

Afghans en route to Turkey: routes, protection risks, and access to assistance

This is an amended version of the snapshot, published 18 November 2021. It has been corrected to show that Urmia, Iran was the second most dangerous location reported. An earlier version reported that Urmia, Turkey was the second most dangerous location reported.

Since 19 August 2021, MMC Asia has been interviewing Afghans in Turkey to better understand their migration experiences, as well as the protection risks and needs they face. For decades Turkey has been both a host country and transit hub [for hundreds of thousands of Afghans](#) escaping persecution as well as political and economic insecurity. To reach Turkey, many undertake long and arduous journeys overland via Pakistan and Iran, with some hoping to continue their journey onward to other countries, including within Europe. This year, [the number of Afghans entering Turkey has been rising](#) in response to mounting political and economic instability in the lead-up to the Taliban takeover. While mass movements of Afghans throughout the region in the wake of the crisis have yet to eventuate, many speculate that [the numbers of refugees seeking to leave will only increase in the future](#).

This snapshot focuses on the routes Afghans take to reach Turkey, the protection risks they face as well as their access to assistance. The snapshot aims to contribute towards building a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to migration movements to and through Turkey.

Profiles of respondents

Information in this snapshot was collected between 19 August and 31 September 2021 in ten locations of Turkey (Istanbul, Izmir, Erzurum, Van, Adana, Ankara, Eskisehir, Konya, Balikesir, and Kayseri). In total, 436 interviews were conducted with Afghans, all of whom reached Turkey within the last 24 months. The majority of respondents were men (81%), between 18-30 years old (77%), most of whom come from an urban background (66%) and had mainly attained secondary (47%), or primary school (21%) levels of education. More than half of the respondents (55%) were unregistered/without documentation

while the rest held some form of documentation like an International Protection Applicant Identification Card¹ (25%), temporary resident permits/visas (8%) or refugee status (5%).

Recommendations

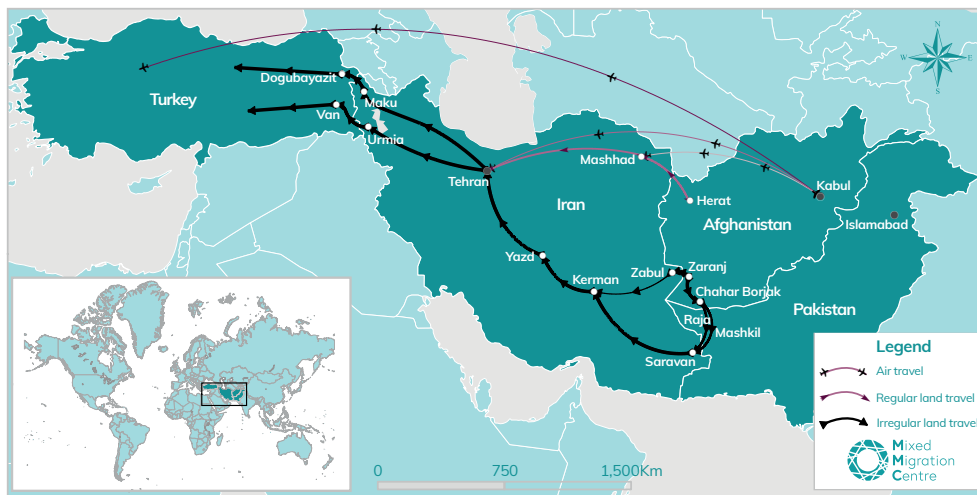
- Provide assistance for Afghans during their journeys, including access to basic items such as food, water, and shelter, and psycho-social support;
- Identify the needs of Afghans en route to Turkey and provide support throughout their journeys, taking into consideration the differences between men and women and between migration routes. In particular scale up the protection response for Afghan children on the move, given the high reported prevalence of children facing very serious risks;
- Engage authorities in major transit and hosting countries, including Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, so that the right to protection and the immediate needs of asylum seekers are prioritized;
- Advocate for effective implementation of regional and cross-regional response mechanisms that prioritize the protection needs of Afghans on the move;
- Scale up the response by the international community along the route, since UN and NGOs are currently not seen as key providers of assistance. In particular, scale up the response near border areas and in particular in and around Van, Turkey, where respondents report a high prevalence of protection incidents combined with a lack of available assistance and support.

