

# Mixed Movements in South-East Asia

2016



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency





## KEY FIGURES

**43,000**

Rohingya refugees estimated to have crossed from northern Rakhine State into Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh in 2016

**168,500**

Rohingya refugees who have fled Myanmar since 2012, including 44,000 in 2016

**112,500**

Rohingya refugees believed to have travelled by sea to Malaysia from 2012 to 2015

**18%**

Percentage of surveyed Rohingya refugee women and girls married before the age of 16



Recent Rohingya arrivals in Bangladesh waiting at a food distribution site. © UNHCR/Sarah Jabin

*2016 was the fifth consecutive year of large-scale movements of Rohingya refugees from Rakhine state in Myanmar to other countries by land or sea, bringing the estimated total since 2012 to 168,500.\* A year-by-year breakdown of the outflow is presented below on page 8.*

## Overview

- Following violence in northern Rakhine state, Myanmar, in October and November 2016, as many as 43,000 **Rohingya refugees** were estimated to have crossed from northern Rakhine state into the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh on foot and by boat across the Naf River by 31 December 2016. An additional 31,000 newly-arrived Rohingya refugees were identified in Bangladesh in January and February 2017.
- Thousands of Rohingya refugees were also believed to have **travelled to India** overland via Bangladesh in 2016, including 1,000 who have already registered with UNHCR, continuing what has been a steady flow since 2012.
- Mixed movements of refugees and migrants by sea across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea **remained disrupted** in 2016, with only rumors of isolated attempts and no confirmed maritime arrivals. Small numbers of Rohingya attempted the overland journey from Myanmar to Malaysia in 2016, but dozens were apprehended en route.
- The absence of large-scale mixed movements from Myanmar to Malaysia in 2016 followed a peak in such movements from 2012 to 2015, when over 100,000 Rohingya refugees were estimated to have attempted the sea journey alongside Bangladeshi migrants. **UNHCR estimates** on deaths, demographics, and the circumstances of women and girls during that period is presented below on pages 7-8 and 11-12.
- At least seven vessels carrying a total of at least 89 asylum-seekers and migrants sailed through South-East Asia in an **attempt to reach Australia** in 2016. At the end of 2016, there were **1,661 refugees and asylum-seekers** who attempted to reach Australia by sea located in offshore processing centres in Papua New Guinea and Nauru or in detention centres in Australia.

*\*The total number of Rohingya refugees and internally displaced persons in the Asia-Pacific region is estimated at 420,000 and 120,000, respectively.*

## New arrivals in Bangladesh

The largest movement of refugees through South-East Asia in 2016 took place in the wake of attacks on border posts in northern Rakhine state, Myanmar, on 9 October and 12-13 November that were followed by a military response to the attacks. By 31 December, an estimated 43,000 Rohingya refugees, mostly from Maungdaw in northern Rakhine state, had fled either overland to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, or by boat across the Naf River, which separates Bangladesh and Myanmar. Several capsizes were reported, resulting in dozens of deaths, and between 8 October 2016 and 22 January 2017, Bangladesh authorities reportedly acknowledged [pushing back 5,316 Rohingya](#) to Myanmar.

