

MMC Research Report,  
February 2024



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July 2022. A railway platform sign at  
Sousse station in Tunisia.

# Acknowledgements

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## About MMC

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs hosted in the Danish Refugee Council's (DRC) 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.

For more information visit: [www.mixedmigration.org](https://www.mixedmigration.org) and follow us at [@Mixed\\_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)

## About MADAR

This work was carried out in the framework of the Maghreb Action on Displacement and Rights (MADAR مدار Arabic for 'path') Network Plus project, which aims to improve the humanitarian protection of vulnerable, displaced people in contexts of conflict in the central Maghreb region of Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. The MADAR Network is funded by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).

MADAR is a multi-country network of professionals from civil society and research organisations, led by Professor Mariangela Palladino at Keele University. MADAR facilitates research collaborations and commissions research projects drawing on the regional expertise of UK and Maghreb-based scholars from across the arts and humanities and the social and political sciences. MADAR combines an interdisciplinary approach with participatory and collaborative methods, deploying artistic and creative engagement to mobilise global voices, to improve access to marginal and underrepresented groups, and provide a more active role for displaced people to shape the research process and outcomes.

<sup>1</sup> Names of enumerators living in Tunisia have been omitted to protect their safety and confidentiality.



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## Glossary

<b>ASEDEJ</b>	Association Solidarité Echange et Développement de la Jeunesse
<b>CSO</b>	Civil society organisation
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>IO</b>	International organisation
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>MADAR</b>	Maghreb Action on Displacement and Rights
<b>MMC</b>	Mixed Migration Centre
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

# Key findings

While most previous research on urban migration in Tunisia has focused on Tunis and Sfax, Sousse, Tunisia's third-biggest city and home to around 240,000 people, stands out as a centre for foreign students and, more recently, a sanctuary for migrants who have encountered violence and discrimination elsewhere in Tunisia. It is also notable for its municipality's progressive approach to migration management. This report seeks to fill a research gap on the experience of migrants and refugees in Sousse and provide an evidence base to better support these populations. It investigates the experiences of migrants and refugees in Sousse, Tunisia's third biggest city. It draws on surveys with 200 Sub-Saharan African migrants and refugees, and qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with Sub-Saharan African, Arab, and European refugees, migrants, and local key stakeholders.

- **Sousse is a hub for foreign students from West Africa and Arab countries and for Sub-Saharan African migrant workers, including those fleeing violence elsewhere in Tunisia in 2023.** Sousse is attractive to migrants and refugees because it offers informal jobs in tourism, high-quality education, and affordable costs of living, but is considered a transit location for most because of high barriers to regularising their stay and employment, and desires to reach destinations in Europe. Foreign students arrive by plane and are eligible for residency permits, but these do not give them the right to work. Migrant workers arrive in Sousse by plane through a 90-day tourist residency permit, which they struggle to extend, or, increasingly, overland through a new irregular migration route across the Algerian border.
- **Sousse is known as a welcoming city for migrants and refugees because of its municipality's progressive approach and strong civil society support.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sousse municipality collaborated with civil society and international organisations to support migrants and refugees, creating an evidence base and networks for more long-term assistance. Since the end of the pandemic, the municipality has mainstreamed migration into broader social inclusion programmes for populations in situations of vulnerability. External factors, such as the fact that Sousse hosts a smaller and more highly educated migrant population compared to other big cities like Tunis and Sfax, have likely laid a strong foundation for this progressive approach and contribute to reduced tensions between refugees, migrants, and locals, as compared to other locations in Tunisia.
- **Most migrants' and refugees' livelihoods before departure were insecure, but economic factors alone do not explain migration decisions.** Before coming to Tunisia, most surveyed migrants and refugees did casual labour, with young people more often depending on family support. Economic opportunities, rights, and freedom are drivers of mobility, but sociocultural factors and a culture of migration, especially for women, were also primary drivers.
- **Migrants and refugees travelling irregularly overland face dangerous journeys, and those arriving via regular channels and by plane risk falling into irregularity, experiencing exploitation and human trafficking.** Surveyed migrants and refugees travelling irregularly overland emphasize needing more reliable information on safety risks along the journey. Women surveyed more frequently reported experiencing sexual violence and engaging in sex work to pay for their trip than did surveyed men. More than half of surveyed migrants and refugees would not start the journey knowing what they know now, and even more are unlikely to recommend the trip to others.
- **Regardless of mode of travel, for the vast majority of migrants and refugees, it is only possible to work in the informal economy - but some graduates fight deskilling through innovative entrepreneurship.** Without the formal right to work, even those with higher levels of education can only find low-skilled informal jobs with no labour protections or social security. This can result in high rates of exploitation, substandard wages, and risk of exploitation and trafficking. Some graduates have set up innovative businesses, often with the help of micro-entrepreneurship grants.
- **Legal insecurity compounds precarious livelihoods for asylum-seekers and refugees.** Sousse hosts the fourth largest number of registered refugees and asylum-seekers in Tunisia, but there is no clear pathway to residency permits and formal labour even for those with confirmed refugee status. Older people and women find it particularly difficult to renew their asylum documentation because there is no UNHCR office in Sousse.
- **Migrants and refugees surveyed in Sousse expressed an almost universal need for assistance, especially for cash.** Less educated migrants who entered the country overland are in greater need of basic livelihoods support, as well as job offers and temporary residency permits tailored to transient populations. Those who arrived by air, including many university students, require legal assistance to apply for residency permits. Women require help with enrolling their children in education, and more frequently indicated a need for basic livelihoods and legal assistance than did surveyed men.



# 1. Introduction

Migrants and refugees in Sousse, Tunisia's third biggest city, have many faces: a Cameroonian fashion designer selling her own creations online; a Syrian refugee making Middle Eastern sweets; a football coach from Mali teaching his sport to local and Sub-Saharan African youth; a teenager from Guinea carrying garbage bags for a living while dreaming of a career as a professional boxer in Europe. Drawing on interview and survey data from 2023, this report analyses migrants' and refugees' livelihoods in Sousse, in the light of Tunisia's recent anti-migrant crackdown, rising economic precarity, and record sea departures to Italy.

## Tunisia as an emerging migration hub in the Mediterranean...

Since Tunisia's 2011 revolution, its coastline has turned into a staging area for boat departures across the Mediterranean. Since then, migrants' and refugees' profiles in Tunisia have become increasingly more diverse with regard to legal status, countries of origin, gender, and reasons for movement. In addition to young Tunisians escaping the worsening economic crisis, recently increasing numbers of international migrants and refugees have taken to the sea aiming to reach Europe: mostly from francophone West Africa, but also from countries further afield such as Syria and Sudan.<sup>1</sup> After the 2011 onset of the Libyan civil war, Tunisia also became a secondary destination, and transit location, for Sub-Saharan Africans working in Libya. In 2021, Tunisia's National Institute of Statistics estimated the number of migrants in the country at 59,000.<sup>2</sup> In September 2023, 11,000 asylum-seekers and refugees were registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),<sup>3</sup> with Syrians (2,800), Ivorians (2,400), and Sudanese (around 2,300) making up the biggest groups. Between July and September 2023, 4,800 new arrivals approached the UNHCR Tunis office for registration, almost five times as many as between April and June 2023. These numbers reflect increased movements in the Mediterranean, and into and out of Tunisia, as well as Tunisia's emergence as the main country of departure to Europe in the Southern Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> Higher registration numbers also suggest that in the current tense political climate for foreigners, displaced people may find it more important to regularise their stay and obtain assistance through applying for refugee status.<sup>5</sup> In 2020, over 70% of migrants and refugees surveyed by MMC in Tunis understood themselves as in transit.<sup>6</sup> As this report will show, even higher numbers of respondents in Sousse understand their stay as a temporary stop-over on their way to the Global North.

There are a number of reasons people on the move choose to travel to or through Tunisia, including visa-free entry for ninety days for citizens of fifteen mostly Sub-Saharan African countries,<sup>7</sup> renowned French-language higher education institutions, and ample employment opportunities, often found through community networks and social media. Informal work sectors are extensive, and migrants and refugees can easily find jobs in restaurants and cafés, with men also commonly working in construction, fishing, and gardening, and women as cleaners, maids, and nannies.<sup>8</sup>

## ...but challenges still abound

However, despite Tunisia's increasing popularity as a migration hub, systemic issues resulting in wide-spread irregularity and informality in the labour market shape the experience of many migrants and refugees. When migrants overstay their 90-day visa and enter irregularity, they begin to accumulate fines commensurate with the duration of their stay and cannot leave the country without having paid them off. Migrants hoping to apply for work visas which would allow them to obtain residency permits fall under the principle of "national preference." They can only be hired

1 UNHCR (2023) [Tunisia Operational Update July-September 2023](#)

2 Institut National de la Statistique (INS) & Observatoire National de la Migration (2021) [Rapport de l'enquête nationale sur la migration internationale Tunisia-HIMS](#)

3 UNHCR (2023) [UNHCR Tunisia Registration Data](#)

4 Camilli, A. & Paynter, E. (2020) [Tunisia: North Africa's overlooked migration hub](#), The New Humanitarian; Msakni, F. (2020) [From Sub-Saharan African States to Tunisia A quantitative study on the situation of migrants in Tunisia: general aspects, pathways and aspirations](#), Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux; REACH & Mercy Corps (2018) [Tunisia, country of destination and transit for sub-Saharan African migrants - October 2018](#), Reliefweb.

5 UNHCR (2023) [Op.Cit.](#)

6 MMC (2020) [Urban Mixed Migration Tunis Case Study](#)

7 Individuals coming from these countries of origin have the right to reside in Tunisia on a tourist visa valid during 90 days: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal.

8 MMC (2020) Op Cit.

by Tunisian companies if employers can prove that there are no potential Tunisian job candidates with equivalent qualifications; in practice, this is hardly feasible. The residency permits issued to foreign university students do not allow them to work. While the 2014 Tunisian constitution guarantees that every individual, regardless of nationality, has “the right to live, in dignity, and with respect of private life” on Tunisian soil, and a 2018 law was meant to eliminate every form of racial discrimination, it remains unclear whether migrants and refugees are enjoying such rights. Despite it being a signatory of the Refugee Convention, Tunisia has also stalled domestic asylum legislation since 2012, and asylum-seeker or refugee status conferred by the UNHCR does not automatically afford displaced people the right to work. As UNHCR grapples with a growing and increasingly diverse refugee population, its opportunities for financial support and to identify durable solutions are limited.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, like many migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees lack access to residency permits and to the formal labour market.<sup>10</sup>

A worsening political climate in Tunisia has increasingly impacted migrants and refugees' livelihoods and movements within and out of the country. The year 2023 presented a turning point for Sub-Saharan African foreigners in Tunisia, for whom growing economic precarity was made worse by their ongoing ambiguous legal situation and, of late, a worsening political climate for foreigners. 4Mi data collected by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) since 2021 show that both physical and non-physical violence are among the most highly reported risks by respondents in Tunisia, pointing to a pattern of racialised discrimination and abuse against migrants in the country.<sup>11</sup> Further, a speech by the Tunisian President on 21 February 2023 triggered an unprecedented outburst of arrests, forced evictions, and open violence against migrants and refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa, and even Black Tunisians.<sup>12</sup> The situation became particularly dire in Sfax, Tunisia's second biggest city and the centre of industrial production in the region. Thousands of migrants and refugees have also been pushed back to desert borders with Algeria and Libya since July 2023.<sup>13</sup>

Cross-Mediterranean geopolitical dimensions have compounded challenges faced by migrants and refugees in Tunisia. In July 2023, Tunisia signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the European Union (EU) to expand their partnership in various domains, including migration management. As part of the deal, it secured €105m to fight people smugglers and around €15m for humanitarian organisations to facilitate voluntary return of migrants.<sup>14</sup> Almost immediately, the Tunisian government backstepped, announcing it would only take its own citizens back, but not Sub-Saharan Africans who had transited Tunisia on their way to Europe.<sup>15</sup> In the meantime, high numbers of sea crossings continued in summer 2023, as coast guards and other law enforcement services on land could not keep up with increasing numbers of migrants leaving by boat from Tunisia, while prices for smugglers plummeted.<sup>16</sup> MMC's 4Mi enumerators also observed that coast guards would often let boats go not due to capacity but rather out of a desire to see foreigners leave Tunisia.<sup>17</sup> At the beginning of October 2023, arrivals to Italy, mostly coming from Tunisian shores, were already higher than they had been since the record numbers of 2016.<sup>18</sup>

## The unique migration context and profile of Sousse

While most previous research on urban migration in Tunisia has focused on Tunis and Sfax, Sousse, Tunisia's third-biggest city and home to around 240,000 people, stands out as a centre for foreign students and, more recently, a sanctuary for migrant workers in vulnerable situations. It is also notable for its municipality's progressive approach to migration management.<sup>19</sup>

9 For an overview of Tunisia's adherence to international instruments of human rights protection, see Ben Achour, S. (2019) *La Tunisie, une terre d'accueil pour les réfugiés?* In: *Frontières, sociétés et droit en mouvement*, ed. by Sylvie Mazzella and Delphine Perrin, Brussels: Editions Bruyant, 221-244.

