

# Use of smugglers on the journey to Indonesia among Rohingya, Afghan and Somali refugees

## Introduction

Indonesia is a destination country for refugees, and a key transit country, for refugees intending to be resettled to third countries, as well as for those seeking to journey onwards to Malaysia. According to the UNHCR, as of November 2022, 71% of refugees in Indonesia are from Afghanistan, Somalia, Myanmar and Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> This snapshot finds that Afghan, Somali and Rohingya 4Mi respondents engage with smugglers<sup>2</sup> in very different ways to reach Indonesia. It examines the routes taken by respondents, interactions with smugglers, and perceptions of smugglers' roles in their migratory journey.

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

- 96% of respondents used a smuggler. A majority of Afghan respondents (79%) and Rohingya respondents (92%) used one smuggler to facilitate their entire journey to Indonesia, while Somalis used multiple smugglers or used smugglers for only part of the journey.

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR Indonesia [Figures at a Glance](#).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

- Across all three groups, respondents approached smugglers directly or were introduced to smugglers by friends or family members. Smugglers rarely approached respondents: for 6% of Rohingya, 1% of Somali respondents and no Afghan respondents.
- Afghan and Somali respondents most often perceived smugglers as service providers. Yet, they did not often report smugglers as perpetrators of abuse. They also did not believe smugglers helped them achieve their migration goal.
- A majority of Rohingya respondents perceived smugglers as criminals (70%) and as perpetrators of abuse (51%) who had intentionally misled them (99%) yet considered that smugglers had assisted them in achieving their migration goal.

## Profiles

Findings presented in this snapshot are based on 635 4Mi surveys collected between January to March 2023 in Indonesia among refugees from Afghanistan (44%) and Somalia (28%), and Rohingya refugees (28%) from Myanmar and Bangladesh. Across all three groups, the majority of respondents were male (70% overall, ranging between 58% among Somalis to 77% among Afghans). The majority of respondents were aged 26-35 (52%, ranging from 38% of Rohingya to 62% of Somalis). In terms of education, a little under half of the respondents (42%) had completed secondary or high school before their arrival in Indonesia, although this varied between profiles.

**Figure 1. Profile of respondents**

Profile		Afghan (n=275)	Rohingya (n=180)	Somali (n=180)
Age group	18-25	23%	36%	11%
	26-35	55%	38%	62%
	36-45	16%	19%	26%
	46-55	5%	6%	1%
	55+	1%	1%	0
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
Gender	Male	77%	69%	58%
	Female	23%	31%	42%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
Education	Did not complete any schooling	2%	35%	13%
	Primary school	23%	48%	35%
	Secondary or high school	60%	16%	42%
	University degree	13%	1%	4%
	Vocational training	2%	0%	6%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%
Living background	Rural	33%	77%	4%
	Urban	67%	23%	96%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100%

