



Mixed  
Migration  
Centre

# Migration drivers and decision-making of West and Central Africans on the move in West and North Africa:

A quantitative analysis of factors contributing to departure

MMC Briefing Paper, June 2021



**Front cover photo credit:**

© UNHCR / Maria Grazia Pellegrino.

Jo, a 20-year-old Ghanaian was one of 209 Africans rescued from two sinking dinghies as they tried to cross the Mediterranean from Libya to Europe. Twenty-two persons died but Jo helped save five female fellow passengers. "I couldn't leave them alone," he said.

# Acknowledgements

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The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a global network consisting of six regional hubs (Asia, East Africa & Yemen, Europe, North Africa, West Africa and Latin America & Caribbean) and a central unit in Geneva. The MMC is a leading source of independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of, and governed by, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector. The information and views set out in this report are those of the Mixed Migration Centre and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Danish Refugee Council or any of the donors supporting the work of MMC or this report. Responsibility for the content of this report lies entirely with the MMC.

This report was prepared for the Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development (Rabat Process) and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) as part of the partnership between MMC and ICMPD to foster effective and sustainable migration policies and programmes.

For more information on MMC visit our website: [www.mixedmigration.org](http://www.mixedmigration.org)



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# About this report

This report is the second of a series of four papers that the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) will be publishing in 2021 as part of a collaboration with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) in the framework of the Rabat Process Dialogue. This work is in line with the MMC strategic objective to contribute to evidence-based and better-informed migration policies and debates.

## Introduction

The Rabat Process (Euro-African Dialogue on Migration and Development) was founded in 2006 to serve as “a dialogue platform for national authorities of the countries of origin, transit and destination along the West and Central African migration routes.”<sup>1</sup> Its current strategic framework is the Marrakesh Action Plan 2018-2020, which among other points for action includes the following: “Analyse the root causes (of migration) and make practical recommendations (...) with a view to improving the incorporation of these issues into policy development.”<sup>2</sup>

To support this objective, in October 2018, the Rabat Process convened a thematic meeting on the root causes of irregular migration entitled “Towards a common understanding and solutions.” The co-chairs, France and Senegal, brought together the meeting’s conclusions in an outcome document, which recognised that “Migration is not the result of one, unique factor. Migrants should be considered as autonomous individuals who are driven by a complex set of factors.” The outcome document also highlighted the need to take “a migrant-centred approach which focuses on the individual or collective voice of actors and their reasoning and reflection in the construction of the project to migrate - or not to migrate - and the migratory journey itself.”<sup>3</sup>

According to a “state of the art” study carried out for ICMPD in the framework of the Rabat Process, research on the so-called “root causes” of migration is often based on a functionalist notion of migration which sees inequality in the distribution of goods as spurring cross-border movements. Such conceptions generally lead to the idea that if you address these root causes – in recent years approached primarily through development programming – it is possible to reduce the demand for migration.<sup>4</sup> The outcome of the Rabat Process thematic meeting signaled a recognition of the need to look at the reasons for migration in a more comprehensive and holistic manner, in a departure from the more functionalist approach.

Based on 2,083 surveys carried out with refugees and migrants surveyed in West and North Africa as part of the Mixed Migration Centre’s 4Mi project, this paper seeks to contribute to the empirical basis for such a holistic migrant-centered approach by examining a variety of elements that factor into migration decision-making. It does so by revisiting recent debates on migration decision-making, including through work by ICMPD in the context of the Rabat Process, and follows with an analysis of 4Mi quantitative data looking at 1) reasons people left their country of departure; 2) influences on their migration decision and 3) perceptions of possible alternatives to migration.

1 Rabat Process (2021) [About: The Rabat Process](#)

2 Rabat Process (2018a) Marrakesh Political Declaration and Action Plan

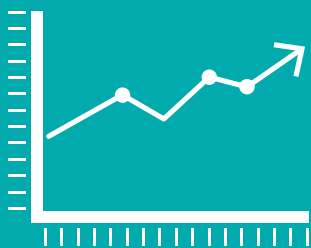
3 Rabat Process (2018b) [Towards a common understanding and solutions: Conclusions of the co-Chairs of the Thematic Meeting on the Root Causes of Irregular Migration](#)

4 Bacon, L. & Robin, N. (2018) [State of the art: The root causes of irregular migration in the region of the Rabat Process](#) International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).

# Key findings



The motivations that go into making a migration decision are complex and multiple and need to be examined holistically. This requires consideration of the conditions faced in the place of origin, one's socio-cultural norms and aspirations, and perceptions of alternatives to migration.



Economic considerations are frequently a factor in migration decisions, but rarely in isolation. They often go hand in hand with other reasons. Additionally, economic factors are themselves multi-faceted, and their diversity should not be overlooked.



While environmental and climate factors have a tendency to be obscured by other drivers of migration, they are nonetheless an important “stress multiplier” (or something that exacerbates other challenges) contributing to movement.



While certain tendencies - such as the importance of economic factors - hold true across regions and gender, there are also notable elements of diversity.

# Methodology

This analysis is based on 2,083 surveys (37% women, 63% men) carried out from February – April 2021 with people on the move through Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Niger and Tunisia as part of the Mixed Migration Centre's Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism initiative (4Mi). Exceptionally, a small number of interviews with West and Central Africans in Sudan were also included in the analysis in order to more fully capture reasons for departure of people on the move along the Central Mediterranean Route. Respondents' ages ranged from 18 – 51, with an average age of 29. Given that our analysis looks at drivers and decision-making pre-departure, data was disaggregated by region and occasionally by country of nationality, with the following regional breakdown:

**Central Africa** (n=319, 202 men and 117 women): Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Republic of Congo

**West Africa** (n=1,764, 1,116 men and 648 women): Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo

4Mi uses purposive and snowball sampling<sup>5</sup> to target refugees and migrants traveling along mixed migration routes, and is not intended to be representative of the overall volume or characteristics of the refugee and migrant populations in these countries and along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes. Hence, results should be treated with caution.<sup>6</sup>

## 4Mi - A Global Data Collection Initiative

The Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) offers a regular, standardised quantitative system of collecting globally comparable primary data on mixed migration flows.

Since it first started in 2014 in East Africa, 4Mi has conducted more than 75,000 interviews with refugees and migrants on the move, becoming the largest in-depth data collection mechanism on migration globally, operational in between 15-20 countries with a network of approximately 120 monitors in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

4Mi field monitors situated along frequently used routes and in major migratory hubs conduct face-to-face interviews with refugees and migrants on a continuous basis.

