Mixed Migration Centre

Use of social media among Nigerian refugees and migrants on mixed migration routes: Risk or protection factor?

An analysis of social media use among 423 Nigerian refugees and migrants on the move through West and North Africa

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Key findings

Key findings are based on surveys carried out with 423 Nigerians on the move through Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Tunisia who had used social media during their journey.

Experience of exploitation and other forms of abuse on the journey

- Among those who perceived dangerous locations on the journey (58% of respondents), the majority had experienced some form of abuse or violation.

- With the exception of sexual violence, men more frequently reported having experienced protection incidents.

- Previous MMC analyses of data from a range of West African refugees and migrants showed that smugglers were less frequently perceived to be perpetrators of abuses en route than other actors. However, when focusing solely on Nigerians, smugglers are cited as perpetrators more frequently than other actors.

- People who used a smuggler more frequently reported having experienced trafficking and exploitation (23%) as compared to those who had not (1%), and they also reported having experienced all other protection incidents more often. Among our respondents, there is a correlation between the use of smugglers and trafficking and exploitation, as well as other experiences of abuse or violation.

Social media as risk

- Overall, using social media during the migration journey did not appear to pose a substantial risk, with 79% of respondents stating that they had not experienced any negative incidents (e.g. scams, misinformation etc.) using social media while en route.

- People who used a smuggler more often reported having experienced a negative incident on social media during their journey (34% vs 10%). However, it is not clear whether or to what extent smugglers may have played a role in these negative incidents, a useful area for further exploration.

Social media as protective factor

- Almost three quarters of respondents (74%) felt that social media made them safer during the journey. The two most-often cited reasons for using social media in general – staying in touch with family and friends and getting information – were also the most cited ways that social media contributes to protection (cited by 88% and 68% of respondents respectively).

- Using social media to be in touch with a smuggler/travel facilitator was the third most frequently cited way that respondents felt social media made them safer during the journey (35%). This was more often the case for men (45%) than for women (24%). This finding highlights the complexity of smuggling dynamics in the region, with smugglers considered both as perpetrators of abuse and as a means of protection.

Introduction

This paper set out to explore experiences of abuse or exploitation among Nigerians during their migration journey, and how use of social media relates to a sense of increased risk or protection. In doing so it examines factors of gender, preferred destination and particularly smuggler use.

Risks for Nigerians on mixed migration routes

The dangers on mixed migration routes are frequently reported, and the widespread use of smugglers is often linked to a particularly dangerous journey.[1] Among Nigerians, UNODC notes that "migrants smuggled from or through Nigeria rely to a significantly larger extent on transnational criminal organizations compared to other West Africans,"[2] which may increase their vulnerability to abuse by smugglers, and may be linked to Nigerians' vulnerability to trafficking. Nigeria is consistently ranked as one of the countries with the most trafficking victims abroad, particularly in Europe.[3] It is a highly gendered problem: in 2017 IOM estimated that 80% of girls arriving in Italy from Nigeria[4] were potential victims of trafficking or sexual exploitation.[5] The 2022 United States Trafficking in Persons Report (US TIP) for Nigeria stated that some 80% of women in unlicensed brothels in Spain had been trafficked for sex, and Nigerians form a substantial part of that group.[6]

Connections between trafficking and exploitation and social media use

The 2022 Annual Report of the European Migrant Smuggling Centre, which focuses on human trafficking into and within the European Union, points to a shift towards online contact between traffickers and their victims, with social media platforms playing an important role in making these connections.[7] Nigeria's National Agency for Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) has also pointed to linkages between social media and trafficking. As reported in the Nigerian newspaper The Guardian, NAPTIP's Director General has shared concerns that social media is "increasingly being used to contact and recruit both old and young for the sole purpose of exploitation".[8]

Social media use among Nigerians

Nigeria has been and continues to be at the forefront of smartphone adoption and social media usage in Africa.[9] According to Datareportal's *Digital 2022 Global Overview* report, internet adoption in Nigeria stood at 51% of the population, the fifth highest in Africa (behind Morocco, Egypt, South Africa and Ghana). Additionally, Nigeria is among the top ten nations worldwide for time spent using the internet on a mobile phone, with an average of five hours per day. While social media usage per capita in Nigeria is relatively low (15.4%), the country leads the world in daily time spent using social media, with an average of four hours daily.[10]

Smartphone access is not essential for social media use, yet it clearly facilitates it. Previous MMC analysis[11] found that whereas on average 71% of West and Central Africans on the move through West Africa reported having access to a smartphone during their journey, this was the case for only 59% of Nigerian respondents.[12] Only one other country of origin – Sierra Leone – reported lower smartphone access (56%) than Nigeria.[13] Thus, it may be that Nigerian migrants and refugees are not using social media during the journey to the extent that most other nationalities do.

