

The role of smugglers in Afghans' irregular journeys to Türkiye

Migration has been a constant in and from Afghanistan in recent decades, particularly due to intensified conflict and instability.¹ Given the restrictions on regular migration pathways, especially in terms of access to visa processes and affiliated costs, irregular migration is often the preferred – or only – option for many seeking to leave. Smuggling² networks across the country have taken advantage of a lucrative and under-policed market, leading thousands of people into neighboring countries daily.³ Smuggling networks are an integral part of the Afghan economy.⁴ Since the August 2021 Taliban takeover and subsequent economic collapse, smuggling services experienced a spike in demand from Afghans trying to flee.⁵

Despite the prevalence of smuggling networks, gaps remain in understanding how they operate, largely due to their illicit nature.⁶ This snapshot on the use of smugglers among Afghans en route to Türkiye aims to contribute to a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses and advocacy efforts related to migrant protection and migration movements to and through Türkiye. It is based on 2,403 surveys conducted with Afghans.

Key findings

- The majority of respondents (83%) used smugglers during their journey to Türkiye.
- Most respondents made stops in Iran (89%) on their way to Türkiye: to look for smugglers to organize the next stretch of their journey (24%), working to earn money for the next stretch of their journey (21%), to stay with friends/relatives (20%), or waiting for transport (19%).
- The main service provided by smugglers was transit across borders (75%), however they also provide other services including in-country transportation (40%), food or water (30%), and accommodation (22%), among others.
- Nearly half of respondents (42%) reported that the smuggler chose the route.
- Those who used smugglers' services spent 1,665 USD on average to reach Türkiye while those who traveled without smugglers spent 2,720 USD on average.
- Afghans consider smugglers necessary to reach Türkiye, but smugglers are considered to be among the top three perpetrators of protection incidents en route to Türkiye.

1 Monsutti, A. (2008) [Afghan migratory strategies and the three solutions to the refugee problem](#)

2 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.

3 Goldbaum, C., Akbary, Y. & Hayeri, K. (2022) [Over a million flee as Afghanistan's economy collapses](#). The New York Times.

4 For example, see Mohammadi, A., Nimkar, R. & Savage, E. (2019) ["We are the ones they come to when nobody can help" Afghan smugglers' perceptions of themselves and their communities](#)

5 Goldbaum, C. & Akbary, Y. (2022) [The Smugglers' Paradise of Afghanistan](#). The New York Times

6 IOM (2016) [Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A global review of the emerging evidence base](#)

Afghan profiles

Information in this snapshot was collected between 19 August 2021 and 30 June 2022, primarily in ten locations across Türkiye (see Table 1). 2,403 Afghans were interviewed, all of whom had reached Türkiye within 24 months of the survey being conducted.

Table 1. Locations of interview and number of surveys collected per location

Location (city)	Number of surveys collected
Istanbul	486
Ankara	434
Van	373
Konya	318
Erzurum	177
Kayseri	174
Adana	167
Eskisehir	132
Balikesir	69
Izmir	46
Other	27