<sup>5</sup> Potential survey respondents are selected at key locations according to a small set of criteria. Selected respondents often refer others who also fit the criteria.

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see [4Mi FAQ](#).



# Framing the analysis: why people migrate?

This section seeks to briefly revisit recent debates on migration decision-making, including through previous MMC work on drivers<sup>7</sup> and work by the Secretariat of the Rabat Process (implemented by ICMPD and financed by the EU).<sup>8</sup> It focuses on migration aspirations, the so-called “root causes” of movement, and drivers and mixed motivations, and synthesises each of these subjects in turn.

## Aspirations

“Migration aspirations” has become a commonly employed conceptual tool in seeking to understand what impels people to migrate, and is based in an individual’s understanding of and interaction with the society and environment in which they find themselves. Put simply, aspirations can be seen as “the conviction that leaving would be better than staying.”<sup>9</sup> Emphasising aspirations, and the capabilities that allow aspirations to be realised, means a move away from the economic rationalism which had underpinned many functionalist migration theories, for instance the push-pull paradigm, and understanding that a person’s attitudes towards migration are shaped by their social context. According to Carling and Collins, “it means recognizing that even economic narratives of movement are socially constructed...”<sup>10</sup>

This point is illustrated by a qualitative study carried out by ICMPD, in its capacity as Secretariat of the Rabat Process. It emphasised the importance of social factors in understanding the complexity of migration decision-making. According to the study:

**“Emigration is therefore the result of cumulative elements; we can no longer understand the decision to emigrate using the “usual” criteria. The process must be analysed in a different way. Economic and political criteria alone are insufficient; extended family and neighbourhood relations have become a fertile entry point for studying the causes of emigration.”**

This conclusion is based on a discourse analysis of focus group discussions (FGDs) with Senegalese migrants and their families in Senegal and Italy. The analysis found that the term “family” occurred the most frequently (240 times) in discussions – even more so than “money,” which along with “child” were the next most frequently occurring (165 times each). This analysis underscored the manner in which economic imperatives were inextricably linked to family needs and pressures – both explicit and implicit.<sup>11</sup>

## Root causes

The desire to understand why people migrate has important implications in terms of policy and programming, where it has frequently been channeled towards efforts to prevent people from moving, or more positively framed, to increase people’s “capacity to stay.” The “root causes” approach has been prominent in policy dialogues and processes, such as the Rabat Process.<sup>12</sup> It originated in the idea of bringing a more holistic approach to forced migration solutions by addressing conflict and other structural-level factors that are often overlooked and yet feed cycles of chronic displacement. More recently, however, it has been exemplified by the “European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa for stability and addressing the root causes of irregular migration and displacement in Africa,” and has come to be associated with the idea that “migration can be stemmed by alleviating poverty and creating jobs.”<sup>13</sup>

7 Frouws, B. & Horwood, C. (2019) [Drivers revisited. Why people migrate](#) Mixed Migration Centre.

8 Robin, N. (2019) [Social immobility versus social mobility: The root causes of international emigration](#) International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD); Bacon, L. & Robin, N. [op. cit.](#)

9 Carling, J. & Collins, F. (2018) [Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration](#) Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44:6, 909-926.

10 Ibid.

11 Robin, N. [op. cit.](#)

12 Carling, J. & Collins, F. [op. cit.](#)

13 Carling, J. & Talleraas, C. (2016) [Root causes and drivers of migration: Implications for humanitarian efforts and development cooperation](#) Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO).



A “state of the art” on root causes of irregular migration in the Rabat Process region noted a tendency for analyses from European and international institutions to focus on an imbalance between sending and receiving countries, which implies that development aid can overcome and obviate the desire to migrate.<sup>14</sup> This harkens back to the idea of functionalist push and pull models which look at migration as a phenomenon of inequality between countries without accounting for social processes.<sup>15</sup> It has also been argued that, among other concerns, the “root causes” approach (when applied to migration instead of forced displacement) leads to an exclusive focus on why people leave but ignores aspirations and reasons why people desire to reach a certain destination; overlooks root causes of a geo-political nature; and shifts development funding to “migration-relevant” countries.<sup>16</sup>

## A move towards drivers and mixed motivations

The report of the Rabat Process thematic meeting on the root causes of irregular migration acknowledges that there is “no internationally recognized official definition of the term ‘root causes.’ It is at times used interchangeably with other terms, such as ‘drivers.’”<sup>17</sup> While both “root causes” and “drivers” may be seen as structural factors which underlie a migration decision, the concept of drivers seeks to move away from the idea that distinct and singular causes – e.g. environmental change – result in the corresponding effect of migration. Rather, the “the shift from ‘causes’ to ‘drivers’ allows for analyses that are more attuned to the complex, multiple and mixed dynamics that shape migration.”<sup>18</sup>

The idea that structural factors may not be easily teased apart goes hand in hand with the understanding that there are usually a multiplicity of reasons and considerations which feed into a migration decision. Yet all too often the role of aspirations and the frequently intertwined nature of contextual factors is overlooked, and migration is portrayed in black and white terms of either escaping conflict or seeking a way out of poverty.<sup>19</sup> However, early work on the “growing salience” of mixed migration underlined the importance of mixed motivations, acknowledging the multiple factors at play in decision-making around departures, transit, and following arrival at a particular destination.<sup>20</sup>

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14 Bacon, L. & Robin, N. [op. cit.](#)

15 de Haas, H. (2021) [A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework](#) Comparative Migration Studies 9, Article No. 8.

16 Frouws, B. (2020) [Op-Ed: Mistaken metaphor: the ‘root causes’ approach to migration is both dishonest and ineffective](#) Mixed Migration Centre.

17 Rabat Process (2018c) [Towards a common understanding and solutions: Report of the Thematic Meeting on the Root Causes of Irregular Migration](#)

18 Carling, J. & Collins, F. [op. cit.](#)

19 Frouws, B. & Horwood, C. [op. cit.](#)

20 Van Hear, N., Brubaker, R. & Bessa, T. (2009) [Managing mobility for human development: the growing salience of mixed migration](#) Human Development Research Paper (HDRP) Series, Vol. 20, No. 2009.

# 4Mi data analysis: Drivers, influencers and alternatives

The current paper provides a quantitative complement to two qualitative studies on the “root causes of irregular migration” carried out in the framework of the Rabat Process<sup>21</sup>. These underscored the multiplicity of factors which can influence a migration decision and the corresponding need to consider migration decision-making holistically, including by taking into account a migrant’s social context. They also emphasized the need to take a migrant-centred approach to such questions, accounting for migrants’ agency in the face of their contextual conditions.