¹ International Protection Applicant Identification Cards are issued for those who submitted their asylum applications in Turkey

Most respondents began their journey from Afghanistan, although 11% embarked on onward movements from Iran

The majority of 4Mi respondents (89%) started their journey to Turkey from Afghanistan with the most common transit countries being Iran (84%) and Pakistan (37%). However, 11% of Afghans interviewed cited Iran as their first country of departure. This accounts for Afghans who have been living in Iran as refugees or undocumented migrants and, due to a variety of factors including lack of access to education, employment, and legal status,² embark on onward journeys to Turkey and beyond.

Map 1. Most prevalent routes taken by Afghan 4Mi respondents to reach Turkey (n=436)



Land routes are most common: 12% traveled directly to Turkey via air

The most prevalent routes taken by respondents were overland via both Pakistan and Iran, see Map 1. The large majority (84%) travelled to Turkey overland, 4% flew first to Iran and 12% reached Turkey directly from Afghanistan via air.

Leaving Afghanistan respondents traveled by two main irregular routes: 1) the 'Raja/Mashkil route' via Pakistan; and 2) the 'Zabul route' across the Nimruz province border with Iran, see Map 1. Those who held visas for Iran were also able to cross via the official Islam Qala border crossing. From Iran, respondents reported travelling two routes to get to Turkey: 1) via Urmia to Van; and 2) via Maku to Dogubayazit, see Map 1. Among the modes of transport used, walking was the most common (86%), followed by car/pick-up (54%), bus (45%) and truck (16%), among others.

It is really dangerous to travel to Turkey via Iran after the months of November and December because of the snow and cold weather. I hear that many freeze to death during winter in the mountains of Iran and Turkey.

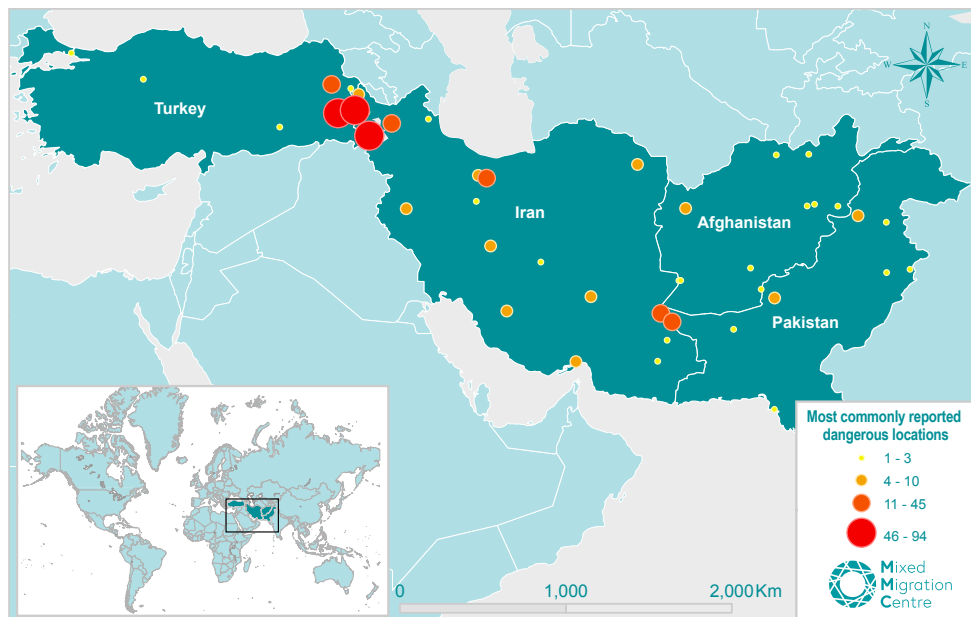
27-year-old Afghan man, interviewed in Balikesir, Turkey

² For more see <https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/11/20/unwelcome-guests/irans-violation-afghan-refugee-and-migrant-rights>