10 For an overview of asylum and migration policies in Tunisia, and refugees' and migrants' access to work, see for example Geisser, V. (2019) *Tunisie, des migrations subsahariennes toujours exclus du rêve démocratique*, Migrations Société; MMC (2021) *Hidden hardship of an unnoticed workforce. The economic lives of refugees and migrants in Tunisia*; Natter, K. (2022) *Tunisia's migration policy: the ambiguous consequences of democratization*, Heinrich Boell Stiftung; Terre d'Asile Tunisie (2020) *L'essentiel - «L'accès au travail des migrants en Tunisie : Du cadre juridique à la pratique»*

11 MMC (2023) *4mi interactive: Dangers on the journey reported in Tunisia*

12 UN OHCHR (2023) *Tunisia must immediately stop hate speech and violence against migrants from south of Sahara, UN Committee issues early warning*

13 Tondo, L. (2023) *'I had to drink my own urine to survive': Africans tell of being forced into the desert at Tunisia border*, The Guardian.

14 Doyel, S., Forin, R. & Frouws, B. (2023) *A damaging deal: abuses, departures from Tunisia continue following EU agreement*

15 O'Carroll, L. (2023) *Tunisia says it will not be 'reception centre' for returning migrants*, The Guardian.

16 Key stakeholder interview, 4Mi enumerator from Sub-Saharan Africa, October 2023.

17 Key stakeholder interview, 4Mi enumerators, October 2023.

18 MMC (2023) *Quarterly Mixed Migration Update North Africa, Quarter 2, 2023*; UNHCR (2023) *Europe Situation: Data and Trends – Arrivals and Displaced Populations September 2023*

19 ICMPD, UCLG & UN-Habitat (2020) *Profile migratoire de la ville de Sousse*



Hosting leading public and private universities, Sousse has long been a hub for talent from francophone West Africa, as well as various Arab countries. In 2018/9, university enrolment statistics listed 920 foreign students;<sup>20</sup> for young athletes, especially footballers, local sports clubs are also sought-after employers. Because of its high standard of living and coastal location, the city is attractive to European retirees, while being a centre of medical tourism for affluent Sub-Saharan Africans. In recent years, the composition of Sousse's foreign population has changed, starting with the arrival of Libyan and Syrian refugees in the mid-2010s, and later irregular migrant workers from Sub-Saharan Africa. Sousse now hosts the fourth largest number of registered refugees and asylum-seekers in Tunisia, with 353 registered asylum-seekers (compared to 5,000 in Greater Tunis).<sup>21</sup> In 2020, there were around 3,000 migrants and refugees in need of assistance in Sousse, though numbers may have increased since then.<sup>22</sup> In mid-2023, Sousse's reputation as a more welcoming city than Sfax, and its proximity to the beaches from which boats leave to Europe, turned it into a "safe haven" for those fleeing violence in Sfax,<sup>23</sup> as well as for growing numbers of migrants entering Tunisia irregularly via a new route: across the land border with Algeria.<sup>24</sup>

## Providing an evidence base to better support refugees and migrants in Sousse

Data for this report were collected for the project "Make Them Count! Supporting Civil Society Action to Improve Refugees' and Migrants' Livelihoods in Sousse, Tunisia," a one-year collaborative study financed by the Maghreb Action on Displacement and Rights (MADAR) Network Plus. Partners include the Association Tunisienne Awledna (referred to as "Awledna" throughout), a Tunisian CSO aiding migrants and refugees in Sousse, migration experts from the MMC, and an anthropologist from the University of Edinburgh.<sup>25</sup>

### Text box 1. Livelihoods and migration

By "livelihoods", we understand mobile people's monetary and non-monetary assets, capabilities, and survival strategies. A multiscale approach factors in migrants' and refugees' pre-migration livelihoods, livelihoods in transit locations, and social networks in countries of origin, transit, destination, and elsewhere. Livelihoods transcend a purely economic rationale, and are embedded in a dense web of refugees' and migrants' social obligations, affection, and shared responsibilities. Cultural factors, caring duties – especially for women – and social pressures bring some people to Sousse, and keep them there.

Adopting a livelihoods framework in the broad sense described above (see text box 1), this report is an integral part of the "Make them Count!" project, included to provide an evidence base and recommendations that will allow Awledna and others to better provide assistance for mobile populations and advocate for safe and decent migration policies in Sousse. It is situated in the overall migratory projects and experience of refugees and migrants in Sousse, but also touches on national-level and local migration/asylum policies that enable or curtail their livelihoods.

The rest of the report comprises five sections: after an overview of our mixed-methods approach, it discusses the internal and external factors that have turned Sousse into a city of welcome. The report then presents findings on three stages of respondents' migratory projects: pre-migration livelihoods and motivations, journeys, livelihoods and assistance needs in Sousse. In conclusion, we focus on policy recommendations tailored to municipalities more generally, as well as to Sousse's unique positioning as a city of welcome and transit location.

20 Ibid.

21 UNHCR (2023) [UNHCR Tunisia Registration Data](#)

22 Key stakeholder interview, head of the Terre d'Asile office in Sousse, February 2023.

23 Bajec, A. (2023) [Fears for stranded Black African migrants as tensions boil over in Tunisia](#), The New Humanitarian; Speakman Cordall, S. (2023) [Europe frets over migration: Tunisia moves refugees to departure points](#), Al Jazeera.

24 In the past, most of those entering Tunisia overland arrived from Libya, cf. Msakni, F. (2020) Op. cit.

25 For more information, please consult the project website: <https://madar-network.org/en/projects-new/large-grants/make-space-edinburgh/>

## 2. Methodology and profiles

### Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach with twenty semi-structured qualitative interviews and two focus group discussions with migrants and refugees, as well as interviews with various key stakeholders, in addition to standardised quantitative 4Mi surveys conducted with 200 migrants and refugees in Sousse.<sup>26</sup> All research participants were above 18 years of age. In this study, 4Mi data collection sampled only francophone respondents, while qualitative interviews were conducted in Arabic and French. Enumerators conducting the 4Mi survey were directed to maximize diversity of gender, age, legal status, nationality, etc. (see text box 2).

#### Text box 2. About 4Mi

The 4Mi methodology is adapted to target people on the move – a population whose fluidity makes it both challenging to reach and difficult to count. The data collection therefore uses a non-probability sampling approach, and is not intended to be representative of the overall volume or characteristics of refugees and migrants in Sousse. 4Mi data is also self-reported and MMC has no means to verify reported information. However, using the 4Mi system allowed for collection of first-hand data on migrants and refugees in Sousse, a mobile, heterogeneous, and hard-to-reach population that had never been studied systematically before. It provides a useful snapshot of their experiences which in turn can help guide policy and response.

Qualitative interviews and focus group discussions took place in February 2023, i.e., before the upsurge in violence and discrimination against foreigners starting in late February. The 4Mi surveys were conducted between June and September 2023. In October 2023, a follow-up interview with 4Mi enumerators yielded insights into local migration dynamics and the logistics of data collection at a moment of heightened tensions for foreigners in Tunisia.

### Profiles

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection included slightly more men than woman migrants and refugees, but in the qualitative interviews the age range was greater and maximum age was higher (46 years in the 4Mi sample vs. 78 years in the qualitative interviews). For the 4Mi sample, analyses are disaggregated by age group (18-28, 29 years and older), gender and, in a few cases, by whether respondents travelled by air (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Age and gender distribution (absolute numbers in brackets)**

Gender				
Age				
		Female	Male	Total
	18-28	18.0% (36)	32.5% (65)	50.5% (101)
	29 and older	22.5 % (45)	27.0% (54)	49.5% (99)
Total		40.5% (81)	59.5% (119)	100% (200)

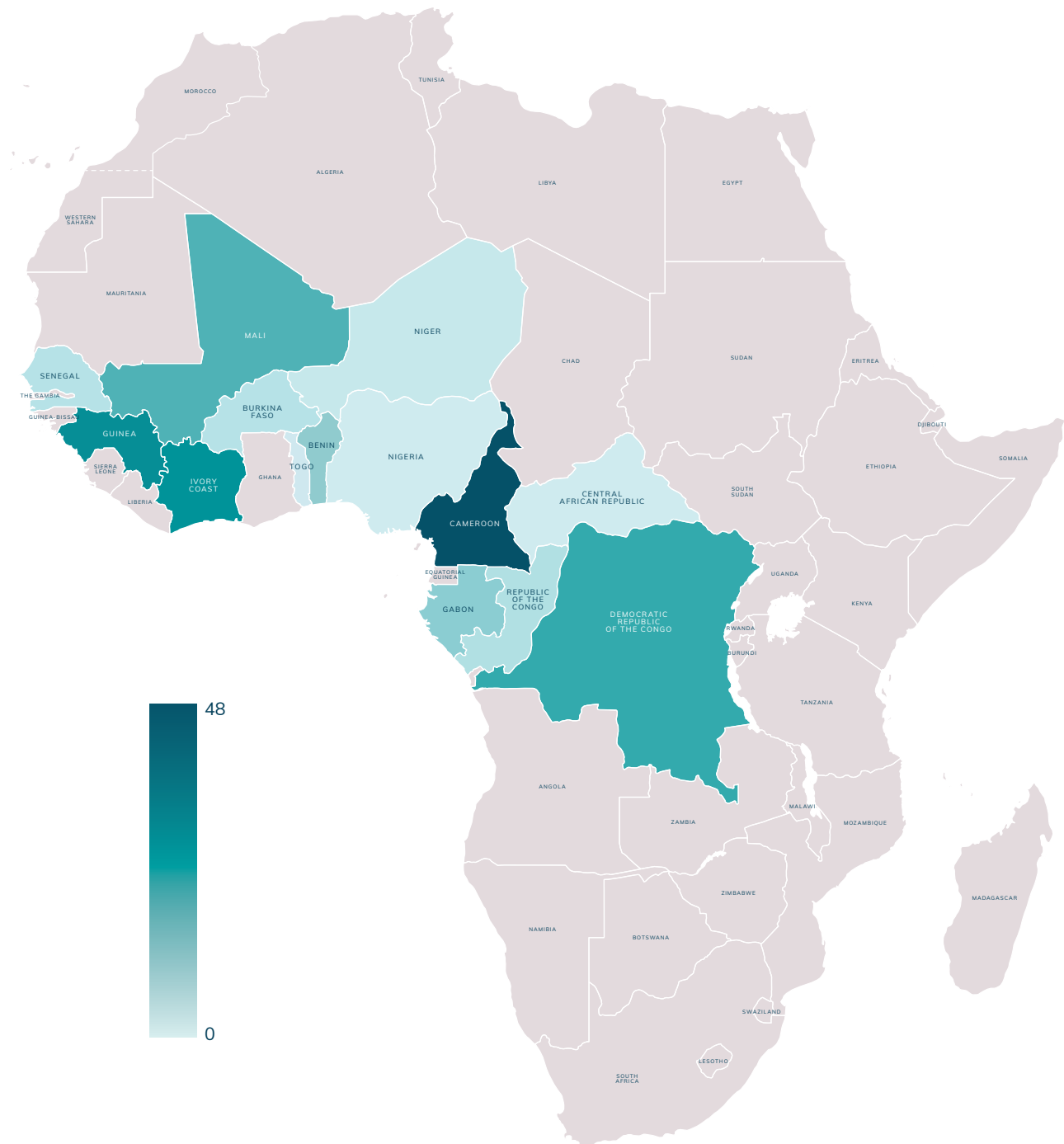
The 4Mi survey only included migrants and refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa, while qualitative interviews also included Europeans and Arabs. In the 4Mi sample, most respondents hailed from francophone West Africa; the main countries of origin were Cameroon (24%), Guinea (15%), Ivory Coast (14%), Democratic Republic of the Congo (10%), and Mali (7%) (Map 1). Enumerators with several years of experience conducting 4Mi surveys in Tunisia confirmed rising numbers of migrants from Ivory Coast and Cameroon, but also the emergence of new profiles, including Malians, Nigeriens, Senegalese, and, in particular, Guineans. This reflects increasing numbers of Guineans moving in the

<sup>26</sup> For more information on research methodology, please see Annex 2.

