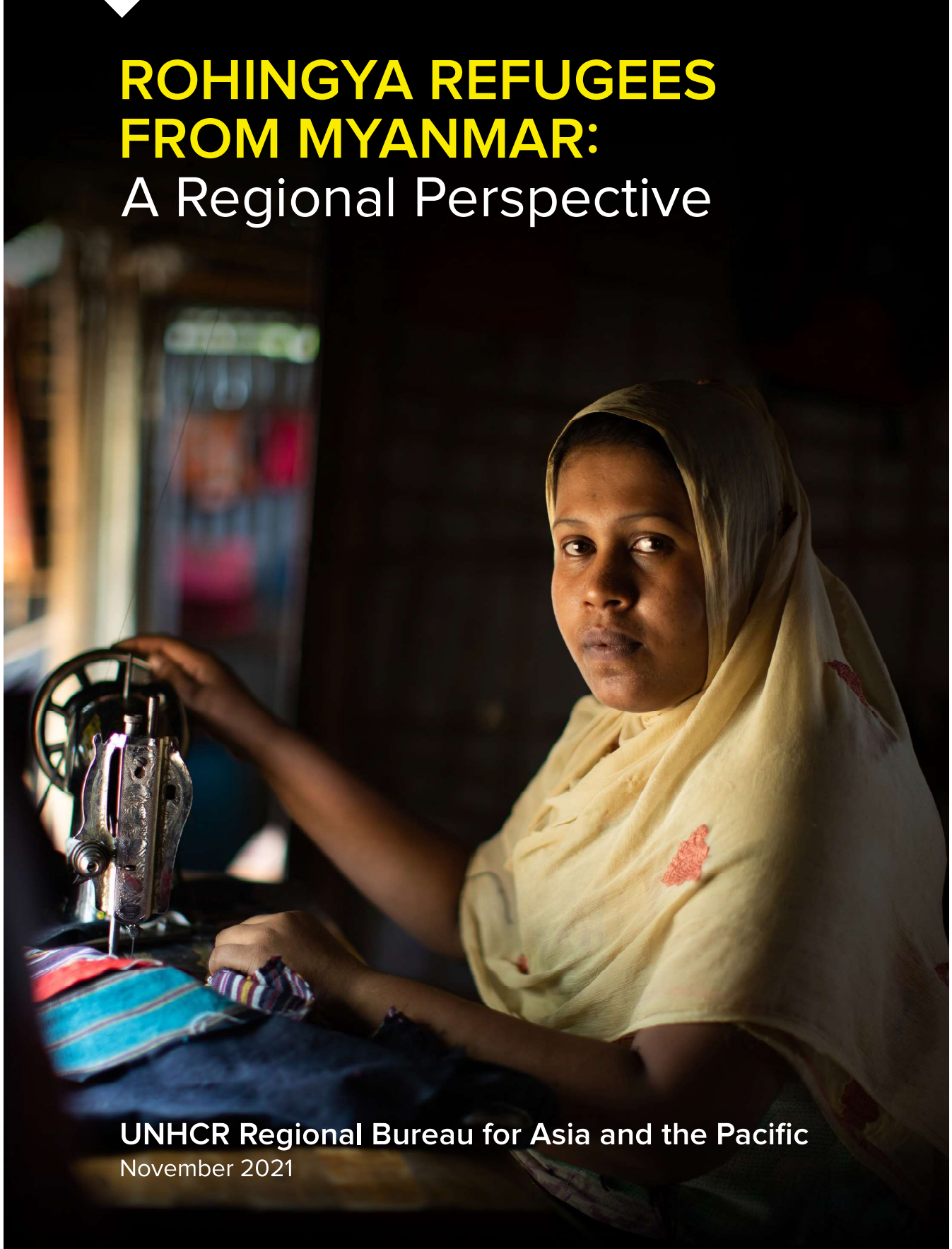


# ROHINGYA REFUGEES FROM MYANMAR: A Regional Perspective



UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific  
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# 1