This analysis draws on MMC’s ongoing quantitative 4Mi data collection carried out in Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, Niger, Sudan and Tunisia from February – April of 2021. It is based on 2,083 interviews with refugees and migrants who originate from across West and Central Africa and were interviewed along the Central Mediterranean Route in countries that participate or have observer status in the Rabat Process,<sup>22</sup> as well as Sudan.

This section draws upon 4Mi data on the drivers of migration; other factors that may contribute to migration aspirations and decision-making, which we will be calling “influencers”; as well as perceived alternatives to migration.

## Drivers

“My husband’s salary was just a contract, so after it ended he couldn’t get another job. Which makes it very difficult for the whole family to cope, while his siblings are there depending on only him for everything.”

29-year-old female from Senegal, interviewed in Tunisia

### Importance of economic considerations in migration decisions

The centrality of economic factors in decision-making appears quite clearly through the data. However, as we will see later, drivers are complex and intertwined.

Overall 83% of respondents cited economic factors as a reason for leaving their countries of departure.<sup>23</sup> Sampled men (86%) more often cited economic reasons than women (76%), a likely reflection of traditional gender roles assigning men as breadwinners, though both genders report a majority.

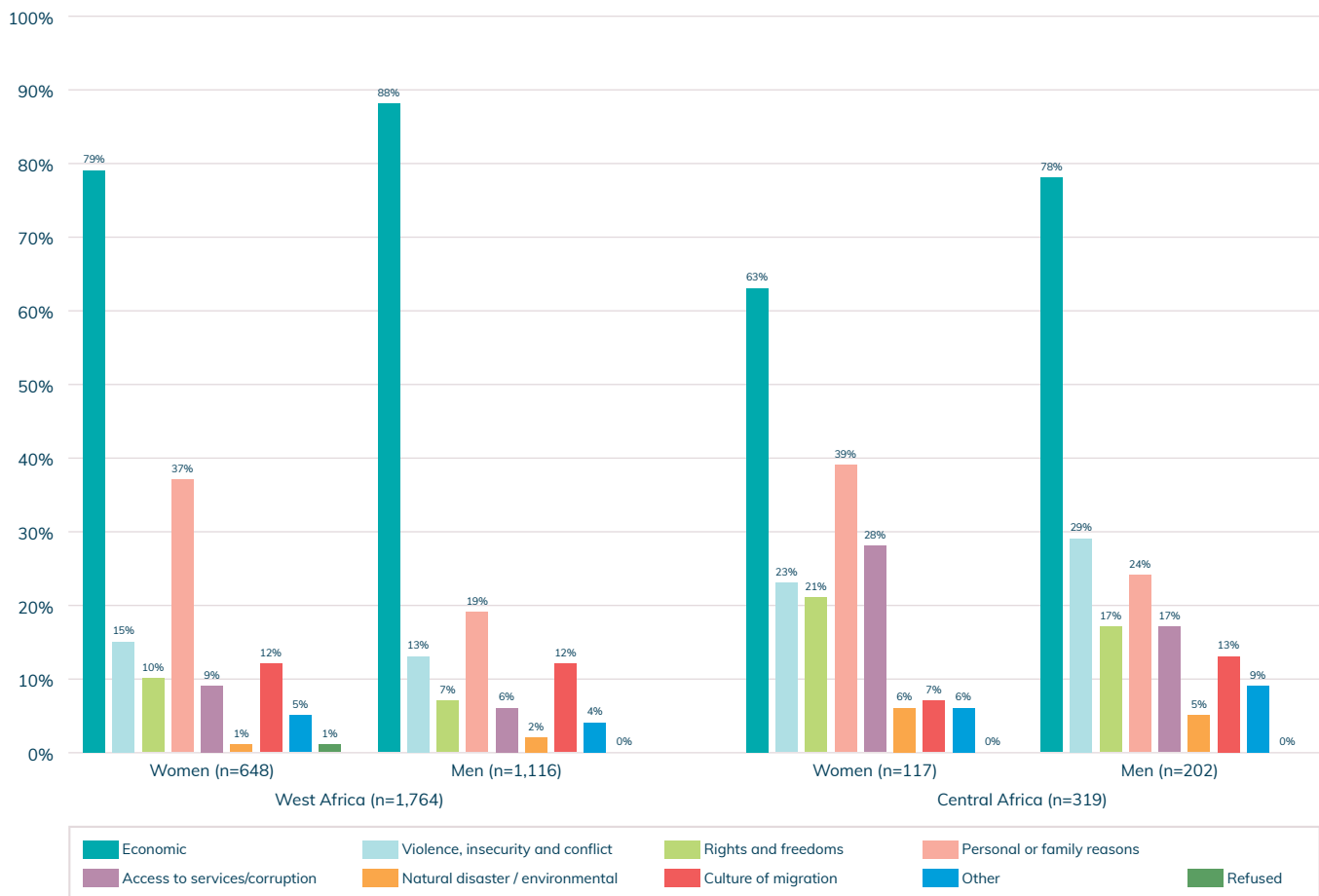
West and Central African respondents are following similar trends in that the overwhelming majority from both regions report economic drivers. While the sample sizes between the regions vary considerably, which should be borne in mind when comparing, the majority of West African respondents (84% vs 73%) citing economic drivers may underscore the well-trodden labour migration corridor that the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes provides for West Africans on the move, even those who may have also experienced drivers related to conflict and violence.

21 [Social immobility versus social mobility : The root causes of international emigration](#) & [State of the art: The root causes of irregular migration in the region of the Rabat Process](#)

22 Libya, which has observer status in the Rabat Process, and Tunisia are also members of the Khartoum Process, as is Sudan.

23 In the 4Mi survey ‘country of departure’ is used in questions on migration decision-making in order to recognize that some respondents are already outside their country of origin when they embark on their current migratory journey. However, for the vast majority of respondents (87%), country of origin and departure are the same, and in this in this study we carry out analysis based on respondents’ country of nationality to capture dynamics related to their place of origin.