Mediterranean: between January and August 2023, Guineans made up the biggest group of sea arrivals to Italy (14%), up from 2% during the same period in 2022.<sup>27</sup>

The 4Mi surveys targeted newer arrivals who had been in Tunisia for less than two years, with an average stay of one year. The qualitative interviews included migrants and refugees from more diverse countries of origin and who had lived in Sousse for an average of six years, for example, Syrian refugees who had arrived in the mid-2010s, privileged European migrants (e.g., from France), Arab university students, and Arab marital migrants (e.g., from Algeria and Morocco).

**Map 1. Countries of origin, 4Mi sample (n=200)**



27 UNHCR (2023) [Italy weekly snapshot - 2 October 2023](#)

## 3. Findings

### A. Progressive urban migration management and civil society support in Sousse

Among migrants and refugees, Sousse is known as a city of welcome, due to a number of external factors, but also the municipality's active migration management and strong civil society support. Compared to industrial centres like Sfax, Sousse faces fewer migration challenges: numbers are smaller, newcomers, many of them university students, are highly educated, and while they tend to live in ethnic clusters, there is less of a risk of ghettoization. Migrants and refugees settle in mixed neighbourhoods like Erriadh and Boukhzar with a history of domestic migration and close to universities. In these areas, new arrivals find open-minded, cosmopolitan environments and cheap accommodation.

However, Sousse's reputation is also the result of over a decade of active migration management by several actors within the municipality, in collaboration with strong CSOs.<sup>28</sup> Between 2018 and 2023, Sousse had a vice-mayor in charge of migration affairs who strove to improve migrant livelihoods through building partnerships with CSOs, IOs, and other municipalities. Local administrators in migrant-receiving neighbourhoods have also been sensitized to their needs, and often collaborate with local CSOs. The municipality's approach to migration management has gone through several phases: since the mid-2010s, it has been involved in transnational city networks promoting decentralisation and peer-to-peer exchange, including United Cities and Local Governments of Africa, the International Observatory of Mayors, and the MC2CM Mediterranean City-to-City Migration Initiative.<sup>29</sup> One of the outputs of the MC2CM Initiative was a migration profile, summarising available migration data and listing the diverse parties involved in migration governance in Sousse.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Sousse municipality began cooperating with international organisations (INGOs) on migration management. In 2019, for example, together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Sousse organised mobile units called "Plus près de chez vous" to share information about services for migrants: psychosocial and legal assistance, voluntary return, and sensibilisation.

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing greater public awareness of migrants' and refugees' hardship became a turning point for the municipality and its partners. Through "Sousse solidaire," it created a multi-stakeholder committee for migration governance, organising online meetings with CSOs such as Awledna, the trade unions, the regional commissary for social affairs, Caritas, and Sousse governorate.<sup>31</sup> As there was no reliable data on migrants and refugees in Sousse, Awledna, with its existing database on beneficiaries, took on a key role in coordinating needs assessments and aid distribution. This approach yielded relationships of trust between Sousse municipality and migrant communities, as well as stronger networks and a distribution of labour between CSOs. In August 2022, human rights organisation Terre d'Asile opened an office inside the Erriadh neighbourhood, testimony to the support of local administrators. By February 2023, Terre d'Asile was receiving around sixty vulnerable migrants a month, working closely with migrant-led organisations and providing legal (as well as other forms of) assistance.

Besides the municipality's progressive approach, another contributing factor to ensuring support for migrants and refugees is the underfunded, but lively and diverse local NGO scene: small civil society and national and international organisations frequently refer beneficiaries to each other, and local organisations even exchange volunteers. Several ethnic student-led associations provide peer support, and are important community partners for local and international development organisations, although their access to funding is often hampered by their lack of legal registration status.

Against the backdrop of high levels of unemployment and precarity in the wider population, Sousse municipality has since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic focused on social inclusion through activities in marginalised neighbourhoods for youth, poor Tunisians, and migrants alike. This includes the revitalisation of public spaces, for example football fields for girls. Another planned project, in cooperation with Awledna, foresees the development of an interactive app

28 Section 3a was completed through key stakeholder interviews with members of Awledna, the head of the local Terre d'Asile office, the directors of two migrant-led organisations, and the head of the local Union des Français de l'Etranger chapter (February 2023), and two local policy-makers in charge of migration affairs: a local administrator and the former vice mayor of Sousse (October 2023).

29 MMC & UNHCR (2022) [Going to town: A mapping of city-to-city and urban initiatives focusing on the protection of people on the move along the Central and Western Mediterranean Routes](#)

30 ICMPD, UCLG & UN-Habitat (2020), Op. cit.

31 In Greater Tunis, similar assistance programs for migrants were set up by Ariana, Raoued and La Marsa municipalities during the pandemic, cf. MMC 2020, Op. cit.

for new arrivals, involving migrants as programmers. To facilitate migrant entrepreneurship, the municipality is also exploring opportunities for a “solidarity economy” to bring together Syrian refugees with Tunisian business partners.

Despite the progress that Sousse has made to assist migrants and refugees, the municipality’s work remains severely limited by the lack of a dedicated budget. For now, it can only work through its partner organisations. The real estate crisis in Sousse poses another challenge: rents are skyrocketing, even though many houses remain empty. In addition, there is very limited social housing in Tunisia, and it falls outside the municipality’s remit. The absence of national-level legal frameworks for regularising foreigners’ stay and employment means that the municipality cannot address the root causes of precarious livelihoods of many migrants and refugees: legal insecurity and informal labour.

## B. Economic and sociocultural factors motivate migration to Sousse

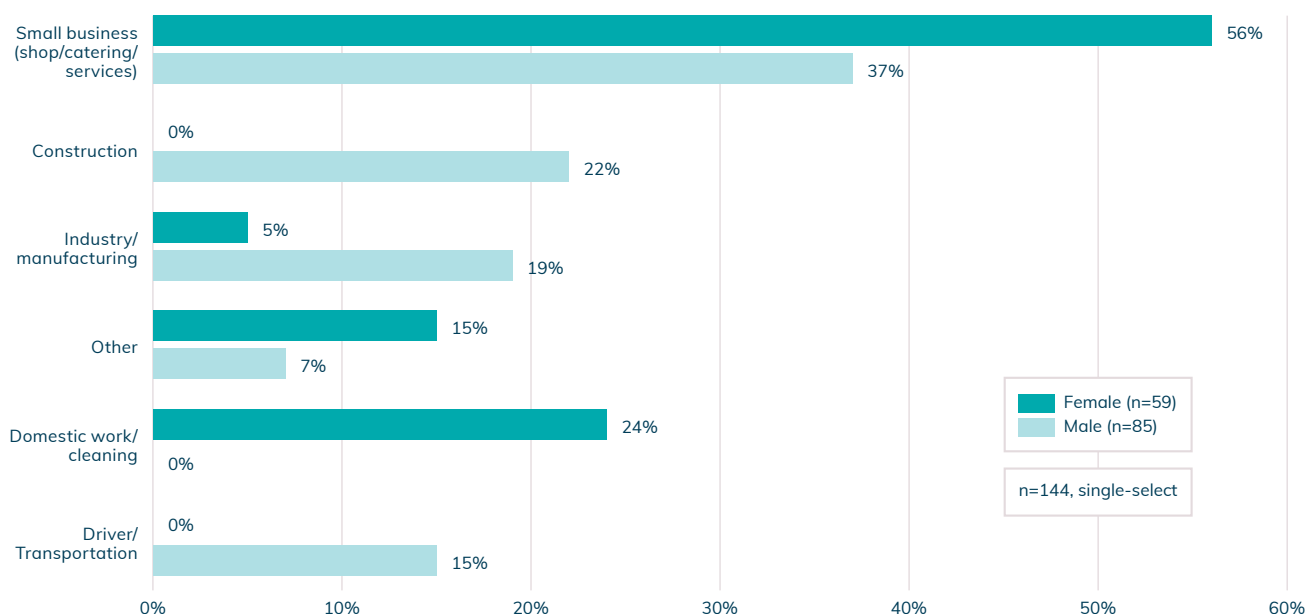
The qualitative data suggest that in addition to smaller numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers, Sousse is home to two different migrant profiles, each with their unique survival strategies, motivations, and vulnerabilities: younger university students, who arrived in Tunisia by plane, and older workers, many of whom travelled irregularly across land borders. Prior to migration, 4Mi respondents tended to have insecure livelihoods, with casual jobs, and dependency on family support especially for younger travellers. While access to economic opportunities and access to rights and freedom inspired many migrants’ and refugees’ decision to go abroad, sociocultural factors play the most significant role in shaping previous migration decisions.

### Insecure pre-migration livelihoods

In the year before their departure, a larger proportion of 4Mi respondents aged 29 and older reported making money before they left (89%), compared to younger respondents (55%). Only 58% of migrants and refugees who later travelled by air, previously had an income (vs. 88% of those who travelled overland). This can be explained by the fact that many of those travelling by plane are students, as suggested by their slightly younger age, and the fact that for 78% of them, their families initially financed their trip.

Before their departure, although 72% of all respondents were making money, only 17% had a steady income. Among those working, both women and men mostly held employment in small businesses; women also had jobs as cleaners, while men worked in construction, manufacturing, and as drivers (Figure 2). Among those who did not have an income prior to their migration, 75% reported being students.

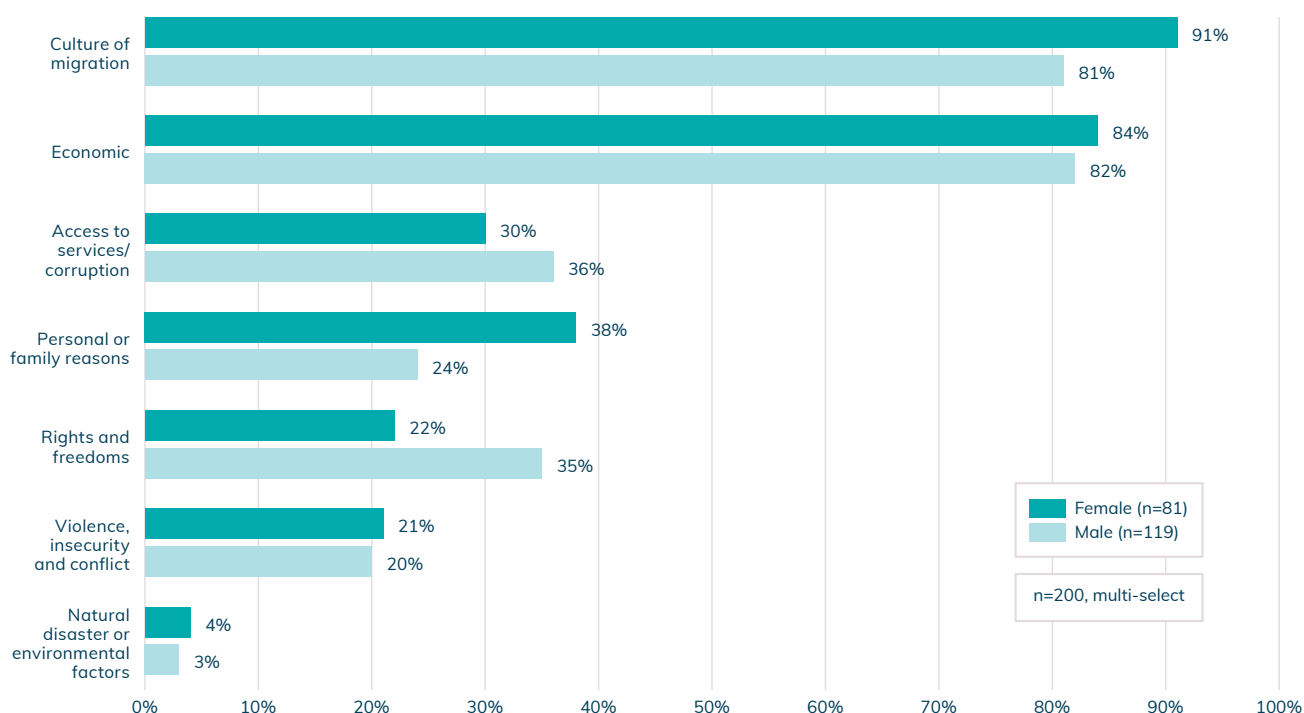
**Figure 2. Sectors in which migrants and refugees worked prior to their departure**



## Sociocultural and economic factors are main drivers of migration

Among 4Mi respondents in Sousse, “culture of migration” and economic considerations were by far the most commonly cited reasons for migration. Eighty-three percent of surveyed migrants and refugees reported economic considerations (83%) (Figure 3). Among those who did not travel by air to reach Tunisia (and were thus, presumably, migrant workers who entered Tunisia irregularly), economic reasons were even more common (96%). Among all interviewed, the most frequently cited driver of migration, however, was “culture of migration” (85%), especially amongst women (91%). By comparison, previous MMC reports surveying migrants and refugees across Tunisia indicated that most of those respondents had moved for a combination of economic opportunities and to access rights and freedoms.<sup>32</sup> In surveys collected with respondents in Tunis, Sfax, and Médenine in 2020/1, these were the most frequently indicated reasons, selected by more than 54% and 45% of participants respectively. “Culture of migration,” however, was an option chosen by merely 14% of respondents in the 2020/1 4Mi data for all of Tunisia.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 3. Reasons to leave the departure country, disaggregated by gender**



In the 4Mi sample from Sousse, the prevalence of “culture of migration” may be explained by the high number of students who may consider migration for university a rite of passage – in qualitative interviews, some described it as the quintessential “study abroad” experience. Even among respondents who are not students, the overall 4Mi sample is quite young with a maximum age of 46, which also likely correlates with a desire to undertake migration for life opportunities and enrichment, as was also confirmed through qualitative interviews. While “migration culture” is often associated with the endeavours of young single men, there are also obligations and strategies specific to women (see text box 3).

<sup>32</sup> The relatively lower prevalence (30%) of ‘rights and freedoms’ as a driver of migration for the Sousse respondents may partly be due to the low number of asylum-seekers and refugees in this sample (only 3%).

<sup>33</sup> MMC (2021) Op. cit.



The 2023 qualitative interviews conducted in Sousse shed further light on the importance of “culture of migration:” men and women participants from West Africa used expressions such as “aller à l’aventure” (go off in search of adventure) and “se chercher” (to find oneself) to capture the existential dimension of the migration journey. In recent years, the concept of “migration culture” has drawn attention to how migration becomes normalised, and even an intergenerational pattern, in certain societies.<sup>34</sup> Not only do livelihood opportunities and social networks motivate and facilitate mobility, but shared values and attitudes, desires, practices etc. also underpin individuals’ and their families’ movement decisions. Most respondents (88%) stated that they were influenced by somebody or something to go abroad, including 91% of women, which speaks to the influence of social networks for migratory decision-making.

### **Text box 3. Migration culture and societal expectations for female carers – Marie’s story**

The example of Marie, a 35-year-old woman from Cameroon, illustrates the societal expectations that push many women to engage in risky migration. Marie first worked in Dubai for two years as a cleaning lady and carer for an autistic child, but returned to her home country when she herself became a mother for the first time. Next, she planned to move to Belgium to support her ailing parents, but was scammed by a visa agent. A friend of her older sister then told her about job opportunities in Tunisia, a country she had never heard about. Still hoping to financially support her parents, she decided to try her luck in Tunisia and keep Dubai as a fallback option, as her residency permit in the United Arab Emirates had not yet expired. In the end, her family paid a visa agent to arrange Marie’s trip to Tunisia, with an option to continue to Cyprus later. When she suggested that she could use the travel money to open a business in Cameroon instead, her mother told her that she should leave, but would be allowed to return home anytime.

In March 2018, Marie arrived at Tunis airport, from where she was picked up by the younger brother of her visa agent and taken to a shared apartment in Erriadh, Sousse. Another Cameroonian woman told her that “she had arrived in hell,” and she quickly realised that she had fallen victim to human trafficking. When she complained to her visa agent, she was evicted and found herself in the street, and her mother had to send her money so she could rent a room. Five years later, Marie is still in Sousse, living with her Cameroonian husband, whom she met in Tunisia, and their three young children. While Marie sends remittances to her oldest child in Cameroon, the lack of a residency permit means that she is unable to visit her home country, a situation that puts an emotional toll on her. In Sousse, she runs a support organisation for migrant women in vulnerable situations, applying for funding to open a creche for migrant children. Having become a well-known actor on Sousse’s NGO scene, she also coaches new arrivals on how to apply for asylum once they make it to Europe.

34 For an overview of the concept, see Kumpikaitė -Valiūnienė, V., Liubinienė, V., Žičkutė, I., Duobienė, J., Mockaitis, A. & Mihi-Ramirez, A. (2021) Migration Culture. A Comparative Perspective, Springer.

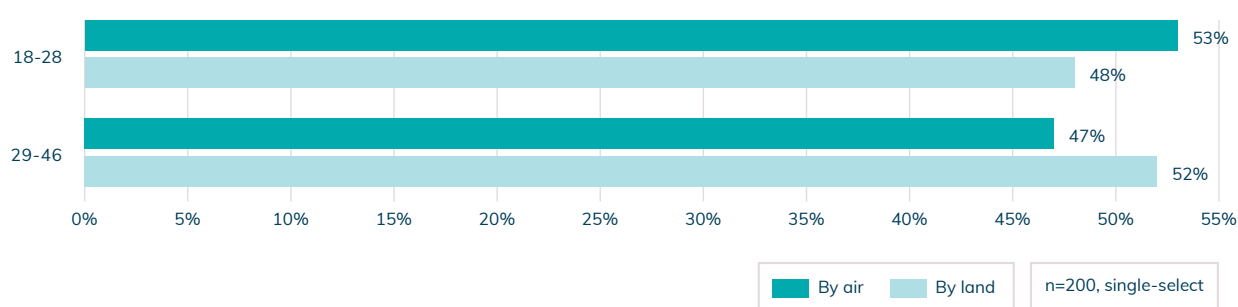
## C. Dangerous journeys and risks at arrival

According to 4Mi data collected in 2023 in Sousse, more than half of migrants and refugees in Sousse arrived by plane. While those travelling overland to reach Tunisia face well documented dangers,<sup>35</sup> those entering Tunisia through regular channels and by plane are also at risk of falling into irregularity, and are vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking. Together, the qualitative and quantitative data suggest that many migrants and refugees may have arrived in Sousse with debts to smugglers, traffickers, and family, that they then had to work off before planning the next part of their journey.

### More than half of travellers arrive by air

Slightly more than half of all respondents travelled by plane (53%), with slightly higher proportions among younger respondents and women. The fact that younger people were more often reported arriving by air reflects the presence of a huge student population in Sousse, able to enter Tunisia regularly, and often with the help of scholarships and family support that allow them to afford plane travel (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Means of transportation, disaggregated by age group**



Roughly half of all travellers had an extremely short journey, and another half had a much longer trip. For university students arriving by plane, the voyage to Sousse usually took less than a day. By comparison, a displaced family of four from Mali spent four years on the road travelling from Mali to Tunisia, with stop-overs of various lengths in Algeria. This finding is again indicative of two main routes to Tunisia – by air and over land – each with contrasting durations, means of travel, smuggling/financing dynamics, and protection risks.

### Prospective migrants lack reliable information on work opportunities and risky overland journeys

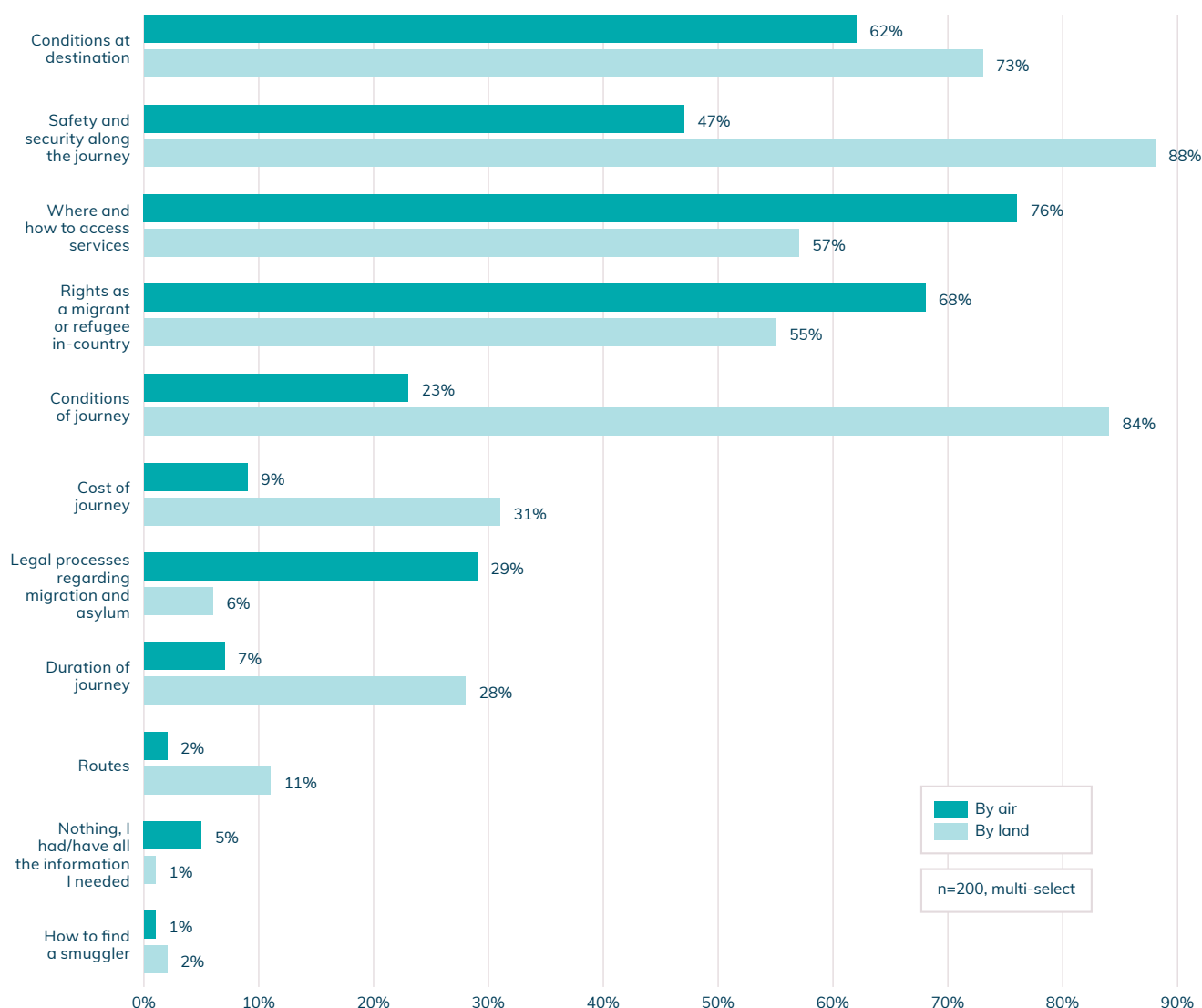
In the 4Mi sample, 92% of respondents said that they had obtained information before setting off, mostly from friends and family abroad (92%), online communities (49%), and smugglers (47%). Indeed, at times accessing information through personal networks can be a lifesaver: for instance, one qualitative interviewee had to flee his home country in a hurry because of homophobic assaults. A sympathetic friend chose his destination, paid for his plane ticket, and put him in touch with a co-national in Tunis who helped him settle in. While 91% of 4Mi respondents obtained further information during their journey, their sources of information became more diverse. Friends and family abroad (76%), smugglers (45%), and online networks (24%) remained important sources of information, but travellers also turned to the wider diaspora (21%), friends and family in their home country (20%), and fellow migrants (19%). Eighty five percent of respondents relied on social media and messaging apps as a means of obtaining information while on the move.

Asked about information that they would have found useful, but did not have at the time of travel, respondents' answers reveal differences with regard to means of travel. Plane travellers generally wanted more reliable information about the situation at their destination. The qualitative data suggest that several interviewees had been brought to Tunisia by plane to take up jobs, often with false student enrolment papers, but on arrival realised that working conditions and pay were different from what they had been promised by friends and labour brokers at home (see text box 4). By contrast, 88% of those who had travelled overland (but only 47% of plane travellers) said that they would have required more information on safety and security, overall conditions, costs, and duration of the journey (Figure 5). Such answers emphasise the harsh conditions, greater uncertainty, and added vulnerabilities of migrants and refugees irregularly crossing land borders on their way to the Mediterranean.<sup>36</sup>

35 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](#)

36 MMC (2023) [Mixed Migration Review 2023](#)

**Figure 5. Information that migrants and refugees would have found useful but did not have during their journey**



#### Text box 4. Hidden forms of human trafficking – Antoinette’s story

Antoinette, a 25-year old woman from Ivory Coast, came to Tunisia in 2018 when her brother-in-law arranged for her to work as a live-in housekeeper for a Tunisian woman in Sfax: “All I knew was that I had to go to Tunisia. They told us in Tunisia there would be a lot of money and jobs.” She travelled by plane, received a 90-day visa upon arrival, and was even equipped with (false) university enrolment papers. At Tunis airport, a contact put Antoinette on a minibus, and she arrived at her employer’s address after dark, only later learning her exact location. After two months, she decided to leave, as her employer had abused her verbally and by withholding food and starving her. Antoinette’s employer insisted that she reimburse her for her plane ticket, worth 3,000 TND (around 1,018 Euro). As Antoinette had already worked for around 2,000 TND, she then spent another three months in Tunis gathering the remaining money to pay off her “debt”. After leaving her abusive employer, Antoinette spent time in Zarzis and Sousse. During this time, she met her boyfriend, also a migrant in a situation of irregularity, and became pregnant. She went into labour on a boat en route to Italy, and Tunisian fishermen took her back to the shore. Antoinette’s journey started like that of many international students - with a plane ticket and regular border-crossing – but resulted in a situation of human trafficking, subsequent irregularity, and in her considering risky onward movement via boat to Europe. Back in Sousse, Antoinette now lives with her child and receives some support from her boyfriend. Being a de facto single mother makes it impossible for her to work as a live-in maid, and thus makes it harder for her to raise the funds for another sea crossing.

## Dangers are common

In a similar vein, respondents who reported that there were dangerous locations on their journey (n=157), named physical violence (78%), robbery (62%), non-physical violence (e.g., harassment, 50%), and injury and ill-health from harsh conditions (45%).<sup>37</sup> Except for non-physical violence, all types of incidents were reported more often by respondents who did not travel by air. Women more than twice as frequently reported having experienced sexual violence (23% (15/64) of women vs. 9% (8/93) of men), while men almost twice as often reported injury or ill-health from harsh conditions as compared to women (53% (49/93) of men vs. 33% (21/64) of women). This suggests that even though men and women take the same routes, they may have different protection needs.

With hindsight, 53% of respondents said that they would not have started the journey knowing what they know now, with a larger proportion of women stating this (58% vs. 50% of men). The largest difference, however, is between respondents who travelled by air (61% would migrate again) and those who did not travel by air (25% would migrate again), likely related to the increased precarity and protection risks associated with irregular movements. What is more, 64% of overall respondents said they were unlikely or very unlikely to encourage other prospective migrants to undertake the trip.

## Migrants finance their journey through family support, savings, and (risky) labour

Most respondents had their family pay for them and/or used their own funds to finance their journey. A larger proportion of older respondents used their own funds (79%) compared to younger respondents (42%), highlighting younger travellers' financial dependency on their families. In the case of respondents aged 28 years and younger, 72% reported that their families paid for their trip. Still, for 43% of respondents (n=85) in this age bracket, these funds were not sufficient to pay for their journey and they had to resort to work (71/85), requesting additional financial support from friends and family back home (42/85), borrowing money from other migrants (22/85), and even begging (15/85) along the way.

What is more, 12% of women who worked to pay for their journey engaged in sex work. Some of the men who took part in the qualitative interviews also engaged in sex work, but social stigma may make men less inclined to volunteer this information in 4Mi interviews. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when menial work opportunities for migrants were scarce, some LGBTQ+ men survived through occasional sex work. This affected their living situation: while Sub-Saharan African migrants and refugees in Sousse tend to live in shared flats, men working in sex work and receiving customers were said to more often choose single-occupancy studios with separate entrances. Living alone and without the protection of social networks was reported as a factor of vulnerability for sex workers. One of the men interviewed for this study in this situation had recently been burgled and his savings, laptop, and TV had been stolen. As he did not have an official rental contract, the police did not register his complaint.

## D. Legal insecurity and informal labour curtail migrant livelihoods in Sousse

Saving money to continue their journey has motivated most 4Mi respondents to come to Sousse. But regardless of their mode of arrival, barriers to accessing the formal economy are high, and most migrants end up working in the informal sectors to support themselves and raise funds to continue their migration journeys. Situations of irregularity and informality place migrant workers at risk of badly paid and exploitative labour, trafficking, and deskilling.

In the 4Mi sample, nearly all respondents (99%) indicated that they had not reached the end of their journey, with no differences between age groups and genders. These figures are even higher than 4Mi numbers for Tunisia overall (90% since 2019),<sup>38</sup> further underlining Sousse's position as a transit location for migrants and refugees en route to Europe. Of those who provided reasons for stopping in Tunis (n=154), 73% said that they were working in Sousse to earn money for the next stretch of their journey, and 36% explained that they were looking for a smuggler to organise their onward trip (Figure 6). As one of the enumerators, a Cameroonian woman, succinctly put it: "Those who stay don't have the guts to do it [i.e., cross the Mediterranean], or because they have already tried and failed." However, legal insecurity and lack of access to the formal labour market curtail refugees' and migrants' livelihoods in Sousse, making it harder for them to save up for their onward movements (text box 5).

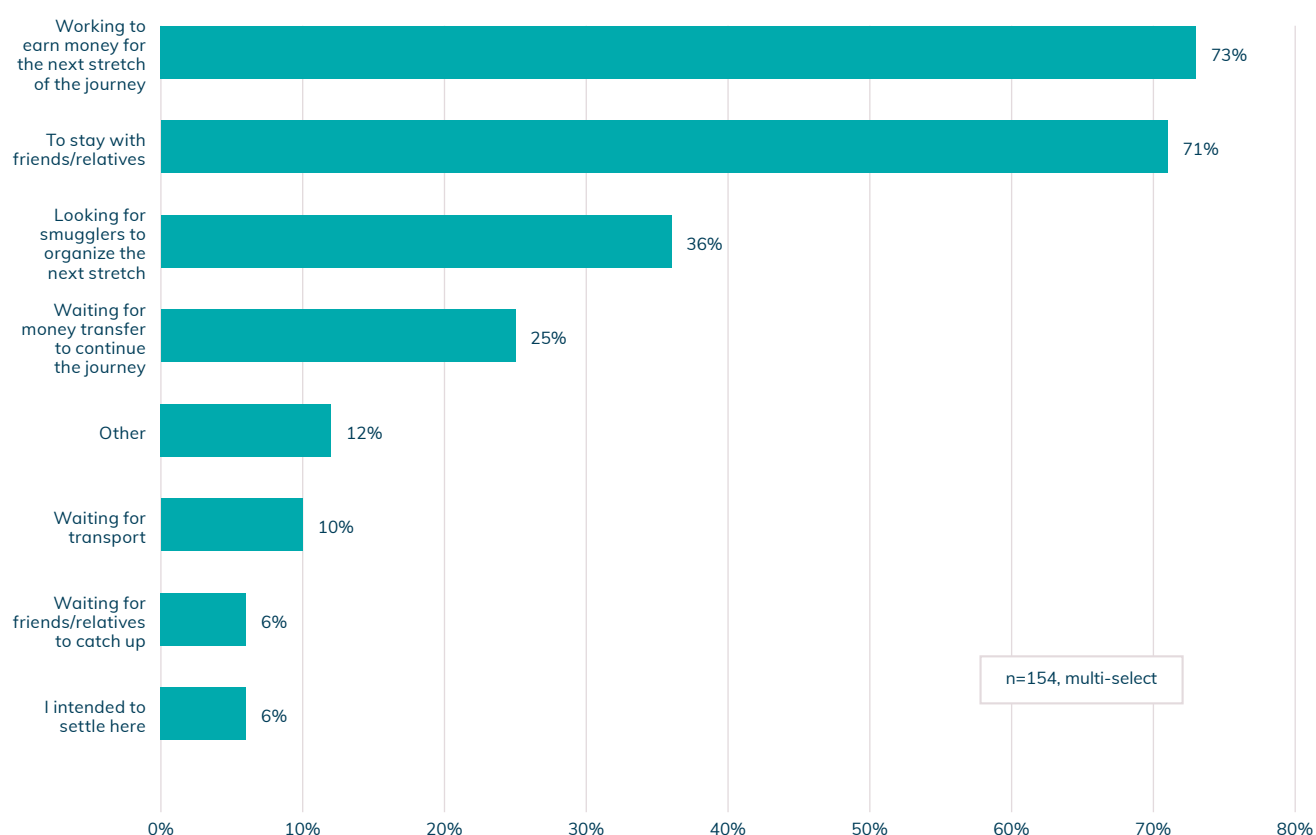
<sup>37</sup> Due to the small sample size, this item could not be disaggregated by age group, gender, or location.

<sup>38</sup> [4Mi data – Mixed Migration Centre](#), consulted in October 2023.

### Text box 5. Sousse as a dead-end for people on the move? – Maurice’s story

Maurice, a 20-year-old migrant from Guinea, has never owned a passport in his life. In 2020, he travelled overland to Algeria, where he worked and received remittances from his family to continue his journey. After four months, he paid smugglers to take him across the Tunisian border in a jeep in a group of thirty people. After four months in Sfax and Tunis, he arrived in Sousse in 2022, and now survives through menial labour, such as carrying garbage bags to a dump. However, he only finds work two to four days a week, earning 30-40 TND per day. An aunt who lives in Paris previously sent him money to help him come to Tunisia. Convincing her to support him again is his only hope to continue his journey, as his meagre earnings do not allow him to make any savings for the next leg of his migratory project, the boat trip to Italy. “When you find work, you eat,” he put it. For now, his migration has stalled.

**Figure 6. Reasons to stop in Sousse<sup>39</sup>**



<sup>39</sup> Reasons to stop in Sousse that were cited by less than 2% of respondents include poor health, a stop by smugglers to recruit clients, applying for asylum, immigration controls, detention, and being abandoned by smugglers.

## Most migrants and refugees lack residency permits and access to the formal labour market

Both migrants and refugees who arrive to Tunisia irregularly, as well as many who arrive by plane and on temporary visas, face significant barriers, or are excluded, from accessing the formal labour market. Tunisian employment law discourages work for foreigners through parallel, lengthy, and complicated bureaucratic procedures. In particular, the relationship between residency permits (“cartes de séjour”) and work visas is a double-bind: they are issued by different authorities but are related to one another. Residency permits can be obtained from the General Directorate of National Security, situated within the Ministry of Interior. To get a one-year residency permit stamped “Authorised to take up salaried employment in Tunisia,” applicants need to provide signed work contracts, proof of residency, and an authorisation to work. These residency permits can be renewed on an annual basis each time applicants to sign their work contracts again.<sup>40</sup>

Confusingly, residency permits are also a pre-condition to applying for an authorisation to work, issued by the Department for Professional Training and Employment within the Ministry of Youth upon presentation of a signed contract with a Tunisian employer (see Law n° 68-7, 1968). In addition, the 1966 Tunisian Labour Code (Articles 258 to 269) specifies that the relevant authority within the Ministry of Youth reviews work contracts, applying the principle of “national preference”: foreigners can only be hired if there are no Tunisian applicants with equivalent qualifications. This is hardly feasible, especially for low-skilled migrant workers. The authorisation to work then allows migrants to apply for a residency permit stating their right to work – the only way to get access to the formal labour market. There are exceptions for foreign entrepreneurs and investors, as well as certain nationalities, e.g., Moroccans and French, who can bypass the authorisation to work procedure. As a matter of principle, foreigners cannot find employment in Tunisian public service.<sup>41</sup>

In practice, this means that different types of migrants in Sousse – as elsewhere in Tunisia – struggle to access the formal labour market. In summing up reasons why “migrants don’t see their future in Sousse,” the president of a migrant-led organisation emphasised the difficulties foreigners face in planning for their future and the future of their families due to the legal obstacles to regularising their residency and employment. Residency permits are currently only available to foreign university students, but not to graduates or other migrant workers. But even students are not allowed to access formal sector jobs, as their residency permits do not include the right to work. After graduation, there is no legal pathway towards the formal economy. In the informal sector, wages are too low to allow them to make savings or start their own businesses, which would allow students in particular to make good use of their diplomas.<sup>42</sup> As for non-student migrants, most fall into irregularity after their three-month tourist residency permit expires, accruing fines of 20 Tunisian Dinars for each week that they are overstaying their visa. Conversely, the lack of a residency permits makes it impossible for them to apply for an authorization to work. Migrants in debt can only leave Tunisia if they apply for refugee status with the UNHCR or the IOM’s voluntary return programme.<sup>43</sup>

In the 4Mi sample, 71% of respondents held no regular residency status in Tunisia, with comparable numbers between men and women, and higher proportions amongst older people (83%) compared to youth (60%). Only 4% were permanent residents. In line with a large student population, the proportion of younger people who are temporary residents (35%) was higher than that of older respondents (11%) (Figure 7). What is more, 31% in the older group reported that their visa had expired, compared to only 17% in the youth group, which might suggest that many older migrants are former students struggling to regularise their stay after graduation.

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40 Nasraoui, M. (2017) [Les travailleurs migrants subsahariens en Tunisie face aux restrictions législatives sur l’emploi des étrangers](#), Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales.

