

Smuggling, risks, and abuses: characteristics of respondents and the perception of smugglers as perpetrators (part 2 of 3)

This is the second in a series of three 4Mi snapshots looking at the conjunction between smuggling¹ and the risks and abuses faced by refugees and migrants moving through West and North Africa. It draws on 2,427 interviews conducted in Libya, Niger, Mali, and Tunisia between March and July 2021.

The first snapshot focused on smuggling and dangerous routes, and the role of smugglers as perpetrators of risks relative to other actors in these locations.²

This second snapshot focuses on the link between the individual characteristic of the respondents (gender, nationality, and financial status) and reports of smugglers as perpetrators of risks.

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](#).

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 Find the first snapshot of the series [here](#).

Key findings

- **Among nationalities that cited the most risks, higher proportions of respondents from Eritrea (36%) and Sudan (24%) perceived smugglers as perpetrators.** However, only in the case of respondents from Eritrea were smugglers cited more than any other perceived perpetrator, like criminal, armed groups or border guards.
- **Respondents with insufficient funding for their journey may be at greater risk of abuse at the hands of smugglers.** 57% of mentions of smugglers as perpetrators were made by people whose financing had not been sufficient for the journey thus far as compared to 33% of mentions made by those with adequate funds.

Profiles and smuggler use

Between March and July 2021, a total of 2,427 surveys with refugees and migrants (32% women, 68% men) were carried out in Libya (n=908), Niger (n=477), Mali (n=471) and Tunisia (n=571). 76% of respondents (n = 1,845) said that they used a smuggler for at least part of their journey.

Respondents interviewed in Libya and Niger more often said they had used smugglers (90% and 87% respectively). Libya is considered extremely challenging to navigate without the assistance of a 'third party',³ and previous MMC research has underscored the importance of smugglers for movement both in Libya and in parts of Niger.⁴ This contrasts with Tunisia, where 65% of respondents reported using a smuggler, and Mali, with only 52%. Therefore, the data on the prevalence of smugglers tells us something about how freely and independently refugees and migrants can move into and through a country.

To best understand the risks and perpetrators faced and perceived by those who use smugglers, this snapshot focuses on the five locations most frequently cited as dangerous by those who used a smuggler, where the majority of risks (87% of those cited by respondents who used smugglers) were perceived, which were Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and the Sahara Desert (n=1,205).⁵ Therefore, these results are not generalizable as the sample is structured to focus on risks and abuses.

Of these respondents, 32% were women (n=383) and 68% were men (n=822), with an average age of 28. The main countries of nationality among this group were Nigeria (29%), Sudan (7%), Guinea (5%), Eritrea (5%), Ghana (5%), Cameroon (5%), Niger (5%), Benin (4%), Sierra Leone (4%), Senegal (4%).

After citing locations they perceived as dangerous, respondents could specify risks that they associated with these locations, and the actors or groups they perceived as perpetrating these risks or abuses.

3 UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021) [Key Findings on the Characteristics of Migrant Smuggling in West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean](#)

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

5 All analysis that follows is based on this group of people who both used smugglers, and cited Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and/or the Sahara Desert as dangerous (n=1,205). It considers risks and perceived perpetrators in relation to these five locations. Respondents could cite multiple locations as dangerous, including locations outside of these five, and they could also cite the same country as dangerous multiple times (eg Libya, Sabha; Libya, Khoms; Libya, Tripoli). They could also indicate multiple risks and multiple perceived perpetrators per location. Given these characteristics of the dataset, this analysis is generally based in times a risk or perpetrator is mentioned, rather than the proportion of respondents mentioning it.

Little variation by gender, more by nationality

When disaggregating by gender, the extent to which men and women respondents perceived smugglers as perpetrators of risks usually did not vary substantially (only for Algeria and Mali was there a somewhat more pronounced, though still small, variance). However, when looking at the nationalities that had cited the most risks in these locations,⁶ there is a fair amount of variation in the proportional importance given to smugglers as perpetrators, breaking down as follows: Eritrea (36%), Sudan (24%), Nigeria (18%), Guinea (16%), Sierra Leone (16%), Senegal (13%).