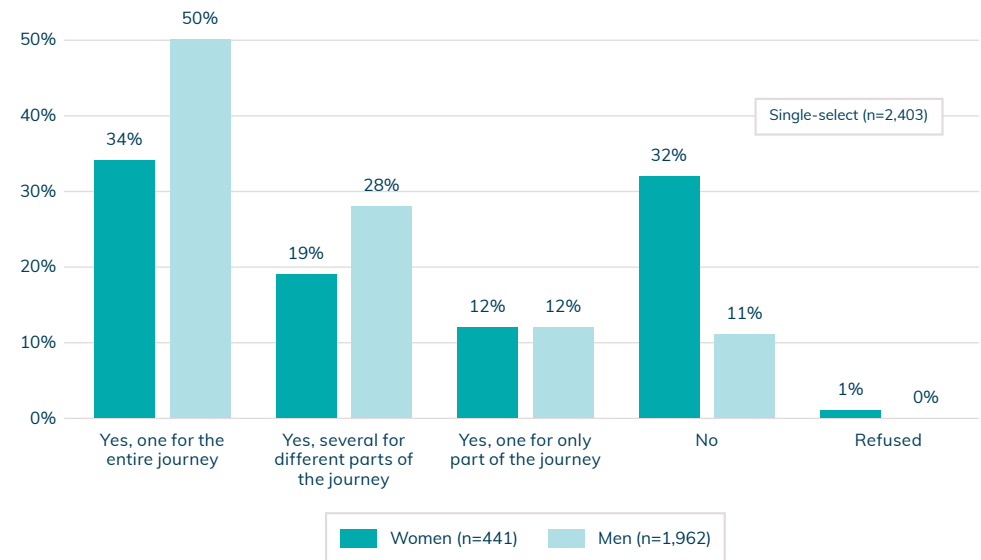
The majority of respondents were men (80%) between 18 and 30 years old (75%). Most respondents came from an urban background (75%) and had secondary (46%) or primary school (20%) levels of education. More than half of the respondents (57%) were unregistered or without documentation, while the remainder held some form of documentation, such as an International Protection Applicant Identification Card (32%), or temporary resident permit or visa (9%).

The vast majority of respondents used smugglers to reach Türkiye

83% of respondents used smugglers to reach Türkiye. Nearly half (45%) used a smuggler for the entire journey, while the rest used several, for different parts of the journey (26%), or one for only a part of the journey (12%). 