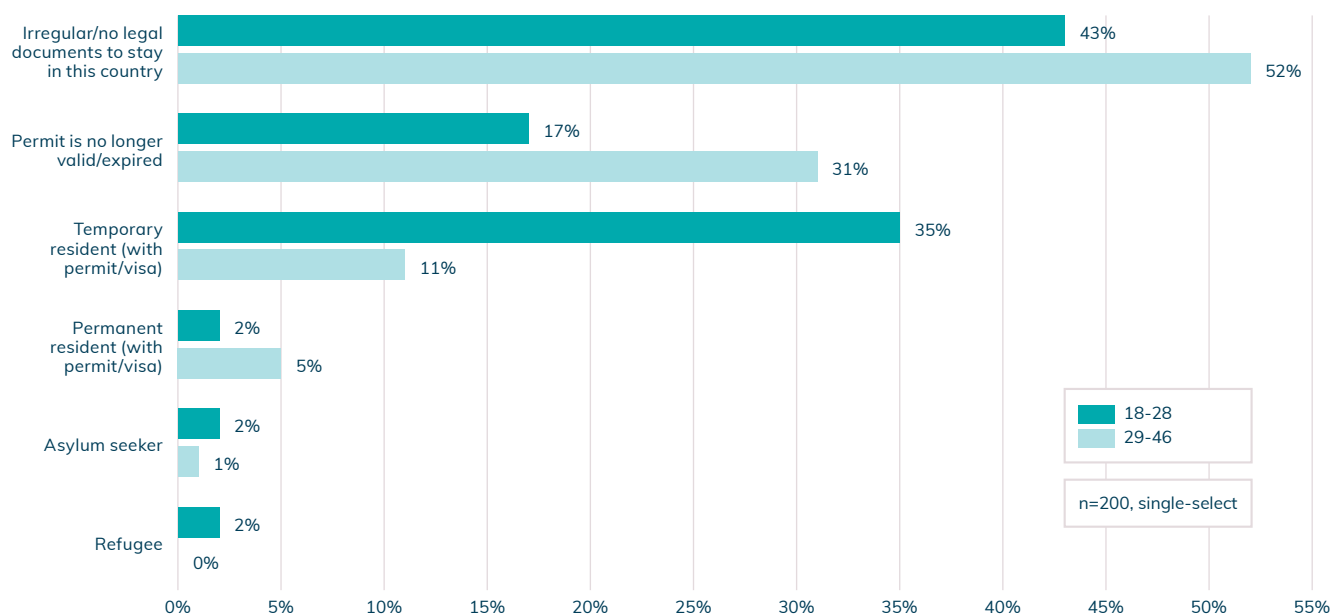
41 Ibid.

42 Key stakeholder interview, head of Association Solidarité Echange et Développement de la Jeunesse (ASEDEJ), February 2023.

43 Nasraoui, M. (2017) Op. cit.

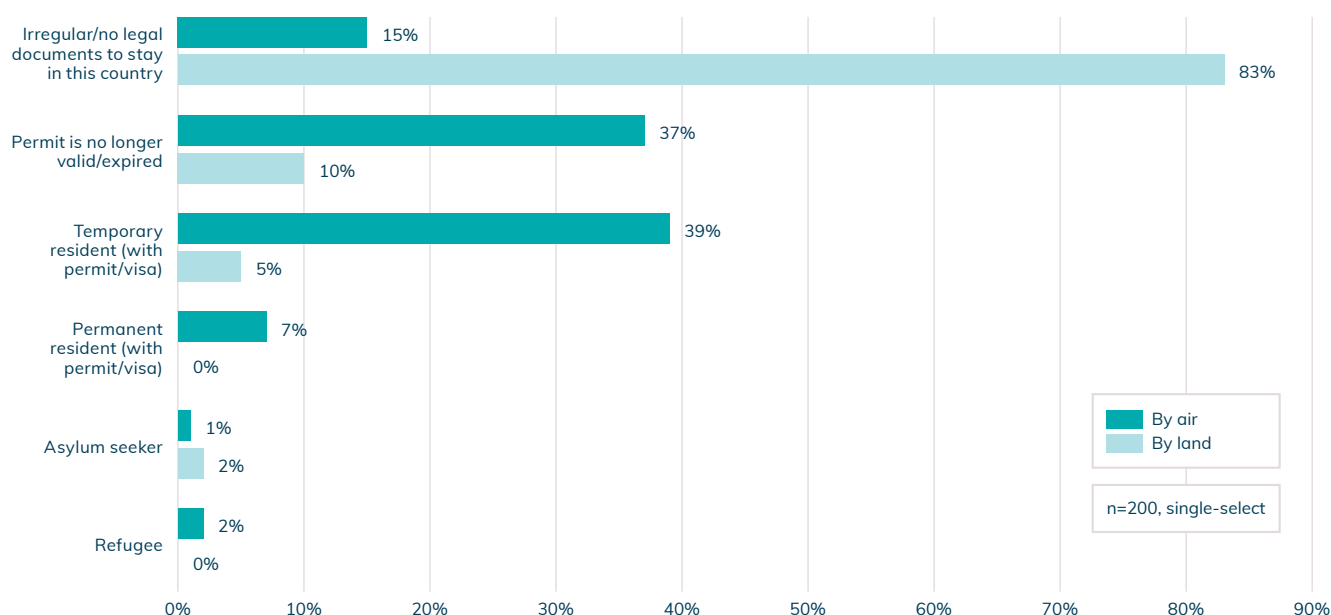


**Figure 7. Legal status, disaggregated by age group**



Disaggregated by means of transport, the 4Mi data on legal status paint a clear picture: while 46% of those who travelled by air hold a temporary or permanent residency permit, only 5% of those who entered Tunisia overland are temporary residents (Figure 8). This stark contrast reflects the split between university students travelling by plane - currently the only population with a clear route towards obtaining a residency permit - and irregular migrants arriving overland from Libya and Algeria. The 4Mi survey also reveals additional gendered vulnerabilities: more women reported an irregular status compared to men (78% vs. 66%), possibly because men in the sample more often indicated they were students than did women respondents.

**Figure 8. Legal status, disaggregated by means of transport**



Legal insecurity compounds precarious livelihoods for asylum-seekers and refugees in Sousse: while most struggle to be recognised as refugees, even official refugee status does not translate into residency permits or access to the formal labour market. Asylum-seekers and refugees are tolerated on Tunisian territory but registration with the UNHCR does not confer on them a residency permit. In the absence of national asylum legislation, refugee labour is neither legal nor illegal. Technically, asylum-seekers and refugees should thus be treated like other migrant workers, but in practice, refugees do not have to provide an authorisation to work. For asylum-seekers, the legal situation is even more unclear. This uncertainty has grave consequences for displaced people's right to stay and work in Tunisia.<sup>44</sup>

Even though one of the Syrian refugees who participated in a qualitative interview had spent eight years in Sousse, she had only ever been registered as an “asylum-seeker,” not as an approved “refugee,” with UNHCR. As a previous MMC report shows, displaced Syrians in Tunisia are often treated as “de facto” refugees and considered already integrated by Tunisian authorities, but not given official refugee status.<sup>45</sup> Even registered refugees may face legal troubles: a family of four from Mali that we interviewed obtained UNHCR asylum-seeker cards but were refused residency permits, even though UNHCR gave them a document to take to the police to regularise their stay. However, their request was rejected repeatedly because they had entered Tunisia irregularly overland, and thus had no entry stamps in their passports. There is no UNHCR representation in Sousse, and the nearest office is in Tunis, several hours away. Especially older asylum-seekers and women struggle to renew their documentation on an annual basis, and often let their status lapse.

### **Despite diverse legal statuses, challenges exist for all**

The varying experiences that came to light in the course of the qualitative interviews, even though anecdotal, hint at the existence of a legally stratified migrant and refugee population, with different forms of status and contradictory experiences with Tunisian authorities. Even privileged French and other European migrants, including retirees and entrepreneurs, struggle with renewing their residency permits. However, in practice, they are not at risk of deportation and arrest, and are often treated more leniently by the police and custom officers. Yet, different groups of migrants and refugees face similar problems: curtailed freedom of travel, and lack of access to the formal labour market, healthcare, and rental contracts. Of particular relevance to Sousse is that even foreign university students, theoretically with a clear pathway towards residency, risk becoming irregular during their studies. Conversely, obtaining false university enrolment papers is a strategy for non-students to regularise their stay. In light of the challenges for asylum-seekers and refugees elaborated above, some displaced people simultaneously resort to different legal pathways (see text box 6).

#### **Text box 6. Refugees exploring parallel legal pathways – Louis’ story**

Louis, a 35-year-old businessman from Ivory Coast, arrived in 2018 on a 90-day visa because a contact had promised him a job in finance. The job never materialised, but, having sold off his assets in his home country, Louis was forced to stay, and take on menial labour in a chicken hatchery and as a gardener. Having overstayed his visa, he began to accumulate penalties, which he managed to have removed with the help of an NGO in 2023. He then applied for a residency permit, using a fake registration at a local university. At the time of the interview in February 2023, he had received a provisional three-month document and was waiting for a one-year permit. Independently, in 2021, he also registered with the UNHCR, but while he quickly received refugee status, this did not cancel his fee for overstaying his visa. While the UNHCR refugee card gave him access to public services, and could be presented to the police during document controls, Louis still sought a residency permit, as he was hoping to return to Ivory Coast temporarily to visit his parents.

### **Exclusion from the formal labour market pushes highly qualified migrants and refugees towards entrepreneurship**

Not surprisingly for a university town like Sousse, the majority of the 4Mi sample are highly qualified: 48% had secondary or high school level education, 21% held university degrees, and 17% had received vocational training, with no big differences between the two age groups. Men slightly more often reported having a university degree than women (24% vs. 16%) and having received vocational training (19% vs. 15%). Those who arrived by plane much more often held a university degree (30% vs. 10% of overland travellers), while those who crossed borders overland more often reported having only a primary school education (11% vs. 4% of plane travellers) or secondary school-level education (59% vs. 38% of plane travellers).

However, work opportunities in the informal economy in Sousse often do not match foreigners' generally high level of

<sup>44</sup> Terre d'Asile Tunisie (2020) Op. Cit.

<sup>45</sup> Zuntz, A. et al. (2022) [Destination North Africa - Syrians' displacement trajectories to Tunisia](#), MMC.

qualifications. The qualitative interviews indicate that in the absence of the legal right to work, migrants and refugees find jobs in the informal sector, changing employers frequently, and often experiencing abuse at the workplace. A 23-year-old woman on a student visa from Burkina Faso, for example, subsidises her scholarship with mini jobs as a cleaner at hotels. She has never received a written contract and is often paid half of what she was initially promised. Hotel guests also insult and accuse her of stealing, and even refuse to be served by her. While some CSOs offer vocational training for migrants and refugees, teaching them to work in hair salons and bakeries, these fail to address participants' lack of legal work rights, and thus do not lead to jobs, or provide the necessary start-up capital to set up small businesses.

Despite these obstacles, many migrants and refugees have innovative business ideas, carving out their own niche in order to put their skills to use. Former students use their diplomas, while making the best of existing training and funding opportunities through NGOs to become micro-entrepreneurs (text box 7). Several people interviewed for this study have plans for transnational trade, factoring their mobile lifestyles and migration aspirations into future business projects. Ivorian men often worked in chicken hatcheries around Sousse, and were saving money in Tunisia to open similar facilities in their home country. A 57-year-old French tailor, who had lived in Sousse with her husband since the mid-2000s, had opened a workshop for making hand-embroidered dresses. She was producing more cheaply in Tunisia but selling her designs in high-end boutiques in France, while providing training to local seamstresses. Other migrants from West and Central Africa were hoping to import African textiles to Tunisia, and vice versa.

### **Text box 7. Migrant graduates and innovative entrepreneurship – Adrienne's story**

Adrienne Penda, from Cameroon, is featured in the short documentary that was produced for this study. She arrived in Sousse in 2015 and completed a three-year course as a fashion designer. After graduation, she took on menial jobs in the hospitality industry and in textile factories; during this time, she also gave birth to her daughter. As a cleaning lady for a French-Tunisian couple, she earned enough to buy two sewing machines and other equipment. In 2021, she started producing her own clothes, now with the support of a micro-grant from the Association Solidarité Echange et Développement de la Jeunesse (ASEDEJ). She also completed training with Terre d'Asile on entrepreneurship. Her designs fuse African and Tunisian fashion, and they sell well on social media and at UNHCR fairs. Adrienne receives financial support from her boyfriend and her boyfriend's family. Being a mother means that she has to organise her business around her daughter's childcare needs.

## **E. Need for assistance is universal, but differs depending on means of entry and gender**

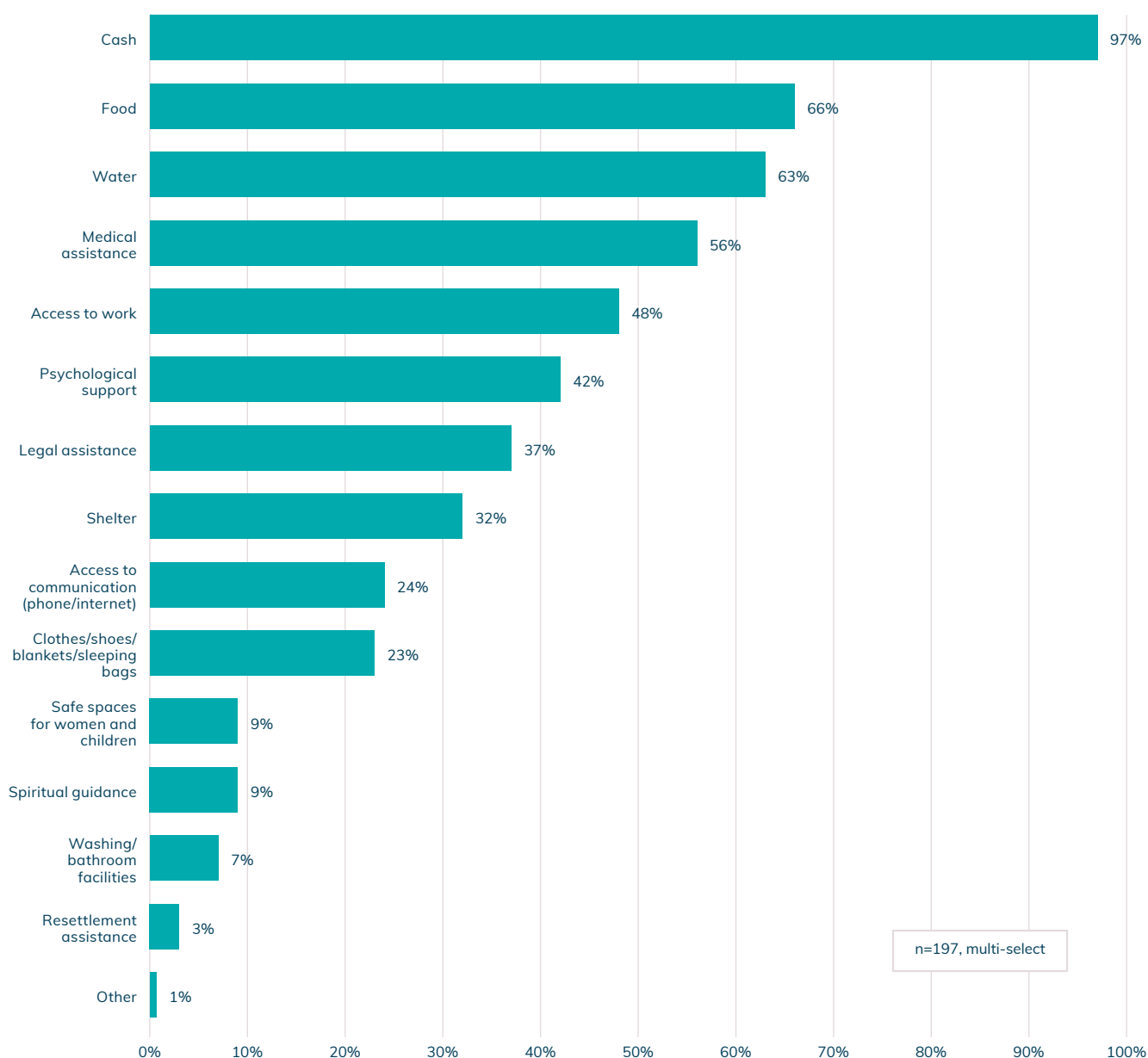
In Sousse, migrants' and refugees' needs for assistance are almost universal, especially for cash. In the 4Mi sample, nearly all respondents (99%) indicated that they required assistance at the time of interview, with no differences between age groups, genders, or means of travel to Tunisia. This is higher than the 90% of 4Mi respondents interviewed across Tunisia in 2020/1.<sup>46</sup>

### **Exacerbated assistance needs after mass migration from Sfax in summer 2023**

The higher need reported among 4Mi respondents in 2023 in Sousse, as compared to 4Mi interviews conducted in 2020/21 across the country, may be a result of exacerbated needs resulting from political insecurity and violence towards migrants and refugees in summer 2023. 4Mi enumerators reported that there were substantial numbers of respondents in the sample who had fled violence in Sfax in summer 2023, and later had to start their lives in Sousse from scratch. This was also confirmed in key stakeholder interviews in October 2023 with staff members of Awledna, one of the CSOs supporting newcomers, and a local administrator from Erriadh district in Sousse (see text box 8). New arrivals lack information, financial resources, and personal contacts, including knowledge of support organisations and the local labour market. They are thus in dire need of cash to rent accommodation and pay for basic goods. Indeed, overall and across both genders and age groups, cash was the most frequently cited need, indicated by 97% of 4Mi respondents (Figure 9). Some migrants and refugees may have travelled to Sousse for easier access to employment during the tourist high season, so they can earn money and eventually travel back to Sfax for a maritime departure.

<sup>46</sup> 4Mi data – Mixed Migration Centre, consulted in October 2023.

**Figure 9. Assistance needs in Sousse in summer 2023**



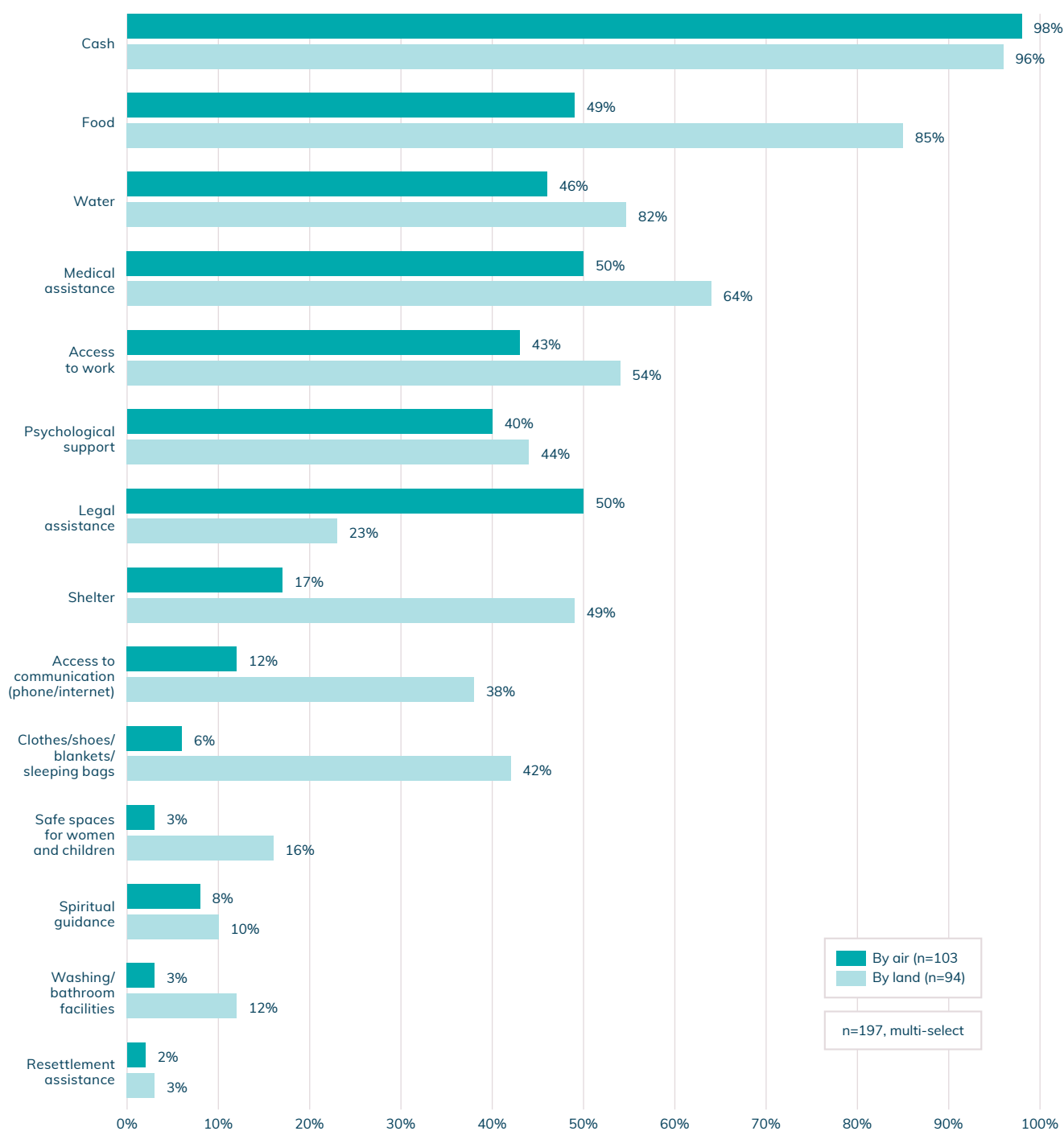
#### **Text box 8. Local organisations' experience with migrants arriving from Sfax in 2023**

The 4Mi enumerators reported that most newcomers from Sfax had settled in Erriadh, one of the neighbourhoods with an already strong foreign presence, and began looking for jobs in restaurants and in private households. In July 2023, police ramped up their document controls of anyone they suspected to be a migrant, constraining migrants' and refugees' ability to access workplaces. By way of illustration, Awledna, much like other CSOs in Tunisia in summer 2023, received an increased volume of requests for support, especially from adolescent migrants arriving from Sfax. Some of these youths were put into emergency accommodation, but with no access to schools or the labour market, the only solution they were offered was the International Organization for Migration's voluntary return programme. All refused, and fled the youth centre after a month. Some new arrivals were in dire need of medical assistance; for example, Awledna supported a mother who had to walk all the way from Sfax with her infant daughter, leaving the girl severely dehydrated.

## Differing assistance needs based on means of entry to Tunisia

There were at times notable differences in assistance needs depending on how a respondent had entered Tunisia. Those who entered the country overland (more likely to be less qualified migrants and in situations of irregularity) and reported assistance needs (n=94) were in greater need of basic livelihoods support, such as food, water, shelter, clothes, phone/ internet. By contrast, those who arrived by plane (more likely to be university students and in regular situations) and reported assistance needs (n=103) expressed a greater wish for legal assistance, presumably with applying for a residency permit (Figure 10).

**Figure 10. Assistance needs in Sousse in summer 2023, disaggregated by means of transport**



## Gendered experiences and assistance needs

For women, children can be an important factor in shaping their livelihoods and assistance needs. In the 4Mi sample, 48% of women, but only 37% of men, had children. While 76% of respondents were not currently travelling or living with children, those in the older age group (34/99 vs. 14/101 in the youth group) and women (30/81 vs. 18/119 of men) more than twice as often reported having children in their care. Among those with children (n=48), most were travelling or living with only one child (39/48). In the qualitative interviews, many women shared their experiences of split families, single motherhood, and difficult pregnancies without access to healthcare (see text boxes 3, 4, and 7).<sup>47</sup>

As came out through the qualitative interviews, access to education for migrant and refugee children is clearly a challenge. By way of illustration, a Malian mother-of-two without a residency permit was told (wrongly) that her children would not be allowed to start primary school in Sousse (even though their Tunisian birth certificates give them the right to enter state schools), and thus plans to take them back to Mali. Without knowledge of Arabic, many children struggle to integrate the public educational system. Through its partnership with a private French-language school in Sousse, Awledna is able to secure scholarships for a small number of Sub-Saharan African children each year. At school, these children also study Tunisian Arabic and make Tunisian friends, an important factor in their social integration. Unfortunately, case-by-case solutions like this are limited by lack of funding. Currently, the scholarships cover tuition fees, but not after school clubs or transport, pushing some of the beneficiaries to leave their children at home.

Old age and being confined to one's home exacerbate gendered vulnerabilities. Older women interviewed for this study, especially widows, are even less likely to find jobs, apply for residency permits or refugee cards, or make Tunisian friends. A Moroccan widow in her fifties, for example, was left destitute with her two teenage sons when her Tunisian husband, the family's sole breadwinner, died. Unable to return to her home country, where she has no family left, she survives on social welfare from the Tunisian state, assistance from sympathetic neighbours, as well as occasional cleaning jobs. Such gendered and ageist struggles reflect the changed migrant population in Sousse, now not only home to foreign university students, but also, increasingly, to families with children.

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<sup>47</sup> In the 4Mi surveys, women answered that sexual violence was prevalent during their journeys, but this is not something we felt comfortable discussing in detail during the qualitative interviews because we did not want to elicit traumatic memories without being able to provide adequate care.



# Conclusions and recommendations

This report presents qualitative and quantitative data on migrants' and refugees' livelihoods and assistance needs in Sousse. In the absence of national migration and asylum strategies, Sousse municipality is taking a progressive approach to migration governance. What began as efforts to coordinate civil society action for migrants and refugees in situations of vulnerability and creating an evidence base during the COVID-19 pandemic has now turned into a longer-term approach to mainstream migration affairs into social inclusion programmes.

Migrants and refugees in Sousse are more than a cheap workforce. The city is home to diverse foreign groups who have entered Tunisia through different channels (primarily by plane and over land) and with different age cohorts, legal statuses, livelihood strategies, and protection needs. On the one hand, Sousse's role as a regional education hub ensures the presence of highly qualified foreign students, mainly from West Africa and other Arab countries, who usually arrive by plane. Through casual work in the tourism industry, students already make an important economic contribution, and have great potential as future (transnational) entrepreneurs.

On the other hand, and in particular following the outbreak of violence in Sfax in summer 2023, growing numbers of migrant workers in irregular situations have relocated to Sousse, escaping growing violence and discrimination and looking to earn money through menial labour in hospitality, construction, and manufacturing often to pay for the sea-crossing to Europe. Many of these individuals first arrived in Tunisia irregularly after crossing its land border with Algeria. This migration route has recently gained in popularity, as an alternative to existing, and ever more dangerous, routes from Libya towards Tunisia's southern border, from where migrants are frequently pushed back by Tunisian border forces into Libya.

With Sousse's heightened role as a transit hub and safe haven, civil society actors supporting newcomers now have to meet urgent livelihood needs (cash, shelter, work). The overwhelming majority of these new arrivals do not intend to stay in Sousse, even though lack of funding may delay their onward movements. They require livelihoods support, especially access to regularised work and social and legal labour protections tailored to transient populations. Refugee and migrant women have unique vulnerabilities and protection needs, especially those who are carers and older, and thus require tailored livelihoods support, including access to education for themselves and their children and affordable childcare.

Besides their economic contribution, foreign students and graduates have carved out a role for themselves as development actors, and sought-after partners for Sousse municipality, CSOs, and UN organisations. Through self-established NGOs, Sub-Saharan Africans in particular provide micro-grants and entrepreneurship training to their own communities.

It remains to be seen how high numbers of boat departures from the Tunisian coast and internal movements from Sfax to Sousse will be affected by the country's controversial agreement with the EU. In summer 2023, authorities demonstrated inconsistent approaches to departures, with coast guards at times burning migrants' boats and at other times turning a blind eye to sea departures. Even in cities considered "safe havens" like Sousse, police increased document controls for migrants and refugees. Moving on, how will the Tunisian government, and authorities on the ground, position themselves?

## Policy recommendations

Previous research already provides suggestions on how to improve Tunisia's migration policies at the national level, and how to include migrants and refugees into national employment strategies.<sup>48</sup> Here, recommendations have been tailored to Sousse's double role as a hub for foreign students – and, potentially, future entrepreneurs – and a safe haven for migrants and refugees working irregularly, many of whom are on their way to Europe. These recommendations were formulated based on our research findings, and in collaboration with the project partners and the help of key stakeholders from Sousse, including from CSOs and the municipality.

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48 MMC (2021) Op. cit.

## National level

- **Provide easier and more inclusive access to residency permits tailored to migrant and refugee groups with different needs:** The 4Mi data show that most migrants and refugees do not hold residency permits and thus cannot apply for an authorisation to work. Qualitative interviews also highlight the difficulties of university students unable to work in the formal sector during their studies, or to convert their residency permits after graduation. The Tunisian government should implement its 2017 national migration strategy. It was revised in 2021, and greater consideration was given to the role of municipalities, but has not been implemented. Improved procedures should factor in the needs of different foreign populations:
  - **University students:** Authorities should clarify procedures for obtaining a residency permit ("carte de séjour") for migrant students. Currently, students can only apply by enrolling in Tunisian universities, which charge different fees to help support migrants in obtaining their residency permits. Authorities should either impose standardised application fees for all universities, or allow students to apply directly. University students should be able to extend their residency permits after graduation and become eligible for an authorisation to work, to allow them to enter the formal labour market and open businesses.
  - **Irregular migrant workers:** Migrants who entered Tunisia irregularly via its land borders or are not university students are not currently eligible for a residency permit or authorisation to work. As many sectors of the Tunisian economy, including in Sousse, depend on these workers (e.g. construction, agriculture, hospitality), they should become eligible for temporary residency permits with the right to work.
- **Transfer of decision-making power to the local level:** Migration governance in Tunisia is currently distributed across different national ministries, with no clear strategy. Decision-making power should be transferred to municipalities that are best placed to collect data and coordinate inclusion efforts. Municipalities could then liaise with regional and national authorities, including regional commissariats and governorates.
- **Enable municipalities to devise and implement data-driven migration policies:** Municipalities should be supported to a) open welcome centres in neighbourhoods with many migrants; b) create a "social observatory", i.e., a hub for data collection and exchange, to analyse migration data and develop data-driven policy responses. This would require developing safeguarding mechanisms to ensure that migrants know and consent to their data being collected, without putting them at risk of arrest and deportation. By allowing Terre d'Asile to open its welcome centre inside the Erriadh district office, Sousse municipality has already taken a first step towards integrating support for migrants and refugees into existing municipal services.

## Municipality level

- **Promote cross-sectoral inclusive development for social cohesion:** Instead of singling out migrants and refugees, municipalities should take a cross-sectoral approach to including vulnerable populations (such as poor Tunisians, youth, women, and migrants and refugees) into economic and social development, for example through the development of inclusive public spaces, e.g., parks, football fields, and pedestrian areas. They should also put a greater focus on issues affecting all these vulnerable populations, for example rising rates of homelessness in Sousse for domestic Tunisian migrants and, since summer 2023, for international migrants arriving from Sfax.
- **Harmonise migration through triangular partnerships and exchange of best practices between cities of origin, transit, and destination, for example within the framework of transnational city networks.** For example, Sousse municipality could build collaborations with cities in Ivory Coast and Italy. This might allow Tunisian municipalities to acquire more financial support, for example through partnerships with cities on the northern shore of the Mediterranean.
- **Focus on local administrators to ensure continuity in efforts related to migration:** Municipalities should increase resources earmarked for expenditure on migration issues that can be provided to local administrators, as the latter are not affected by municipal elections and might thus remain in post for longer. This includes raising awareness of migration issues and inclusive development among this group.

## Civil society organisations

- **Upscale basic livelihoods support to migrants and refugees:** The 4Mi data show an almost universal need for assistance among migrants and refugees, regardless of their legal status. CSOs should prioritise cash assistance, especially to migrants having fled violence elsewhere in Tunisia, and provide information to newcomers on local aid providers, local authorities, and employers.
- **Provide tailored livelihoods support to migrant and refugee women:** Foreign women may require additional training, combined with free childcare, and financial support with childcare costs, so they can take up employment. Given rising rates of homelessness, also among women, CSOs should envision a one-stop centre offering emergency relief and shelter, and more long-term job training and livelihoods skills, to homeless Tunisians, migrant and refugee women.
- **Take the lead on urban migration governance:** In March 2023, the dissolution of elected municipal councils by Tunisian President was a setback for decentralisation and power-sharing, including migration management led by municipalities.<sup>49</sup> To fill the gap, CSOs could take the lead in partnering with municipalities on inclusive socioeconomic development.
- **Capacity-building for local CSOs on migration issues:** In Sousse, there were no CSOs specialising in supporting migrants and refugees before the COVID-19 pandemic. CSOs bring a deep understanding of local realities and needs, as well as trust-based relationships with target populations, but often lack strategic planning skills.
- **Remove linguistic barriers for non-Arabic speaking migrants and refugees:** CSOs should expand their programme of volunteer translators who can assist beneficiaries at police stations, hospitals, and with Tunisian authorities. There is also an urgent need to facilitate integration through Arabic language classes, especially for university students and migrant and refugee children.
- **Realise the economic potential of foreign students:** CSOs should encourage migrant entrepreneurship through micro-grants, business skills training, and pairing up foreign and Tunisian entrepreneurs and investors.

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<sup>49</sup> Reuters (2023) [Tunisian president to dissolve municipal councils months before local elections](#)

# Annex 1. Qualitative data collection

## Key informants interviewed in Sousse

Date of interview	Organisation
03/02/2023	Académie Annour
03/02/2023	Dignity of immigrant women Tunisie
09/02/2023	Association Solidarité Echange et Développement de la Jeunesse (ASEDEJ)
08/02/2023	Terre d'Asile
08/02/2023	Union des Français de l'étranger
13/02/2023	Université Privée de Sousse
08/10/2023	Sousse municipality

## Migrants and refugees interviewed in Sousse

Date of interview	Country of origin	Sex
01/02/2023	Mali	Male and female (couple)
01/02/2023	Cameroon	Female
02/02/2023	Morocco	Female
02/02/2023	Ivory Coast	Male
02/02/2023	Algeria	Female
03/02/2023	Cameroon	Female
03/02/2023	Ivory Coast	Female
03/02/2023	Syria	Male and female (couple)
06/02/2023	Ivory Coast	Male
06/02/2023	Palestine	Male
07/02/2023	Burkina Faso	Female
07/02/2023	DR Congo	Female
08/02/2023	French	Female
09/02/2023	Guinea	Male
10/02/2023	Ivory Coast	Male and female (couple)
10/02/2023	Syria	Female
10/02/2023	Ivory Coast	Male and female (couple)
13/02/2023	Iraq	Male
13/02/2023	Iraq	Male
13/02/2023	Gabon	Male

## Annex 2. Methodology

As this report was compiled using data from a mixed-methods approach, we provide more information about how data were collected and ethical considerations.

### Qualitative interviews

In February 2023, we carried out twenty semi-structured interviews with migrants and refugees in Sousse, many of them among Awledna's long-term beneficiaries. Through purposive sampling, we strove to include diverse migrant and refugee profiles: students from Sub-Saharan Africa and Arab countries, refugees and asylum-seekers (e.g., from Syria and Ivory Coast), labour migrants, marital migrants, older migrants, and people with a disability. During recruitment, we relied on Awledna's relationships of trust with foreign communities in Sousse. Because of the small sample size and sampling method, qualitative data cannot be generalised, yet they provide in-depth life histories, while adding nuance to our quantitative findings.

Before the interviews, all participants received written information and consent forms in either French or Arabic. All agreed to take part in the study on the condition of anonymity. Interviews took part at a time and location of their choice, usually at interviewees' homes or in cafés. Because of crowded living arrangements, some meetings occurred in the presence of family members, which helped to shed light on gendered and generational experiences and distribution of labour. Questions focused on interviewees' migration journeys, legal situation, current livelihoods and assistance needs, and plans for onward movement. Interviews took between half an hour and an hour; they were recorded and afterwards transcribed by the research team. All participants received a financial compensation of 40 TND (around 12 €) to make up for working hours lost.

We also conducted and recorded two hour-long focus group discussions in French and Arabic with migrant and refugee men and women to gauge gendered dynamics and interactions between foreign students of different nationalities, as well as irregular workers. These discussions took place inside the Maison des Jeunes in the Erriadh district in Sousse. Beforehand, all participants were provided with written information and consent forms in either French or Arabic, and also received a financial compensation of 40 TND.

In addition, key informant interviews were conducted with local representatives of NGOs, private sector institutions, and the municipality in February and October 2023. Most of these interviews were recorded; no financial compensation was given.

### 4Mi surveys

The MMC's 4Mi project offers a globalised system of collecting primary data on mixed migration through a closed-question survey. The survey asks questions on migrants' and refugees' profiles, migratory drivers and routes, financing strategies and challenges, and migration aspirations. A total of 200 surveys were carried out in Sousse between June and September 2023 by four enumerators who were recruited, trained and supervised by MMC. Two enumerators were men and two were women. All but one (a woman Tunisian staff member of Awledna) were from refugee and migrant communities. Survey participants were identified through snowball sampling in known refugee and migrant neighbourhoods and from the enumerators' personal networks. The enumerators targeted respondents living and working in different areas of Sousse and hailing from different communities, and sought to obtain an equal representation of men and women. In summer 2023, potential participants were reluctant to engage, even with enumerators from their own communities, for fear that their personal data could be shared with police. All enumerators (including the two women enumerators) found it harder to recruit women; Syrian refugees were contacted but refused to take part in the survey.

Enumerators follow a standardised data collection protocol: first, they read a script to respondents, informing them about the Danish Refugee Council (MMC's umbrella organisation) and MMC, the purpose of the interview, and that the information shared by them is voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. The 4Mi survey takes around 45 minutes and is available in multiple languages, including Arabic, English, and French.



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).

For more information visit:

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