

Detention of migrants and refugees in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger

This snapshot provides an overview of 4Mi data in relation to the detention of migrants and refugees in West Africa. It is based on 3,094 4Mi interviews conducted between June and November 2019, 30% of which were with women. Interviews took place in Mali (Kayes, Mopti, Gao, Timbuktu and Ber), Niger (Niamey, Diffa, Agadez, N'guimi and Tillabéri) and Burkina Faso (Dori, Bobo Dioulasso and Kantchari). The main nationalities interviewed were Guinean (12%), Nigerian (12%), Burkinabe (12%), Malian (10%), Ivorian (10%) and Nigerien (9%).

Profiles of detained migrants and refugees

9% (n=291) of respondents reported having been detained at least once. 96% were aged between 18 and 42, with 24% of them aged between 28 and 32. Respondents who have been detained identified 62% as Muslim and 36% as Christian, the same proportion as the overall sample. **14% reported witnessing detention of minors under 18.**

The main nationalities of those reporting to have been detained were Guinean (12%), Nigerien (12%), Burkinabe (11%) and Malian (10%), which matches the overall sample with the exception of Niger, for which the proportion of detainees is slightly higher. A majority (72%) were working before undertaking their journey, mainly in services (39%) or as labourers (19%), and 91% left for economic reasons. 69% of the respondents who reported being detained had been travelling for two months or more. 50% had been detained more than once. 43% of respondents reporting to have been detained were aiming to reach European countries (mainly Italy 12%, Spain 10%, and France 9%), while 18% mentioned Algeria and 7% Libya as their destination country, which again reflects the overall sample.

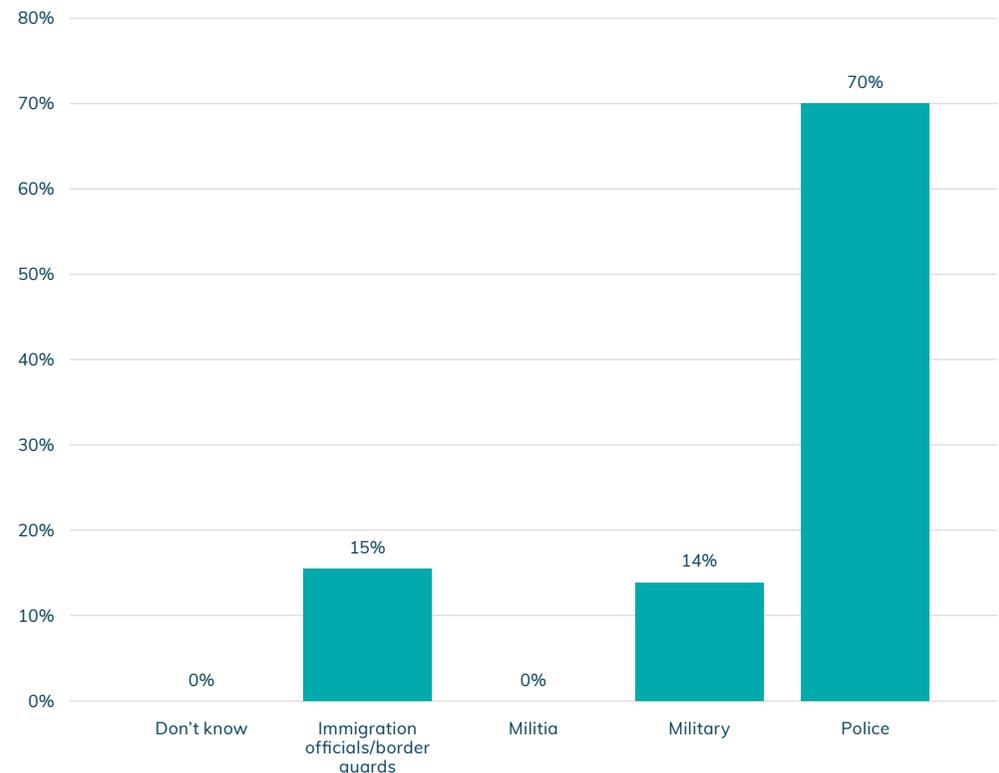
No significant differences were observed between men and women regarding the likelihood of being detained.

Key findings

The police are most frequently reported to be responsible for detention

The police were mentioned as being responsible for 70% of reported detention cases, followed by immigration officials/border guards (15%) and military (14%).