1 MMC (2021) Smuggling, risks, and abuses (1 of 3): dangerous locations and perpetrators; UNODC (2023) Smuggling of migrants in the Sahel: Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment; MMC (2023) Human rights in the context of smuggling: Perceptions and experiences of migrants in Mali and Niger.
2 UNODC (2021) West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean: Key Findings on the Characteristics of Migrant Smuggling in West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean, Observatory on the Smuggling of Migrants.
3 Human Rights Watch (2019) "You Pray for Death": Trafficking of Women and Girls in Nigeria.
4 According to IOM, in 2016, 11,009 girls arrived in Italy from Nigeria.
5 IOM (2017) UN Migration Agency Issues Report on Arrivals of Sexually Exploited Migrants, Chiefly from Nigeria.
6 US Department of State (2022) 2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nigeria.
7 Europol (2022), European Migrant Smuggling Centre - 6th Annual Report, Publications Office of the European Union.
8 Falaju, J. (2021) Social media fueling human trafficking, says NAPTIP, The Guardian.
9 Kazeem, Y. (2016) More people use Facebook in Nigeria than anywhere else in Africa, Quartz; Datareportal (2022) Digital 2022: Global Overview Report.
10 Datareportal, op. cit. To be noted that social media usage per capita is in line with usage in West Africa in general (16%).
11 MMC study on usage of social media by migrants moving in and through West Africa; unpublished.
12 n=1,128
13 Ibid.

Methodology

Given the linkages to Nigerian women and trafficking to Europe; reports that social media is increasingly being used to lure victims of trafficking; and connections between smuggling and trafficking, particularly when it comes to smuggling of Nigerians by transnational organized criminal networks, MMC decided to explore how Nigerians on the move are using social media and how this might relate to risks they face during their migration journey. Using MMC's core 4Mi survey to understand the profiles of respondents, engagement with smugglers, and perception of and exposure to protection risks on the journey, MMC posed additional questions to users of social media, to investigate how social media is being used and how this may impact on the security of the journey.

This quantitative data is complemented by insights from qualitative interviews on the use of social media conducted in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in August 2022 with a range of key informants including smugglers and travel facilitators, migrants, and experts from a range of civil society organizations, NGOs and international organizations.

Sample and respondent profiles

This paper is based on 423 quantitative interviews carried out with Nigerian refugees and migrants on the move through West and North Africa who had used social media during their migration journey. Sampling was purposive, targeting Nigerians on mixed migration routes who had used social media, and aiming for a minimum quota of 50% women participants, as well as 40% respondents seeking to reach Europe. Data collection was carried out in February and March 2023 in Burkina Faso (n=109), Mali (n=106), Niger (n=106) and Tunisia (n=102).

Surveyed refugees and migrants were generally young; 21% were aged between 18-24, 61% between 25-34 and 18% between 35-55. Respondents came from almost all states/territories of Nigeria, with more than half the sample coming from ten locations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Top 10 origin states of respondents

Top 10 origin states	
Lagos	14%
Abuja Federal Capital Territory	8%
Adamawa	5%
Kano	5%
Yobe	5%
Bauchi	5%
Edo	4%
Enugu	4%
Abia	4%
Cross River	4%
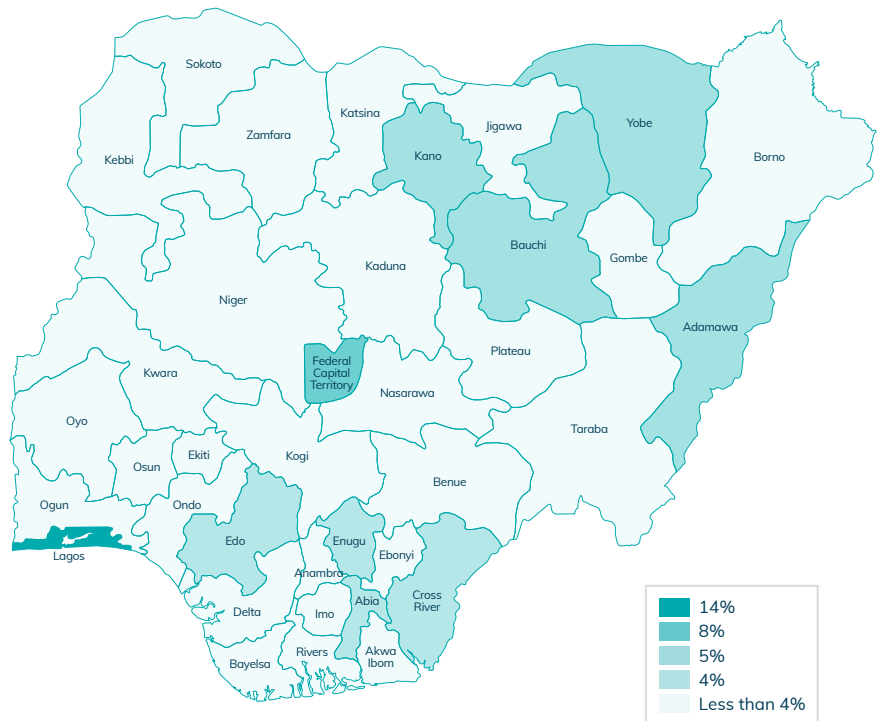
The sample comprised 52% (n=222) women and 48% (n=201) men. However, there was some difference in terms of gender breakdown of respondents across countries of interview, with a comparatively high proportion of women interviewed in Burkina Faso (71%, n=77) and a comparatively low proportion of women interviewed in Tunisia (31%, n=32).