**Figure 1: For what reasons did you leave your country of departure?**



While it is not uncommon for economic reasons to be referred to with broad terms such as “poverty,” they are in fact complex and multifaceted. They also vary between the micro – at the level of the individual – and macro – at the level of the broader economic situation of a given country. For instance, when respondents who selected economic reasons as a factor in their migration decision (n = 1,721), were asked to elaborate on what kind of reasons,<sup>24</sup> 60% mentioned “not earning enough in the job I had,” showing how economic considerations can be very subjective, and the result of individual circumstances (i.e. a salary one person might consider insufficient could be seen as adequate by someone else). On the other hand, 34% selected “difficulty doing business,” which may be attributed to broader issues in a national economy, such as corruption, poor rule of law, etc.

In terms of gender, unemployment (of either oneself or the main household earner) was cited more often by surveyed women (33%) than men (24%). Surveyed men more often reported feeling they did not earn enough in the job they had (66%), as compared to women (50%), perhaps again reflecting a perception by men that it is their responsibility to provide for their families.

<sup>24</sup> With the options, “I or the main earner was unemployed,” “I was not earning enough money in the job I had,” “It was difficult to do business,” “Other” or refusal to answer.

## Political and Social Drivers

**“Community and land conflict in my region in Mali. We had to leave because our lives were threatened.”**

**30-year-old female from Mali, interviewed in Burkina Faso**

While economic factors are clearly very important in people's decision to migrate, they do not tell the whole story, and there are other notable trends and findings to draw from the reasons respondents gave for leaving their country of departure.

For example, “violence, insecurity and conflict” were selected by 27% of respondents from Central Africa as compared to 13% of respondents from West Africa. This aligns with more macro-level data available on conflict and displacement situations across these regions; while conflict in the Central Sahel and Lake Chad Basin have been responsible for the displacement of millions of people in West Africa, conflict-affected countries nonetheless make up a smaller proportion of the overall sample in West Africa as compared to Central Africa.

At the same time, country-level analysis in West Africa can show notable variation. For instance, 33% of respondents in Mali (n=146) indicated that “violence and insecurity” were a factor in their departure and 71% cited economic factors. In Burkina Faso (n=112) these factors were cited by 13% and 88% of respondents respectively, showing a much greater differential between security and economic factors. This is despite the fact that both countries face high levels of insecurity. The dominance of economic factors among respondents from Burkina Faso could suggest that conflict-affected people there face some degree of involuntary immobility, and the contrast between these two countries invites further attention and analysis as the dataset grows.

In addition to a higher proportion alluding to “violence, insecurity and conflict,” respondents from Central Africa more frequently indicated “rights and freedoms” (18%) and “access to services/corruption” (21%) as reasons for their departure than did respondents from West Africa (8% and 7% respectively).

The data also highlights some important gender variations. For instance, across both regions, higher proportions of women respondents (37% overall) selected “personal or family reasons” as a factor in their departure from their country of origin as compared to men (19%). This may suggest that the surveyed women on the move have more family responsibilities, are moving to reunite with family, or are moving to flee family-related abuses,

including forced marriage or female genital mutilation (FGM), to name a few potential explanations.

## Environmental reasons

**“My house and my surrounding were affected by one of the biggest mining companies in Kono, Sierra Leone. They were mining underground for minerals, so our land was bought by the company from the government, so there was nothing we can do to help the situation.”**

**29 year-old female from Sierra Leone, interviewed in Tunisia**

Overall, there was a low proportion of respondents who listed “natural disaster or environmental factors” when asked specifically for what reasons they left their country of departure (2% in West Africa and 6% in Central Africa), and none of these respondents cited this as their sole reason for leaving. However, when asked in a separate and direct question whether environmental issues were a factor in their decision to leave their country of departure, a substantially greater percentage of respondents – 48% overall (West Africa – 47%, Central Africa – 53%) – indicated that these had played a role, and for a variety of reasons.

On the surface, these results may seem contradictory. However, it actually confirms what we know about the role of climate change and other environmental factors in decision-making on migration, and shows the importance of survey methodology to unravel the complex interaction between environmental and other drivers. Unless in the case of immediate, sudden onset environmental disasters and changes forcing people to move, environmental reasons are usually further to the back of people's mind when they give reasons for migration.<sup>25</sup>

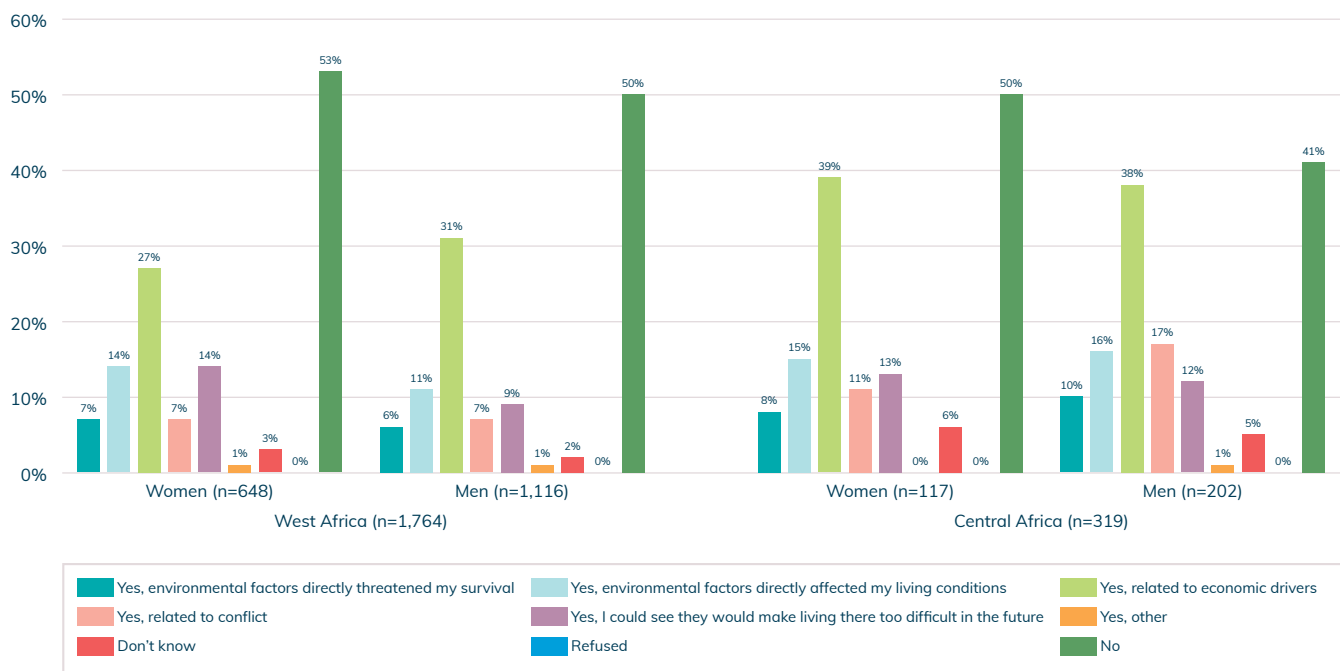
In the first question on reasons for departure, the answer options are not prompted, and as such, not many respondents indicate spontaneously that they left for environmental reasons. In the second question, they are asked directly, forcing them to think about environmental factors. These often manifest themselves as a stress multiplier, or something that exacerbates other challenges. In this case, environmental factors affect other drivers of migration, such as livelihood opportunities (economic reasons) or conflict, which subsequently is what respondents indicate when asked without prompting.