Border areas are reported as the most dangerous locations en route

Protection risks were reported as common among 4Mi respondents en route to Turkey. Respondents most frequently mentioned the borders of Iran/Turkey and Iran/Afghanistan as the most dangerous locations. Nearly half of respondents (44%) reported dangerous locations in Iran and another 26% mentioned locations of concerns in Turkey, see Map 2. Van, Turkey, was mentioned as the most dangerous city by 4Mi respondents (24%), which is supported by media reporting [Van as a key protection hotspot for Afghans](#) wanting to reach Turkey and Europe. Urmia, Iran was the second most dangerous location reported by 15% of respondents, followed by Tabriz (7%) and Tehran, (6%) in Iran.³

Map 2. Most dangerous locations on route reported by Afghan 4Mi respondents in Turkey (n=436)

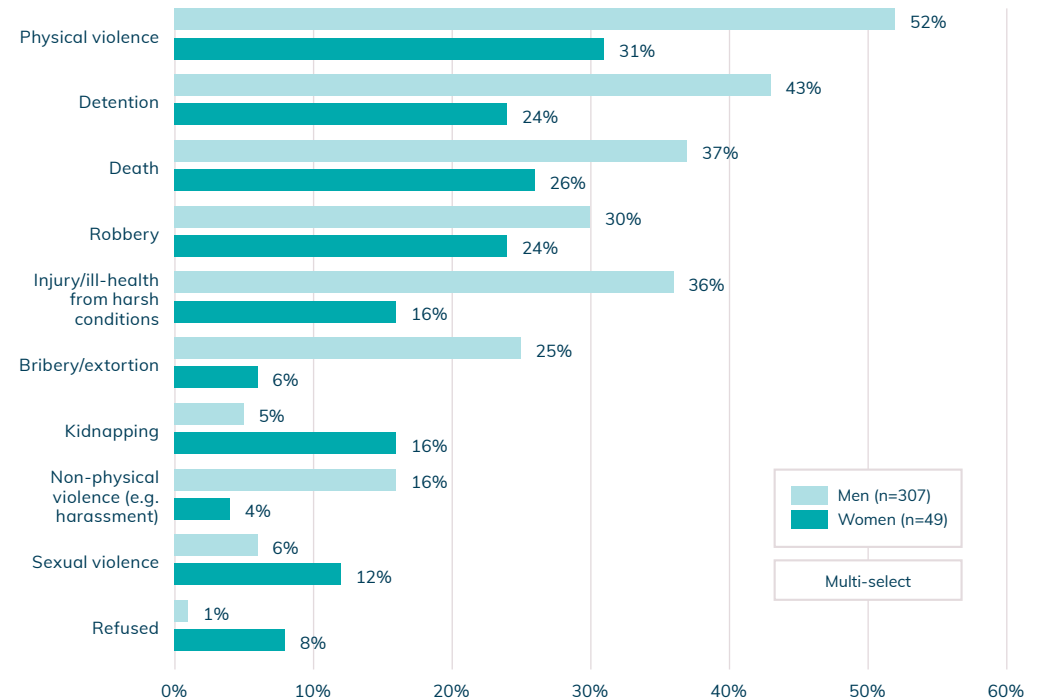


³ In addition, 20% of respondents mentioned dangerous locations along the Afghanistan-Pakistan and Iran-Turkey borders that were locations of concern, however the specific name of the location was not known.

Physical violence, detention and death are the three most commonly reported risks en route

Physical violence (41%), detention (33%), death (31%) robbery (27%) and injury/ill-health from harsh conditions (26%) were reported as the main risks faced by Afghans en route to Turkey, see Figure 1. Men and women reported slightly different risks, for example, a greater share of men reported physical violence (52%), detention (43%), injury/ill-health from harsh conditions (36%), and bribery/extortion (25%), compared to women. A greater share of women reported sexual violence (12%) and kidnapping (16%) compared to men. Although note that the sample size for women is small, so care should be taken in interpreting the results.

Figure 1. What were the main risks faced en route?



Among respondents traveling with children (n=128), 70% reported a high or very high likelihood of children facing protection risks en route, including death (49%), injury/ill health from harsh conditions (44%) and physical violence (40%).