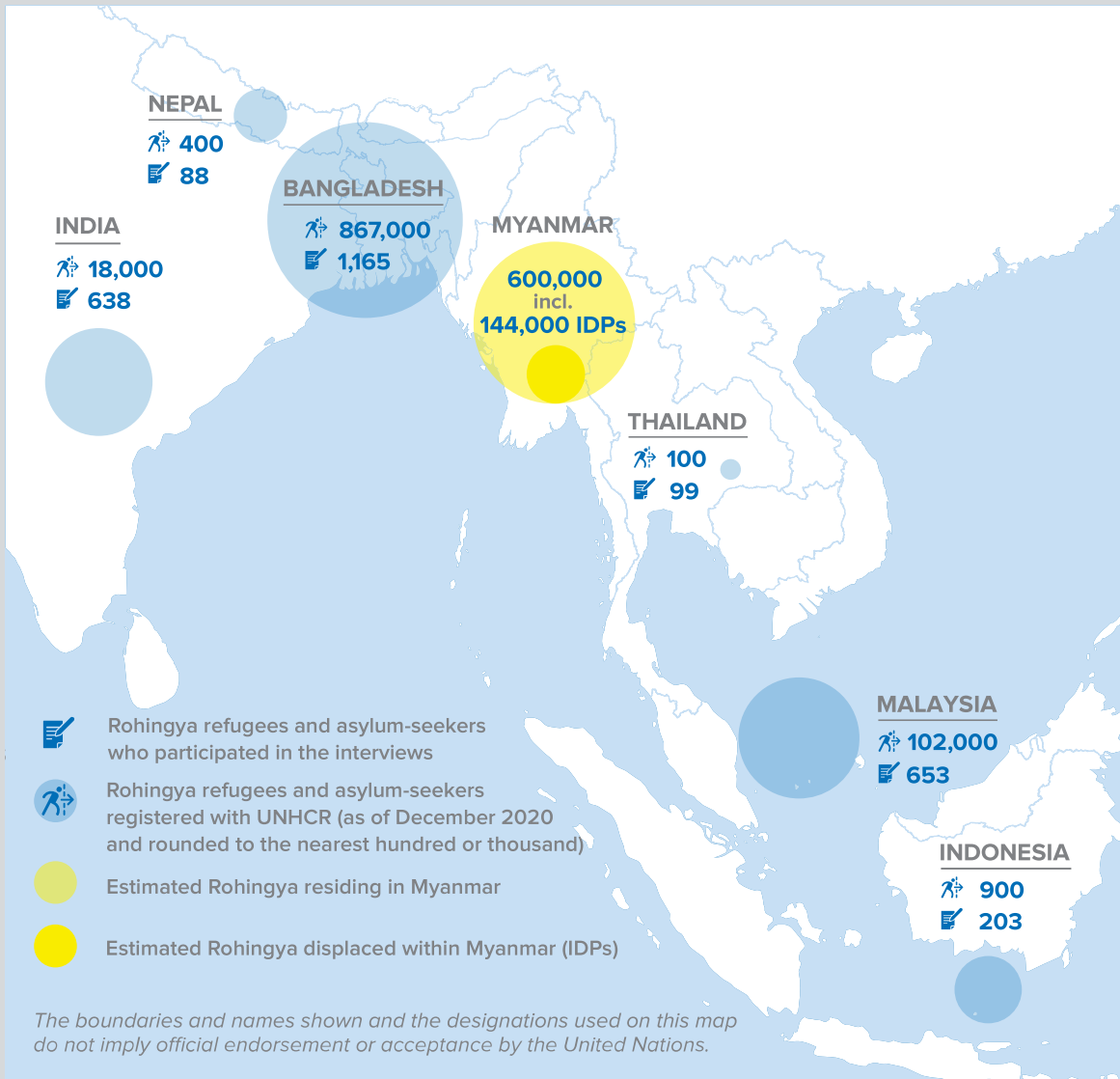
## Introduction

In the first half of 2021, UNHCR organized **comprehensive consultations with Rohingya refugees** across the region to better understand how Rohingya refugees envision their future — and what challenges stand in the way of their desired solutions. Teams across Asia interviewed a total of 2,846 Rohingya refugees in the six Rohingya-hosting countries in the region: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, and Thailand, which together host one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. These consultations built on extensive work done by various stakeholders in recent years — particularly since the refugee influx to Bangladesh in 2016 and 2017 — to survey Rohingya refugees and ensure their voices are represented and reflected. They also incorporated Rohingya refugees’ views of developments in Myanmar since the events of 1 February 2021.