25 Mixed Migration Centre (2020) [Weak links: challenging the climate & mixed migration paradigm in the Horn of Africa & Yemen](#)

These results clearly show that environmental factors are playing an important role in people’s migration decisions. Yet this is the case not so much as the single driver directly leading to international migration, but rather as a factor primarily interacting with and intensifying other factors.

It serves as an illustration of the often-intertwined nature of migration drivers, and how teasing these factors apart can be challenging, even for the migrant him/herself.

**Figure 2: Were environmental issues a factor in your decision to leave your country of departure?**



Respondents who agreed that environmental issues played a role in their decision to migrate most often said it was related to economic drivers. This was the case across regions and gender.

### Covid-19 as a driver

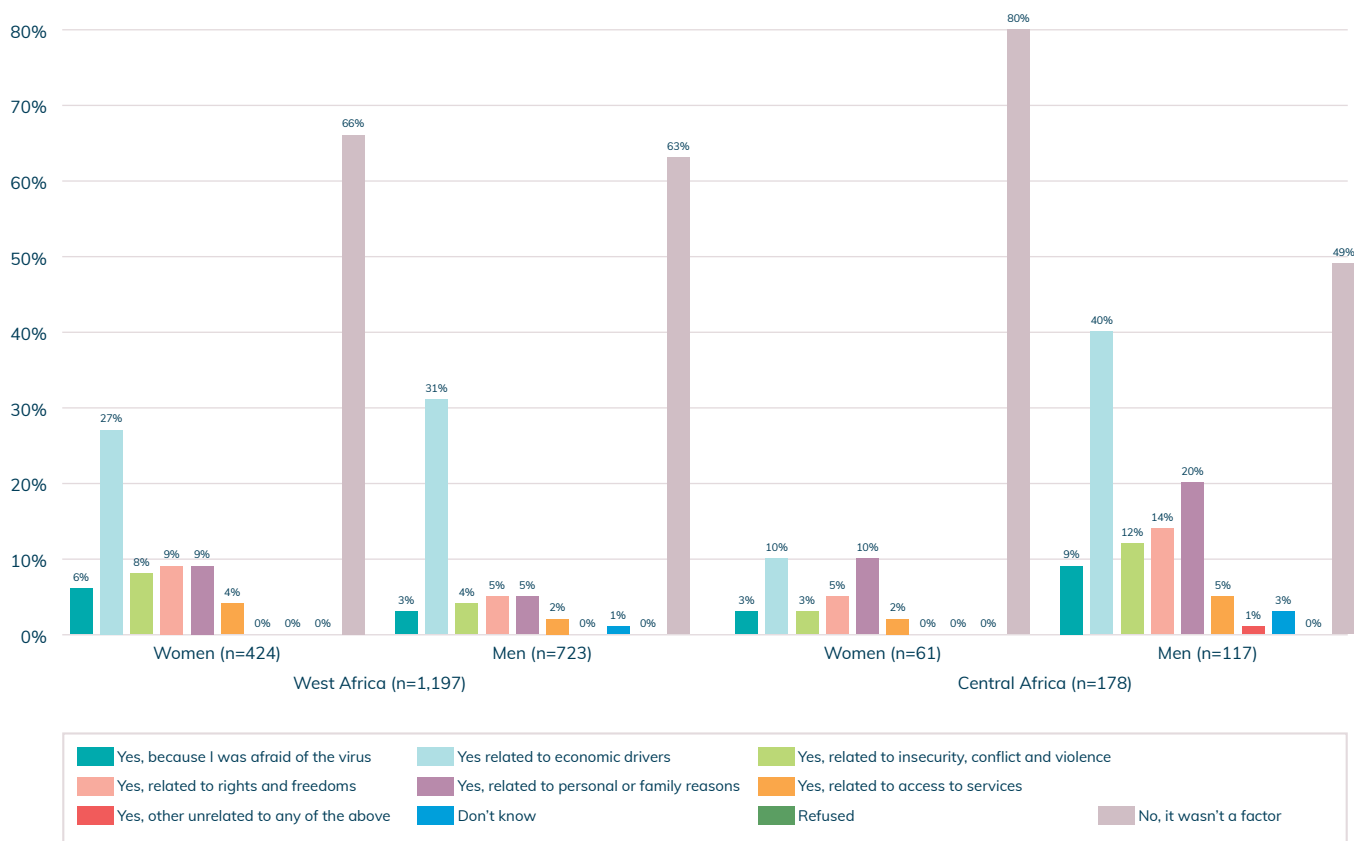
“ Covid-19 has totally destroyed the purchasing power of those who work in the informal sector. We no longer earn enough to help our parents. ”

27-year-old male from Benin, interviewed in Mali

Of respondents who left their country of departure after the pandemic began in earnest,<sup>26</sup> 36% indicated that Covid-19 factored into their decision to leave. As above with environmental factors, Covid-19 – and important measures to contain it, such as lockdowns, closure of businesses and travel restrictions – primarily impacts economic factors. This was cited by 30% of overall respondents who departed post-Covid, with 29% of West African respondents and 40% of men in Central Africa giving this as a reason. Men in Central Africa as a whole appeared to be more greatly influenced by Covid-19, with 49% expressing that it had affected their migration decision.

26 This is designated as those who left their country of departure after 31/3/2020.

**Figure 3: Was Coronavirus a factor in your decision to leave your country of origin?**



### Multiplicity of factors

“ I want to increase my status in the company where I work through training. ”

34 year-old man from Benin, interviewed in Tunisia

When asked their reasons for leaving their countries of origin, 40% of respondents gave more than one reason, underscoring the fact that migration is often driven by a multiplicity of factors. The mean number of reasons given per respondent was 1.6. The tendency towards indicating multiple factors in response to this question was greater overall in Central Africa (49%) than in West Africa (39%), and in West Africa women respondents more frequently cited multiple factors (45%) than men respondents (35%).