From the beginning of the journey until now, I've been worried about my children and my wife, because we, men, are used to this hardship but for them, it is really difficult and dangerous. The route we took was full of risks and this affected my wife and children very badly.

33-year-old Afghan man, interviewed in Adana, Turkey

It was a difficult and grueling journey, especially for me, because I have my four children with me without their mother. Those who have children should never come on foot and land. I wish I would have tried to get a visa and have travelled by air to Turkey.

38-year-old Afghan man, interviewed in Erzurum, Turkey

Travelling in a group was commonly cited as the main measure to mitigate protection risks en route (51%), followed by avoiding carrying cash (29%). Among women (n=49), planning their journeys carefully (33%), researching and follow recommendations (24%) and stopping in places with trusted contacts (10%) were common protective measures reported.

Smugglers, followed by border guards/immigration officials and military/police are the main perpetrators of protection violations en route

44% of respondents who indicated at least one dangerous location en route reported smugglers as the most common perpetrators of protection incidents. This is followed by border guards/immigration officials (35%), military/police (34%) and criminal gangs (28%), see Figure 2. These findings are in line with recent reports outlining [the increased securitization of borders](#), as well as increased reliance on smugglers.

Compared to men, women more commonly reported other migrants (19%) and family members (6%) as perpetrators of protection violations (compared to 8% and 1% for men, respectively).

Figure 2. Who were likely to be perpetrating such incidents?