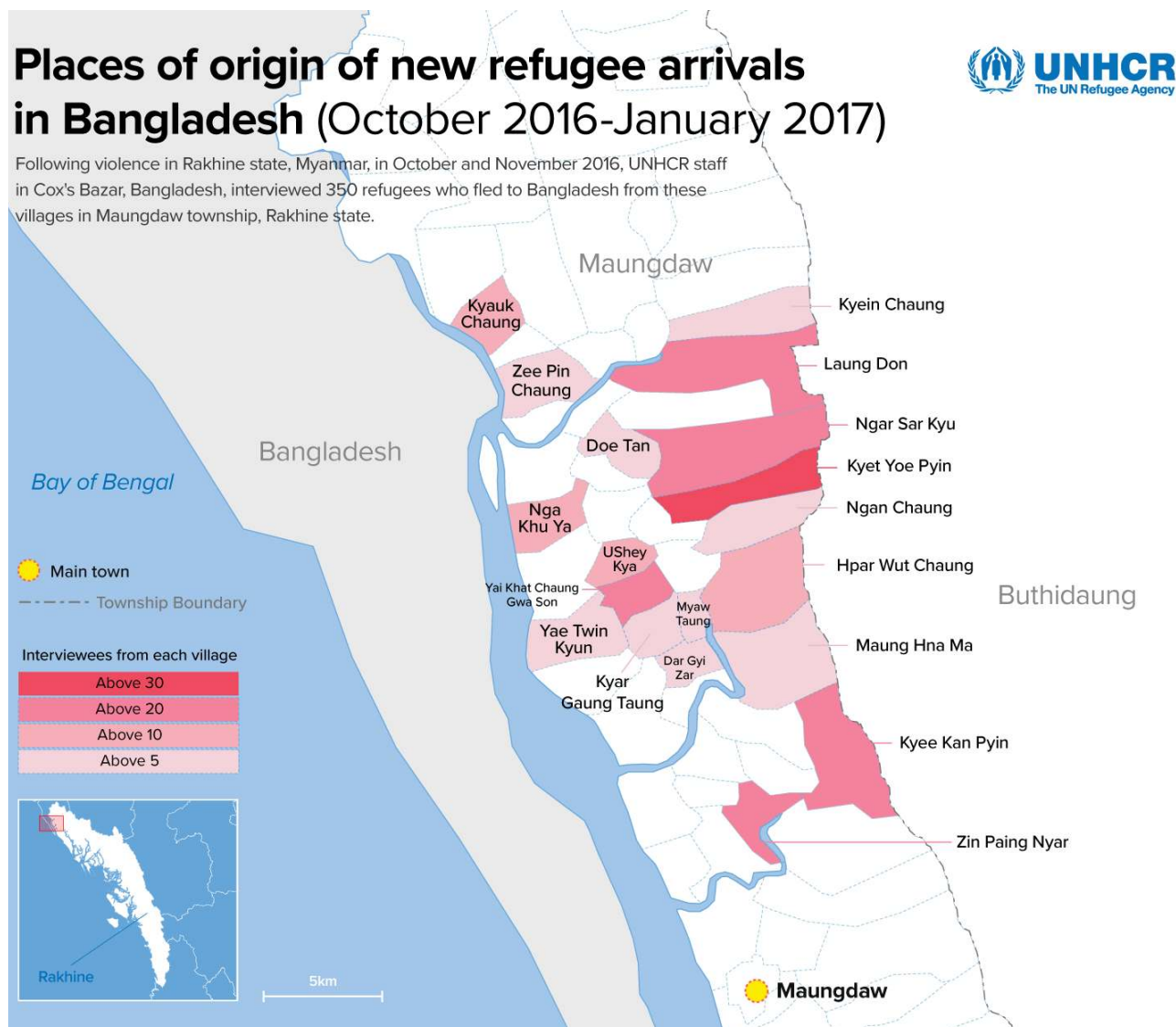
In addition to 31,000 more newly-arrived Rohingya refugees identified in Bangladesh in January and February 2017, a further 20,000 people are believed to have been internally displaced within northern Rakhine state since October 2016, though most of those internally displaced are believed to have since returned home. Access to the area remains restricted, particularly for international humanitarian staff and local Muslim staff, so figures cannot be verified, but the total estimated displacement of nearly 100,000 people is comparable to some 112,500 Rohingya believed to have travelled by sea to Malaysia from 2012 to 2015.



Recently arrived Rohingya refugees build their new home from bamboo in Bangladesh after fleeing violence in Myanmar.  
© UNHCR/Saiful Huq Omi

UNHCR staff in Bangladesh conducted confidential protection interviews of over 500 Rohingya families who arrived in Bangladesh after October 2016 to determine their needs and vulnerabilities. Most interviewees fled to Bangladesh after becoming direct victims of violence in Myanmar, while a minority had fled as a precautionary measure. Among the interviewees, children reported witnessing their parents shot dead in their homes, women said they were raped and sought medical treatment in Bangladesh, and the fate of hundreds of interviewees' family members apprehended by authorities or separated during flight was unknown. Some interviewees had recent bullet or burn wounds, and most said their homes had either been looted, burned, or demolished. Due to the restricted access in many of the refugees' places of origin in Myanmar, it has not been possible to conduct independent verification of these accounts.

The map below of northern Rakhine state, Myanmar, shows the main places of origin of refugees who arrived in Bangladesh after October 2016, as reported in protection interviews.