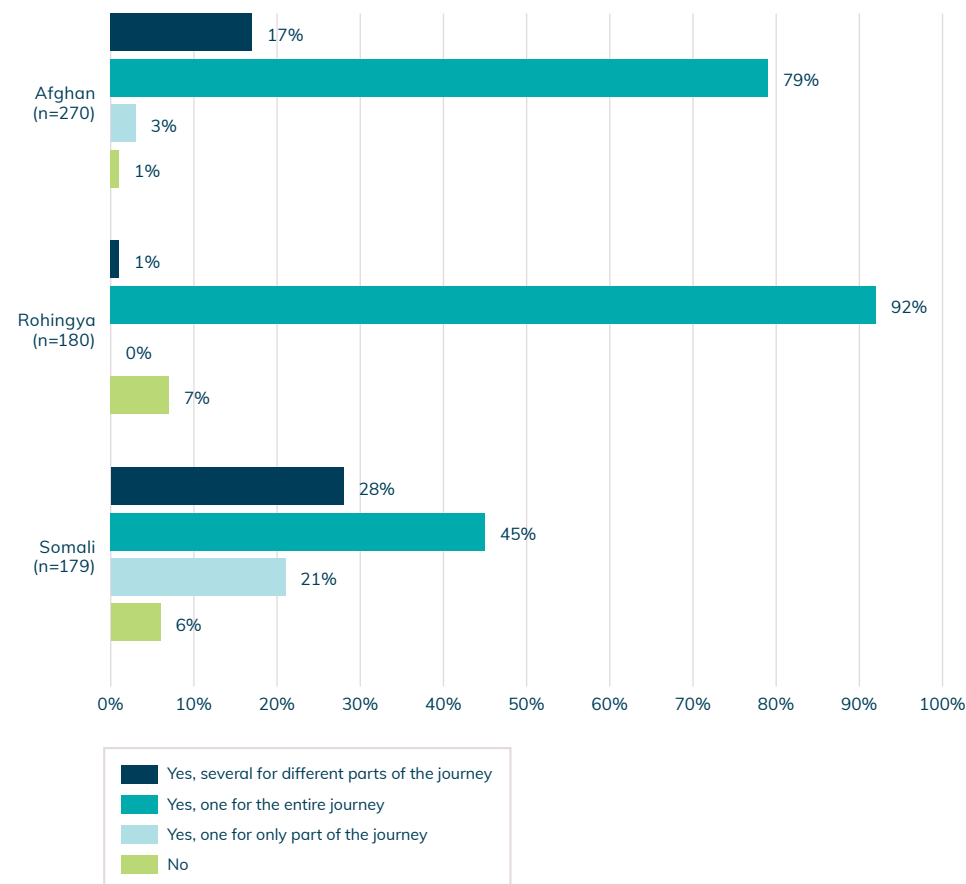
Prior to their arrival in Indonesia, most respondents (63%) lived in urban areas in their country of departure. Overall, a little over half of respondents (52%) had a source of income for at least 12 months prior to leaving the country of departure. Among those who were employed, respondents either had a regular paid job (36%), were business owners or self-employed (33%) or were engaged in casual work (31%).

83% of respondents, across the three groups, reported leaving their country of origin on account of violence, insecurity and conflict, and 64% reported a need to safeguard rights and freedoms. 31% reported economic factors.

## Most Afghans, Rohingya and Somalis used smugglers to arrive in Indonesia, but the reasons varied

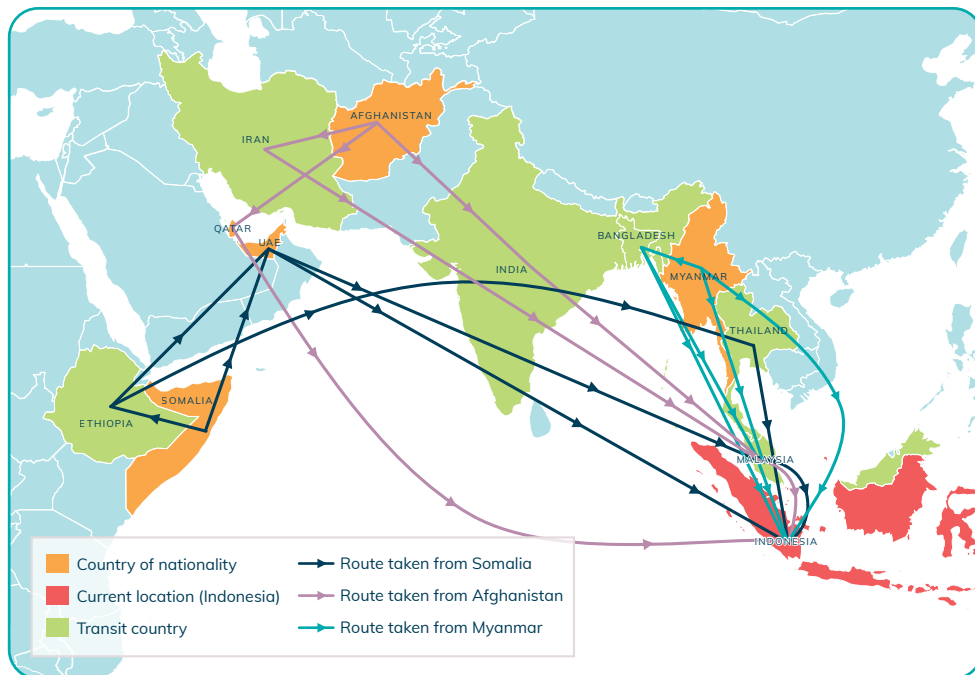
96% of surveyed respondents across all three groups used smuggler(s) to facilitate their journey to Indonesia. Most (73%) reported using one smuggler for the entire journey. It was more common among Afghan (79%) and Rohingya (92%) respondents to report using one smuggler for the entire journey. Only 45% of Somali respondents used one smuggler for the entire journey, while the remaining 28% reported using different smugglers for different parts of the journey, and 21% reported using only one smuggler to facilitate a part of the entire journey to Indonesia (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Did you use a smuggler?**



The different modalities of smuggler use may be explained by the very different journeys (see Figure 3). The journey from Somalia to Indonesia tends to be covered in segments, transiting another African state and /or the Middle East or Türkiye, before transiting Thailand and Malaysia to arrive in Indonesia. Afghan and Rohingya respondents transited fewer countries. Afghan respondents travelled via Qatar or Pakistan/India and in some cases Malaysia. In the case of Rohingya respondents, 34% travelled directly from Myanmar by boat, while the rest transited Bangladesh, India, and Thailand.

**Figure 3. Routes taken by the respondents**



Each group reported different reasons for using a smuggler. More than half (59%) of Afghan respondents felt there was no alternative, and one third said their family or friends in the country of departure recommended it (32%). Most Rohingya respondents thought it would be cheaper to use a smuggler (64%), and 61% also thought it would be easier. 49% of Somali respondents thought using a smuggler would make migration easier, while an equal proportion reported acting on the recommendation of friends or family in the diaspora (44%) or in the country of departure (44%).

## Smugglers did not initiate contact

A majority of Afghan respondents (53%), and 44% of Rohingya respondents reported making contact with smugglers through friends or family members. In the case of Somali respondents, the role of friends and family members in establishing contact with the smuggler was even more important - 95% of respondents relied on them to contact smugglers. In comparison, very few respondents were approached by smugglers - 6% in the case of Rohingya respondents, 1% in the case of Somali respondents and no Afghan respondents. The rest approached the smugglers themselves, directly.

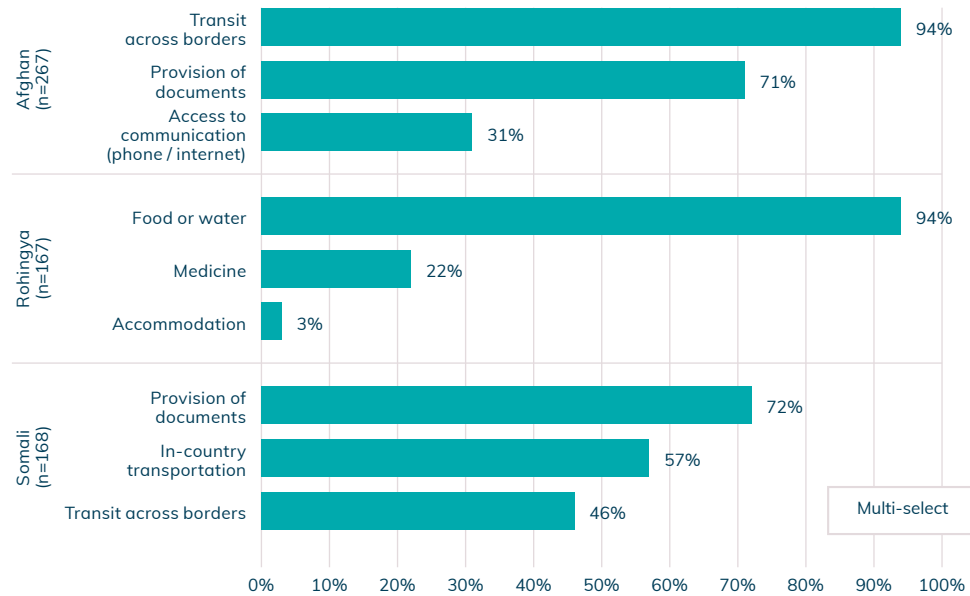
## Services provided by smugglers to Afghan, Rohingya and Somalis varied depending on the nature and length of the journey

Afghan respondents mainly used smugglers to get across borders (94%), but this was far less the case among Somalis (46%) and Rohingya (1.2%) respondents. Afghan respondents also reported that smugglers provided them with documents (71%), access to a phone or internet (31%) and facilitated money transfers on their behalf (30%). Rohingya, who had most often taken the sea route to Indonesia, often referred to the provision of food and water (94%) and medicine (22%). The journey by boat can take months, so these are all vital.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that the invisibility of the maritime border, since people arrive by boat at locations where state authorities are absent means respondents do not consider smugglers to be providing the service of helping them transit borders. For Somali respondents, journeys involve transiting a greater number of countries, possibly combining different means of transport.<sup>4</sup> Reflecting this multi-stage journey, Somali respondents more often reported that smugglers assisted with the provision of documents (72%), arranging for in-country transportation (57%) and dealing with immigration authorities (17%).

<sup>3</sup> ABC News (2020) [Hundreds of Rohingya asylum seekers land in Indonesia after six months at sea.](#)

<sup>4</sup> Budisatrijo, A (2014) [Asylum seekers stuck in Indonesia limbo.](#) BBC.

**Figure 4. Most common smuggling services<sup>5</sup>**



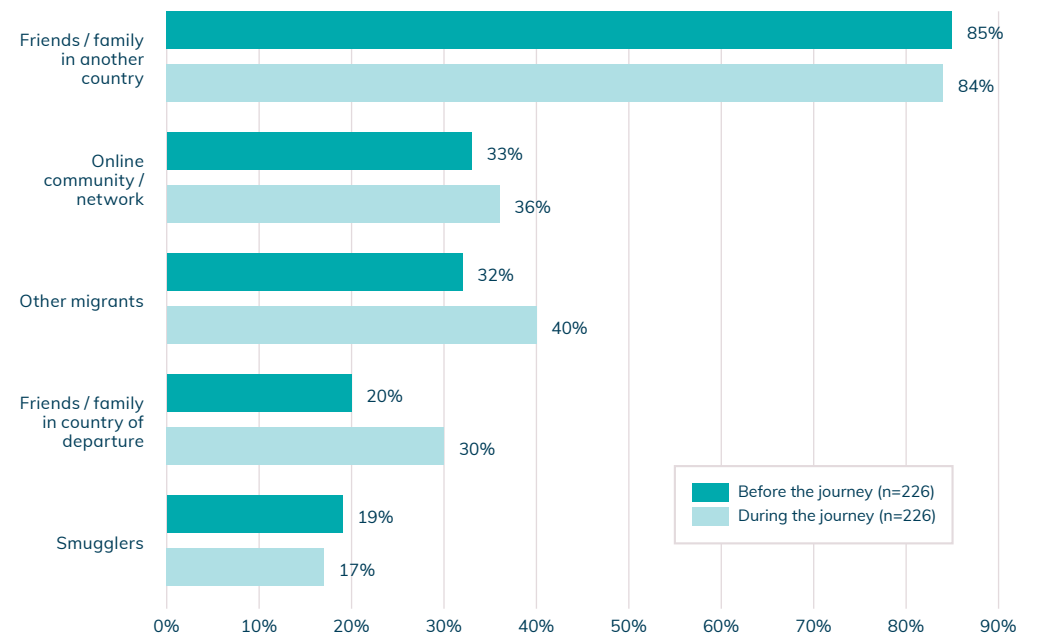
## Smugglers did not influence the decision to migrate, nor were they key sources of information

Smugglers did not feature as a strong influence in the decision to migrate. Among Afghan respondents, only 39% reported their decision to migrate was influenced by external factors or individuals. Among them, the three biggest influences were friends or family in another country (68%), parents (62%), and social media (49%). In the case of Rohingya, however, only 15% of respondents reported any influence, with the three biggest influences being parents (68%), spouse (16%) and friends or family in another country (12%). In contrast, 89% of Somali respondents reported an influence; with parents (80%), friends/family in another country (60%), and friends/family in the country of departure (29%) being the three most common.

<sup>5</sup> This figure presents top three services reported by respondents. Other services include: 'facilitated money transfer', 'facilitated release from detention', 'introduced me to other smugglers', 'access to communication (phone/internet)', and 'helped me find a job'.

Smugglers are also reported to be a fairly minor source of information. Just over one-third of respondents (36%) across all three groups reported accessing information on routes, destination, costs, and risks before or during their journey, respectively. For those who accessed information, friends and family members in another country were the most important source before (85%) and during their journey (84%). Relatively few respondents who accessed information relied on smugglers either before (19%) or during the journey (17%) (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Most common sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before and during the journey, among those who access information**



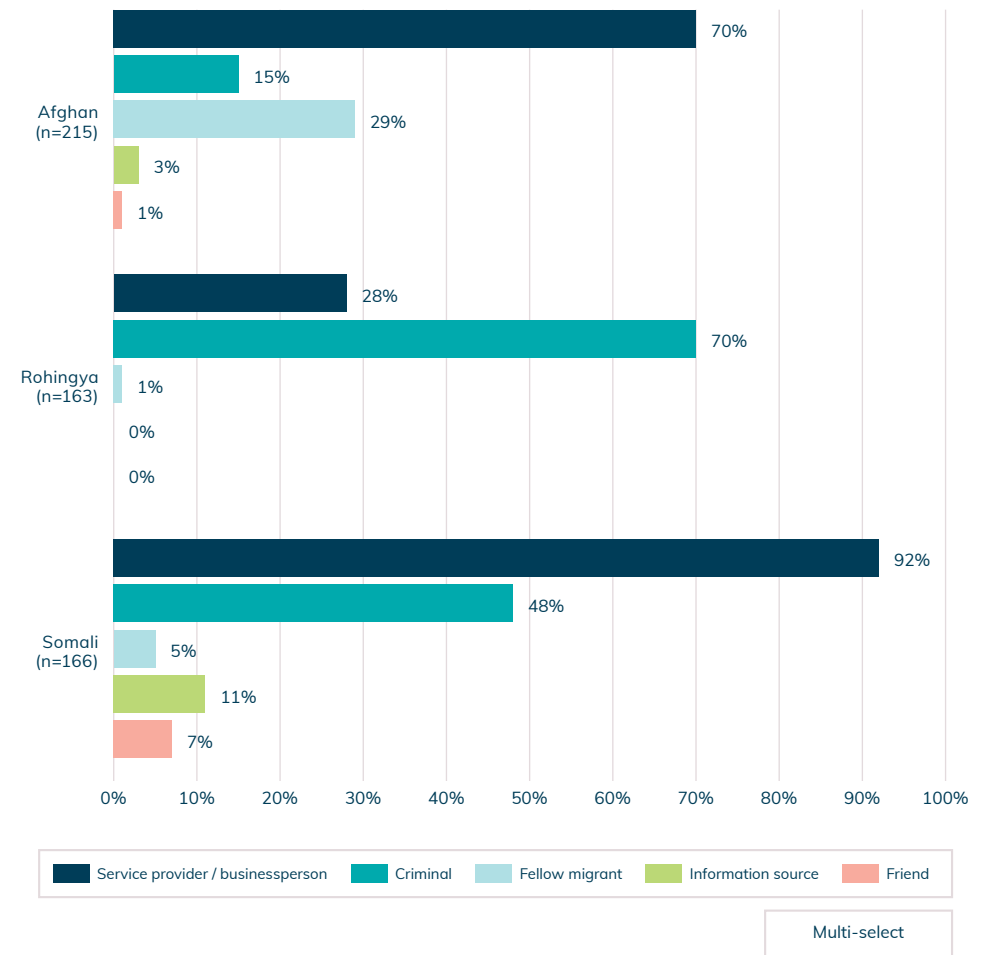
## Smugglers considered perpetrators of abuse in the case of Rohingya respondents

Half of surveyed respondents (51%) across all three groups reported facing risks during their journey to Indonesia. The most commonly reported risks include physical violence (66%), death (58%) and non-physical violence (55%). 53% of Rohingya respondents named smugglers as perpetrators of abuse, followed by criminal gangs (18%) and the police (12%). Smugglers were reported as perpetrators by only 3% of Afghan respondents and 4% of Somali respondents. Afghan respondents reported that people from the local community (38%), criminal gangs (25%) and border guards and immigration officials (23%) were the main perpetrators of abuse, and in the case of Somali respondents, it was armed groups (95%), people from the local community (79%) and military or police (67%).

## Afghan and Somali respondents perceived smugglers as service providers or business persons, while Rohingya respondents perceived them as criminals

70% of Afghan respondents described smugglers as service providers or business persons. They less often perceived smugglers as fellow migrants (29%) or criminals (15%) (see Figure 6). A majority of Somali respondents (92%) also perceived smugglers as service providers or business persons, although almost half (48%) also perceived them as criminals. In contrast, Rohingya respondents more often perceived smugglers as criminals (70%) than service providers or business persons (28%), corresponding to the finding that smugglers were seen as key perpetrators of abuse in the case of Rohingya respondents.

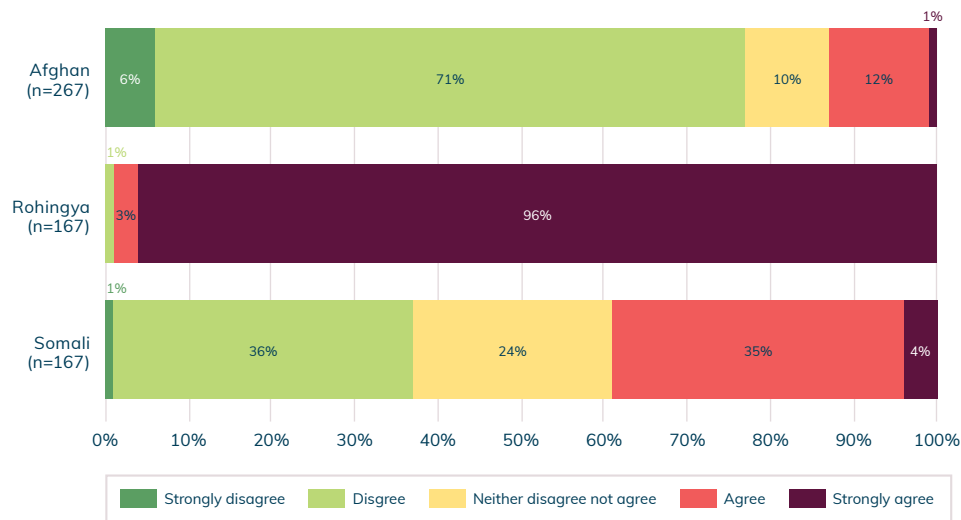
Figure 6. How would you describe your smuggler?



Despite most often considering the smuggler as a service provider, 40% of Afghan respondents did not believe that smugglers had helped them achieve their goal of migrating to another country (32% of respondents thought they had helped, and 27% were neutral). In contrast, and despite considering smugglers to be criminals, and perpetrators of abuse, 60% of Rohingya respondents believed that smugglers had helped them achieve their migration goal. Somali respondents, with more mixed perceptions of the smuggler's role, generally found them not to have helped (88%).

The majority of Afghan respondents (77%) did not feel they had been misled by smugglers (reported disagree and strongly disagree). However, 99% of Rohingya respondents (who reported agree and strongly agree) considered that they had been intentionally misled by the smugglers about their journey. These reflect each group's overall perception of the role of the smuggler (service provider and criminal, respectively). Again, Somali respondents presented a more mixed picture: 35% agreed that the smuggler misled them, and 36% disagreed (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "I was intentionally misled about the journey by my smuggler or smugglers"**



4Mi data suggest that Somalis, Afghans and Rohingya engage very differently with smugglers and the smuggling process. Across all groups, smugglers were not significant influences or sources of information, and neither were they initiating contact with refugees. However, Rohingya seem much more exposed to abuse by smugglers, while at the same time being dependent on their 'help', Afghans relate more to smugglers as service providers, and Somalis, who also take more fragmented, multi-stage journeys, have a more mixed experience.



## 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 Asia and the Pacific, Eastern and Southern Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa, and West Africa.

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](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)