemic we all have difficulties buying basic food and paying the rent. And then there are so many people being arrested because they are undocumented.

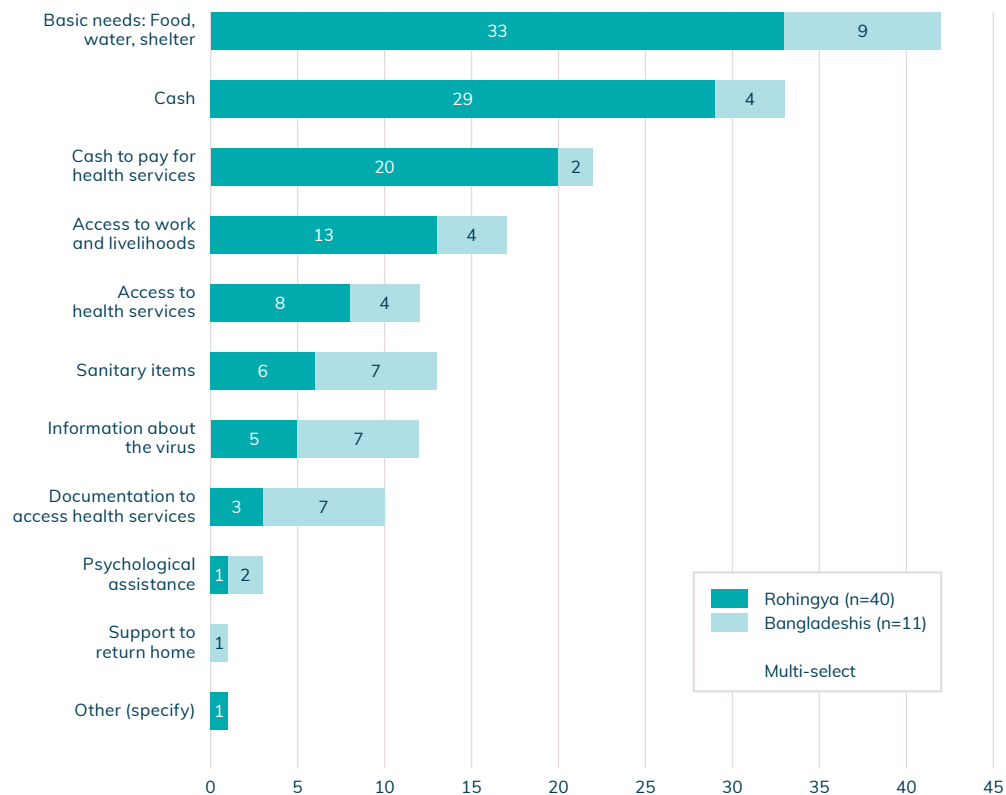
20-year-old Rohingya woman, interviewed in Selangor, Malaysia

COVID-19 has increased the need for emergency relief including food, shelter and cash

80% of respondents (n=51) stated they needed extra support as a result of COVID-19. Among both Rohingya and Bangladeshi respondents, basic needs, such as food, water and shelter were cited as the most urgent needs (42 responses) as represented in Figure 4.

Although the small sample size means results must be interpreted with caution, the surveyed Rohingya and Bangladeshi respondents communicated different needs under the COVID-19 crisis. Among Rohingya respondents (n=40) cash, both for general purposes (29 responses) and to pay for health services (20 responses), was cited as the second greatest need behind access to food water and shelter (33 responses). Meanwhile, for Bangladeshi respondents (n=11), sanitary items, such as sanitizers, masks and gloves (7 responses), documentation to access health services (7 responses) and information about the virus (7 responses) were cited as other needs, after food, water and shelter (9 responses). The greater need for cash among Rohingya respondents is potentially due to higher reported income loss compared with Bangladeshi respondents (see Figure 2). Further, Malaysia has not yet granted refugees the right to work, leaving many Rohingya without access to formal work opportunities.⁶

Figure 4. Extra supports needed



Despite increased needs, the majority of respondents had not yet received additional support

Despite the reported increase in need among both Rohingya and Bangladeshi respondents, only two fifths of those interviewed had received additional assistance since the outbreak of COVID-19 (n=25). Assistance received included food, water and shelter (23 responses), while other kinds of assistance remained sparse. Fewer Bangladeshi respondents reported accessing additional support, and when they had, support had come from the Bangladeshi consulate (3 responses, n=3). NGOs (20 responses) and UN (6 responses) were reported by Rohingya respondents (n=22) as the main source of assistance received.

⁶ See <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/05/25/Malaysia-coronavirus-refugees-assembly-seekers-xenophobia>



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