As host country governments, the United Nations, NGO partners and donors engage in programming and advocacy to improve Rohingya refugees’ lives and expand their opportunities for solutions, it is imperative that these efforts are guided by the refugees’ own hopes, concerns, and intentions. Many organizations regularly speak to Rohingya refugees — through individual counselling, focus group discussions, protection monitoring, and other fora — and the aim of this survey was to consult refugees in a comprehensive manner. By asking uniform questions to Rohingya refugees across Asia of various ages, genders, and diversity profiles, these consultations sought to gain a holistic understanding of:

- How Rohingya refugees envision their future, the perceived or actual barriers to voluntary repatriation and other solutions, and what actions are needed to overcome such barriers;
- What can be done in countries of asylum to better prepare Rohingya refugees for solutions, particularly through education, skills building, and livelihoods opportunities; and
- How Rohingya refugees’ individual age, gender, vulnerability, and other diversity circumstances influence their protection risks, perceptions of solutions, access to information, and decision-making process.

**Figure 1.1** Rohingya populations in the region, including host countries where consultations were conducted







## 2 | Findings

### a) Rohingya refugees express a diversity of views on their future intentions and current concerns

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The consultations as well as follow-up focus group discussions revealed Rohingya refugees' differing opinions on their future intentions and current concerns based on their gender, age, family status, sexual orientation, and whether they have a disability.

#### 1. Future intentions

- **Women** are more likely than men to highlight the importance of family ties in considerations about their future. Women who express a desire to return to Myanmar noted the ability to reunite with family members as a key factor, and similarly, women who express a desire to remain outside of Myanmar often cited the desire to be near family members. They are less likely than men to prioritize safety and opportunities for work and education.
- **Older** refugees are more likely than others to cite a lack of trust of Myanmar authorities as a barrier to return. Unlike younger age groups, older refugees who wish to reside in third countries in the future are primarily motivated by the presence of family members in those countries.
- **Youth** aged 15 to 17 are less likely to wish to return to Myanmar than older age groups; 54% of youth intend to return, compared to 68% of refugees 18 and above. Youth are also significantly more pessimistic than older Rohingya refugees on the possibility and pace of reform in Myanmar. Youth who do not wish to return to Myanmar cite education as the most important factor in considering where they would like to live in the future.
- Most **children** under 18 who wish to return to Myanmar arrived in countries of asylum more recently. They express a strong emotional attachment to Myanmar and a hope that they would be able to enjoy greater freedom of movement and live in less crowded conditions upon return. Other children express an interest in third country options but have concerns about how their cultural and religious traditions may be accepted in third countries.
- **Female heads of households** are less inclined than other refugees to return to Myanmar, primarily because they feel they will be safer and their children will have a better future

elsewhere, through educational opportunities and access to quality health services. Some seek third country opportunities to reunite with extended family members. Most female heads of households who are inclined to return cited the challenges of living in a refugee camp. Female heads of households considering return shared concerns about their ability to build or repair shelters upon return, stating that they are unable to do it themselves and would not have the resources to pay someone. Some female heads of households also spoke about the sexual violence that women and girls experienced in Myanmar and concerns that women would be a target for violence in the future.