It is notable that proportionally speaking, respondents from both Eritrea and Sudan indicated smugglers as perceived perpetrators to a greater extent than respondents from the above-mentioned West African countries. However, only in the case of respondents from Eritrea were smugglers cited more than any other perceived perpetrator. This may be because Eritreans are particularly reliant on smugglers, given that they generally lack access to travel documents and are often depart from context Eritrea or in Sudan from which it is very difficult to move.

Less financially secure, greater perception of smugglers as perpetrators

A previous MMC study⁷ found that the means of financing the journey impacted respondents' vulnerability to experiencing abuses, suggesting that the financial status of refugees and migrants is worth considering here. Among respondents who had used a smuggler and cited at least one of the above locations as dangerous, 53% (n=643) said that their initial financing had been sufficient to pay for their journey up to the point of interview, whereas 36% (n=436) indicated that it was not enough.⁸

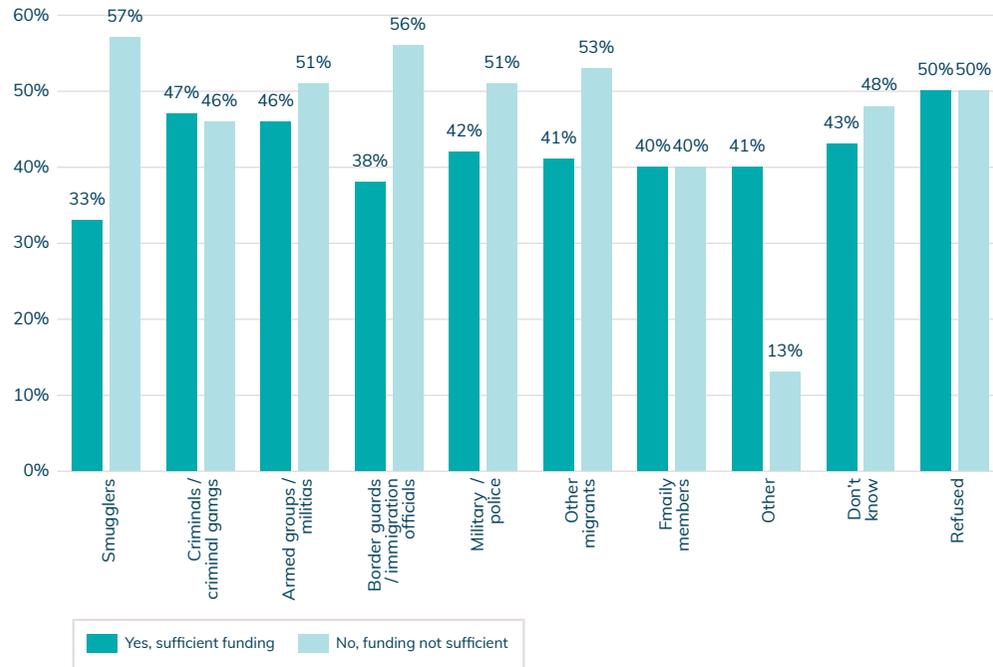
Smugglers were mentioned as perpetrators of risks by 311 people who stated that they had inadequate funding (57% of all smuggler mentions by those who cited the top five dangerous places), versus by 180 people who had sufficient funds (33%).

6 It is not possible to say that these nationalities experience the most risks, as they could be over-represented in our data, and were also among the 10 most cited nationalities of our sample.

7 MMC (2020) [A Sharper Lens on Vulnerability \(North Africa\): A statistical analysis of the determinants of vulnerability to protection incidents among refugees and migrants in Libya](#).

8 10% (n=126) did not answer this question.

Figure 1. Perceived perpetrators by financial status



This is in contrast to mentions of criminals/gangs and armed groups/militias as likely to be perpetrating abuses, which were proportionally very similar among those with sufficient and insufficient funds. This seems to suggest that while criminals and armed groups are more likely to prey on migrants indiscriminately, smugglers are more likely to perpetrate abuses against migrants with fewer financial resources, perhaps because they have not been able to pay the smuggler sufficiently, which could lead the smuggler to use extortion methods such as kidnapping for ransom or forced labor. The latter also seems to hold true, though in slightly less pronounced fashion, with state actors such as police and border guards.

It is also worth noting that respondents who no longer had sufficient funding had been traveling on average more than three times as long (347 days) as those who still had adequate money (103 days). Thus, it is possible that journey length could also be a factor in explaining the disparity between these two groups regarding citations of smugglers as perpetrators.



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