50% of men used one smuggler for the entire

journey, compared to only 34% of women (see Figure 1). Overall, fewer women had travelled with smugglers than men. 32% of women reported that they had not used a smuggler in order to reach Türkiye, compared to 11% of men. This may be because Afghan women use different routes to men, and are more likely to travel by plane: 34% of women reported using air travel for part or all of their journey, compared to 11% for men, and this may be because it is considered safer.⁷

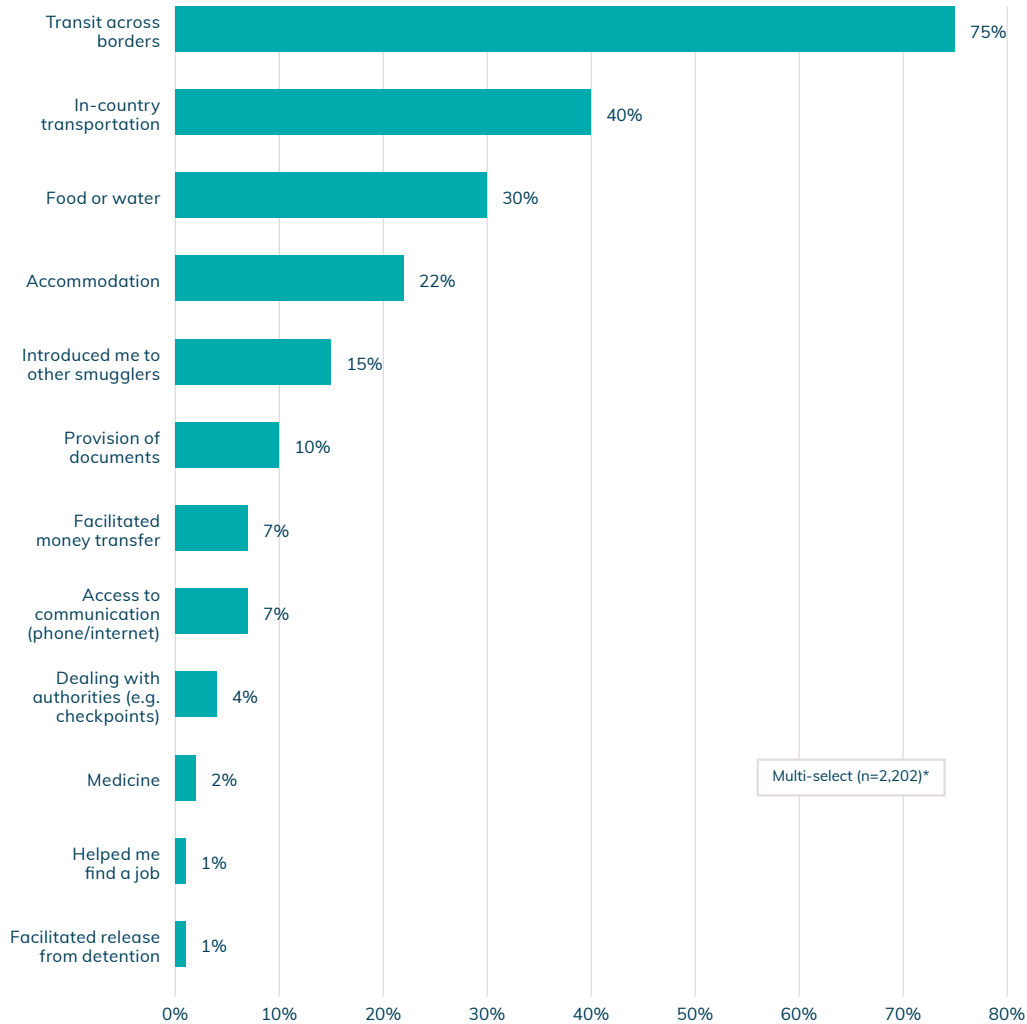
Figure 1. Did you use a smuggler?