- The main concerns of **LGBTIQ+** refugees in countries of asylum are harassment, limited access to health care and education, social stigma, isolation from family members, physical abuse, lack of employment and skills building opportunities, and intolerance/disdain toward their sexual or gender orientation. When asked about their futures, they stress safety as their primary concern. Most LGBTIQ+ refugees also emphasize the importance of having access to a larger LGBTIQ+ community, as this provides a feeling of security, protection, and kinship.
- Refugees with a **disability** and their caretakers highlight the limited services available to them in countries of asylum, including a lack of mental and specialized health services. They also cite additional barriers of cost and documentation that sometimes prevent them from accessing assistance. For refugees with disabilities, access to services and advance treatment related to their disability is a key consideration in their future intentions. Refugees with disabilities feel that their caregivers often do not discuss issues with them and instead make decisions on their behalf. They also feel they are a burden on caregivers and that this burden could be alleviated if they resided in a country that facilitated access to services and opportunities for persons with disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities are constantly worried about the future of their children and whether they will be able to live independently.

**Woman with disability**

*“I want to be self-dependent; I want to be able to make my own decisions.”*

## 2. Current concerns

- **Women** (51%) are more likely than men (35%) to have had no education. Women (2%) are also significantly less likely to have completed secondary school than men (20%), and fewer women (3%) possess official documentation of schooling than men (11%). More women (58%) felt connected to the local community in their country of asylum than men (53%).
- **Older** refugees are more concerned about access to and quality of health services in their host country than other Rohingya refugees. Older refugees are also less likely than younger Rohingya refugees to have formed relationships with the local community; be engaged in livelihoods activities; and interested in learning new skills.

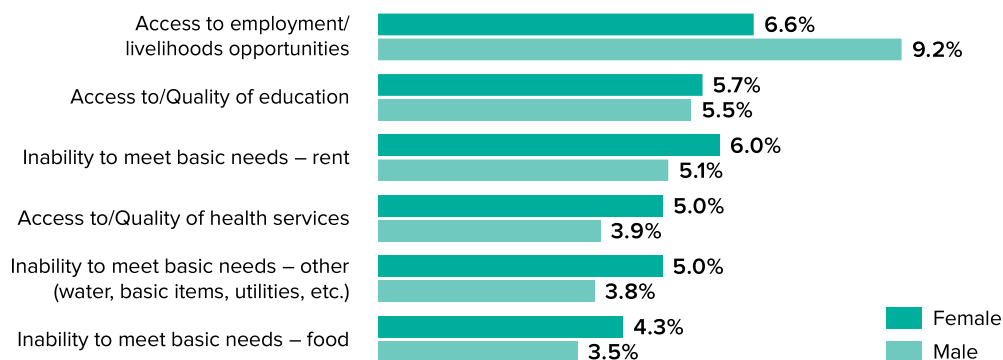
- **Youth** aged 15 to 17 are more likely than other age groups to have completed primary education, having benefited from informal educational opportunities in countries of asylum; 71% who have completed some level of schooling have done so while living outside Myanmar. Rohingya refugee youth are eager to learn new skills and expressed a wide range of career interests, reflecting diverse hopes and dreams. They hope to make contributions to their communities, including as police officers, doctors, teachers, shopkeepers, musicians, nurses, mechanical engineers, actors, social workers, software engineers, graphic designers, and dancers.
- **Children** are most concerned about their inability to access opportunities, particularly quality education, due to their parents' financial struggles in countries of asylum. Some who do attend school said they felt discriminated against at school. In addition to education, **unaccompanied and separated children** also prioritized skills building and livelihood opportunities, learning English, and the maintenance of their physical and mental health.
- **Female heads of households** largely do not feel safe in countries of asylum. Mothers of young daughters feel particularly insecure at night. They said they are harassed by male refugees and feel they are treated worse than women who have access to male family support. Female heads of households often feel isolated, as their voices are not heard by community leaders. In urban settings, female heads of households also face difficulties meeting basic needs, ensuring their children can go to school, and balancing all aspects of family life.
- **Single fathers** are concerned that their children will be unable to fulfil their dreams. They are stressed by the lack of positive opportunities for their children and the great loss this brings to the Rohingya community. Single fathers struggle to balance caring for small children and earning an income and are also concerned about the negative coping mechanisms that some children are resorting to in the absence of educational opportunities.

