

Empirical research on the use of migrant smugglers and facilitators¹ by people on the move in West and North Africa is scarce. A Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) study found that more than two-thirds of refugees and migrants surveyed in Libya and half of those surveyed in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger between 2017 and 2019 used a smuggler.² Drawing upon new 4Mi data collected in February and March 2021 with people on the move, this snapshot sheds more light on the prevalence and roles of smugglers along mixed migration routes in Libya, Niger, and Mali.

This snapshot is produced in the context of a partnership with the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#).

Key findings

- Smugglers are used by the majority of 4Mi survey respondents to cross borders in West and North Africa.
- Smugglers play a limited role in respondents' decision to migrate but are an important source of information before and during the migration journey.
- Respondents agree that smugglers helped them achieve their goals of migrating to another country, but some feel they were intentionally misled, particularly in Libya.

1 MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', one which encompasses various activities — paid for or otherwise compensated by refugees and migrants — that facilitate irregular migration. These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation, and accommodation. This approach reflects refugees' and migrants' perceptions of smuggling and the facilitation of irregular movement. Our interpretation is deliberately broader than the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants' definition. However, this does not imply that MMC considers all activities it includes in its broad understanding of smuggling to be criminal offences. MMC prefers to use the term 'human smuggling' instead of 'migrant smuggling' as smuggling involves both refugees and migrants. This publication is produced in partnership with the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](#). The Observatory uses the word 'smuggler' when it can reasonably be assumed that the crime of migrant smuggling is constituted, as per Article 3 of the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, while the word 'facilitator' is used whenever the elements of (a) irregular entry and/or (b) financial or material benefit, could reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence. www.unodc.org/res/som/index.html.

2 MMC (2020). [Migration and risks: smuggling networks and dynamics on the Central Mediterranean Route](#).

Profiles

This snapshot draws upon 516 surveys conducted with refugees and migrants in Libya (n=216), Mali (n=150) and Niger (n=150). In Libya, most respondents were located in Tripoli (45%), Sebha (24%) and Ejdabia (7%). Respondents in Mali were mostly located in Gao (31%), Timbuktu (25%) and Mopti (18%), while those interviewed in Niger were in Niamey (30%), Agadez (24%), Diffa (17%) and Tillaberi (15%).

The sample is composed of 35% (n=178) women and 65% (n=338) men, with a slightly lower proportion of women interviewed in Mali (29%) than Libya and Niger (37% each). Respondents are 18-46 years old, and the average age in all countries of interview is 29. Overall, 14% (n=73) of respondents are travelling with children, of whom almost two-thirds (64%) are women. The most common countries of nationality among all interviewed respondents are West African countries Nigeria (16%), Côte d'Ivoire (8%), Guinea (7%) and Niger (7%) (see Table 1 for most common nationalities by country of interview), while a significant proportion of respondents in Libya are from Sudan (15%), Cameroon (6%) and Ethiopia (6%).

Table 1. What is your country of nationality?

(Top 6 per country of interview)

In Libya			In Mali			In Niger		
Country	n	%	Country	n	%	Country	n	%
Nigeria	53	25	Guinea	26	17	Nigeria	23	15
Sudan	32	15	Côte d'Ivoire	21	14	Chad	19	13
Niger	19	9	Niger	17	11	Mali	16	11
Cameroon	14	6	Burkina Faso	15	10	Côte d'Ivoire	14	9
Mali	14	6	Togo	14	9	Benin	12	8
Ethiopia	13	6	Senegal	13	9	Togo	12	8
Other	71	33	Other	44	29	Other	54	36
Total	216	100	Total	150	100	Total	150	100