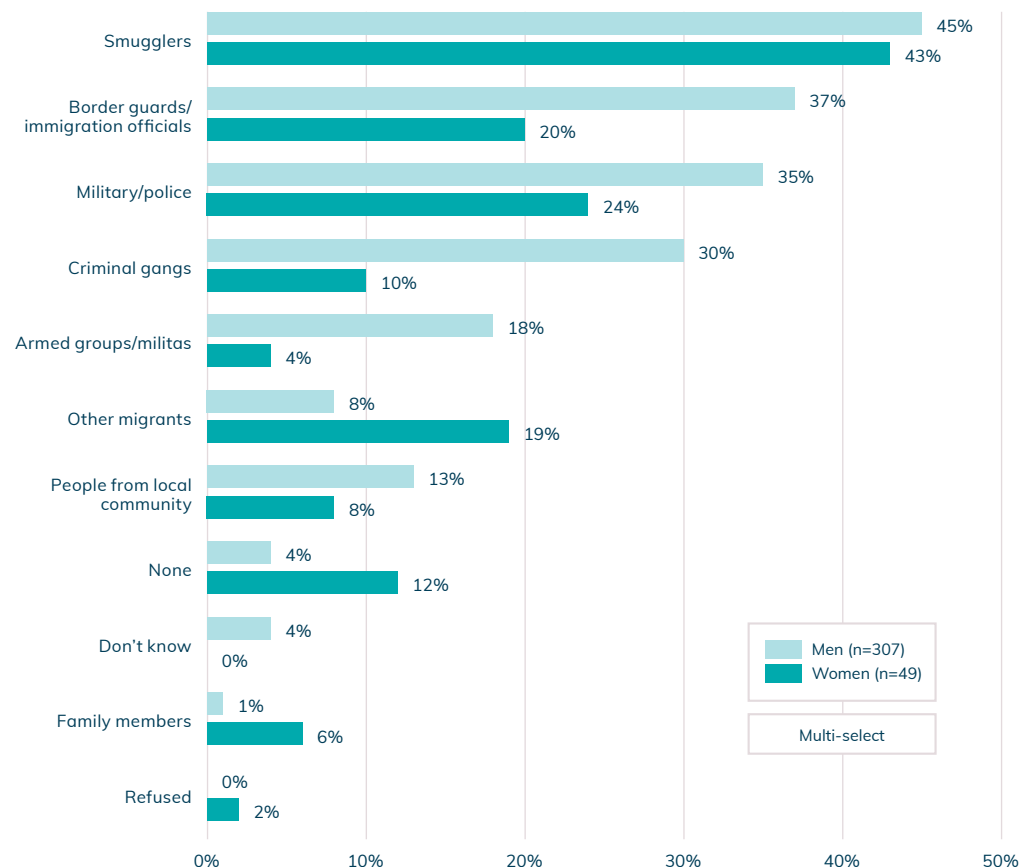
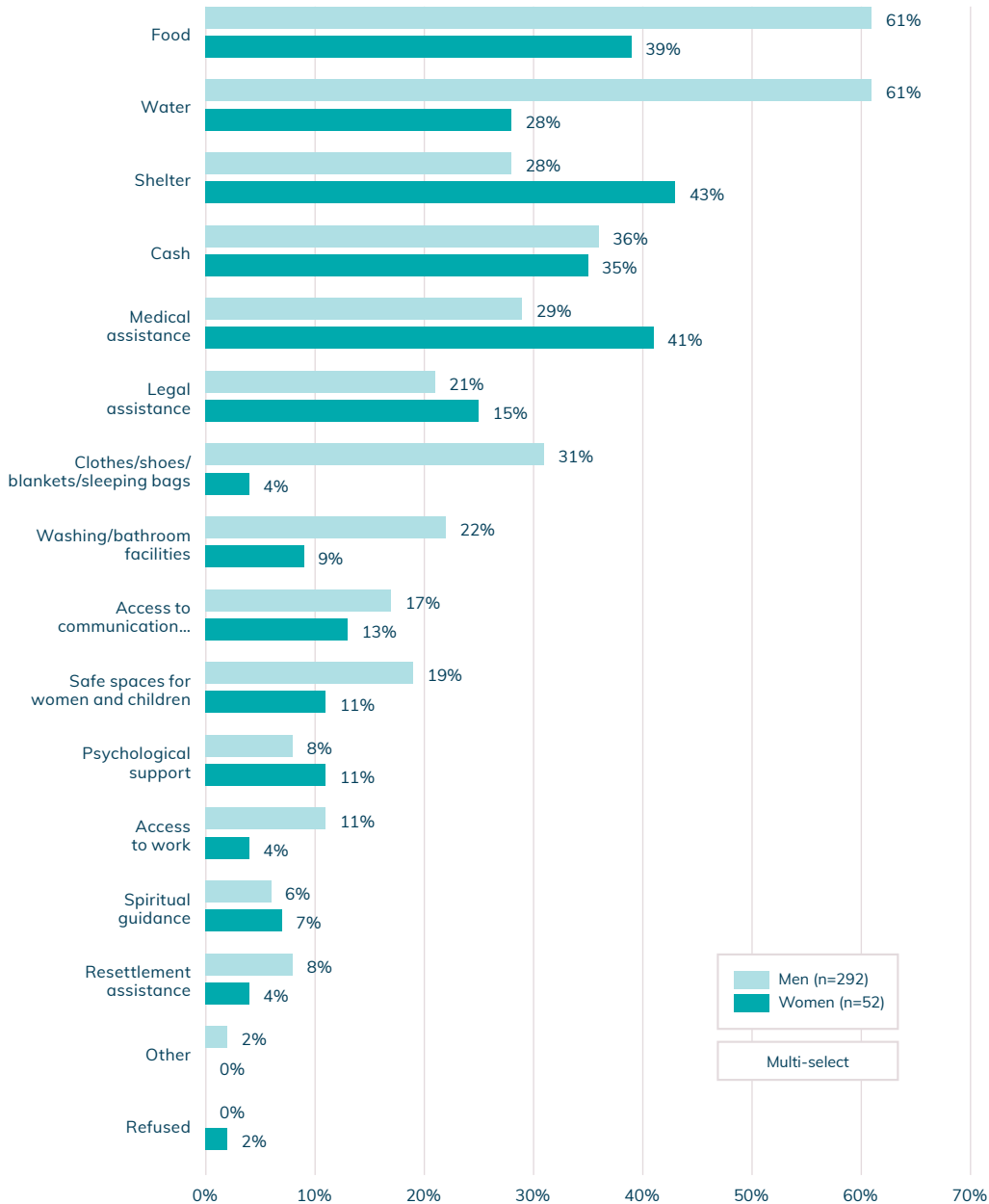


Figure 3. What were you most in need of in this location?