## b) While waiting for return, Rohingya refugees are most concerned about their livelihoods and education

Some 27% of Rohingya refugees cite livelihoods and education as their main concerns in their country of asylum. Rohingya refugees living in urban communities are also unable to meet their families' basic needs, face challenges in accessing health services, and fear being detained, but their greatest worries are about making a living and nurturing their children.

### **Woman**

*"I don't feel like I am living, I feel like I am surviving."*

**Figure 2.1** What are the biggest problems you are facing in the country of asylum?

The vast majority of **Rohingya refugees in all host countries say they have no access to formal employment or education**. They say they must work to survive and, outside of Bangladesh, over half say they are engaging in informal work, including 29% of youth aged 15 to 17. This has the potential to put them at increased risk of arrest, detention, and deportation, as well as financial and labor exploitation. It contributes to the exclusion of women, with only 8% of Rohingya refugee women saying they are earning an income, compared to 51% of men. Some 12% of Rohingya refugees say they receive financial support from abroad and 7% say they are sending money back to family members who remain in Myanmar.

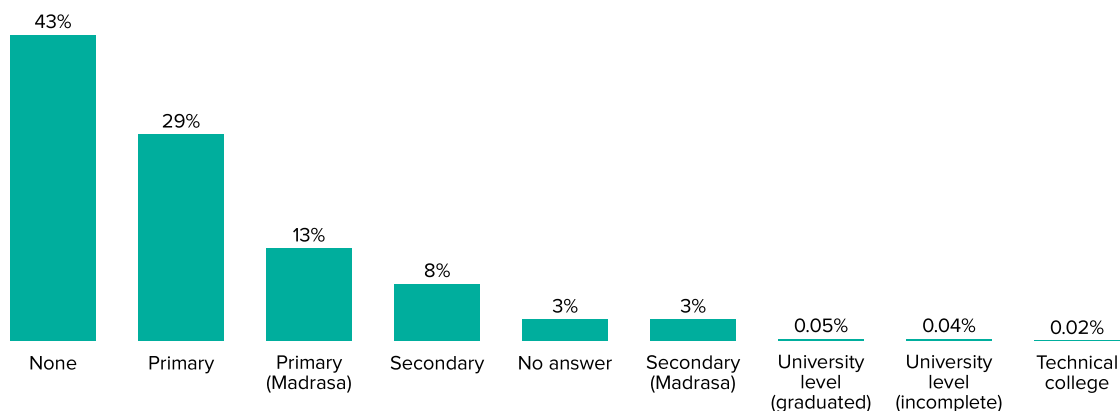
**Nearly half (45%) of all Rohingya refugees (64% of men and 29% of women) believe they have skills and experience suitable for legal employment.** For men, their experience is in construction (36%); education (15%); skilled trades, such as electricians, plumbers, and mechanics (11%); agriculture (11%); and the service industry (6%). For women, it is in handiwork, such as tailoring, cooking, and crafts (42%); the service industry (22%); agriculture (19%); and elderly and childcare (10%).

#### Youth

*“Whatever skill someone is willing to provide me, I wish to learn it.”*

**Most Rohingya refugees express a desire to learn new skills while in their country of asylum.** Rohingya refugee women say they are eager to receive training in elderly and childcare, agriculture, and tailoring, while men want to develop mechanical, construction, electrical, agricultural, and computer skills. Individual refugees expressed a diverse interest in careers ranging from journalism, music, and filmmaking to medicine, law, and landscaping.

**Yet 43% of Rohingya aged 15 or older (51% of women and 35% of men) say they have not received any education,** and only 8% report having official documentation of schooling. When they do complete the informal schooling available to them in countries of asylum, Rohingya refugees say they often find that opportunities remain limited due to their lack of formal certification, which discourages children and youth from pursuing education generally.