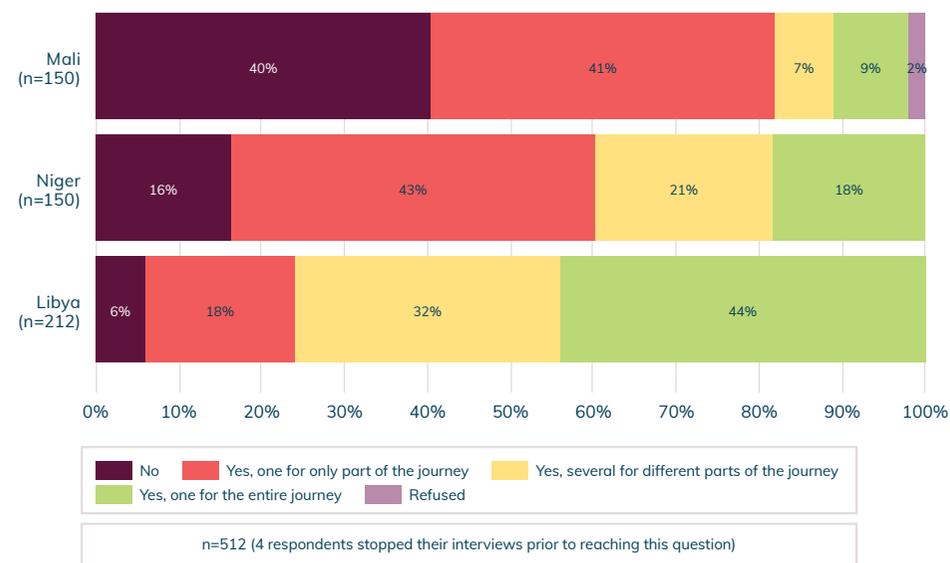
Smugglers and/or facilitators used by the majority of respondents

Compared to the aforementioned MMC research based on data from 2017-2019,³ data collected in early 2021 show a greater prevalence of refugees and migrants using a smuggler. 94% (n=200) of respondents in Libya, 84% in Niger (n=126), and 58% in Mali (n=87) used a smuggler at some point during their journey (Figure 1). This increase may be indicative of the impact of COVID-19 on cross-border mobility. Indeed, as highlighted by previous MMC and UNODC research,⁴ movement restrictions adopted to contain the spread of the virus, even within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free movement area, appear to have led to a greater need for smugglers.

The reported use of smugglers varies depending on a country's geographical position and availability of regular migration channels along mixed migration routes, with a greater prevalence in Libya and Niger than in Mali. This finding aligns with MMC research from 2020 showing that smugglers are key for movement to and within Libya and through certain parts of Niger.⁵

Among refugees and migrants who reported using a smuggler at some point during their journey, in Libya, 47% of respondents cited using one for the entirety of their journey, compared to 21% of respondents in Niger and 16% in Mali. Respondents in Mali and Niger who had used smugglers more frequently reported using one for only part of their journey (71% and 53%, respectively). When comparing nationalities, Nigerian respondents in all three countries most often reported using one smuggler or facilitator for the entirety of their journey, amongst those that had made use of a smuggler or facilitator (48/72).

Figure 1: Did you use a smuggler⁶?



3 MMC (2020). [Migration and risks: smuggling networks and dynamics on the Central Mediterranean Route](#).

4 MMC (2020). [COVID-19 Global Thematic Update #1. Impact of COVID-19 on migrant smuggling](#); MMC (2021). [The impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants on the move in North and West Africa](#); UNODC Research (2020). [How COVID-19 restrictions and the economic consequences are likely to impact migrant smuggling and cross-border trafficking in persons to Europe and North America](#).