Figure 1. Who is responsible for detention?



Detention in Mali is more frequently reported by respondents

Although the proportion of migrants interviewed who transited through Mali is equal to those who transited through Burkina Faso and Niger (30%), most of the cases of detention were reported to have occurred in Mali (74%), with some reported in Niger (7%) and Burkina Faso (7%). According to Interpol, anti-smuggling and trafficking operations led by the police have taken place during the period these interviews took place, as “Mali serves as a major transit country for human traffickers”.¹ In addition, according to 4Mi monitors, with the ongoing conflict in Mali, national security forces are verifying IDs of people on the move to check links with terrorism. It would appear that some migrants and refugees are being detained as part of these checks. Detention cases in Mali were reported to have occurred mainly in the south, in Sevaré (28%), Bamako (21%), Segou (18%), and Sikasso (11%).² Detention is also being reported as practiced at checkpoints to ask for ransom, in particular along the axis Bamako-Gao.

Many reporting to be detained are ECOWAS nationals

84% of the migrants and refugees reporting to have been detained are nationals of ECOWAS countries. Burkinabe, Ivorian, Guinean, and Senegalese report being detained more than once and for a longer period.

Among the 12% of Nigerian interviewed overall, a small proportion (3%) report having been detained. Strong trafficking networks connections between Niger and Nigeria seem to enable migrants to avoid being controlled by the authorities. According to a 4Mi key informant in Burkina Faso, traffickers trafficking Nigerians for sexual exploitation are also paying bribes along the journey.

In addition, although the sample of Sudanese and South Sudanese interviewed by 4Mi

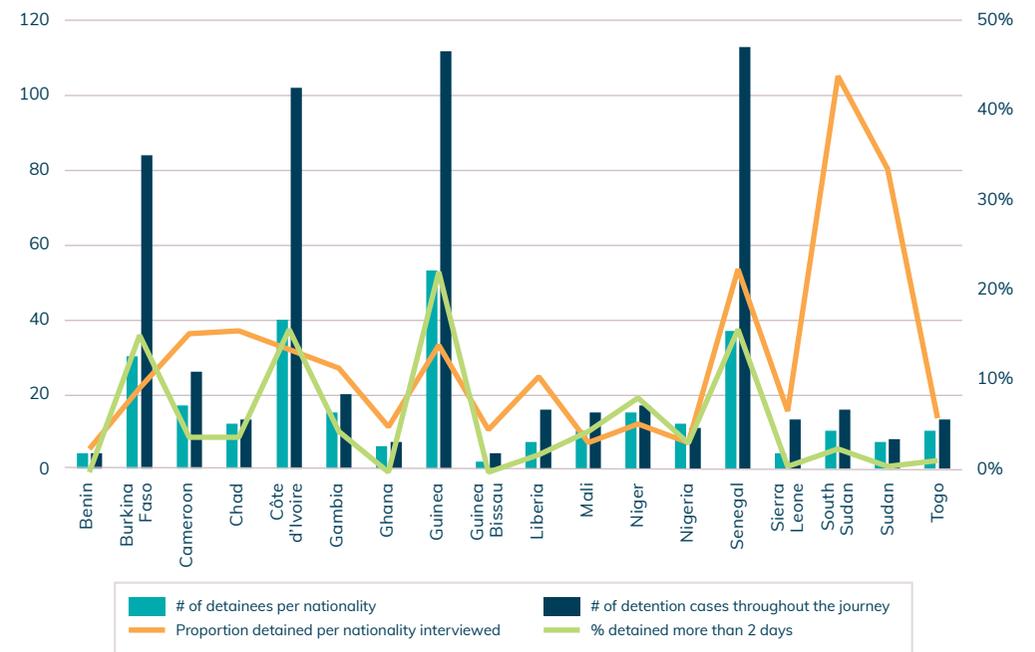
1 <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2019/Trafficking-victims-rescued-during-INTERPOL-coordinated-operation-in-Mali>

2 A specific location may be cited more frequently for several reasons other than it being the location where most detention incidents happen. It may be that more respondents have travelled through certain locations than others, since interviews are taking place along migration routes from Burkina Faso all the way to Northern Mali. It is very likely that locations further away from area of departure have been less used by this sample.

in West Africa is very small (6%), a significant proportion report to have been detained during their journey (43% Sudanese and 33% South Sudanese).