For 75% of respondents (81% of men and 69% of women), Europe was the preferred destination. Among European destinations, Italy (cited by 58 respondents) and France (cited by 57 respondents) were the most frequently selected preferred destinations. These were followed by Spain (36), Germany (35), Europe (32), Belgium (29), and the United Kingdom (23). The intended destinations of those who did not indicate Europe were varied and primarily located outside of West and North Africa, with 11% citing a destination in North America, 6% citing a destination in Africa, 3% citing a destination in Asia and 1% citing destinations in Latin America, Australia or New Zealand.

Overall, 45% of respondents indicated that they had used a smuggler for some or all of their journey up to the point of interview, with more men saying this (55%) than women (36%). Smuggler use was reported by 52% of respondents seeking to go to Europe compared to only 25% of those who indicated another intended destination.

Limitations

It is important to keep in mind that this research is on vulnerabilities to a range of violations and abuse on the journey, and not focused exclusively on trafficking: the 4Mi survey and sampling approach targets people travelling on mixed migration routes and their protection needs in general, with the aim of better understanding vulnerabilities on the move. It is not designed to identify or specifically target victims of trafficking. Additionally, this study was carried out only with people who had reported using social media during their journey, and does not compare with those who did not. Finally, given that 4Mi's methodology is adapted to target people on the move – a population whose fluidity makes it both challenging to reach and difficult to count – 4Mi data collection uses a non-probability sampling approach, and therefore is not intended to be representative of the overall volume or characteristics of Nigerians on the move in the region.[14]

Findings

Risks of abuse and exploitation during the migration journey

As this paper seeks to explore possible linkages between social media use and risks of abuse and exploitation during the migration journey, we begin our analysis by looking at protection incidents personally experienced by respondents.[15]

Trafficking and exploitation

Among those asked if they had personally experienced any abuse or violation during the journey, 39 people (16%) reported having experienced exploitation/trafficking, and this was more frequently reported by men (19%) than by women (12%). It is also interesting to note that trafficking and exploitation were reported more frequently by respondents who were not seeking to go to Europe (24%) than by those who were (14%).

These findings could be considered counterintuitive given the relative prevalence of criminal networks engaging in trafficking of women between Nigeria and Europe.[16] One possible explanation for this could be that the journeys of people being trafficked across continents are more hidden, and therefore out of reach of 4Mi. For instance, research carried out for UNODC's Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment on smuggling of migrants suggested that a remote bypass route through the Nigerien desert village of Kouri Katana may be used for human trafficking activities, and such routes would preclude access to those being trafficked. Among other possible factors, dynamics of exploitation in the region – for instance, labor exploitation at mining sites – may also help to explain the higher proportion of men reporting trafficking/exploitation.

It is important to note that respondents who had used a smuggler much more frequently reported having experienced trafficking and exploitation (23%) as compared to those who had not used a smuggler (1/78). This aligns with reporting of smuggling networks also carrying out trafficking activities northward from Nigeria.[17]

Overall protection incidents

The pattern of results for trafficking and exploitation – reported more frequently by men, people who used a smuggler and people not seeking to go to Europe – was echoed across almost all other types of protection incidents (see Figure 2). It appears that these findings

14 See more information about 4Mi at https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/
15 The question "Have you personally experienced any of these types of incidents on your journey" was asked only of people who had said there had been a dangerous place on their journey, leading to a smaller sample size (n=246) for the analysis in this section.
16 UNODC (2022) Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: Research Findings on Migrant Smuggling of Nigerians, Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants; GI-TOC (2021) Conflict, Coping and Covid: Changing human smuggling and trafficking dynamics in North Africa and the Sahel in 2019 and 2020.
17 Ibid.

were driven by the specific sub-group of men who used smugglers, who more often reported protection incidents than any other group.

Figure 2. Personal experience of incident by gender
Among those who reported a dangerous location *en route*
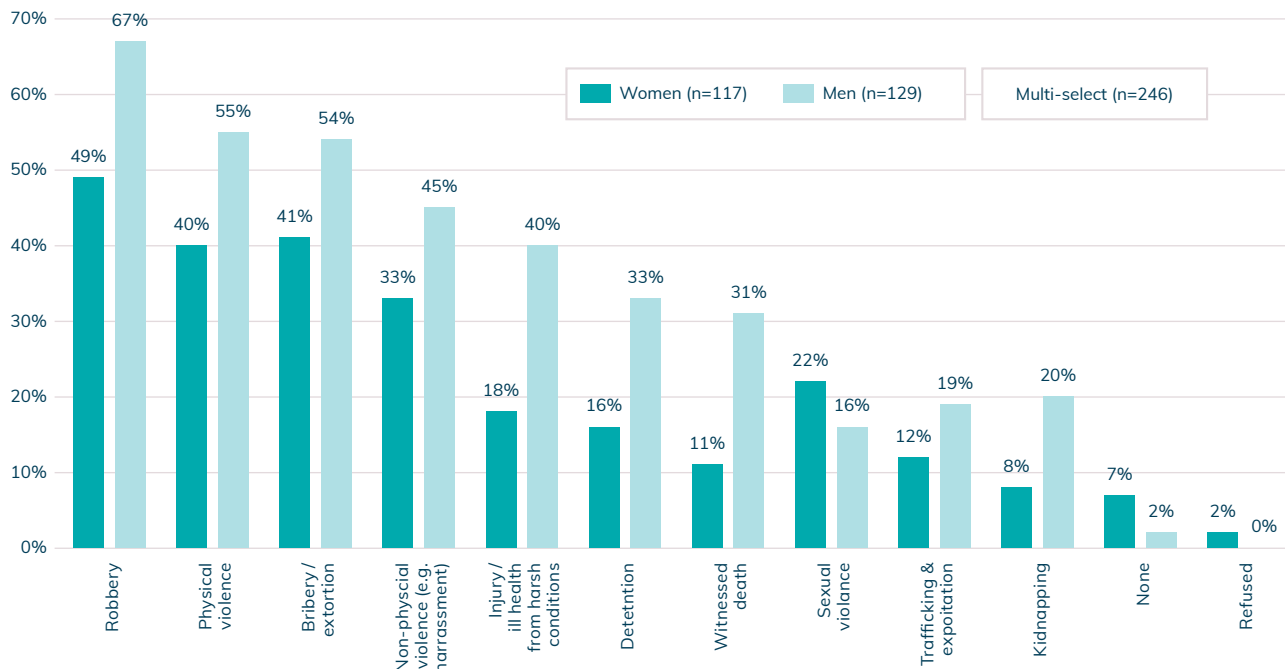
Respondents who had used smugglers more often reported all types of protection incidents than those who did not use smugglers, and often by wide margins (see Figure 3). These results are notable given that recent MMC analyses carried out on a broad sample of

nationalities of people on the move in West Africa have not found such pronounced differences in experience of incidents – across all categories – between people who use smugglers and those who did not.[18]

Figure 3. Personal experience of incident by smuggler use
Among those who reported a dangerous location *en route*
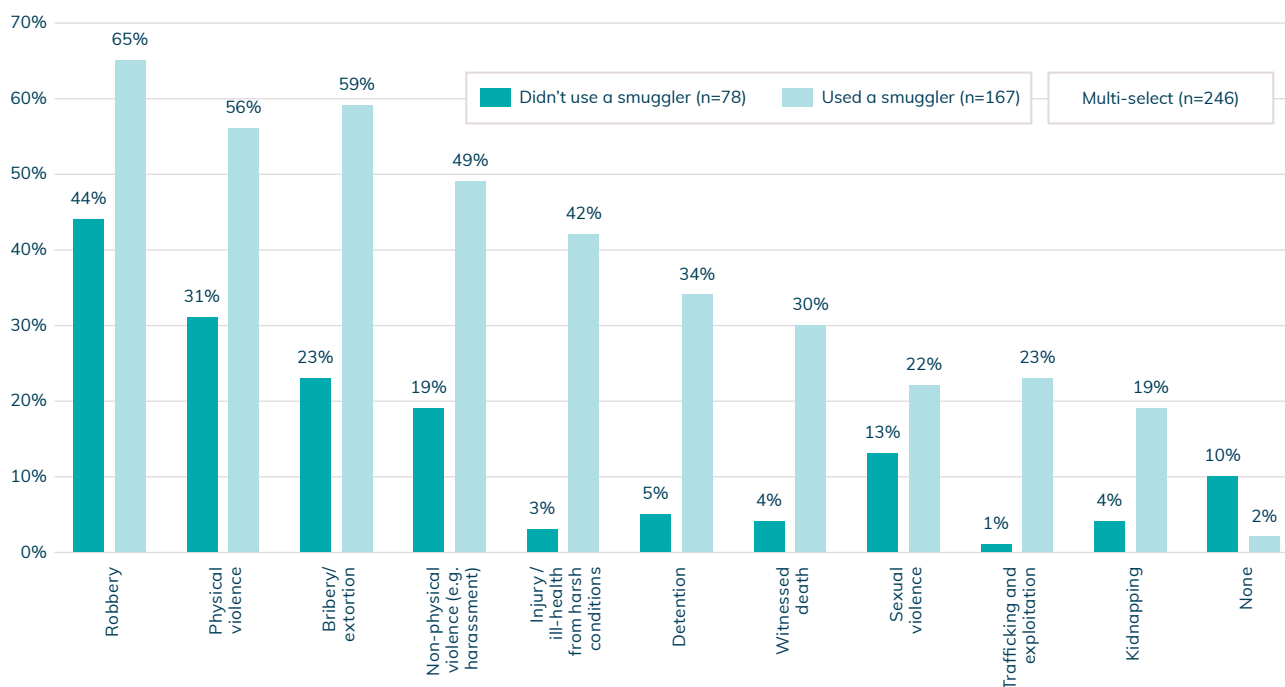