However, it is clear that the above percentages under-represent the actual extent to which a multiplicity of factors spurred respondents' departure. When considering respondents who indicated that environmental issues or Covid-19 impacted their

migration decision along with those who gave multiple reasons when asked why they left, we see that 69% of surveyed refugees and migrants attributed their migration decision to more than one factor.

### Influencers

“ I learned from friends that there is a soccer club that trains young people and gives them the opportunity to go to European clubs. This is what pushed me to undertake this journey because soccer is one of my passions and I would like to be like Samuel Eto'o, Didier Drogba, etc... ”

24 year-old male from Côte d'Ivoire, interviewed in Burkina Faso

In addition to forces such as economic and conflict drivers, other less tangible factors may contribute to migration aspirations and decision-making. As suggested by the Rabat Process study and “state of the art” referred to above, and further supported

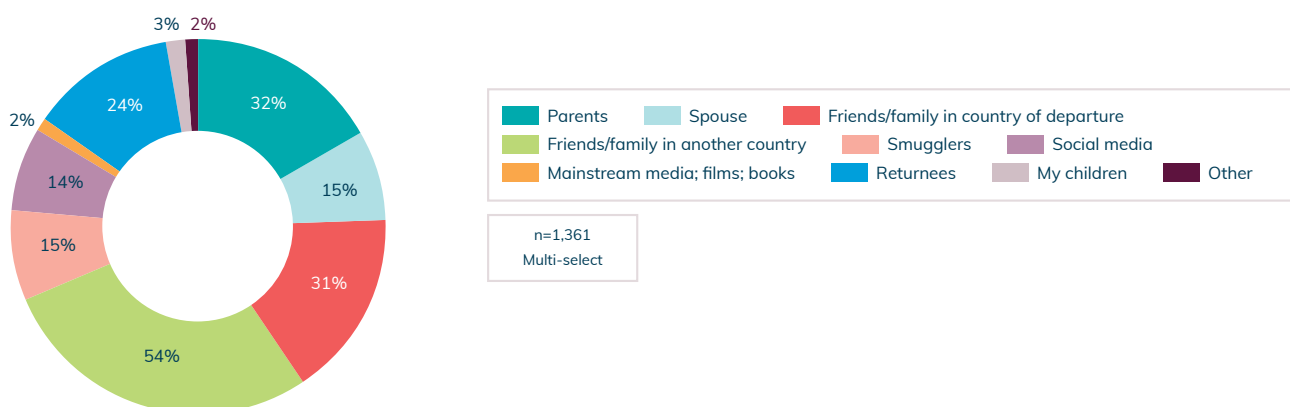
by previous MMC publications,<sup>27</sup> social factors may frequently be intertwined with other drivers, for instance the combination of economic and social imperatives that a person might feel when expected to provide for their family. Thus, it is important to consider influences of a social nature – which may be direct or implicit – that affect a migration decision.

### Majority perceive an influence in their migration decision

When asked whether anyone or anything had influenced their decision to migrate, the overall majority of respondents said yes (65%), with a greater proportion of women from West Africa expressing influence (74%) than men from West Africa (62%), women from Central Africa (61%) or men from Central Africa (59%).

However, these findings also show slightly more than one third of respondents (34%) indicated no one influenced their decision to migrate, underscoring the importance and extent of individual agency in migrant decision-making.

**Figure 4: What were the biggest influences on your decision to migrate?**



### Influences are overwhelmingly close social connections

According to respondents, the sources of influence were overwhelmingly close social connections. Of respondents who felt influence on their migration decision (n=1,361), 32% cited parents and 15% a spouse. “Other friends/family in another country” was cited by 54% of respondents, and “other friends/family in country of departure” by 31%. The former was the most cited influence across both regions and between both genders. In line with this theme of personal connections, social media, selected by 14% of this sample, was more influential than mainstream media, films and books, indicated by only 2%. Returnees were cited as an influence by 24% of respondents. Smugglers are only mentioned by 15% of respondents, echoing previous MMC research which has suggested that in many places smugglers are not a major force in influencing migration decisions.<sup>28</sup> This runs contrary to how the role of smugglers is often portrayed – and exaggerated – in policy circles and media, as unscrupulous criminals stoking dreams and aspirations and directly encouraging people to migrate.<sup>29</sup>

While not the most prominent influences, spouses and smugglers were perceived as an influence by more women respondents (14% and 16% respectively) than men respondents (7% for both). Returnees appeared to exert a greater influence in West Africa, cited by 17% of respondents compared to 10% of respondents in Central Africa.<sup>30</sup>

27 REACH & MMC (2020) [Destined to migrate: Exploring a culture of migration in a world of migration restrictions – Kayes, Mali](#), MMC (2021) [A Gateway Re-opens: the growing popularity of the Atlantic route, as told by those who risk it](#)

28 Golovko, E. (2018) [Players of many parts: The evolving role of smugglers in West Africa's migration economy](#), Mixed Migration Centre.

29 UNODC (2018) [Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants 2018](#)

30 Women respondents who perceived influence – n=550; men respondents who perceived influence – n=811; respondents from Central Africa who perceived influence – n=191; respondents from West Africa who perceived influence – n=1,170.



## Alternatives

“ (I could have tried) to go and see the services that fight against corruption, but that would have been pointless. ”

27-year-old male from Togo, interviewed in Burkina Faso

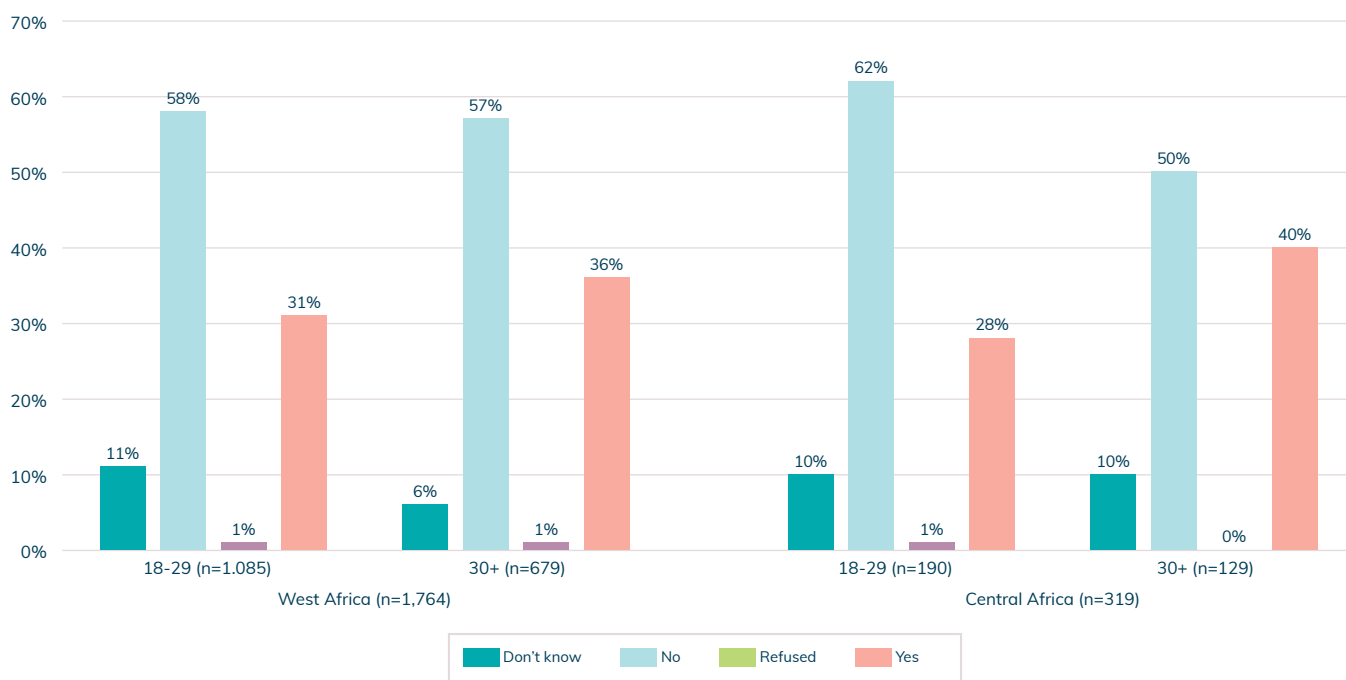
### Majority do not see alternatives

Research on decision-making and drivers of migration is, naturally, focused on why people leave. What is sometimes ignored is what are the alternatives to migration for prospective migrants, or phrased differently, the risk of staying. This could encompass not only direct threats to safety, but also the risk of not

fulfilling life aspirations. In order to gain a more holistic picture of what moves people to embark on a migratory journey, it is therefore useful to consider their perceptions of possible resolutions to issues at home. In a way this is a question that is fundamental to “root causes” thinking and its corresponding manifestations in policy and programming, as it seeks to understand what might have helped people stay and implies alternatives to migration.

Respondents were asked whether (before starting their journey) they thought there were things they could do (alternatives) to address the reasons they had given for leaving. The overall majority of respondents (57%), with little variation between genders, answered in the negative. In other words, the majority did not see any good alternatives to migration.

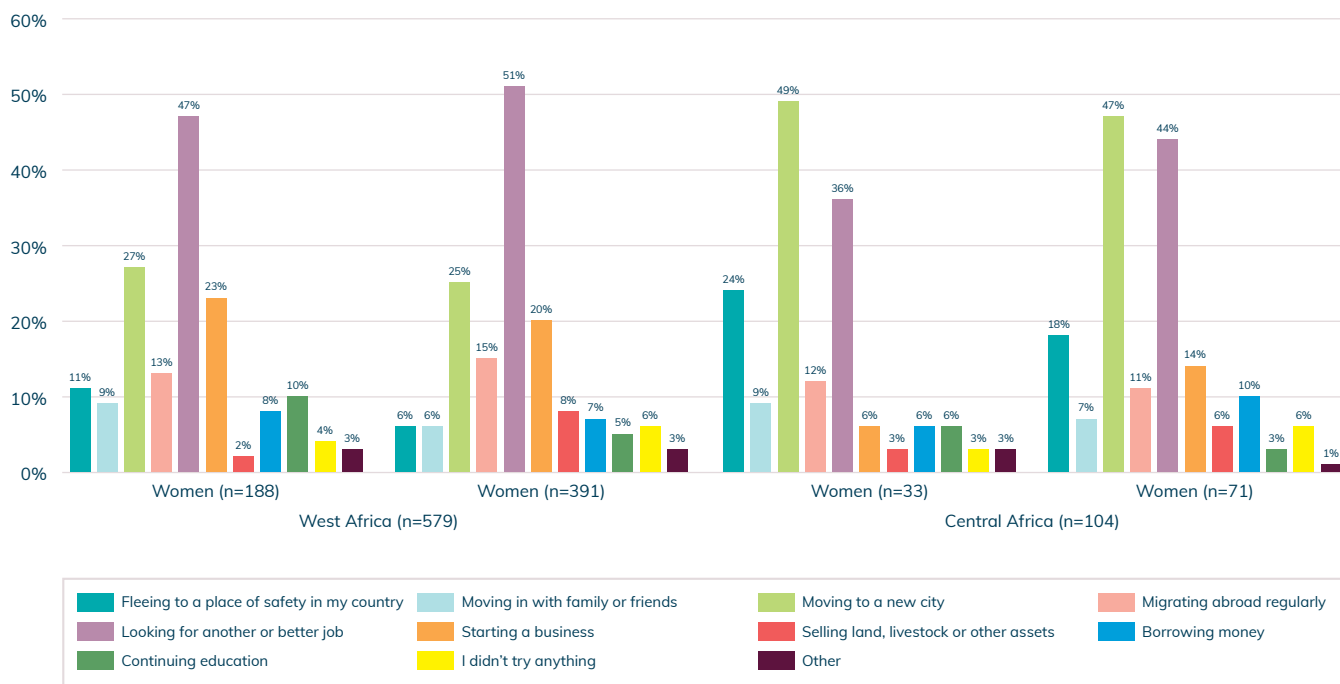
**Figure 5: Did you think there were things you could do that might address your reasons for leaving?**



There was a somewhat more notable difference between age groups, with a greater proportion of respondents aged 30 and above seeing alternatives to migration as compared to their younger counterparts (aged 18-29). This difference was minimal in West Africa, but somewhat starker in Central Africa where 62% of

respondents under 30 did not see a way to address their reasons for leaving, as compared to 50% of respondents aged 30 and above. This may reflect a higher appetite for risk on the part of younger people, a lower likelihood of being single and childless which may ease departure, and/or a greater impact of peer pressure or influence.