Detention on the grounds of irregular entry/exit is a main reason for detention

Figure 2. Detention per nationality

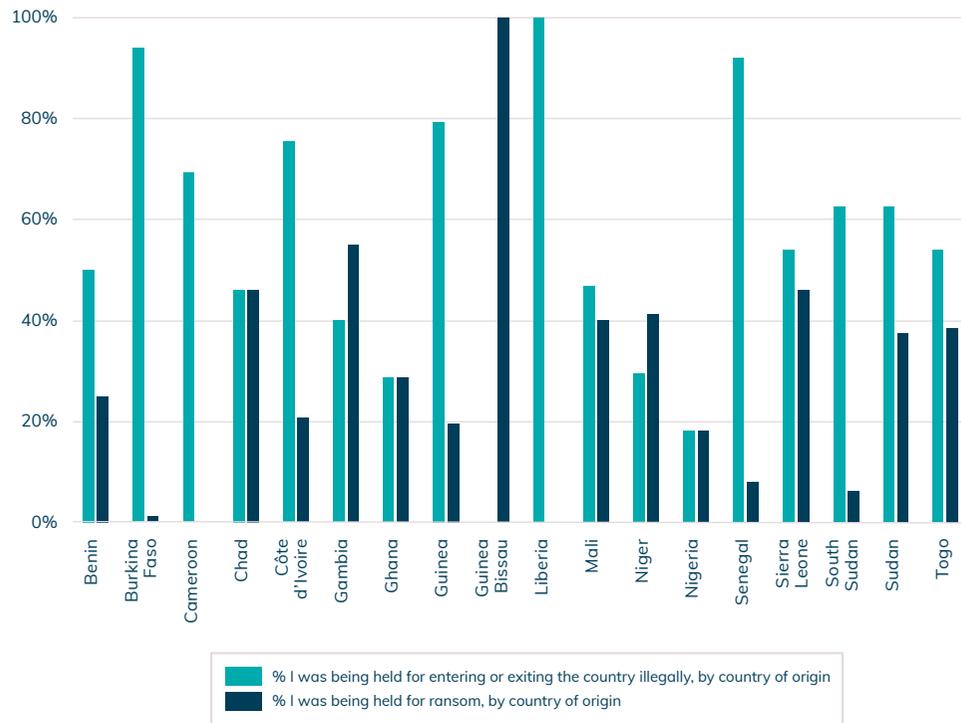


The main grounds for detention mentioned by respondents were irregular entry into the territory (74%) and being held for ransom (18%). While it is possible that some respondents who are ECOWAS citizens are traveling without documentation, nonetheless it is striking that a very high proportion of certain ECOWAS nationalities reported being detained due to irregular entry into or exit from the territory. For instance, this was the case for 92% of Senegalese, 94% of Burkinabe and 79% of Guineans. This represents a significant obstacle towards achieving free movement within the ECOWAS space.³ In addition,

3 According to the [1979 Protocol Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Residence and Establishment](#), nationals of ECOWAS countries should benefit from free movement across the borders of 16 Member States. However, in practice, border crossings often result in numerous difficulties, including bribes and cases of detention.

18% of cases declared having been detained for ransom which shows that extortionate detention is high, as already observed by the MMC along other migration routes.⁴

Figure 3. Grounds for detention per country of origin



A majority held for more than 2 days...

Among the respondents reporting having been detained, 44% reported one day or less of detention, which suggests that they may have been held in relation to identity controls. However, 56% reported more than two days of detention, amongst which a majority is made up of Guinean (22%), Senegalese (15%), Burkinabe (15%) and Ivorian (15%) nationals.

⁴ MMC Briefing Paper, [Everyone's prey: Kidnapping and extortionate detention in mixed migration](#), 5 July 2019. In previous publication on the [role of corruption in mixed migration](#), 51% of respondents in WA had declared that they had to give government officials gifts, services or bribes during your journey.

... with little to no access to basic services reported in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso

Among the respondents who were detained, 54% reported that they did not receive any assistance during their journey. This proportion grows among the 197 respondents detained for more than two days, where a majority (62%) declared not to have received assistance. Only 35% reported having access to water and 34% to food. Overall, only one respondent reported having had access to legal services. A higher proportion of detention cases in Mali were reported as not having received any assistance (95%), compared to 74% in Niger and 70% in Burkina Faso.