5 MMC (2020). [Migration and risks: smuggling networks and dynamics on the Central Mediterranean Route](#).

6 Art. 3 of the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the 2000 UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

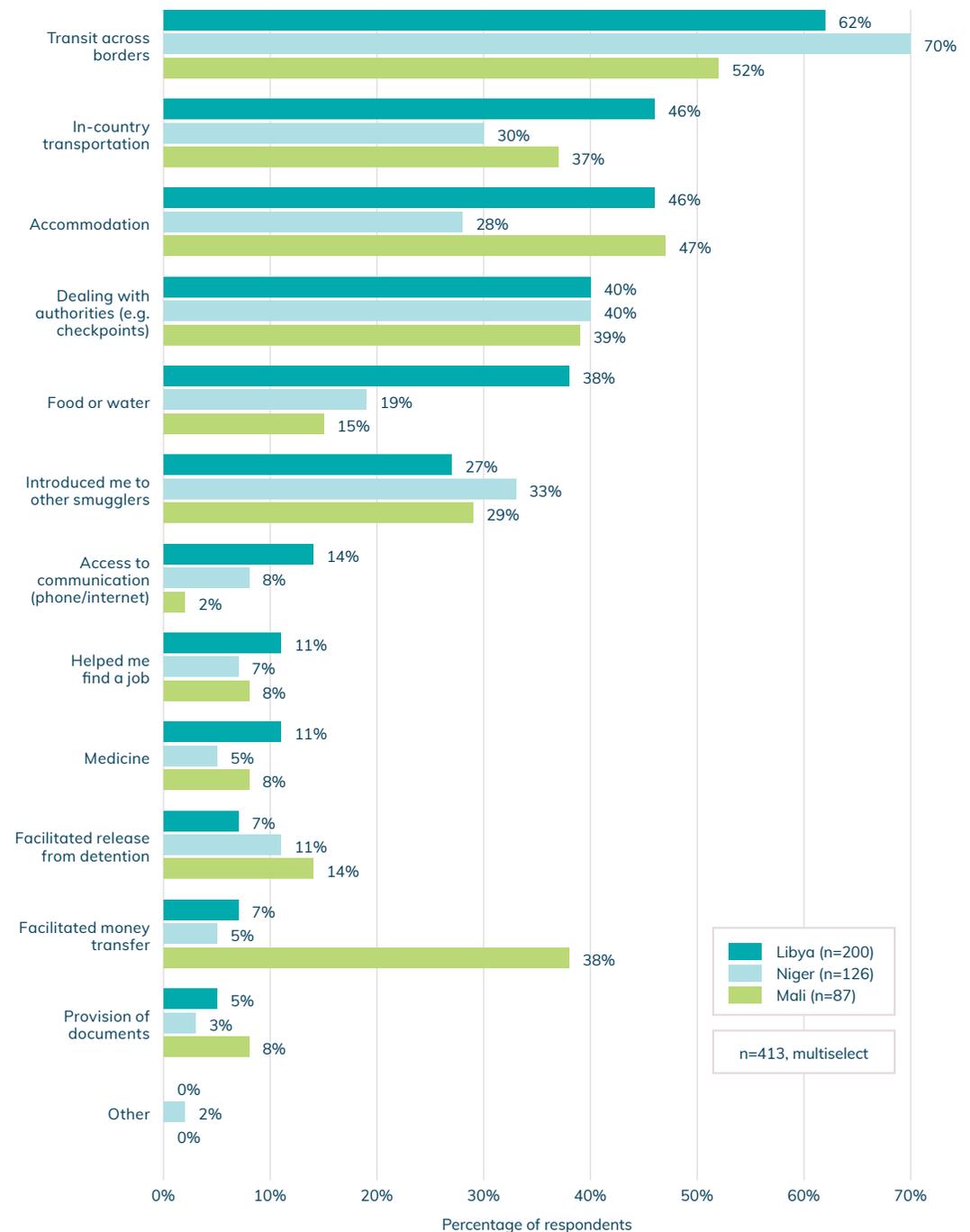
Most respondents used smuggler services to cross borders, but other facilitation activities are common

When disaggregating, of the 413 refugees and migrants who cited using a smuggler, the majority said they enabled the crossing of borders (62%), indicating activities in line with the legal definition of smuggling of migrants.⁷ Other migration facilitation activities mentioned by respondents included: arranging accommodation (40%), dealing with authorities (39%), providing in-country transportation (39%), introducing respondents to other smugglers (29%) or providing food or water (27%).