18   UNODC (2023) op. cit.; MMC (2023) op. cit

One possible explanation for this might be that in the case of Nigerians specifically, smugglers may be more likely to be carrying out abuses themselves. In previous MMC studies on smuggler use, dangerous locations and perceived perpetrators of abuse, data collected among West Africans consistently found smugglers to be less frequently cited as perpetrators of abuse than other actors.[19] However, when the nationality focus narrows to Nigerians, we see a different result. Among this sample, smugglers are actually the most frequently cited as a perceived perpetrator of abuse en route, with 19% of overall mentions, with other groups close behind: border guards/immigration officials (16%), armed groups/militias (15%) and criminal gangs (15%). While the 4Mi data does not allow a direct connection between protection incidents experienced and perpetrators of said incidents, the fact that Nigerians more often perceive smugglers as perpetrators of abuse is suggestive, and aligns with notions of more criminalized networks operating between Nigeria and Niger/Libya/Europe.

How Nigerians on the move are using social media

Figure 4. For what reasons did you use social media?
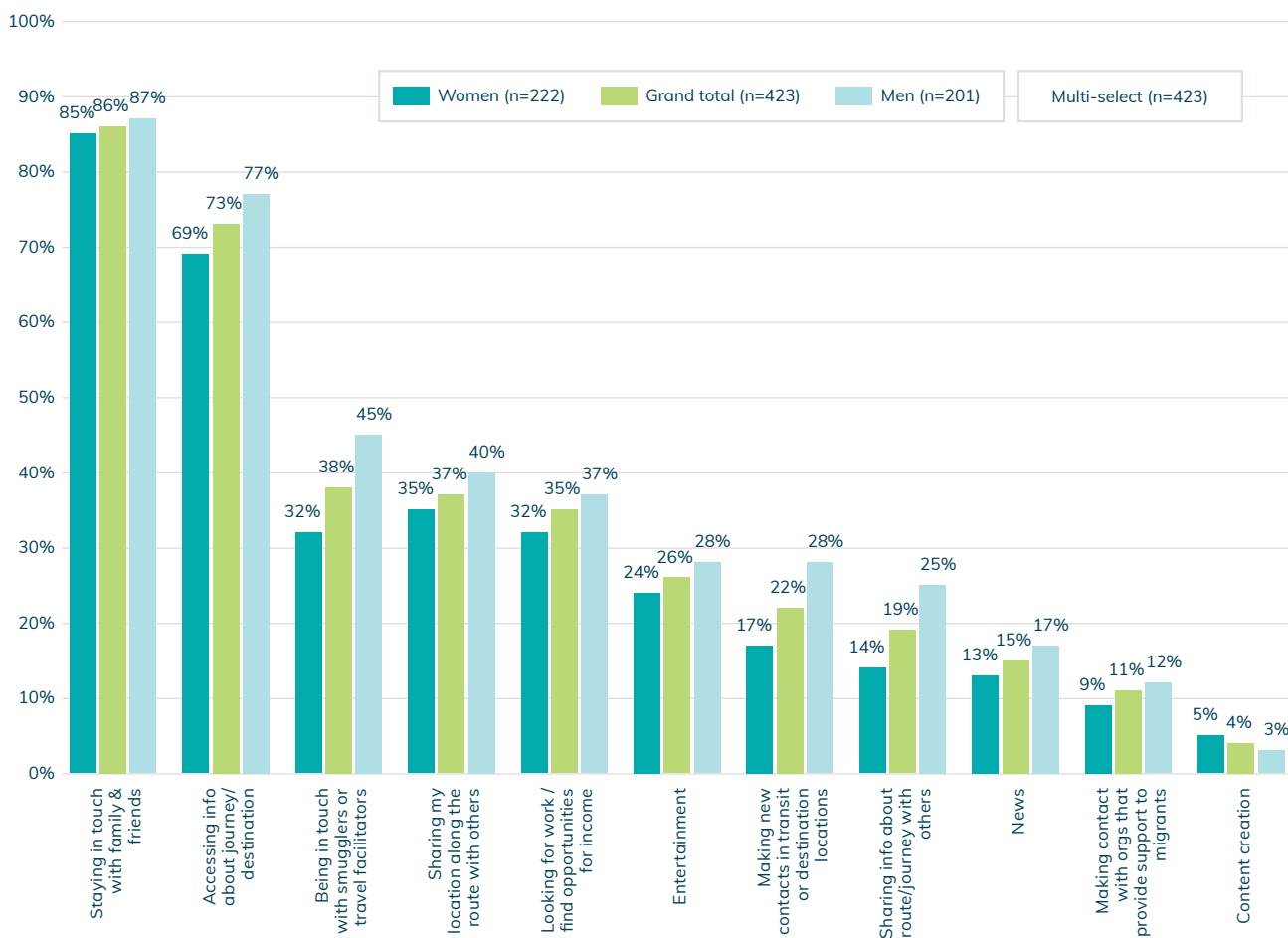
4Mi respondents who used social media most often used it to stay in touch with family and friends and to access information about the route (see Figure 4). Higher proportions of men reported using social media across almost all categories. The largest difference between genders was seen in being in touch with smugglers or travel facilitators, cited by 45% of male respondents vs 32% of female respondents. This was also the case for people indicating Europe as an intended destination (42%) vs those who weren't seeking to go to Europe (25%).

