

Nigerian Refugees' and Migrants' Use of Smugglers

This snapshot focuses on the experience of smuggling¹ among Nigerians on the move in West and North Africa and along the Central Mediterranean Route, drawing on 644 interviews conducted in Niger, Libya and Italy between end 2019 and June 2021. As well as providing valuable insights on the overall dynamics of smuggler use among Nigerians, the findings indicate that Nigerian women's experience of smuggling is very specific, and suggest a possible link to human trafficking, supporting existing reports and analyses.²

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



Key findings

- **Almost all Nigerians interviewed used a smuggler.** Nigerians interviewed further along the route more frequently reported a negative perception of the smuggler than those interviewed at an earlier stage in their journeys, when they were still within the ECOWAS free movement zone.
- **Smugglers interviewed by 4Mi frequently report Nigerians to be among the top three nationalities of clients.**

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 on 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 See, for example, Human Rights Watch, "You Pray for Death": Trafficking of Women and Girls in Nigeria, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/08/27/you-pray-death/trafficking-women-and-girls-nigeria>

- Compared to the Nigerian men who were interviewed, **women from Nigeria more often reported that their first contact with a smuggler was through the smuggler approaching them, that they intended to use a smuggler from the beginning, and that they knew of no alternative or were pressured by the smuggler to use them.** They also more commonly used one smuggler for the entire journey (especially respondents in Italy), reported that the smuggler chose the route (especially respondents in Libya and Italy) and that the smuggler intentionally misled them (again, most frequently in Italy).
- While in general, smugglers are not a major influence on West Africans' decision to migrate (11% among all West Africans interviewed in Italy, Libya and Niger), Nigerian women are the exception. Overall, **38% of Nigerian women interviewed in Italy, Libya and Niger indicate smugglers influenced their decision to migrate, making smugglers the most important influence.** This is particularly the case among Nigerian women interviewed in Libya (45%).
- Taking the findings mentioned above, there are indications that the smuggling of Nigerian women towards North Africa and Europe is different from the smuggling of other West Africans and more frequently takes place in a rather organised manner. While this is not the case for the majority of Nigerian women, **it is more common among Nigerian women that the smuggler approached them, influenced the decision to migrate, chose the route, and took responsibility for the entire journey, and there is a more common perception that the smuggler misled them, which could point to a potential link to human trafficking³ – though this should be further explored** more in-depth before any conclusions can be drawn – or at least a lower degree of voluntariness that normally characterises human smuggling.

3 Human Trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit. Men, women and children of all ages and from all backgrounds can become victims of this crime, which occurs in every region of the world. The traffickers often use violence or fraudulent employment agencies and fake promises of education and job opportunities to trick and coerce their victims.

Profiles

This snapshot is based on 644 interviews with Nigerians in Libya (n=284), Niger (n=187) and Italy (n=173)⁴ conducted between February and June 2021 in Libya and Niger, and November 2019 and June 2021 in Italy. See Table 1 for an overview of locations of interview.

Table 1. Location of interview

Niger			Libya			Italy		
City	N	%	City	N	%	City	N	%
Agadez	53	28%	Tripoli	124	44%	Arezzo	34	20%
Diffa	34	18%	Sebha	51	18%	Florence	28	16%
Niamey	30	16%	Zuwara	35	12%	Rome	22	13%
N'guigmi	28	15%	Other	74	26%	Livorno	21	12%
Tillaberi	25	13%				Other	68	39%
Other	17	10%						

Women comprise 44% (n=286) of respondents and men 56% (n=358), which is a relatively high proportion of women (the proportion of women among West Africans interviewed in North and West Africa is usually around one-third). Around one in five (20%; n=105)⁵ respondents reported travelling with children in their care, of whom almost two thirds (63%; n=66) were women.

Respondents were originally from the following Nigerian regions: South-South (40%; n=255), South-West (21%; n=135), South-East (13%; n=82), North-East (10%; n=67), North-West (9%; n=61) and North-Central (7%; n=44).

4 The data in Italy was not collected under the partnership between MMC and UNODC, but under the EU Horizon2020 funded ADMIGOV programme. Given the relevance and in order to be able to include data on Nigerians who made the crossing to Europe, this dataset was included here. Some additional questions on migrant smuggling – included in the interviews in North and West Africa implemented under the partnership with UNODC – are not included in the interviews in Italy, and as such results from Italy do not feature in all finding and graphs below.

5 This question (Are you currently travelling with children in your care?) was not present in interviews implemented in 2019. Therefore, % generated only using data collected in 2020 and 2021.

A large majority of Nigerian respondents used a smuggler

91% (n=583) of respondents had made use of a smuggler at some point during their journey. This includes all Nigerians interviewed in Libya (100%), 88% of respondents in Italy and 79% of those interviewed in Niger. As Niger is an ECOWAS Member State, Nigerians with the requisite travel documents have freedom of movement to and in Niger. Similar proportions of Nigerian men (93%; n=318) and women (89%; n=265) had used smugglers, and no major differences were found between age groups (18-25, 26-35, 36 and above). A slightly lower proportion of Nigerians travelling with children had made use of smugglers or facilitators (86%), than those travelling without (92%).

The use of smugglers among Nigerians interviewed in Italy, Libya and Niger is high (91%), though only slightly higher than the use of smugglers among other West Africans interviewed in Italy, Libya and Niger (87%). When considering data collected in the same countries before 2021, the proportion of respondents using smugglers in 2021 has dramatically increased among non-Nigerian West Africans, and somewhat increased among Nigerians.⁶

Use of a smuggler varied slightly between regions of origin: 99% of respondents from South-West used a smuggler, 98% from North-Central, 96% from South-East, 92% from South-South, 78% from North-East and 67% from North-West, although caution must be taken with the small sample sizes from some regions.

6 See, for example, the first in this series of snapshots, page 1. https://mixedmigration.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/187_Roles_of_Migrant_Smugglers_and_Movement_Facilitators_in-West_and_North_Africa.pdf

Almost all routes transited Niger, then Libya

Almost all respondents interviewed in Libya had transited Niger (95%), before reaching Libya. Almost all respondents in Italy had transited Niger (95%) and Libya (92%) before arriving in Italy.

46% of respondents reported that the smuggler had chosen the route, while 28% stated that friends/family had suggested it or were taking it, and 19% stated that it was the cheapest route. It was more common for respondents interviewed in Italy (53%) to report that the smuggler had chosen the route, than those in Libya (46%) or Niger (38%).

Nigerian women more often said that the smuggler had chosen the route (58%) than men (36%), particularly those interviewed in Italy (64%) and in Libya (59%).

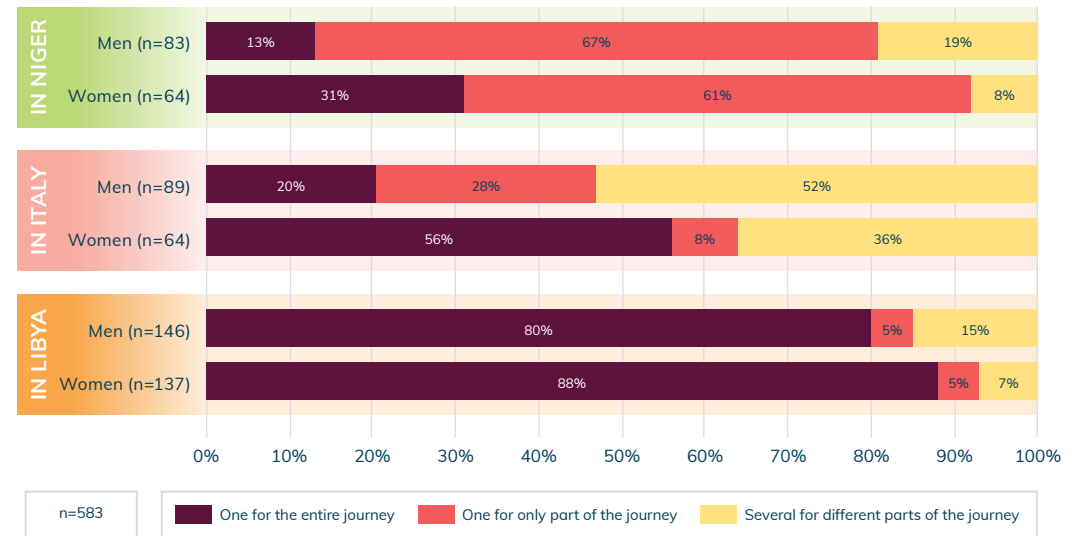
Nigerians more often use one smuggler for the entire journey

The use of one smuggler for the entirety of the journey is considerably higher among Nigerian respondents (55% used one smuggler or facilitator) than among non-Nigerian respondents interviewed in the same countries (34%).

55% (n=323) of Nigerians who used a smuggler used just one for the entire journey, 24% (n=139) used one for only part of their journey, while 21% (n=121) used several for different parts of their journey. **It is even more common for Nigerian women to use just one smuggler for the entirety of their journey, 69% vs 53% of men.** The gendered distinction is particularly pronounced in Italy, where 56% of women respondents reported using one smuggler compared to 20% of men.

Respondents in Libya much more commonly used one smuggler for the entirety of their journey (84%), compared to respondents who had used one smuggler in Italy (35%) and Niger (21%). In Niger, almost two-thirds (65%) had used a smuggler for only part of the journey, while in Italy 45% reported using several different smugglers for different parts of the journey, see Figure 1 for details.

Figure 1. Did you use a smuggler? (Type of use - among Nigerian respondents who reported using a smuggler)

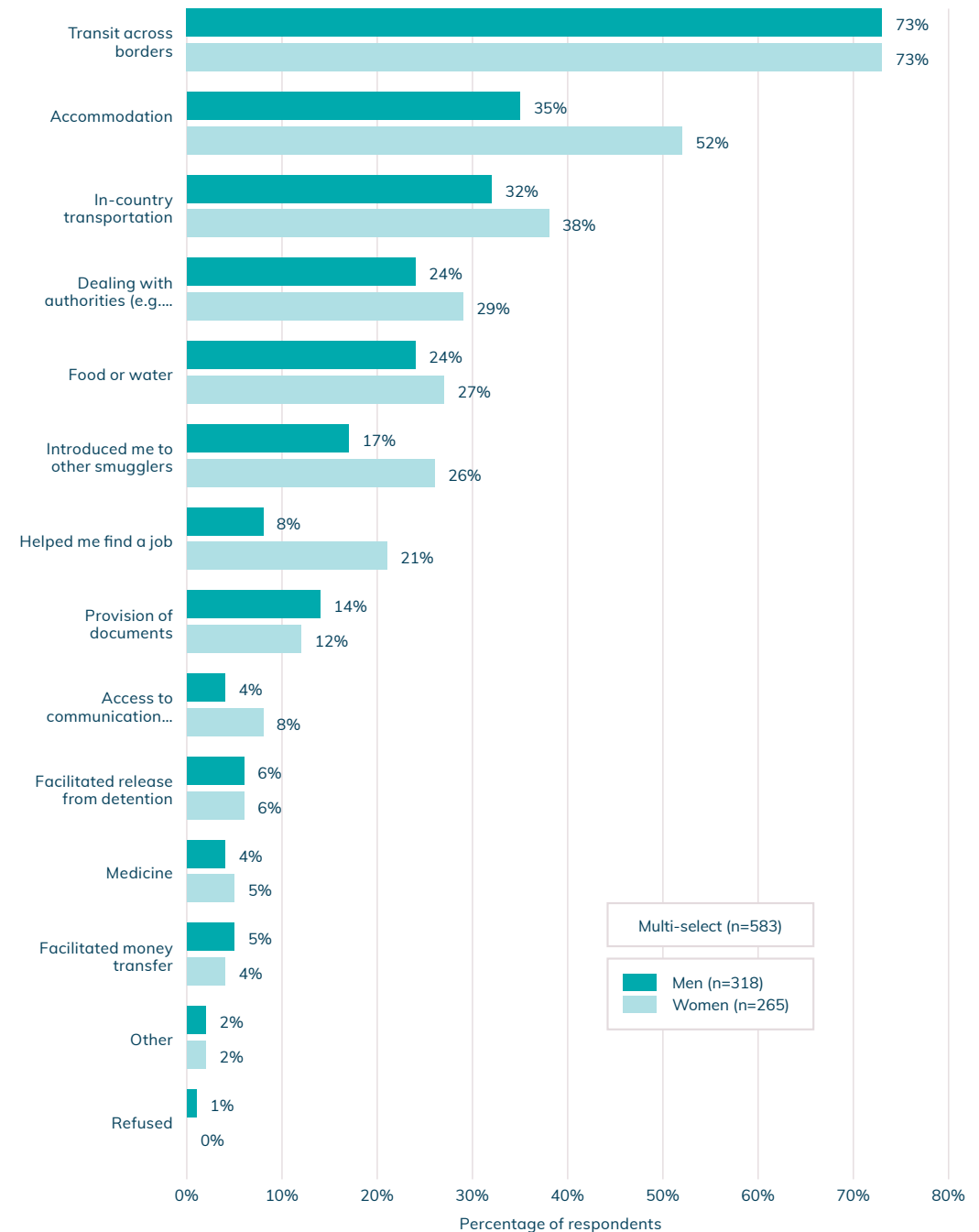


Transit across borders is the most frequent 'service,' but others are also provided

73% of respondents who used smugglers (n=425) said that the smuggler provided transit across borders. Other services included: arranging accommodation (43%), providing in-country transportation (35%), dealing with authorities (26%), providing food or water (25%), introducing respondents to other smugglers (21%) or helping to find a job (14%). Respondents interviewed in Libya far more commonly reported having been provided with accommodation by smugglers/facilitators (61%) than did those interviewed in Niger (28%) and Italy (23%). Comparing respondents in Niger with respondents in Libya, this may indicate a greater need for smugglers to provide services such as accommodation in Libya, as refugees and migrants have less capacity to secure accommodation themselves, or it may reflect the more organized nature of human smuggling in Libya. However, it is interesting that Nigerians in Italy, who transited Libya, are not reporting additional services to the same degree.

Just as Nigerian women more often used one smuggler for the entire journey, **women respondents more commonly reported that smugglers provided more 'services', particularly accommodation (53% vs. 35% of men), introductions to other smugglers (26% vs. 17%) and help to find jobs (21% vs. 8%),** see Figure 2.

Figure 2: What services did the smuggler provide? (Among Nigerian respondents who reported using a smuggler)

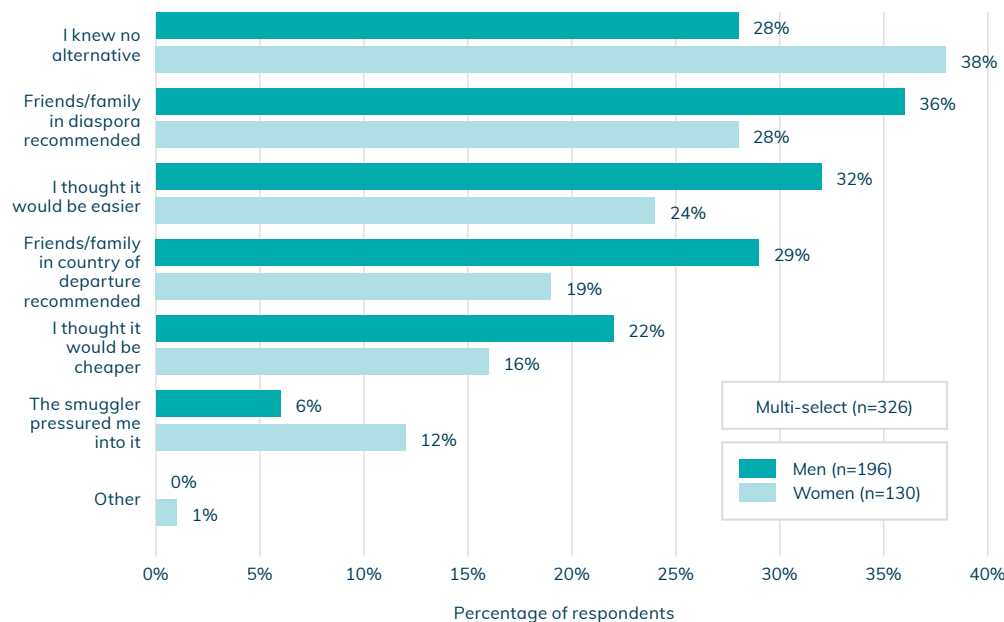


No alternative to smugglers?

When Nigerian respondents in Libya and Niger⁷ were asked why they had used the services of a smuggler or facilitator, respondents most frequently reported that friends/family in the diaspora had recommended using a smuggler (33%), they knew no alternative (32%) or they thought it would be easier (29%). 8% of respondents cited that the smuggler or facilitator had pressured them into it. Among non-Nigerian West Africans interviewed in the same countries, it was more common to have used the services of a smuggler because they thought it would be easier (35%) or cheaper (25%), and it was less common to have used one because they knew no alternative (22%) or because the smuggler pressured them into it (3%) than reported by Nigerians.

As shown in Figure 3, **Nigerian women more frequently cited not knowing of any alternative to using a smuggler or facilitator (38% vs 28% of men) and having been pressured into it (12% vs. 6% of men), again pointing to a more organized smuggling process of Nigerian women.**

Figure 3. Why did you use a smuggler? (Among Nigerian respondents in Libya and Niger that reported using a smuggler)

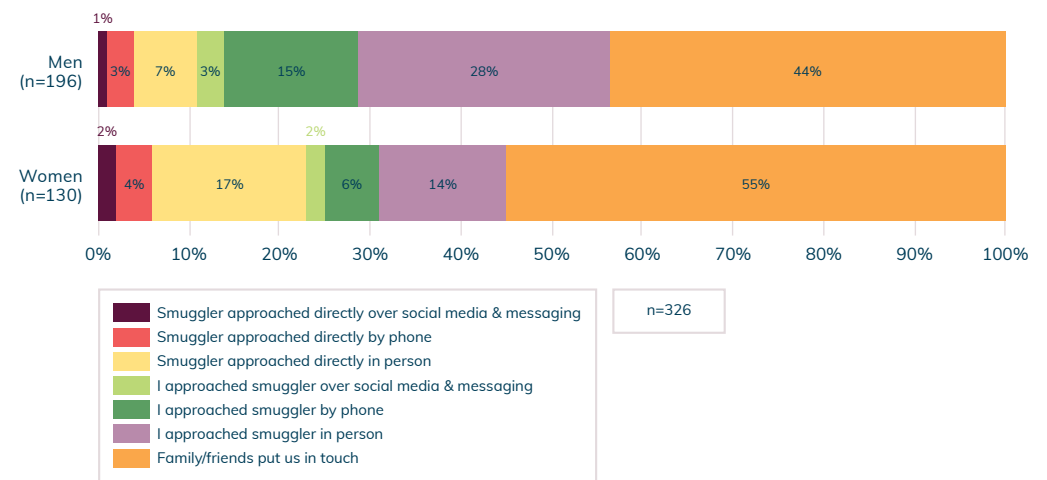


7 This variable was part of a set of additional questions on smuggling added to interviews conducted in Libya and Niger, which were not included in interviews conducted in Italy.

The majority of respondents (79%; n=257) in Libya and Niger⁸ who used smugglers said they had planned to use one while preparing for their journey, although this suggests that more than one in five (21%) respondents did not initially intend to do so. **It was more common for women (86%) to have planned the use of a smuggler or facilitator than for men (74%).**

First contact with smugglers/facilitators was most often made through friends/family (48%; n=158).⁹ Respondents also commonly approached the smuggler or facilitator directly themselves (36%) either via phone (22%), in person (18%) or – more rarely – through social media (2%). The remaining 15% reported that it was the smuggler or facilitator that approached them in person (11%), by phone (3%) or through social media (1%). These figures vary considerably between men and women respondents, as evident in Figure 4. **Nigerian women were far more often approached by smugglers (22%), than men (10%) and, less frequently approached smugglers themselves (22%) than men (46%).**

Figure 4: How did you first get in touch with the initial smuggler? (Among Nigerian respondents in Libya and Niger that reported using a smuggler)



8 This variable was part of a set of additional questions on smuggling added to interviews conducted in Libya and Niger, which were not included in interviews conducted in Italy.

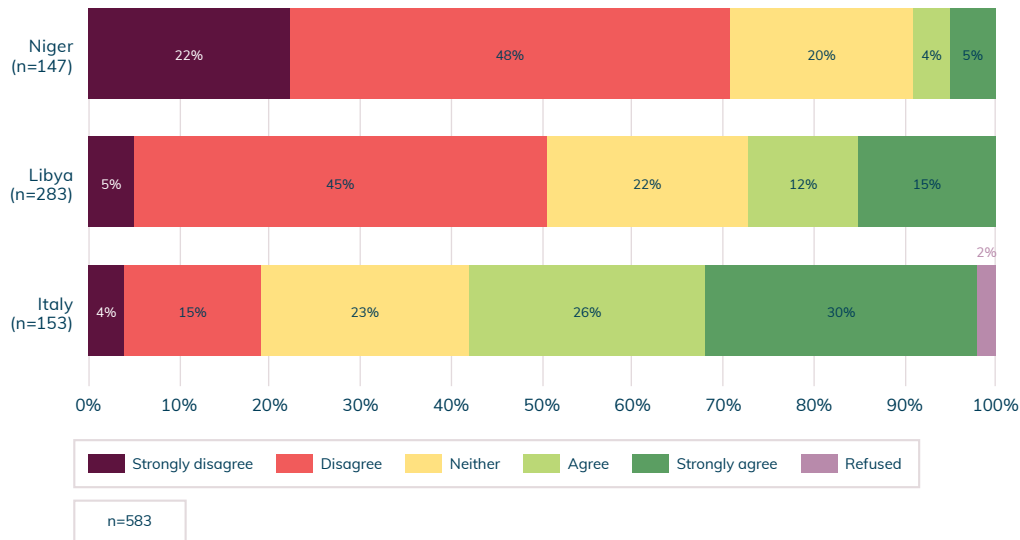
9 This variable was part of a set of additional questions on smuggling added to interviews conducted in Libya and Niger, which were not included in interviews conducted in Italy.

A more negative perception of smugglers further along the route

The majority of respondents agreed/strongly agreed (66%; n=384) that the smuggler helped them achieve their goal of migration, and only 15% disagreed/strongly disagreed (n=88) with the statement, and 30% agreed/strongly agreed that a smuggler intentionally misled them.

However, further along the route, the percentage of Nigerian respondents saying their smuggler misled them increases; see Figure 5. In Italy, 56% agree/strongly agree that the smuggler had intentionally misled them about their journey compared to 9% in Niger (9%). **61% of women interviewed in Italy agreed/strongly agreed that the smuggler intentionally misled them.**

Figure 5. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers"?



Smugglers are considered as service providers/business persons

Asked how they would describe their smugglers or facilitators,¹⁰ Nigerian respondents most frequently considered them to be service providers/business persons (83%). The other answer options reported were an information resource (22%), a protection resource (16%), a fellow migrant (16%), a criminal (12%), a friend (4%), other (1%) or didn't know (2%).

The perception of smugglers and facilitators as criminals was reported more frequently in Libya (16% vs. 5% in Niger) and by women (15% vs. 10% of men).

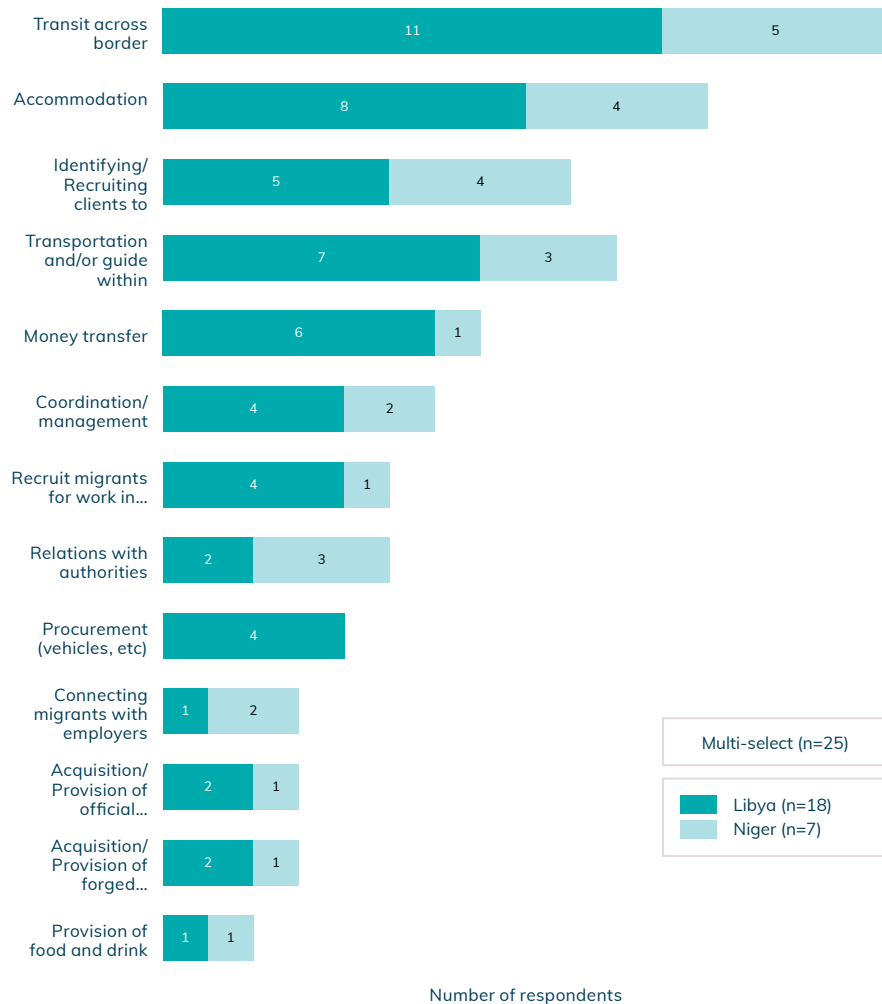
Smugglers report Nigerians as a large proportion of clients

Throughout June 2021, MMC also conducted interviews with migrant smugglers operating in North and West Africa. Of 24 smugglers interviewed in Libya, three-quarters (18) reported Nigerians as one of the three main nationalities of the people they provided smuggling/facilitation services to. In Niger, 7 of the 11 smugglers or facilitators interviewed reported the same. Smugglers and facilitators providing services to Nigerians in Libya were mostly of Nigerian nationality (11/18), followed by Ghanaian (3), Cameroonian (2), Malian (1) and Nigerian (1). In Niger, 6 were from Niger, and one from Nigeria. Of the 25 who had reported having Nigerian clients, 7 were women, mostly located in Libya (6). More than half (13/25) outlined that their clients were about half men and half women, while 9 reported these were mostly men and 3 mostly women. More smugglers interviewed in Libya reported that their clients were either mostly women or half-half (14/18), than in Niger (2/7).

The smugglers interviewed in Libya and Niger who had provided services to Nigerian nationals more often reported assisting migrants to travel to Libya (18/25) than to Italy (9/25) and Niger (9/25). The majority of interviewed smugglers were involved in smuggling operations across borders (16/25). Similar to the reports of refugee and migrant respondents, other facilitation activities include: providing accommodation (12), identifying and recruiting clients to migrate (10) and transportation and/or guiding within transit location (10).

¹⁰ This variable was part of a set of additional questions on smuggling added to interviews conducted in Libya and Niger, which were not included in interviews conducted in Italy. Respondents could choose more than one answer option.

Figure 6: What are your main responsibilities in the smuggling process?



This snapshot is produced in the context of a partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants: www.unodc.org/res/som/index.html

4Mi data collection

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 enumerators 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