When disaggregating the activities of smugglers by country of interview, respondents in Mali more often reported that they had facilitated money transfers (38%; n=33) than did respondents in Libya (7%; n=14) or Niger (5%; n=6). The provision of food or water was more common among respondents in Libya (38%; n=75), than those at the earlier stage of the journey in Niger (19%; n=24) or Mali (15%; n=13). This may be due to smugglers in Libya providing food or water for the southern desert crossing, where there are reports of migrant deaths as a result of dehydration.⁸ A higher proportion of women reported that their smugglers had found them a job (18%; n=25) than did men (4%; n=12), possibly reflecting dynamics of trafficking in persons in some cases. The links between smuggling and informal work will be explored in subsequent snapshots.

Figure 2: What services did the smuggler offer?

(Amongst respondents who used a smuggler)



⁷ Art. 3 of the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the 2000 UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

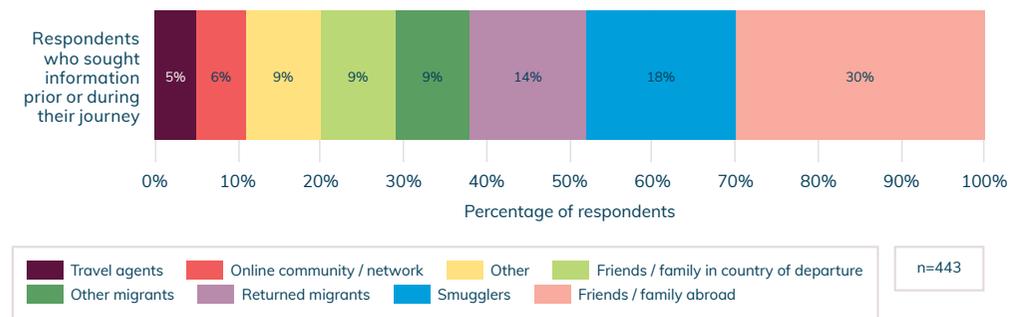
⁸ UNHCR & MMC (2020). [‘On this journey no one cares if you live or die’: Abuse, protection, and justice along routes between East and West Africa and Africa’s Mediterranean coast](#)

Smugglers play a limited role in the decision to migrate but are an important source of information

The most common sources of information about routes, destination, costs, and risks prior to respondents undertaking their migration journey are friends/family abroad (42%) and friends/family in the country of departure (29%). Smugglers are the third-most common information source prior to departure, cited by 26%. Smugglers' roles as information providers become more important after departure; just over one-third (34%; n=177) identified smugglers as a source of information during the course of the journey.

Among those who had sought information prior to or during their journey, when asked what had been the single most reliable source of information, friends/family abroad (30%) were the most-cited source, followed by smugglers (18%) and returned migrants (14%). More respondents interviewed in Libya (21%; n=37) and Niger (21%; n=29) identified smugglers as the most reliable source than in Mali (10%; n=13).