Food, water and shelter are the most common needs reported en route

Most Afghans interviewed indicated food (58%), water (57%), shelter (42%), cash (36%) and medical assistance (31%) as their greatest unmet needs en route to Turkey, see Figure 3. Men reported a much higher need for food and water, compared to women who reported a greater need for shelter, medical assistance and psychological support.

Despite the high level of need, only 27% received assistance en route: younger Afghans are least likely to receive support

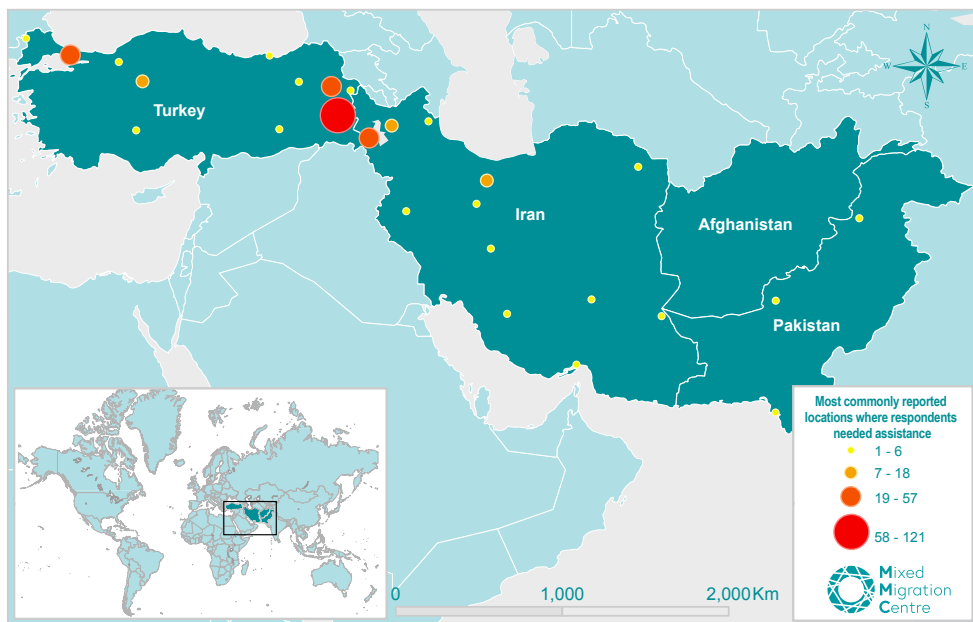
Most respondents (73%) reported that they had not received any assistance en route to Turkey. Among different age groups, younger respondents reported less access to assistance than older ones; while 40% of interviewees above 30 years old reported they had received assistance, only 21% of those between 18 and 30 did. Among those who received assistance (n=117), emergency humanitarian assistance, such as food (85%), water (81%), temporary shelter (24%), and medical assistance (15%) were the most common. Access to psychological support and legal assistance was reportedly much lower (3% and 3% respectively). Among those who received assistance, nearly half received it from the local population/volunteers (44%), followed by fellow migrants (37%) and smugglers (36%). Only 2% mentioned having received assistance from UN agencies and NGOs.⁴

⁴ In line with these findings, a recent study by the Danish Refugee Council shows the limited access to support available for Afghans on the move to Europe. For further details, see: <https://drc.ngo/media/3fbf-dhi0/210625-drc-mapping-final-report.pdf>

Locations within Turkey and Iran were reported as the places where respondents required assistance most, but did not receive it

36% of Afghans interviewed mentioned Van, Turkey as the main location where they needed assistance, but did not receive it. Afghans usually reach Van, a main transit hub, after a long journey by foot across the Iran/Turkey border via Urmia. This journey can sometimes take several days and can be very arduous. Protection risks, as mentioned above, are reportedly high in this area, likely accounting for the higher level of unmet needs reported by participants in this city. Urmia, Tehran and Tabriz are the main locations in Iran where Afghans mentioned as places where assistance was needed most, see Map 3.

Map 3. Locations where respondents most needed assistance but did not get it (n=344)



When we reached Van, we were almost dying of hunger and exhaustion, but we could not go to buy food or find a place to stay because we were afraid the police would find and arrest us.

29 year old Afghan women, interviewed in Istanbul, Turkey



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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