**Figure 2.2** What is highest level of education you have completed?


**Rohingya refugees say they want to work, gain skills, and educate their children.** They say they want to apply their skills, experiences, and knowledge in their host countries, upon return to Myanmar, or wherever they may live in the future. Rohingya refugees say they seek livelihoods and formal education opportunities to empower them to care for their families in displacement and strengthen connections with host communities — 55% said they have already established such connections — while also equipping them to make an impactful contribution in Myanmar upon their return.

### c) Most Rohingya refugees maintain their intent to return, as early as possible, but some say they would not return due to security concerns

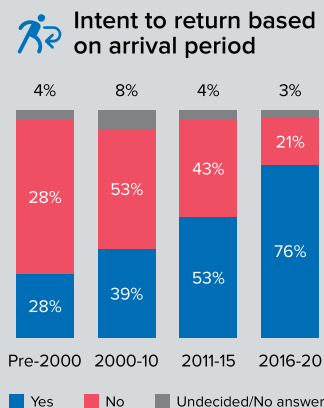
**66%** of the Rohingya intend to live in Myanmar again in the future

**95%** of those intending to return intend to return to their place of origin

**30%** do not intend to return, with insecurity and lack of access to citizenship as the main reasons

**81%** of those intending to return prefer to repatriate through a formal return mechanism organized by Myanmar and host country

**42%** of Rohingya refugees feel they have access to relevant information on Myanmar



**Rohingya refugees say they want to go home.** A large majority (66%) of Rohingya refugees interviewed across the region say that they intend to return to and live in Myanmar one day. This is consistent across almost all gender and age profiles but varied across countries of asylum and period of arrival.

Despite the persecution and exclusion they experienced in Myanmar, Rohingya refugees largely reported continuing to feel rooted in Myanmar. More than anything else, it is this sense of belonging — that “Myanmar is my home and the country to which I am the most connected” — driving their intent to return when conditions are conducive.

#### Female caregiver

*“Even if we received better facilities in another country to live a better life, going back to our own country would be the best choice for us.”*

**Figure 2.3 Why do you intend to live in Myanmar?**



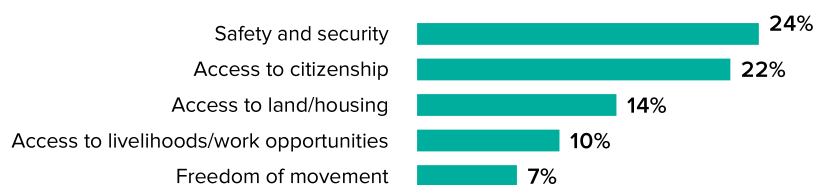
But **Rohingya refugees say they are not ready to return yet.** They say they need assurances that they will no longer face systemic discrimination and violence in Myanmar, which they noted have continued since the military takeover. They highlighted five key issues that must be addressed in Myanmar:

- 1 **Safety and security:** Rohingya refugees say they do not want to be assaulted, intimidated, or threatened in Myanmar, and if they are, they should be able to report it to the police and other authorities who will take legal action.
- 2 **Citizenship and documentation:** Rohingya refugees say they want to be recognized as citizens of Myanmar. They say they want the law to treat them the same way as other Myanmar nationals and not as second-class citizens because of their ethnicity or religion. They say they want an identity document that proves they are Myanmar nationals, and an official record of their marriages, the births of their children, and the deaths of their parents, all without having to pay a bribe. A majority of Rohingya refugees report that they do not have any official Myanmar identity document.
- 3 **Land and livelihoods:** Rohingya refugees say they want to live and work on the same land in Myanmar that their parents and grandparents lived and worked on. They say they want and deserve the same opportunities as other Myanmar nationals to find decent work, earn an income, and contribute to rebuilding Rakhine State.



- 4 **Freedom of movement:** Rohingya refugees say they want to exercise their right to move freely so they can build their own future by going to school, finding work, and receiving medical care. They say they want to choose where they will live, and 95% of those who intend to return want to return to their places of origin.
- 5 **Education:** Rohingya refugees say they want a better future for their children. They say they want equal access to schools at all levels and equal opportunities to study a trade or profession.