Respondents reported a variety of services provided by smugglers. Safe transit across borders was the main one (75% of those who used smugglers). In-country transportation (40%), food and water (30%) and accommodation (22%) were also provided by smugglers (see Figure 2).

⁷ McAuliffe, M. (2022) [Struggling to Survive: Gender, Displacement, and Migration in Taliban-Controlled Afghanistan](#). Center for Strategic and International Studies

Figure 2. What did the smuggler provide you with?



*This figure comprises the sub-sample of 2022 respondents who reported using smugglers.

The most common route among respondents starts in Zaranj, transiting Iran

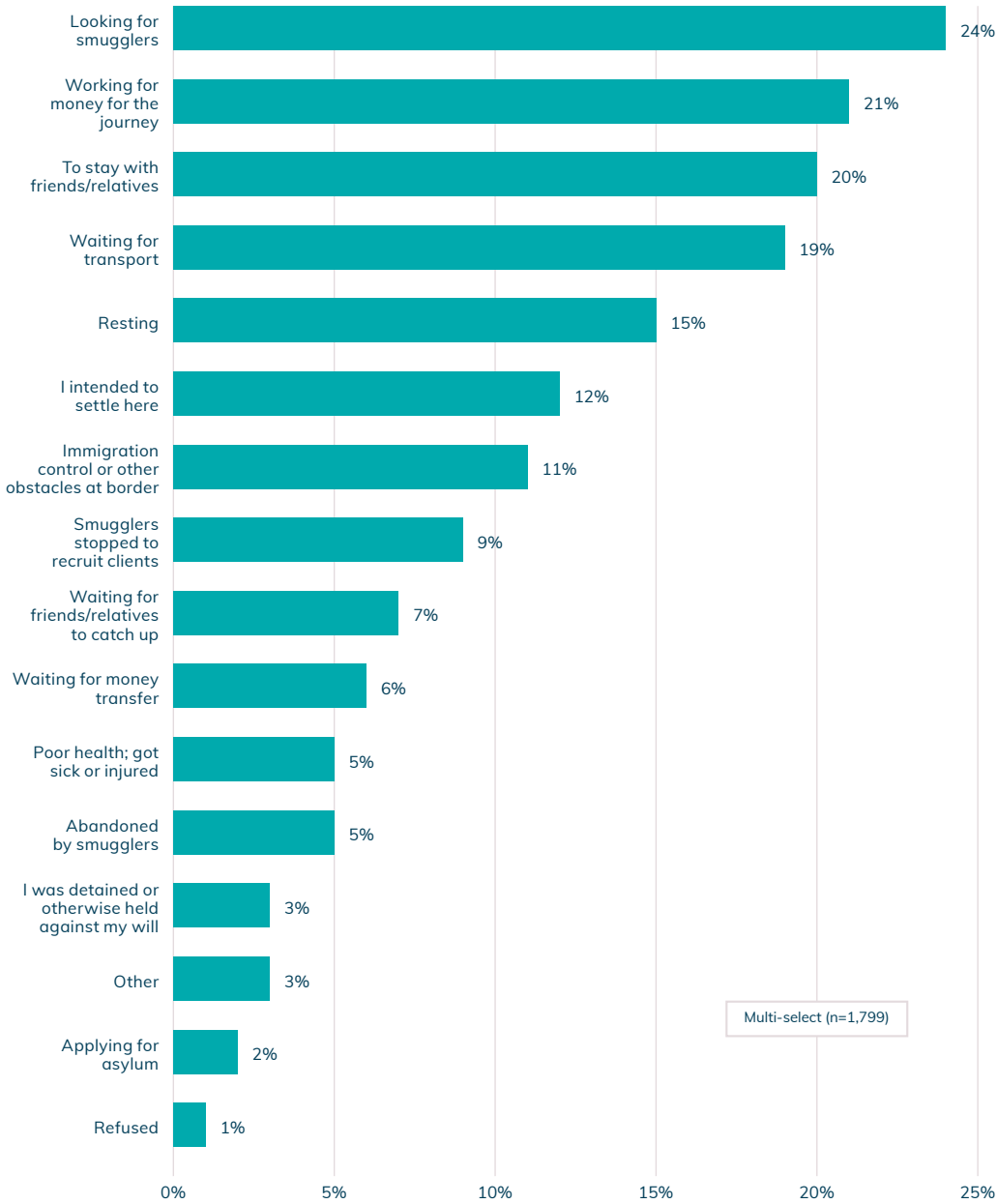
The majority of respondents who used smugglers (92%) reported that they started their journey in Afghanistan.⁸ A large majority transited Iran (89%); 41% transited Pakistan (41%).⁹ Among all respondents, the route was mainly overland (84%), while 6% flew first to Iran; 10% reached Türkiye directly from Afghanistan via air.

The majority of those who used smugglers had a major stop in Iran (86%). The main reasons for these major stops in Iran were to look for smugglers to organize the next stretch of their journey (24%), working to earn money for the next stretch of their journey (21%), to stay with friends/relatives (20%), or waiting for transport (19%). Some mentioned that they stopped in Iran because the smugglers were recruiting new clients (9%) or they were abandoned by smugglers (5%), see Figure 3. Another 11% of respondents also cited immigration control and related procedures or obstacles (fences; border controls/closures) as a reason for stopping in Iran.

8 The rest of Afghans interviewed (8%) 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, embark on onward journeys to Türkiye and beyond. For more information about the situation of Afghans in Iran, see among others: HRW (2013) [Unwelcome Guests: Iran's violation of Afghan refugee and migrant rights](#)

9 For an updated map of routes to Türkiye, see MMC (2021) [Afghans en route to Turkey Routes, protection risks, and access to assistance](#)

Figure 3. Why did you stop in Iran?