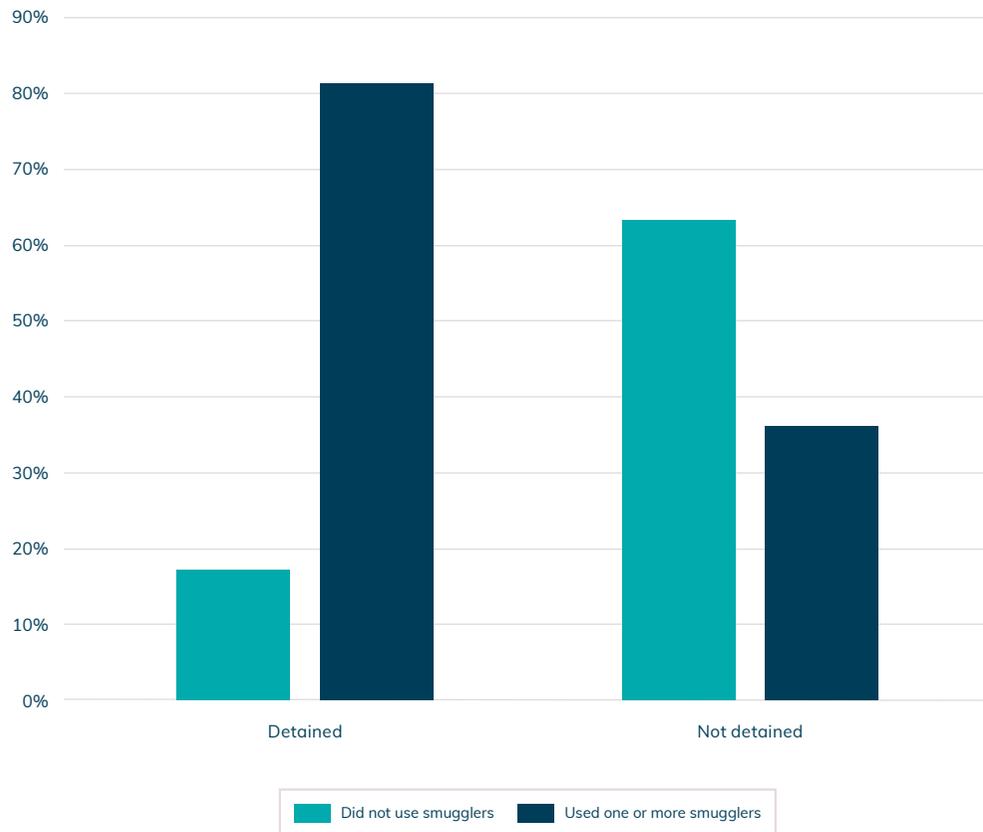
Figure 4. Assistance received



Most who were detained had used smuggler services

A majority (81%) of respondents reporting to have been detained undertook their journey with one or more smuggler, whereas 36% of the overall sample (including people who have not been detained) used smugglers for their journey. This suggests that using smuggler services can render refugees and migrants more vulnerable to detention, or that those more at risk of detention for other reasons (e.g. travelling without papers or using more difficult routes) tend to use smugglers.