**Figure 6: What did you try to address your reasons for leaving?**



Among those who did think there were possibilities in their country of departure to address issues that ultimately contributed to their migration (n=683), two particular options stand out across regions and genders: looking for another or better job and moving to a new city to improve ones' circumstances. Starting a business and fleeing to a place of safety within one's country were also important options in West Africa and Central Africa respectively.

# Conclusion and key findings

This paper examined recent empirical data collected from people on the move in West and North Africa to complement previous research carried out by the Secretariat of the Rabat Process (implemented by ICMPD) on root causes of irregular migration. That research used qualitative methods and found that “root causes” conceptions of migration focusing predominantly on economic factors frequently overlook the fact that such issues may be intertwined with those of social immobility and pressure, and that they are seldom the sole factor leading to migration. These factors will not necessarily be addressed by a simple development project but require a more systemic, holistic approach.

While recognising the prominence of economic considerations, this quantitative analysis carried out by the MMC supports these findings, highlighting the variety of drivers and influences that play into a migration decision. It also shows that while there are some broad trends that seem to supersede personal characteristics or location of origin, there is also diversity of experience and circumstance that needs to be captured. This underscores the importance of going to the source – the migrants and refugees themselves.

## **Economic considerations are important in a migration decision but do not tell the whole story.**

**83% of respondents cited economic factors as a reason for leaving their country of departure.** However, this statistic requires further analysis to recognise the variety of livelihoods and economic considerations that can come into play, as well as understanding the ways in which economic factors can be intertwined with other drivers.

The intersection of economic and other factors was seen quite specifically and substantially vis-à-vis Covid-19 and environmental issues. **Respondents who indicated that Covid-19 or environmental factors affected their migration decision most frequently indicated that this had been the case in relation to economic drivers.** In relation to climate change and environmental factors, a notable finding is that respondents hardly ever mention these spontaneously when asked why they migrated. However, when asked directly whether environmental reasons affected their decision to migrate, almost half of all respondents say it did. This shows the extent to which environmental reasons act as a stress multiplier, affecting other migration drivers.

**Equally, it is important to understand the nature of the economic considerations.** 60% of respondents who said that economic reasons were a factor in their departure indicated that they had not been earning enough in the job they had prior to leaving. This suggests that they were indeed economically active – and not among the poorest people without jobs or income – but this activity did not meet their needs. This also fits the aspiration-capability model explaining why people migrate. Those slightly better off in their countries of departure are usually those that develop the aspirations (through higher education, social networks etc.) and accumulate the resources (capability) to be able to afford migration journeys. Thus, creating jobs or trying to combat poverty – while beneficial in their own right – will not necessarily be sufficient to provide a sustainable alternative to migration, and may have the opposite effect, which points to one of the fundamental flaws in the root causes approach to irregular migration.<sup>31</sup>

## **Migration decision-making is a multifaceted process and should be considered holistically.**

Many different elements can contribute to migration aspirations and may come into play when a migration decision is being made. People can be spurred to depart because they seek change or improvement in one or multiple areas of their life and circumstances. These factors may be amplified by social influences, which can exert overt or covert pressure in their own right. Additionally, people may decide to cross a border after considering or trying to find other options to address the areas in which they seek change.

The 4Mi data analysed in this paper illustrates how migration drivers can interact with each other, and that it is relatively uncommon to find one single, clear-cut reason for migration. When considering respondents who indicated that environmental issues or Covid-19 impacted their migration decision, along with those who gave multiple reasons when asked why they left, we see that **69% of surveyed refugees and migrants attributed their migration decision to multiple factors.**

65% of respondents stated that they had been influenced by somebody or something in making their migration decision. These influences were overwhelmingly close personal contacts such as parents, and other family and friends. **Smugglers are infrequently mentioned as influencing people's decision (cited by 15% of respondents), indicating that their role in encouraging people to migrate tends to be overestimated.**

31 Frouws, B. [op.cit.](#)

On the hand, the importance of individual agency in migration decision-making cannot be overlooked, as **34% of respondents indicate that they were not influenced in their decision to migrate.**

Additionally, the perceived alternatives to migration, and corresponding risk of staying, is an important, though sometimes overlooked, issue in migrant decision-making. **The majority of respondents (57%) did not see alternatives to migration based on the reasons for departure that they had previously indicated.** For those who did say they had felt there were options to address these issues, moving to a new city and looking for a new job were particularly important possibilities.

Perceptions about alternatives differed by age, with **younger respondents (18-29) less likely to see alternatives to migration as compared to their older counterparts (30 plus),** particularly in Central Africa. This may be due to differences in family status, peer reference groups and/or risk calculations.

### **While migration decision-making is complex, there are patterns to find in the data.**

Bearing in mind that the disaggregated samples are not equal and in some cases are small, **there are nonetheless both some notable variations between regions and genders to observe, as well as some patterns and points of convergence.** This underscores the importance of disaggregation, and also can help pinpoint areas where further targeted study – perhaps bringing in qualitative approaches – could be beneficial.

For instance, while **economic reasons were the most frequently cited reason for departure regardless of gender or region, respondents from West Africa more frequently cited economic reasons for leaving** their country of departure when compared to respondents from Central Africa. On the other hand, **a larger proportion of respondents from Central Africa cited “violence, insecurity and conflict,” “rights and freedoms” and “access to services/corruption” as reasons for their departure.**

**Gender differences were seen in a variety of ways.** For example, 37% of women respondents selected “personal or family reasons” as a factor in their departure as compared to 19% of men. Of those who pointed to economic considerations, both men and women most frequently cited “not earning enough in my job” as the specific economic reason that spurred their migration, but this reason was given by a greater proportion of men (66%) than women (50%), whereas a greater proportion of women (33%) than men (24%) indicated unemployment as an economic driver.

**At times, there was variation that stood out both at the regional and gender level,** for instance the greater tendency of women in West Africa to indicate influence in their migration decision or that of men from Central Africa to express that Covid-19 had affected their decision to migrate.



The MMC is a global network consistent of six regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, information, research and analysis on mixed migration. Through the provision of credible evidence and expertise, the MMC aims to support agencies, policy makers and practitioners to make well-informed decisions, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to contribute to protection and assistance responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in the sector responding to mixed migration.

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional teams are based in Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

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