**Figure 2.4** What are the most important issues that must be addressed so that you are able to return?



Some 76% of Rohingya refugees who arrived in their country of asylum in the last 5 years intend to return, compared to 28% of those who have spent more than 20 years in exile. Across the region, a majority of Rohingya refugees displaced since 2016 believe the key issues in Myanmar can be addressed in the next five years, but the proportion of Rohingya refugees who believe such issues will never be addressed increases the longer they have been displaced. Adolescent Rohingya refugees are also less likely to want to return to Myanmar than other age groups, with 54% of those aged 15 to 17 intending to return.

**Table 2.1** Percentage of Rohingya refugees who believe issues in Myanmar will never be addressed

Period of arrival in country of asylum	%
2016-2020	13%
2011-2015	23%
2000-2010	24%
Prior to 2000	39%

While most Rohingya refugees say their future lies in Myanmar, 30% say they do not intend to return, primarily because they do not believe they will ever be physically secure or obtain citizenship in Myanmar. **Some Rohingya refugees said they may never be able to return due to the violence they experienced in Myanmar, the absence of any remaining family members in Myanmar, and their distrust in Myanmar authorities.**

**Figure 2.5 Why don't you intend to live in Myanmar?**

Most Rohingya refugees who do not intend to return to Myanmar expressed an interest in residing in either Saudi Arabia (24%), the United States (23%), or Australia (17%). The interest in Saudi Arabia was primarily among Rohingya refugees who had arrived in their country of asylum since 2016. Outside of that group, Rohingya refugees who do not intend to return to Myanmar were mainly interested in living in the United States (28%), Australia (19%), Saudi Arabia (16%), and Canada (14%), due to the prospect of employment (21%), living in safety (20%), education (15%), reuniting with family members (12%), and obtaining legal residence/citizenship (10%) in those countries. Among Rohingya refugees interested in living in the United States, 12% stated they have family members there, compared to 9% of those interested in living in Australia and 8% of those interested in living in Canada.

In total, 10% of Rohingya refugees say they have an immediate family member in a third country.



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## d) Access to information

In addition to seeking to understand Rohingya refugees' views about their future intentions and current concerns, UNHCR consulted Rohingya refugees about their access to information. Across the region, 42% felt they have access to relevant information on Myanmar, 72% on their country of asylum, and 48% on third countries. Several groups of Rohingya refugees felt that they did not have adequate information about the situation in Myanmar or elsewhere to make an informed decision about their future, namely older refugees, female heads of households, LGBTIQ+ refugees, and refugees with disabilities.

### *Female head of household*

*“We have to rely on ourselves to make decisions about our future. We don't feel that we have someone whom we can trust to consult about our future.”*

Rohingya refugees say they generally turn to UN agencies as the most trusted sources of information, except in Bangladesh, where religious leaders are the most trusted sources, and Nepal, where family members are most trusted.

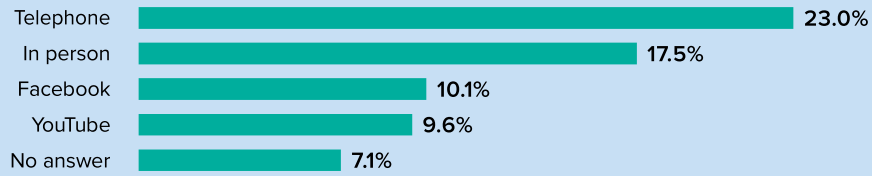
**Figure 2.6** Who do you trust the most to provide accurate information?



Across all gender and age profiles, Rohingya refugees say they prefer to receive information by phone and in person. Among online platforms, Facebook (including its Messenger app) is the preferred platform of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia, while WhatsApp is preferred by those in India. Older refugees also expressed a preference for receiving information by radio. Rohingya refugees receive their news from a wide variety of sources, but primarily Rohingya community outlets, such as Arakan Times, Rohingya Vision, Arakan News Agency, Rohingya News Agency, Rohingya Today, and Voice of Rohingya.