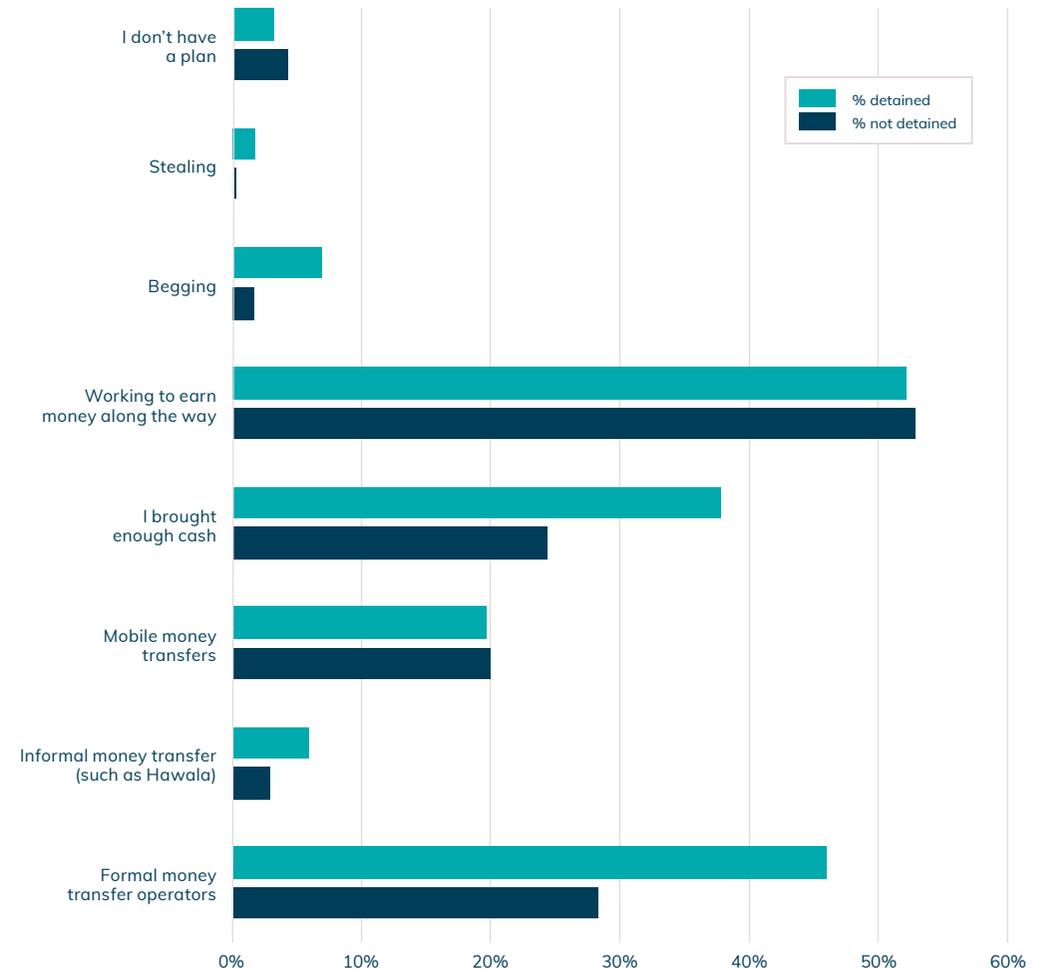
Figure 5. Detention in relation to the use of smugglers



Those who were detained were more likely to have paid for their journey in stages

12% of respondents who had been detained had paid for their journey up front, compared to 16% among those who did not report having been detained. To the extent that detention is used as leverage for extortion, those who paid up-front might be less desirable target, as they may carry less money with them. This dovetails with those who reported being more likely to have brought enough cash on their journey (37% of those detained) and used formal money transfer operators (45% of those detained), than in the overall sample.

Figure 6. Financial plan for the journey



Conclusion

Among the migrants and refugees interviewed by 4Mi in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, over 9% report having been detained at least once. 50% of those respondents reported to have been detained more than once and to have had no to very little access to basic services, including legal assistance, while in detention. The fact that most (74%) of these respondents are being detained for irregular entry/exit when most of them are ECOWAS citizens, who in theory enjoy free movement across borders within the region, should raise concern among the ECOWAS community. Detention for extortion is also of concern. It is also important to consider the role that international border securitization policies may play in this context.

Further research could investigate detention cases at checkpoints in Mali and why out of the three countries studied here, Mali is the country where most detention is happening. Targeted actions such as capacity building and advocacy around the protection of migrants and refugees with the police forces would be particularly relevant to further promote the protection of people on the move, with the support of national ministries and humanitarian Protection Cluster actors.

Portrait of a detained person on the move in West Africa

Interview in Timbuktu

I am a 30-year-old male from Senegal migrating for economic reasons, although I was working in the service industry in my country before migrating. I hold a bachelor's degree.

I transited through Mali, traveling mainly by bus to reach North Africa, my destination country is Algeria. I undertook my journey with a smuggler and arranged continuous payment. I have been traveling for a little more than two months, and my plan is to work along the way to earn money and continue to pay for my journey.

Despite being an ECOWAS citizen, I was arrested more than twice by the police in Mali on the grounds of irregular entry to the territory. I was detained in south Mali for more than two days. During this time, I had access to neither regular meals, clean water, clean toilets, blankets, nor legal assistance.

Despite being detained, I continue my journey towards Algeria.

4Mi

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 and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field monitors are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in West Africa, East Africa and Yemen, North Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Sample sizes are clearly indicated and represent a limited section of those on the move. The findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make any inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi