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19 ibid; MMC (2021) op. cit.

Social media as possible risk factor during the migration journey

Overall, using social media during the migration journey did not appear to pose a substantial risk, with more than three quarters (79%) of respondents saying they had not experienced any negative incidents online during their migration journey. Of those who did report having experienced such an incident, scams (7%) or attempted scams (6%) were the most frequently cited, and a relatively small proportion of respondents reported that contact made through social media led to an abuse that occurred in person (4% indicated exploitation, 4% indicated having been cheated). No major differences were seen in terms of gender.

Notably, one third of people who used a smuggler reported having had a negative experience on social media as compared to 10% of people who had not used a smuggler (it is worth noting that respondents who used a smuggler are perhaps more exposed to this risk, because they more often reported almost every category of social media use, see Figure 5). The data does not indicate whether or not the smuggler is responsible for these experiences. Seeking to better understand this correlation would be an important area for further inquiry. Qualitative interviews conducted by the MMC on the experience of refugees and migrants with social media use occasionally alluded to scams carried out by smugglers, but also to scams related to fake visa, scholarship or recruitment schemes, which did not appear to have an obvious linkage to smugglers.
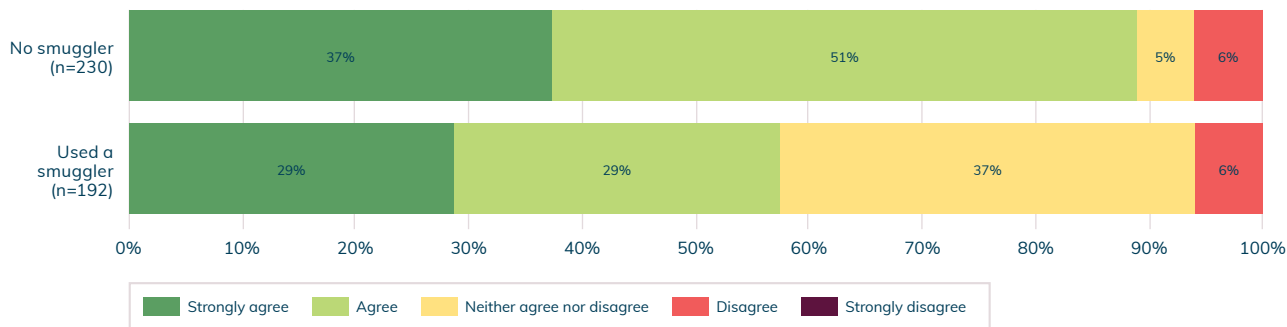
Figure 5. Experience of negative incidents on social media during migration journey
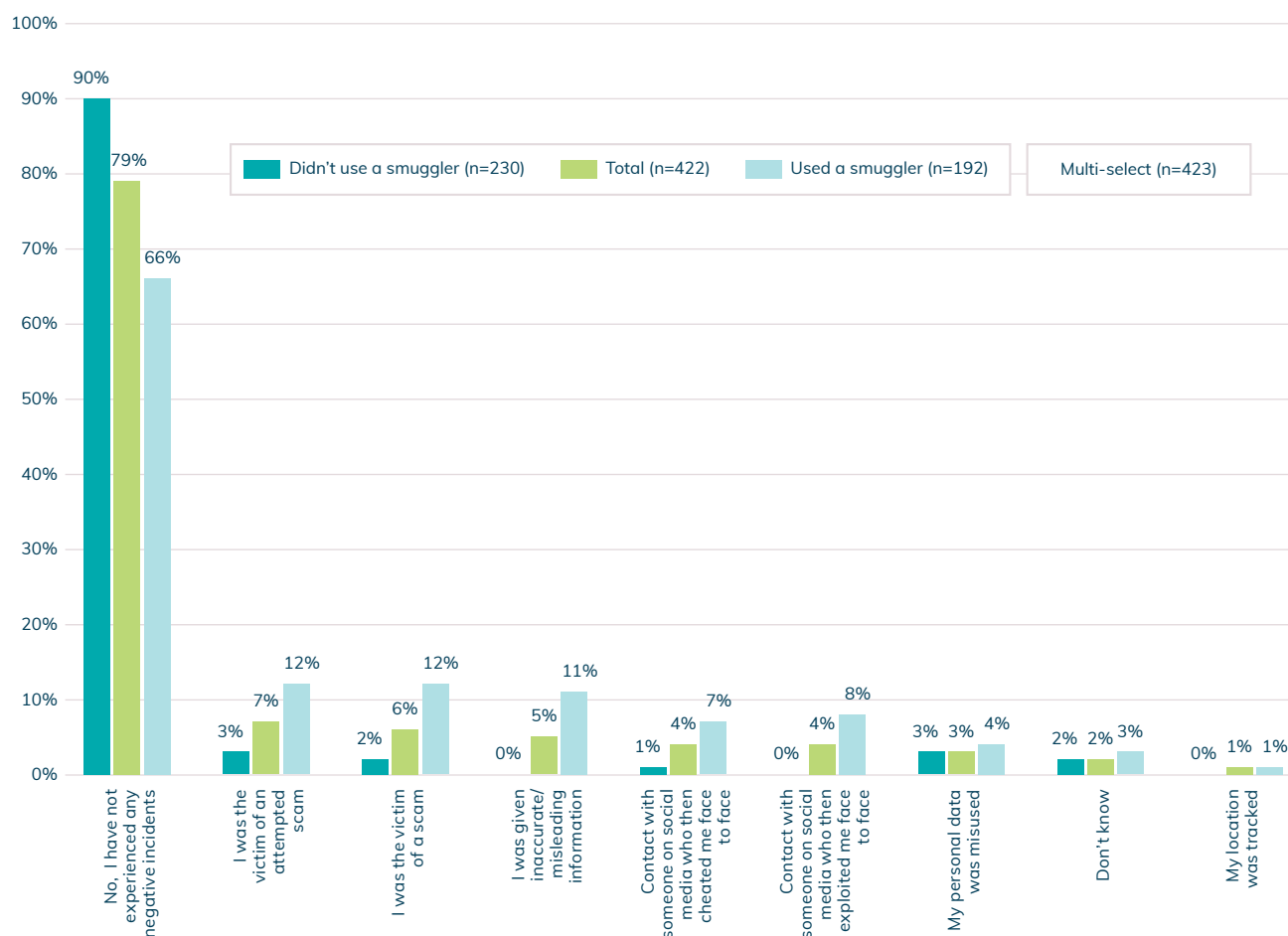
Overall, the majority of respondents agreed that social media made them safer on their journey (74%, see Figure 6), with little difference by gender. Despite appearing to have used social media more, respondents who used a smuggler seemed more ambivalent about whether it made them safer, in contrast to those who had not used a smuggler. When asked to what extent they agreed with

the statement "social media helps make me safer during my migration journey/experience," 88% of those who did not use a smuggler agreed or strongly agreed as compared to 58% of those who used a smuggler. However, it is worth noting that few from either group disagreed, suggesting they did not feel it made them less safe.

Figure 6. Social media helps make me safer during my migration journey

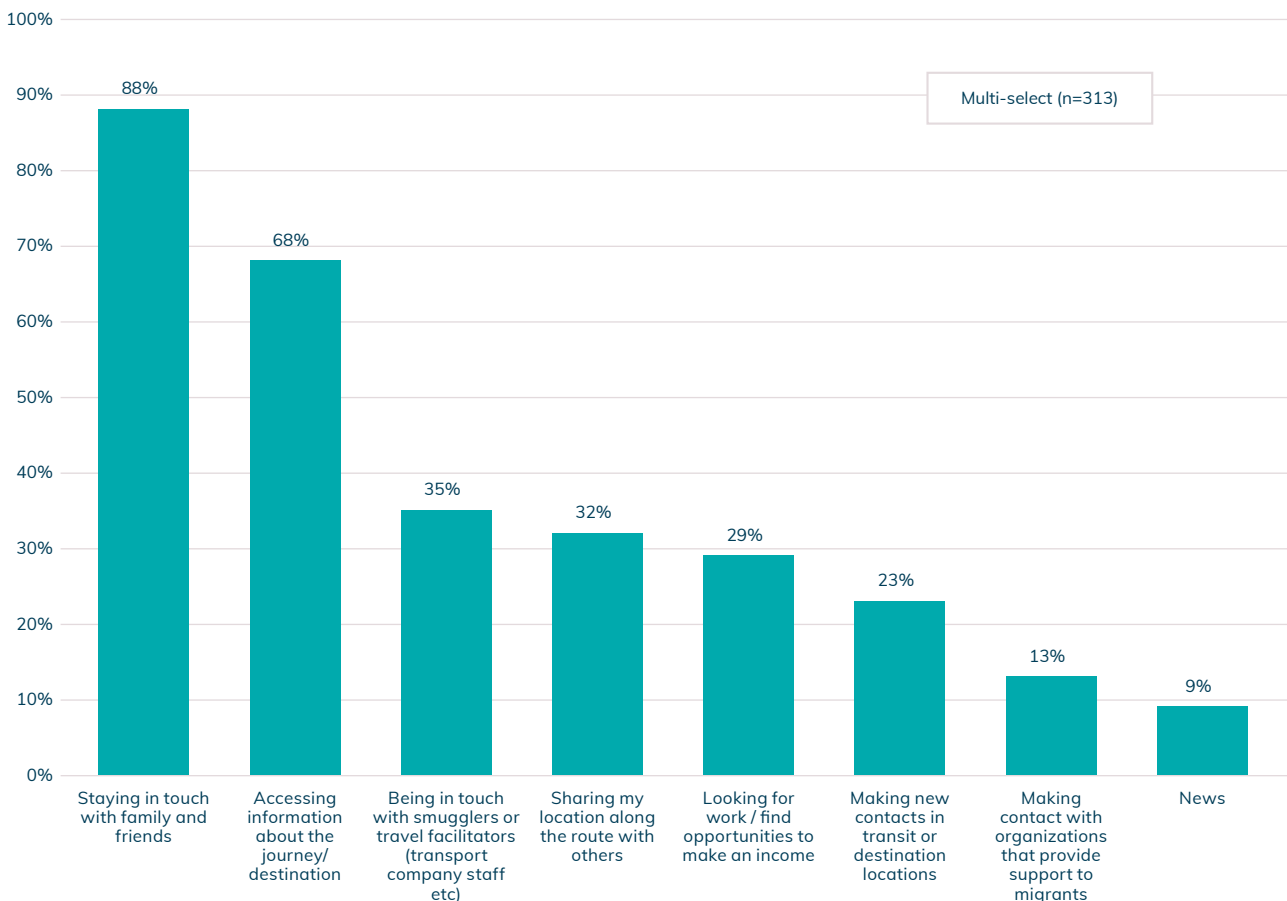|	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
No smuggler (n=230)	37%	51%	5%	6%	
Used a smuggler (n=192)	29%	29%	37%	6%	

Social media as a factor of protection during the journey

For the 74% of respondents who agreed that social media makes them safer during their journey,[20] the ways they said it made them safer generally corresponded with the reasons given for using social media in the first place, above all to stay in touch with family and friends and to access information (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. In what ways does social media make you safer?

Multi-select (n=313)

- Staying in touch with family and friends: 88%
- Accessing information about the journey/destination: 68%
- Being in touch with smugglers or travel facilitators (transport company staff etc): 35%
- Sharing my location along the route with others: 32%
- Looking for work / find opportunities to make an income: 29%
- Making new contacts in transit or destination locations: 23%
- Making contact with organizations that provide support to migrants: 13%
- News: 9%

Previous MMC qualitative interviews on social media use by people on the move in West Africa[21] suggest that both staying in touch with friends and family and accessing information about the journey/destination can be means of protecting oneself en route. Obtaining information about the route through social networks can, for instance, help refugees and migrants know which roads to use or avoid, be aware of locations where bandits or criminals

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20 33% strongly agreed with this statement, 41% agreed with this statement.
21 This research was not limited to Nigerians but sought to provide a broad perspective on experiences with social media of refugees and migrants on the move in West Africa.

have been known to operate, and know how to avoid or mitigate extortion at checkpoints.

Additionally, while at face value staying in touch with friends and family may not be an obvious means of protection, this qualitative research suggested that it can indeed have important benefits in terms of well-being. Some of the migrants interviewed spoke of material benefits, such as being put in touch with helpful people along the way by friends or family. For others, the benefits appeared to derive more from the psychological support of knowing that loved ones know where you are.

Being in touch with smugglers/travel facilitators on social media was the third most often cited way in which social media is deemed to make respondents safer en route, despite smugglers being the most commonly perceived perpetrator of protection incidents. On a journey that can pose multiple dangers and obstacles, a smuggler or facilitator often has specialized knowledge and connections, and may at times be perceived by people on the move as a means of risk mitigation, indicating their dual role.

Conclusion

This paper finds that journeys for Nigerian men and women are dangerous, and that men and people who used smugglers (and particularly men who used smugglers) more often reported protection incidents.

Given the limited scope of this analysis, it cannot be assumed to conclude that in general Nigerian men are more vulnerable to protection incidents during the migration journey than Nigerian women, particularly as it may be that many trafficking victims are not accessible on typical mixed migration routes. This nonetheless serves as an important reminder that Nigerian men face substantial abuses during the migration journey, and should not be overlooked when it comes to protection and assistance responses.

The findings suggest that smuggler use may be a bigger risk factor in the Nigerian context. This aligns with reports from experts that smuggling networks reaching between Nigeria and Europe often show a significant degree of organization and criminality.

The analysis here does not identify a strong link between social media use and risks on the migration journey. It does find a link between respondents who use smugglers (which itself appears to relate to more experiences of abuse) and the extent of social media use, as well as seeing more negative experiences on social media among those who use smugglers. Linkages between social media use and risks of abuse, particularly with regard to aggravated smuggling or trafficking, would be

useful to explore further with a larger dataset and more targeted approach.

Overall, when it comes to social media usage during the migration journey, it appears that people generally consider it to be something that contributes to their safety. The connection between obtaining information on social media and security seems fairly straightforward, as this information can be useful in identifying and avoiding risks, as well as in finding opportunities which could contribute to protection and resilience. Perhaps less obvious is the role that the most often selected option – staying in touch with family and friends – plays in increasing safety en route. This could have material benefits such as being connected to helpful contacts along the route, but it may also be a matter of emotional support.

Finally, as ever, the role of smugglers is not black and white, as we see that getting in touch with smugglers/ travel facilitators is also considered a way that social media usage can keep people safe during their migration journey.

In general it is clear that during the migration journey, social media plays a role both as a risk factor, and more especially as a protective factor, on what are known to be dangerous journeys. It is likely that social media use on migration journeys will increase, and there are many rich veins for further research on how it is being used, and how it can contribute towards protection on those journeys.

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in Danish Refugee Council regional offices in Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Latin America, and a global team based across Copenhagen, Geneva and Brussels.

MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise. MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

MMC is part of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).

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