New refugee arrivals in Bangladesh have also faced a variety of protection concerns inside Bangladesh. The absence of a protection-sensitive refugee registration process puts them in a precarious protection situation in which they remain highly mobile, seeking shelter wherever they can find it. Basic shelter and nutrition is lacking, and an outbreak of measles and acute watery diarrhea have been reported in settlements where new refugee arrivals have taken shelter.

## Continued movements to India

Among Rohingya registered with UNHCR in India, over 1,000 said they arrived in India in 2016, having travelled from Myanmar overland through Bangladesh. Hundreds more who are expected to register with UNHCR in India in 2017 are likely to have also arrived in 2016.

The movements to India in 2016 continued a steady flow of Rohingya into India in recent years. Since 2012, at least 13,000 Rohingya have entered India, virtually all via Bangladesh. Based on UNHCR interviews, Rohingya in India travelled in family units about 30% larger than Rohingya who travelled to Malaysia, and came to India



Many Rohingya children like these, photographed in February 2017, live in overcrowded makeshift sites in Bangladesh having fled violence in Myanmar. © UNHCR/Saiful Huq Omi

## ***Rohingya orphans seek safe space to heal***

*UNHCR is working to identify and assess the best interests of unaccompanied children who recently arrived in the refugee camps of Bangladesh.*

UKHIYA, Bangladesh – At their age, Asif and Suleman\* should be running around, kicking up dirt, giving their parents trouble. Instead the young brothers sit like statues, staring blankly with dull eyes.

Suleman is 12 and Asif eight, but they look much younger than their peers. In recent weeks, their daily routine has consisted of religious school and private English lessons. No play and only sporadic sleep.

“I have dreams of happy children playing,” said Suleman unexpectedly. “But in my dreams we can’t play with them. I’m always afraid. If something falls on the ground or there is a sudden noise, I jump and remember what happened.”

The boys are among many distressed Rohingya children who have arrived in Bangladesh since October last year, when a security crackdown in Myanmar’s northern Rakhine state tore them from their families. More than 70,000 people are estimated to have fled to Bangladesh from October 2016 to February 2017; as many as half could be children aged under 18 years.

Suleman and Asif were playing in their backyard when their home was raided. They ran away, unable to save their little brother who was playing in the front of the house. They believed their parents were shot and killed in the attack, but do not know if their brother survived.

Fleeing with some neighbours, they were eventually taken to their uncle Mustafa in Bangladesh, who had fled earlier in October with his family. Today they live in a makeshift shelter and have received some rice and relief supplies.

Beyond their immediate needs, these boys will need psychosocial counselling to help them overcome the loss of their loved ones and the violence they have witnessed.

In Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps, multi-age play spaces have been set up to help address mental distress.

“Play is essential for all children to build a foundation for learning, but it is particularly important for refugee children because of its therapeutic role,” said Marzia Dalto, UNHCR’s Protection Officer in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. “When properly managed, safe and

imaginative play can help to reduce stress and optimize brain development. It can provide healing opportunities for children's emotional trauma and offer hope to break the cycle of physical and emotional violence."

For some, play can feel like a luxury. Kamal\*, 12, lost his parents during the violence in Myanmar. With nothing to their name, he and three elder sisters fled to Bangladesh in November. They had to borrow 80,000 MMK (USD 60) from a neighbour to pay for a boat to cross the Naf River.

In Bangladesh, they were found by a long-staying Rohingya refugee, Noor Kaida, who decided to host them despite having four children of her own.

"I came across these children crying at a graveyard nearby," said Noor Kaida, 27, who herself fled Myanmar as a baby with her parents. "I took them in because they have nothing, no one. They are so vulnerable and we have a moral responsibility for them."

As the only boy, Kamal volunteered to work at a tea shop in town. He barely comes back to their shelter anymore.

His eldest sister Talifa\*, 18, worries incessantly: "They

are still so young. How we will find food and clothing, how we will survive? We are also in debt to our neighbour for the boat fees. He keeps asking and I promised to beg or do whatever I can to repay him."

Their host says she will shelter them for as long as she can – "until they find their own shelter or get married."

Good intentions aside, the presence of so many unaccompanied minors raises serious protection concerns around the risk of child labour, early marriage, trafficking and sexual exploitation.

UNHCR has mobilized community support groups involving women and youth in the refugee camps to reach out to these vulnerable children. The agency is also working with partners to trace family members where possible, and to assess the best interests of those who have no surviving family. Options could range from tracing and reunification with close relatives, to appointing guardians or foster families who can offer care and guidance.

"I think of my parents often," said Talifa. "We bear the pain inside but we have to deal with it."

*\*Names changed for protection reasons*



Asif, 8, and Suleman, 12, say their parents were killed in the violence near Maungdaw, Myanmar. © UNHCR/Vivian Tan

because it was safer and cheaper than going to and living in Malaysia.



Rohingya refugee children in India. © UNHCR/Saw Myint

Unlike the previous maritime route across the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, in which at least 1,800 refugees and migrants are believed to have died at sea from smuggler abuse and deprivation, the primary protection concern of Rohingya travelling to India was the risk of being detained for illegal entry to India. Abuse by smugglers was not common, as most Rohingya in India had engaged only a loose network of people smugglers and only at border-crossing points, in contrast to the professional and multinational smuggling networks that operated the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea route.

The crackdown on maritime smuggling networks since May and June 2015 has not resulted in an increase of Rohingya travelling to India. In the 18 months following the crackdown, Rohingya registration with UNHCR in India actually declined by 23% compared to the 18-month period prior to the crackdown. Recorded arrivals have similarly decreased since reaching a peak of 4,500 in 2013, suggesting that the overland route to India has not replaced the maritime route to Malaysia, but is rather a separate route catering to generally poorer Rohingya with less sophisticated means of travel and communication.

## Disrupted movements to Malaysia

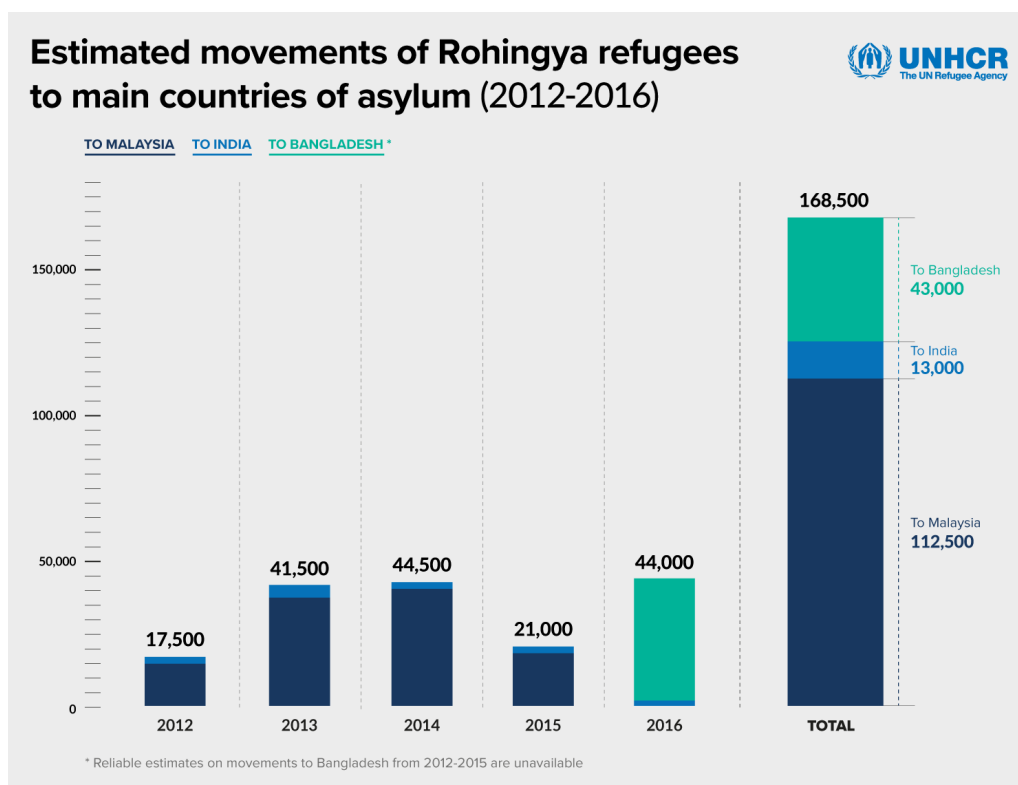
Throughout 2016, refugee communities circulated rumours of isolated attempts to travel from Myanmar to Malaysia by boat, particularly in October and November, but corresponding arrivals by boat have not been confirmed.