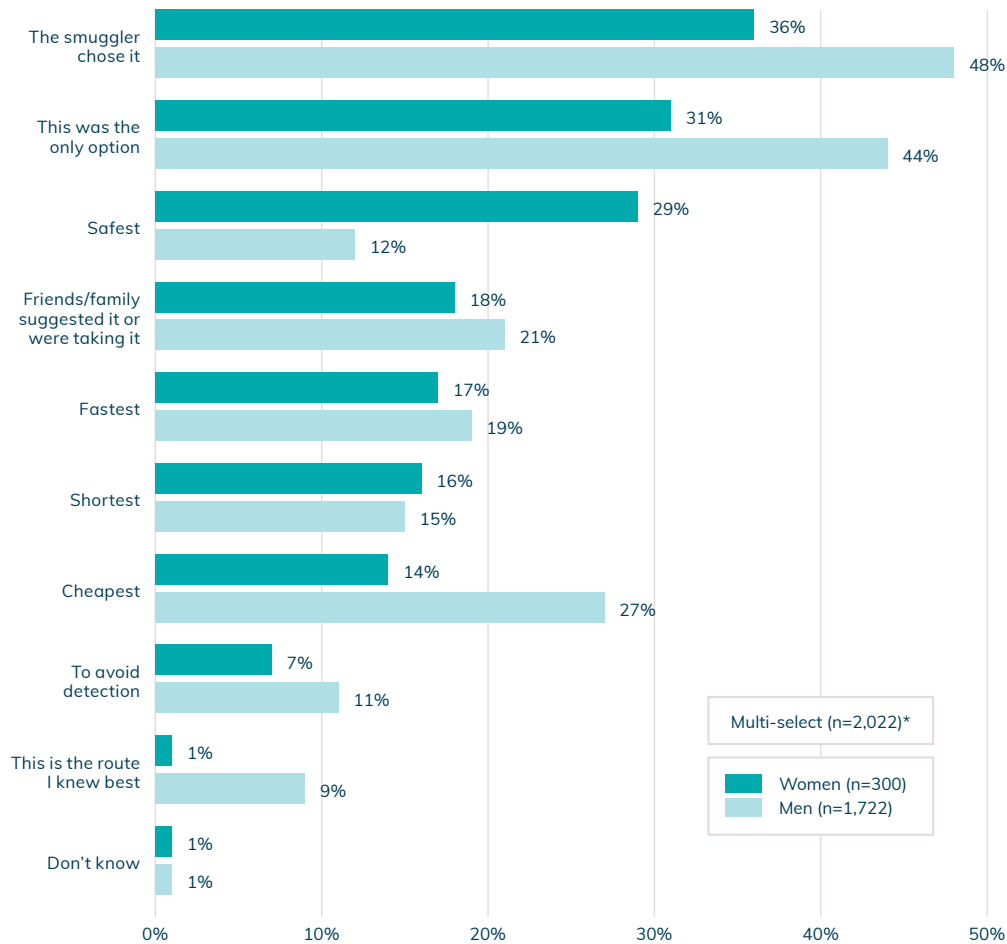
“[The smugglers] kept us in a house for about four nights in Maku and told us that we have to wait as there are many patrols on the border [...]. When we departed from the house, another group of Afghans and Pakistanis - with 20-25 people - were added to our group.”

28-year-old Afghan, male, interviewed in Istanbul, Türkiye

48% of the men and 36% of the women who used smugglers said that their smugglers chose the route. 21% of men and 18% of women reported taking a route their friends and family suggested or were also taking (see Figure 4). 36% were taking routes that were the only option for them.

Among respondents who used smugglers, men and women reported different priorities while following certain routes. For instance, 29% of women (n=300) prioritized safety of the routes, compared to only 12% of the men (n=1722). Meanwhile, a significantly higher share of men (27%) than women (14%) reported preferring the cheapest route.

Figure 4. Why did you take this route?



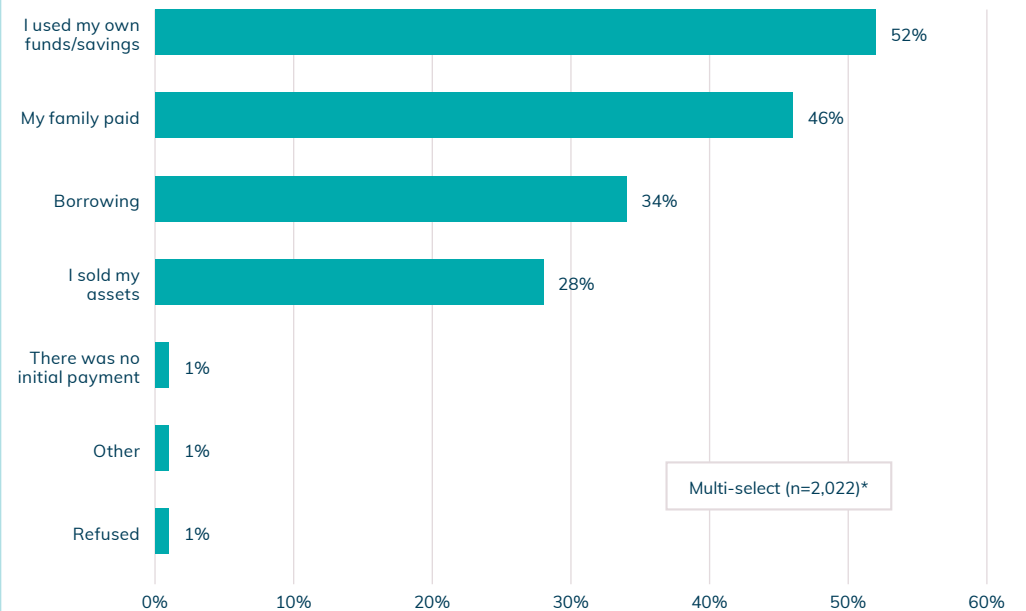
*This figure uses the sub-sample of 2022 respondents who reported using smugglers.

Respondents who were smuggled spent USD 1,665 on average, primarily financed through personal savings and financial support from family

When asked about how much money the respondents spent in total for their journeys (including smugglers, bribes, transport, and similar costs), those who used smuggling

services reported the average amount of USD 1,665. Those who traveled without smugglers reported having spent USD 2,720 on average. Most financed their smuggling journeys through personal funds/savings (52%), followed by help from friends/family in Afghanistan and abroad (46%). Some respondents also resorted to taking up loans (34%) and selling assets (28%) to fund the journeys.

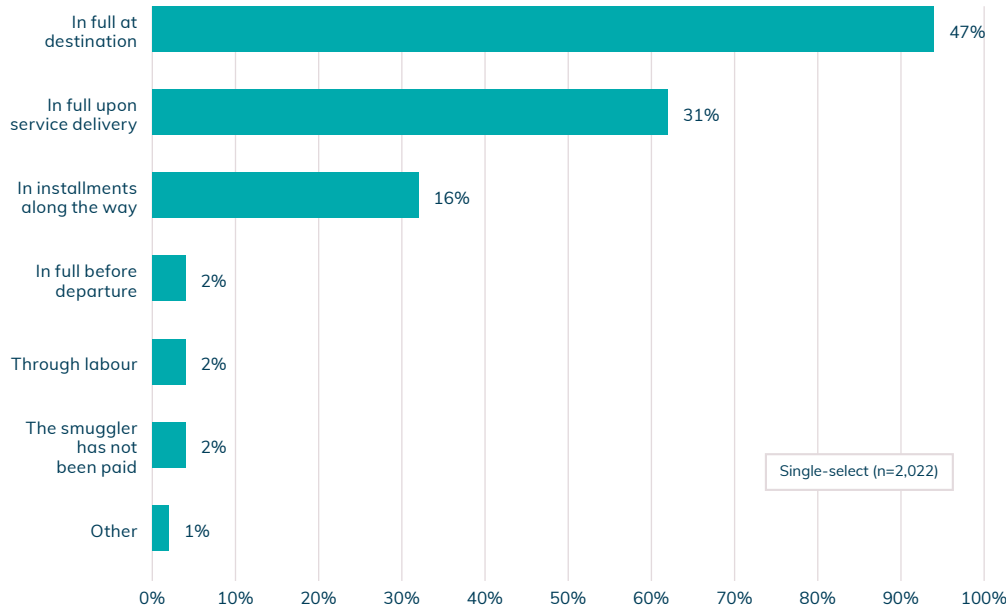
Figure 5. How did you initially finance your journey?



*This figure uses a sub-sample of 2022 respondents who reported using smugglers.

In terms of payment to smugglers, the most common methods of payment were 'in full on arrival at destination' (47%) and 'in full upon service delivery' (36%), see Figure 6. 16% mentioned continuous payment in installments along the journey.

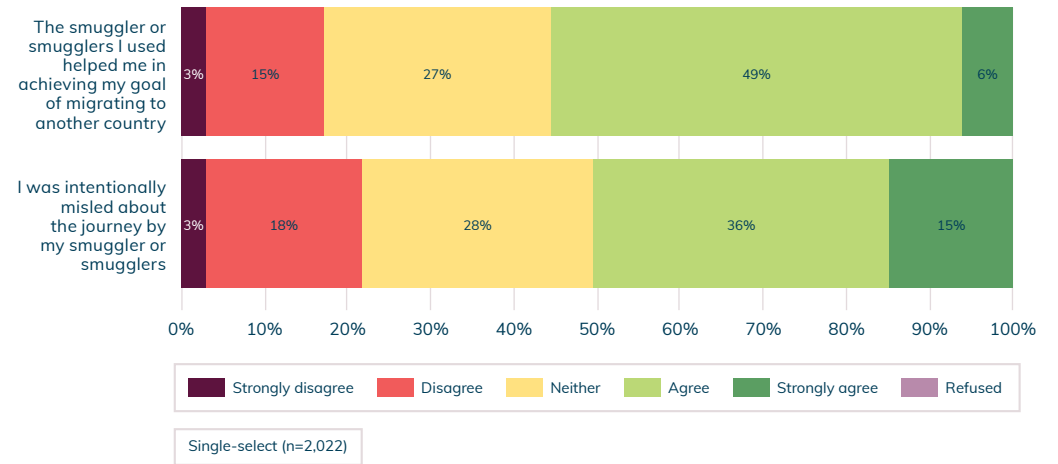
Figure 6. How did you pay the smuggler?



Afghans consider the use of smugglers as necessary

Given the increased movement restrictions and intensified political instability, there has been an increased demand for smuggling services in Afghanistan. The use of smugglers is almost considered a necessity, as demonstrated in the high proportion of respondents who saw smuggling routes as the only option to flee (see Figure 4). More than half of respondents (55%) who used smugglers reported that the smuggler(s) they used helped them achieve their goal to migrate to another country (see Figure 7). However, when asking about if they were misled by smugglers, half of them (51%) reported that they were intentionally misled by their smuggler(s).

Figure 7. To what extent do you agree with the following statement?



Smugglers are perceived to be one of the main perpetrators of protection incidents

The majority of respondents (79%) experienced or witnessed one or several types of incidents that endangered their safety and lives en route to Türkiye. The most common incidents reported were physical violence (43%), detention (38%), death (32%), and robbery (26%). In terms of who is perceived to perpetrate violations and abuse, smugglers rank second, just below border guards/immigration officials (see Figure 8). 34% of respondents who perceived dangers on the route reported smugglers as likely perpetrators. These findings are in line with recent reports outlining the increased reliance on smugglers as well as securitization of borders. There is a significant difference in the share of men (38%) reporting smugglers as perpetrators than women (17%). This is likely because a smaller share of women than men in the survey were using smugglers. Also, according to the 4Mi enumerators, smugglers and security forces tend to be harsher toward men en route.

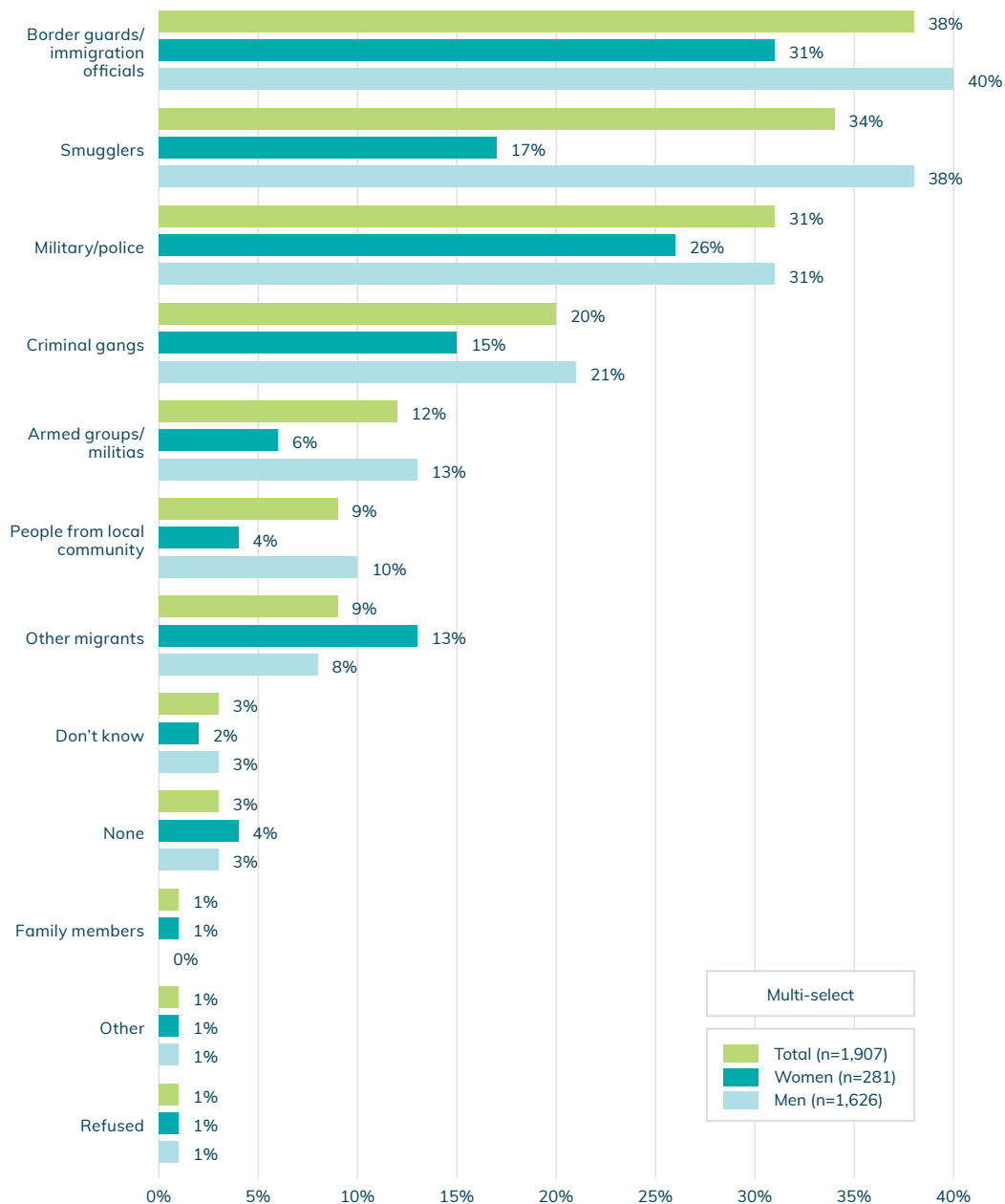
"Afghans are always deceived about the journey from Urumiyya to Van. Smugglers tell Afghan migrants that it is maximum half a day walk to Van and there is no danger on the way, but most of the time they are wandering in the mountains for a day or two, or even get lost for several days."

4Mi enumerator in Van, Türkiye

"From Afghanistan to here, every step is full of risks. Taliban, Iranian guards, Turkish police, smugglers, even local people are treating migrants very badly. Especially police and smugglers. No one asks them why they are mistreating migrants so they have no fear of beating and robbing people like us."

32-year-old Afghan, male, interviewed in Konya, Türkiye

Figure 8. Who were likely to be perpetrating protection risks en route?



"The smuggler left us in Tehran. He took the money to take us to Istanbul, but he abandoned me and my friend in Tehran and took our money with him."

19-year-old Afghan man, interviewed in Istanbul, Türkiye



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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