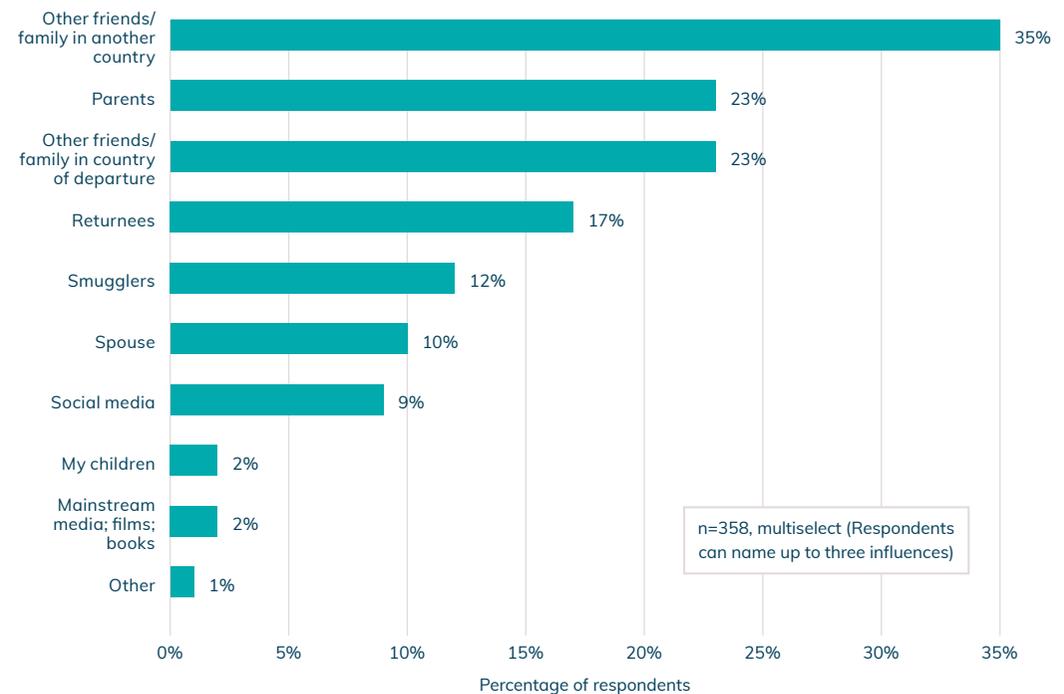
Figure 3: Of all sources, what has been the most reliable source of information overall?



In terms of explicit influence on the decision to migrate, respondents most commonly identified friends/extended family abroad (35%), parents (23%) and extended family in country of departure (23%) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Can you choose the biggest influences on your decision to migrate?

(Amongst respondents that reported someone or something influenced their decision to migrate)

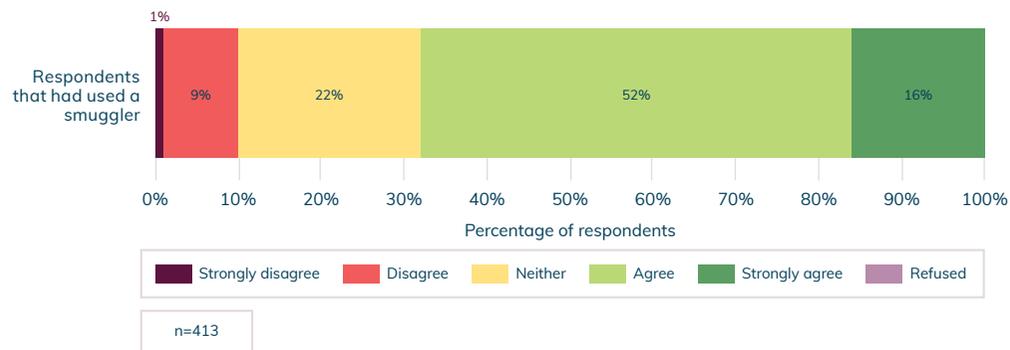


12% of respondents reported that smugglers and facilitators were among the three biggest influences in their decision to migrate. When looking at countries of origin, the influence of smugglers was most frequently reported by Nigerian respondents (29/83). Overall, women more often reported that a smuggler acted as an influence in the decision to migrate (20%; n=36), as compared to men (8%; n=27).

Smugglers perceived as helping people to migrate, but also as intentionally misleading some respondents

When refugees and migrants who used smugglers during their journey were asked whether they agreed with the statement: “The smuggler or smugglers I used helped me in achieving my goal of migrating to another country,” a majority of respondents agreed/strongly agreed (68%; n=281) and only 10% disagreed/strongly disagreed (n=43) with the statement.