Some Rohingya refugees who were rescued by Achenese fisherman in Indonesia in May 2015 were believed to have reached Malaysia in 2016 by crossing the Malacca Strait. That crossing, though relatively short and cheap, remained deadly, with over 100 migrants [dying in capsizes](#) between [January 2016](#) and [January 2017](#), including [one in November](#) that killed 54 Indonesian migrant workers. No refugees were known to be among the dead.

Overland, over 100 people were caught by authorities in [Myanmar](#) and [Thailand](#) attempting the road journey to Malaysia in 2016, about half of whom were Rohingya. Some had paid up to MMK 2.8 million (USD 2,050) each to reach Malaysia.

## Data on earlier movements

UNHCR has collated and analyzed data collected from over 500 interviews of refugees who were among over 100,000 Rohingya estimated to have crossed the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea from 2012 to 2015 (as noted above, UNHCR has not been able to identify any individuals who departed for Malaysia in 2016). Estimates of Rohingya refugees, who travelled alongside Bangladeshi migrants to Malaysia on this sea route, are based on the proportion of Rohingya and Bangladeshis as reported in UNHCR interviews. The results confirm previous observations that the crossing was one of the world's deadliest, and that the proportion of women steadily increased over time.



As the table below shows, the fatality rate in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea was 1.2% from 2013 to 2015, with a peak of 1.7% in 2013. During the same period, the fatality rate in mixed movements [across the Mediterranean Sea](#) was 0.6%, with a peak of 1.6% in 2014 (in 2016, the fatality rate of the Mediterranean crossing was 1.4%). While deaths in the Mediterranean have been mostly attributed to capsizes and drownings, deaths in the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea were largely due to smuggler abuse and deprivation.

### Rohingya and Bangladeshi maritime movements to Malaysia (2013-2015)

YEAR	2013	2014	2015	TOTAL
Fatality rate	1.7%	1.2%	0.6%	1.2%
Estimated deaths	900	700	200	1,800
Female	8%	12%	18%	12%
<b>Place of origin of Rohingya</b>				
Maungdaw	51%	40%	35%	43%
Buthidaung	15%	15%	15%	15%
Sittwe	22%	31%	41%	30%





In some makeshift sites around Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar area, humanitarian agencies have built tube wells that provide a much needed source of drinking water for undocumented Rohingya living outside the official camps.  
© UNHCR/Saiful Huq Omi

## **UNHCR seeks equal treatment for all Rohingya in Bangladesh**

*A small proportion who fled violence decades ago are considered refugees, while many recent arrivals remain undocumented and miss out on vital aid.*

UKHIYA, Bangladesh - At a glance, Mostafa and Sohel\* have a lot in common.

As a young man in 1992, Mostafa fled violence in the northern part of Rakhine state in Myanmar to seek refuge in Bangladesh.

Twenty-five years later Sohel took the same journey. After weeks of violence amid a security operation in his village, the 22-year-old had to be carried across the Naf River to safety earlier this year, his body burnt and swollen.

Pointing to the scars on his feet, Sohel said: "They beat us senseless and left us to die in a ditch. We were five people in the group, only three survived."

Both men found refuge in Bangladesh, where Mostafa recently guided Sohel to a hospital to receive treatment for his injuries. But despite their common Rohingya background and circumstances, Mostafa and Sohel are being treated very differently.

As part of the influx of refugees in the early 1990s, Mostafa is among 33,000 registered refugees living in two government-run camps serviced by UNHCR,

the UN Refugee Agency, and its partners in south-eastern Bangladesh.

He has a home in Kutupalong camp and access to basic services including food assistance, healthcare and education for his wife and three children. Now in his 50s, he has learnt to speak English well and is working as a photographer in the camp.

In contrast, Sohel has no legal status in Bangladesh as one of more than 70,000 Rohingya new arrivals who are believed to have fled a security operation between October 2016 and February 2017. He lives with people from his home village and keeps a low profile. He receives ad hoc assistance if he is lucky.

A third category consists of an estimated 200,000 to 500,000 undocumented Rohingya who arrived in Bangladesh between the two influxes. They live in makeshift sites and local villages, and until recently had no access to humanitarian aid.

"The current situation is not sustainable," said Shinji Kubo, UNHCR's Representative in Bangladesh. "Regardless of when they came and where they live,

these people have the same needs and deserve equal access to protection and assistance.”

The new influx has highlighted the urgent need to verify the number and location of the new arrivals. Without this information, vulnerable refugees risk falling through the cracks while others could be receiving duplication of assistance.

“We are advocating for a joint verification of the new arrivals with our partners as soon as possible,” said Kubo. “This exercise will help the government and humanitarian agencies to better target assistance to those who need it the most, be they new arrivals, refugees who came earlier or locals who host them.”

UNHCR works with humanitarian agencies such as the International Organization for Migration and the World Food Programme in Cox’s Bazar.

Several thousand new arrivals are believed to be hosted in the two official camps, straining the capacity of existing refugees and the infrastructure. The water supply in Nayapara camp is expected to run out by the end of March and there are fears of disease outbreaks as a result of overcrowding and poor sanitation. Many more new arrivals are living in existing makeshift sites or new ones that have sprouted spontaneously.

In Ukhiya district, a site called Balukhali has emerged in the last two months and now hosts 1,600 families,

according to a local politician helping them. Located beyond some rice fields, it is a mish-mash of flimsy shelters and latrines made of thin plastic sheets, dried leaves, tree branches and bamboo. These structures could constitute safety and health hazards unless proper site planning is undertaken.

Miriam\*, 65, has just moved to Balukhali with her son’s family. “We were living in a local village for more than two months but the leader said we can only receive assistance if we go to a camp,” she said as her son cleared some land to build a shelter. “We have nowhere else to go, we’ll have to stay here.”

The Bangladesh government has announced it will extend a 2016 census of undocumented Rohingya living outside the two camps to include the new arrivals.

“In the long run, we hope that all Rohingya in Bangladesh can be documented to ensure full respect for their rights,” said UNHCR’s Kubo. “Knowing the profile of this population will also help us to identify longer-term solutions for them.”

Despite his traumatized state, Sohel is clear about one thing: “Here I am living in someone else’s house and I worry about the future. If we are given status in Myanmar, we will definitely go back.

\*Names changed for protection reasons



Recent arrival Sohel (left) shares his experiences with long-stayer Mostafa (centre) as a UNHCR worker listens in.  
© UNHCR/Vivian Tan

# Rohingya women on the move

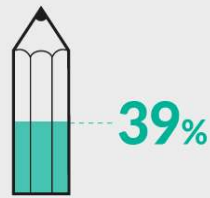
UNHCR conducted a survey of 85 Rohingya women and girls in Malaysia, India, and Indonesia younger than 35.

All interviews took place in October and November 2016 and were conducted in private and only by Rohingya-speaking female UNHCR staff.

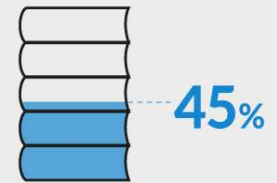
## Average age



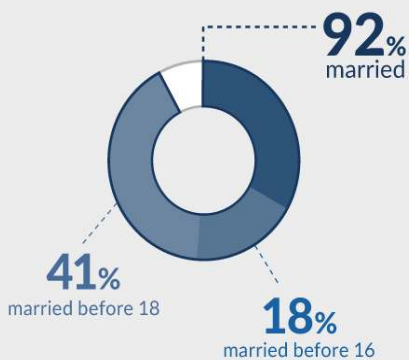
## Literate



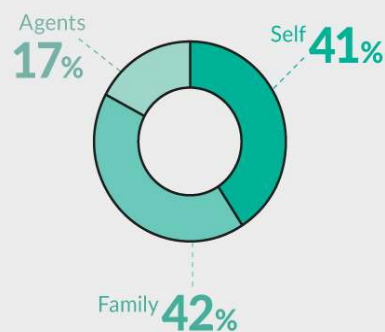
## Education received some education



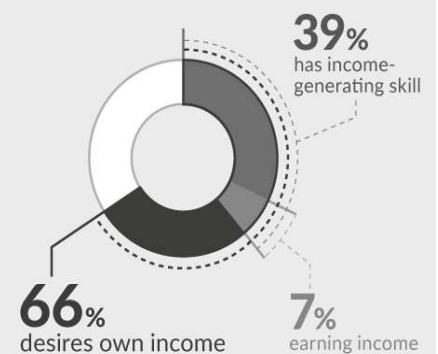
## Marriage



## Husband chosen by



## Livelihoods



Due to the increasing number of Bangladeshis who joined Rohingya crossing the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, by 2015 there were almost an equal number of Bangladeshis and Rohingya on the vessels making the crossing. Based on UNHCR interviews, the cumulative number of Rohingya travelling to Malaysia on such vessels from 2012 to 2015 was approximately 112,500.

As UNHCR has [previously reported](#), the growing number of women and girls who undertook this sea journey from 2013 to 2015 were often subjected to child marriage or other exploitative arrangements. To assess the specific and continuing vulnerabilities they face, UNHCR interviewed 85 Rohingya women and girls in Malaysia, India, and Indonesia in 2016 about the circumstances of their lives on the move. They are among 8,000 Rohingya women and girls registered with UNHCR in those countries between the ages of 14 and 34—meaning they were born stateless, following Myanmar’s enactment of its 1982 Citizenship Law—and had travelled in mixed movements from Myanmar and Bangladesh since 2012.

Ninety-two per cent of the women and girls interviewed were married, and in all three countries had married at similar ages, between an average of 16 and 17; 18% married before they turned 16. The 80% of interviewees who had children gave birth to their first child at an average age of 18.

The likelihood that a Rohingya woman or girl had chosen her own husband

*Based on UNHCR interviews, the cumulative number of Rohingya travelling to Malaysia from 2012 to 2015 was approximately 112,500*

varied across countries. In India, 45% had chosen their own husbands; all the others' husbands were chosen by their families. In Malaysia, however, only 24% had chosen their own husbands; 42% were married to husbands chosen by their families, and 34% by brokers or agents. One in every three women and girls interviewed said they were victims of domestic violence.

Rohingya women and girls now in India appeared to have received more education (in Myanmar) than those now in Malaysia, with 66% having received some education and 59% being literate, compared to 29% and 21% in Malaysia. One possible explanation is that Rohingya women in Malaysia were more likely to have left Myanmar before getting married, thereby interrupting their education. Although 66% of all interviewees said they wanted to earn their own income and 39% possessed some income-generating skill (usually sewing), only 7% were actually earning an income.



A Rohingya woman stands outside her shelter in Bangladesh.  
© UNHCR/Saiful Huq Omi

## Attempts to reach Australia

Seven vessels were reported sailing through South-East Asia in an attempt to reach Australia in 2016, including: one vessel with 12 Sri Lankans intercepted by Australia off the Cocos Islands and [returned to Sri Lanka](#) in May; a vessel carrying 42 Sri Lankans and two Indians that departed from India and [disembarked in Indonesia](#) in June; another vessel carrying 21 Vietnamese who were intercepted and returned to Viet Nam in June by Australian authorities; and a fourth vessel with six Sri Lankans whom Australian authorities [returned to Sri Lanka](#) in August.

Australian authorities also reported intercepting [two other vessels](#) and returning the passengers to their countries of origin—to [Sri Lanka](#), in one case in February—in the first half of 2016, but gave no further details. Indonesian authorities reported that one additional boat of six Bangladeshis was [returned to Indonesia](#) by Australian authorities in March.

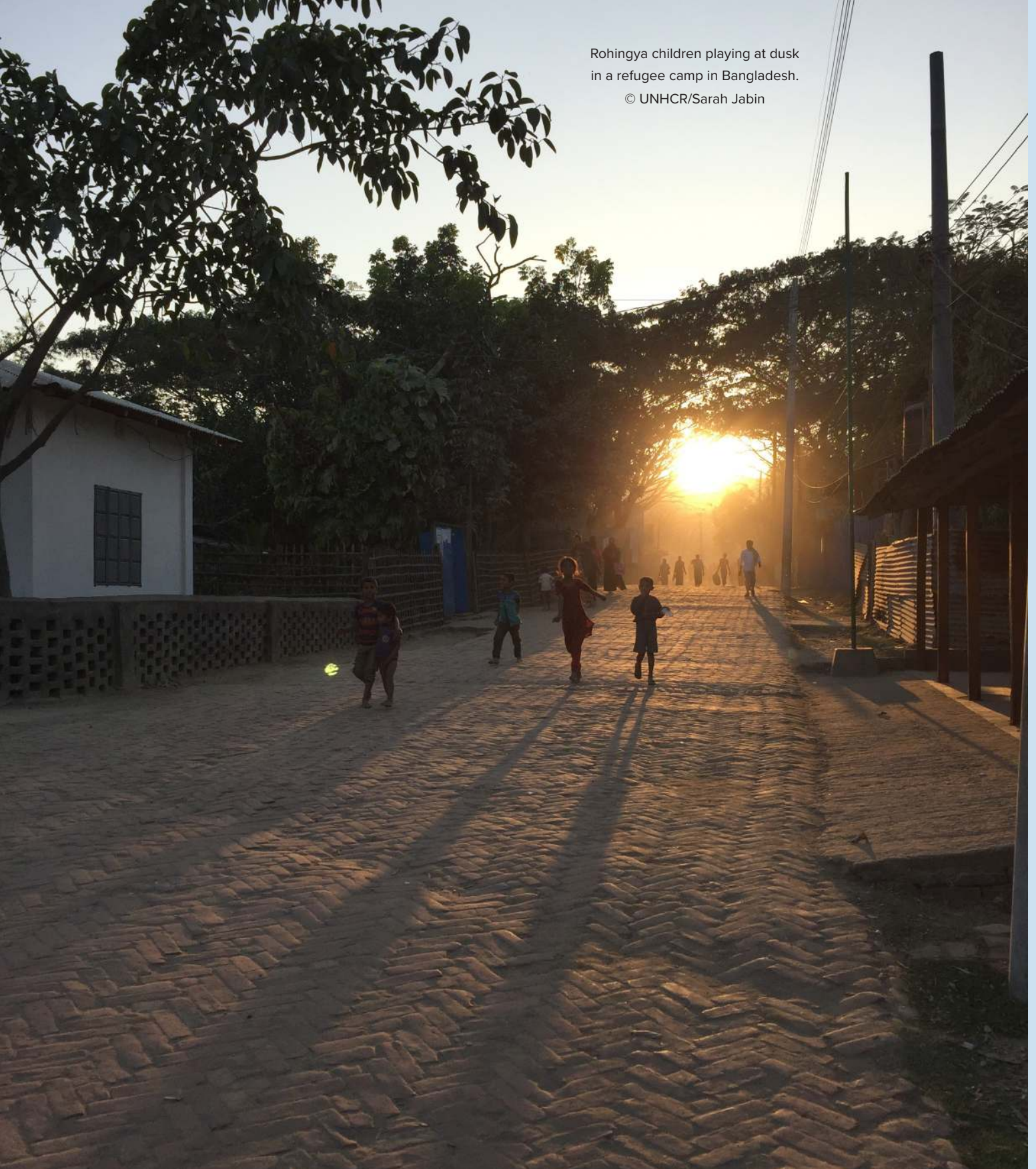
Since September 2012, more than 2,200 individuals who attempted to reach Australia by sea have been transferred to Papua New Guinea and Nauru. The majority of individuals transferred reside in offshore processing centres in those two countries and are still awaiting a durable solution.

As at 31 December 2016, 415 individuals who attempted to reach Australia by sea were in detention in Australia. This includes a number of individuals transferred from Papua New Guinea and Nauru as well as individuals who attempted to directly reach Australia by sea before the “offshore processing” arrangements were re-introduced.

*Since September 2012, more than 2,200 individuals who attempted to reach Australia by sea have been transferred to Papua New Guinea and Nauru*

Rohingya children playing at dusk  
in a refugee camp in Bangladesh.

© UNHCR/Sarah Jabin



*Mixed movements are by their nature clandestine, making the data on such movements difficult to independently verify. The information in this report is compiled from various sources, including governments, implementing partners, media reports, and direct interviews with persons of concern to UNHCR who travelled in mixed movements in South-East Asia.*

## UNHCR Regional Office for South-East Asia April 2017

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