**Figure 2.7** How do you prefer to receive information?



Female heads of households express the need for better and more timely information. The low literacy rate among female heads of households makes it difficult for them to receive written information, and many stated that they do not have access to their own phone or social media sources. They therefore receive information primarily from relatives, community members, male neighbours, and YouTube, but some felt that community members and relatives do not openly share information with them because they are single women. They are also unsure if the information they do have is reliable.



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The consultations utilized a sample survey to enable the standardized collection of quantitative data across the profiles and countries of asylum. The information obtained through the survey was then enhanced and supplemented by information gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KII), which allowed for more nuanced and elaborated discussions and enabled UNHCR to capture the views of population groups (including children, youth, older refugees, persons with disabilities, female heads of households, LGBTIQ+ refugees, and parents of school-age children) whose voices are often under-represented.

UNHCR surveyed a representative sample of women and men and a range of age groups (15 to 17, 18 to 59, and 60 and over) among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, and Thailand. The sampling methodology and sample sizes chosen ensured a low margin of error (7.5%) and provided a high degree of confidence (90%) that the results obtained from the portion of the population interviewed are representative of the views of the whole. This methodology also allows for statistically confident comparisons of the concerns and intentions of Rohingya refugees across different genders, ages, profiles, and countries of asylum.

Due to their distinct profiles, experiences, and living situations, separate sample strata were drawn for two population groups in Bangladesh (Rohingya who arrived in the 1990s and those who have arrived since 2016) and in Indonesia (Rohingya living independently and those living in IOM-sponsored accommodation).

The breakdown of individuals interviewed in each country of asylum is as follows:

	Age 15-17		Age 18-59		Age 60+		TOTAL
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	
Bangladesh (arrivals since 2016)	124	119	135	127	118	119	742
Bangladesh (1990s arrivals)	73	72	72	74	71	61	423
Malaysia	107	112	123	121	83	107	653
India	140	98	130	118	72	80	638
Indonesia (IOM accommodation)	5	1	43	117	0	2	168
Indonesia (living independently)	1	0	10	22	1	1	35
Nepal	6	7	29	41	3	2	88
Thailand	4	13	43	39	0	0	99
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>422</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>659</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>2,846</b>



In several countries of asylum, information was collected through telephone interviews due to COVID-19-related movement restrictions. In Bangladesh, enumerators were able to conduct face-to-face interviews in the camps in Cox's Bazar. All UNHCR operations utilized the KOBO tool to record information and Power BI to assist in data cleaning, weighting, and analysis.

The consolidated results highlight the answers provided by respondents, weighted to proportionally represent the countries of asylum and profiles sampled. As a result, the responses provided by profiles that comprise the largest Rohingya populations across the region (i.e., Rohingya in Bangladesh, who comprise 88% of the total Rohingya population across the region) are given corresponding weight. The consolidated results thus reflect the intentions of each Rohingya refugee in the region equally, but as there are significantly more Rohingya in Bangladesh, the consolidated results are weighted towards their responses.

Consultations in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, and Thailand were completed prior to the events of 1 February 2021 in Myanmar. To determine whether the military takeover substantively changed the outlook, intentions, and concerns of Rohingya in these countries, UNHCR conducted FGDs and KIIs to assess the extent to which these events altered refugees' perspective of the future. These FGDs and KIIs made clear that these developments had not made a substantive difference in refugees' thinking on the consultation topics. UNHCR therefore believes the results of the consultations in these countries remain valid and a repeat exercise was not necessary. Consultations in Bangladesh commenced in May and hence any implications of the recent events on refugees' intentions and perspectives were incorporated in their responses.







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**UNHCR Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific**  
18th Floor, Capital Tower, All Seasons Place  
87/1 Wireless Road 10330  
Bangkok, Thailand

[www.unhcr.org/asia](http://www.unhcr.org/asia)

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