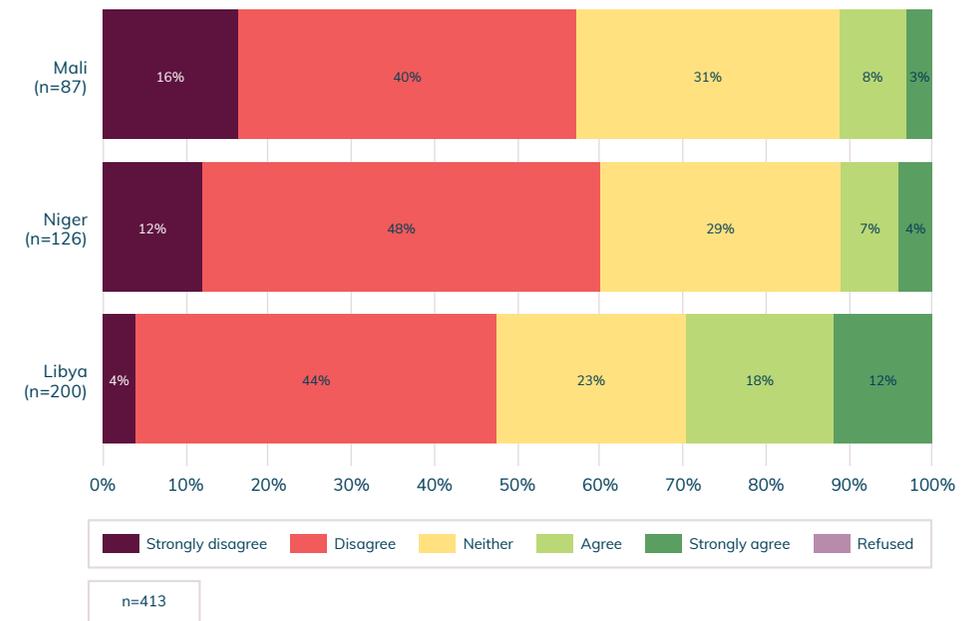
Figure 5: To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "The smuggler or smugglers I used helped me in achieving my goal of migrating to another country"?



When respondents who had used smugglers were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: “I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers,” around one-fifth of respondents agreed/strongly agreed (21%; n=83). This is concerning, considering that some respondents cited smugglers as a crucial source of information before and during the journey.

Figure 6. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers"?

(Among respondents who had used a smuggler)



As outlined in Figure 6, respondents in Libya – who are further along in their journey – more often agreed/strongly agreed that their smuggler or facilitator had intentionally misled them about their journey (30%), than respondents in Mali (11%) and Niger (11%). It was slightly more common for women to agree/strongly agree (23%; n=32) than it was for men (18%; n=51). While it is not possible to identify the form or consequence of having been misled, in the context of Libya where past MMC research has revealed that smugglers are key perpetrators of protection violations, being misled might be linked to protection abuses and in extreme cases, trafficking in persons.⁹

9 UNHCR & MMC (2020). ['On this journey, no one cares if you live or die': Abuse, protection, and justice along routes between East and West Africa and Africa's Mediterranean coast](#)

Conclusion

The data collected and analyzed in this snapshot suggests that smugglers are used by a considerable and increasing proportion of refugees and migrants migrating overland from, to, and through West and North Africa, with a higher reported use among respondents interviewed in Libya than in Mali and Niger. Smugglers and facilitators enable the crossing of borders, including dealing with border authorities; provide accommodation and engage in a wide range of other activities. Smugglers play a limited role in respondents' decision to migrate but are an important source of information before and during the migration journey. While respondents agreed that they had helped them to migrate, some reported being intentionally misled by smugglers and facilitators. This was more common for refugees and migrants interviewed in Libya, which is difficult to enter regularly, geographically located further along mixed migration routes with Libya or European countries as destinations, and is often a location where refugees and migrants are victims of protection violations. Subsequent snapshots will further explore these dynamics between refugees, migrants, and their smugglers and facilitators across West and North Africa.



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4Mi data collection

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, North Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi