

# Protection risks and assistance needs of migrants in the Central Sahel

At the beginning of 2024, the outlook for migrants in the Central Sahel region is marked by uncertainty. Since 2022, Mali's, Burkina Faso's, and Niger's [southern borders with ECOWAS countries have intermittently been closed following sanctions and internal security measures](#), leading migrants to seek alternative routes where they face heightened risks. At the same time, the repeal of Niger's anti-smuggling law 2015-036 in November 2023 has led to the [resurgence of movements along well-established and northbound routes](#). At the end of January 2024, the three countries announced their withdrawal from ECOWAS. In February 2024, ECOWAS announced the lifting of sanctions, but it is unclear what effects this might have on the borders between the three countries and ECOWAS member states. Migration routes across the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) countries remain particularly dangerous amidst a deteriorating security landscape. The protection space is also shrinking as humanitarian actors face increasing challenges in accessing and delivering timely assistance to vulnerable populations.

This snapshot provides data on the protection risks and assistance needs of migrants in the Central Sahel region. It is based on 2,276 4Mi survey interviews conducted with migrants in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in late 2023.

## Key findings

- Overall, **half of the respondents (52%) reported that they had passed through dangerous places** along their migration journey. All migrants interviewed in Dori (Burkina Faso) and Diffa (Niger) indicated that they had traveled along dangerous routes.
- **Types of protection incidents experienced by respondents underscore their financial vulnerability**, with bribery/extortion and robbery being the most frequently reported (54% and 42% respectively) among those who passed through dangerous places.

- **48% of all respondents received help** on their journey.
- **Only 8% of respondents who received help cited NGOs, and 2% cited UN agencies, as assistance providers.** Assistance was most often provided by family/friends (59%) and fellow migrants (41%).
- **Assistance received primarily met basic needs**, such as food (72%), water (66%) and shelter (50%). Only 23% received cash.
- **88% of all respondents stated that they needed assistance.** Cash support was, by far, the most frequently cited need (83%):
  - Cash was more frequently mentioned in Mali (92%), with particularly high rates in Bamako (98%) and Sikasso (94%).
  - Respondents in Gao and Niamey cited in-kind assistance needs such as shelter (34% and 22% respectively) and food (27% and 28% respectively) more often than in other locations.
  - In Gao, women respondents in particular needed medical assistance (70/84, 84%, compared to 12% among all respondents in Gao).

## Profile of respondents

This snapshot is based on 2,276 interviews with migrants carried out between September and December 2023 in Burkina Faso (n=766), Mali (n=759), and Niger (n=751). Surveys were conducted face-to-face in nine different locations along the main migration routes in the Central Sahel (see Table 1). The median age of the respondents was 28 years, with ages spanning from 18 to 71. Out of all respondents, 58% (n=1,325) were men and 42% (n=951) were women.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Enumerators in Burkina Faso and Niger reported facing difficulties reaching women respondents due to religious and cultural sensitivities, whereas in Mali, women migrants working in specific economic sectors, such as the services and catering, were easier to access.

**Table 1. Number of respondents by location of interview**

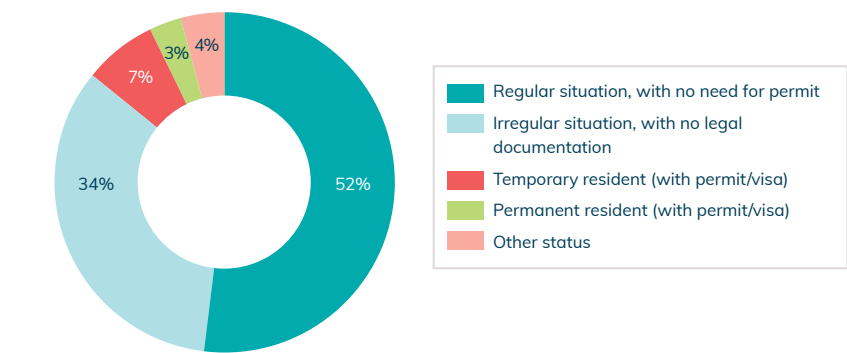
Countries	Locations	Respondents	Percentages
Burkina Faso	Ouagadougou	333	15%
	Tenkodogo	222	10%
	Dori	199	9%
Mali	Bamako	308	14%
	Gao	223	10%
	Sikasso	228	10%
Niger	Niamey	300	13%
	Agadez	231	10%
	Diffa	216	9%
Other	Other	16	>1%

**Mixed migration trends in the Central Sahel are dominated by migration between ECOWAS countries, where citizens of member states have visa-free entry and stay for up to 90 days.** Respondents were originally from 27 different countries, the most frequently cited being Togo (14% of all respondents), Nigeria (13%), Côte d'Ivoire (11%), Benin (9%), and Burkina Faso (8%). Almost all respondents in Burkina Faso (98%) and Mali (92%) were from another ECOWAS member state. These proportions are higher than in Niger (85%) due to the greater presence of Chadians (7%) and Cameroonians (5%) there. Given ECOWAS' progressive stance on visa openness, 62% of all respondents were in a regular situation at the time of the interview. This includes those who did not require any permit (52%), as well as temporary (7%) or permanent (3%) residents (see Figure 1).

**However, a third of respondents overall (34%), particularly Nigerians in Niger, lacked regular status, which is likely to impede their access to public services and compound vulnerabilities.** One-fifth (20%) of respondents reporting irregular status were originally from Nigeria, including two-thirds of Nigerians in Niger (66%).<sup>2</sup> At the time of data collection, the borders between Nigeria and Niger were closed due to ECOWAS sanctions, leading Nigerian migrants to seek alternative routes where they are not registered by border control authorities, likely increasing irregularity.

<sup>2</sup> 30% of the respondents who were in an irregular situation in Niger (n=462) were originally from Nigeria.

**Figure 1. What is your current migration/legal status?<sup>3</sup>**



**More risks reported on routes to Dori and Diffa**

**Not all locations along migration routes in the Central Sahel are perceived as dangerous by respondents, but routes to Dori (Burkina Faso) and Diffa (Niger) appear to be confronted by security challenges impacting migrants' vulnerability.** Overall, half of the respondents (52%) reported that they had passed through dangerous places along their migration journey.<sup>4</sup> This proportion is lower in some interview locations in Mali, such as Sikasso (9%) and Gao (31%), as well as in Burkina Faso's capital city (29%), indicating that the migration routes leading to these places are perceived as relatively safer. However, all migrants interviewed in Diffa and Dori reported traveling through dangerous locations, underscoring the acute insecurity prevalent along the migration routes leading to these cities. Indeed, the [persistent violence in Northeast Nigeria](#) helps explain why migrants in Diffa, a migratory hub in Niger's Southeast borderland region, reported passing through dangerous places. In Diffa, 50% of respondents were originally from Nigeria. Similarly, migrants in the Dori region are facing a deteriorating security situation in Northeast Burkina Faso, particularly the escalating violent extremist insurgency.

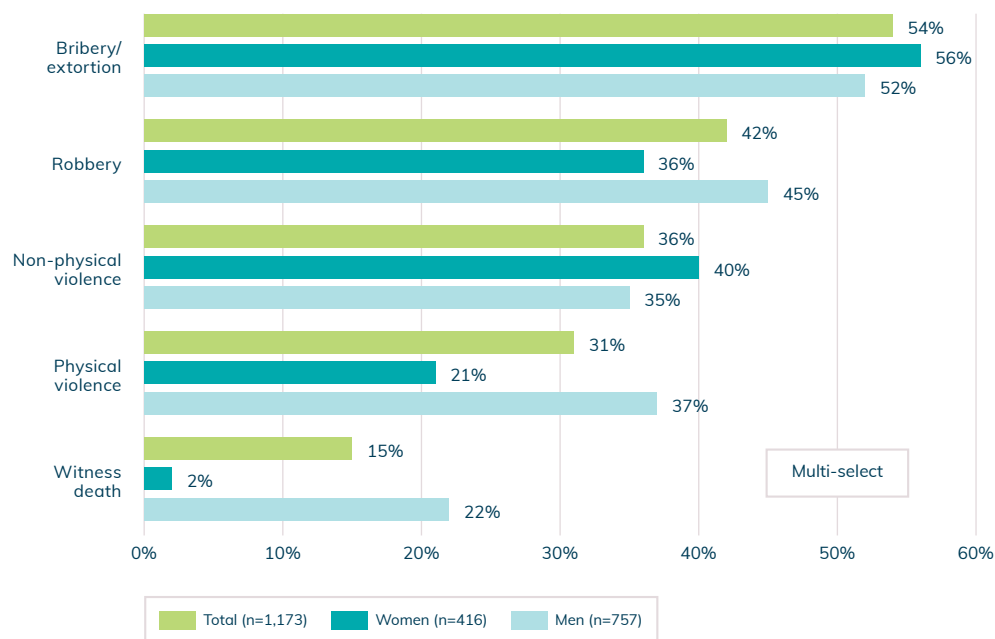
**The types of protection incidents, such as robbery and extortion, most frequently experienced by respondents underscore their financial vulnerability.** The most common incident that respondents who passed through dangerous places (n=1,173) experienced during their journey was bribery and extortion (54%), followed by robbery

<sup>3</sup> Other response options included temporary protection (2%), refugee (1%), permit is no longer valid/expired (1%), don't know (0%), applied for permit/visa (0%), asylum seeker (0%).  
<sup>4</sup> Burkina Faso (25%), Mali (19%) and Niger (14%) were the three countries most frequently cited when respondents indicated the most dangerous places they had went through.

(42%), non-physical violence (36%), and physical violence (31%). There were differences between genders (see Figure 2); robbery, physical violence, and witnessing death were reported by a larger proportion of men than women, whereas bribery/extortion and non-physical violence were reported by a larger proportion of women.

**Migrants interviewed in Diffa and Dori reported more incidents than respondents interviewed elsewhere.** The highest proportion of respondents who reported experiencing kidnapping was recorded among respondents who reached Diffa (37%), possibly due to the prevalence of express kidnapping and ransom in the borderland region between Northeast Nigeria and Niger. On the other hand, the highest scores for most types of incidents were recorded among respondents who reached Dori, notably trafficking and exploitation (68% compared to 12% of all respondents who passed through dangerous places), and injury/ill-health resulting from harsh conditions (50% vs 12%).

**Figure 2. Most common types of protection incident experienced, by gender<sup>5</sup>**



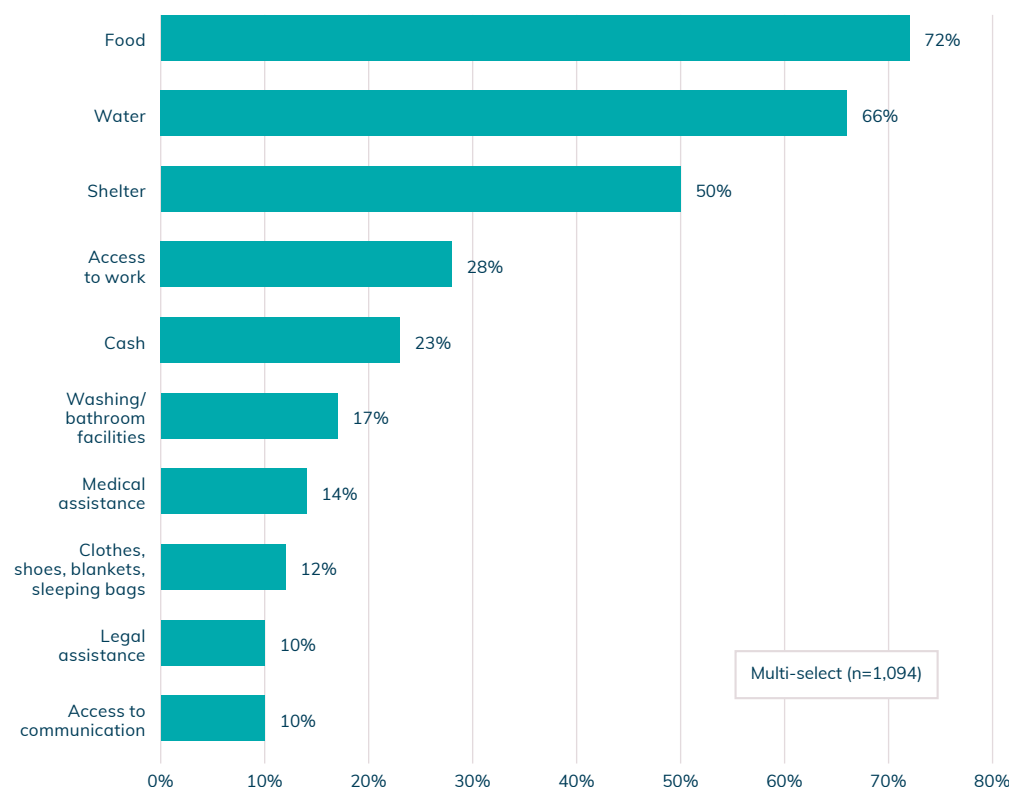
5 Other response options included detention (13%, 16% of men and 7% of women), trafficking and exploitation (12%, 14% of men and 9% of women), injury/ill-health from harsh conditions (12%, 14% of men and 9% of women), kidnapping (9%, 13% of men and 3% of women), sexual violence (3%, 1% of men and 8% of women), none (12%, 10% of men and 14% of women).

## Assistance more often received on more dangerous routes

**Overall, nearly half (48%, n=1,094) of all respondents stated that they had received help on their journey.** Migrants interviewed in Dori and Diffa more frequently indicated that they had received help (100% and 96% respectively) compared to respondents in Sikasso and Gao (11% and 15% respectively) who also cited less frequently travelling through dangerous places.

**Assistance was primarily to meet basic needs.** Figure 3 shows that the most frequently cited assistance was food and water (72% and 66% of respondents who received help, respectively), followed by shelter (50%). A smaller fraction of individuals receiving aid were helped in finding employment (28%) or given cash (23%).

**Figure 3. Assistance received during the journey. Top 10 responses<sup>6</sup>**



6 Other response options included safe spaces for women and children (9%), psychological support (8%), resettlement assistance (7%), spiritual guidance (1%), assistance to return (0%), other (2%).

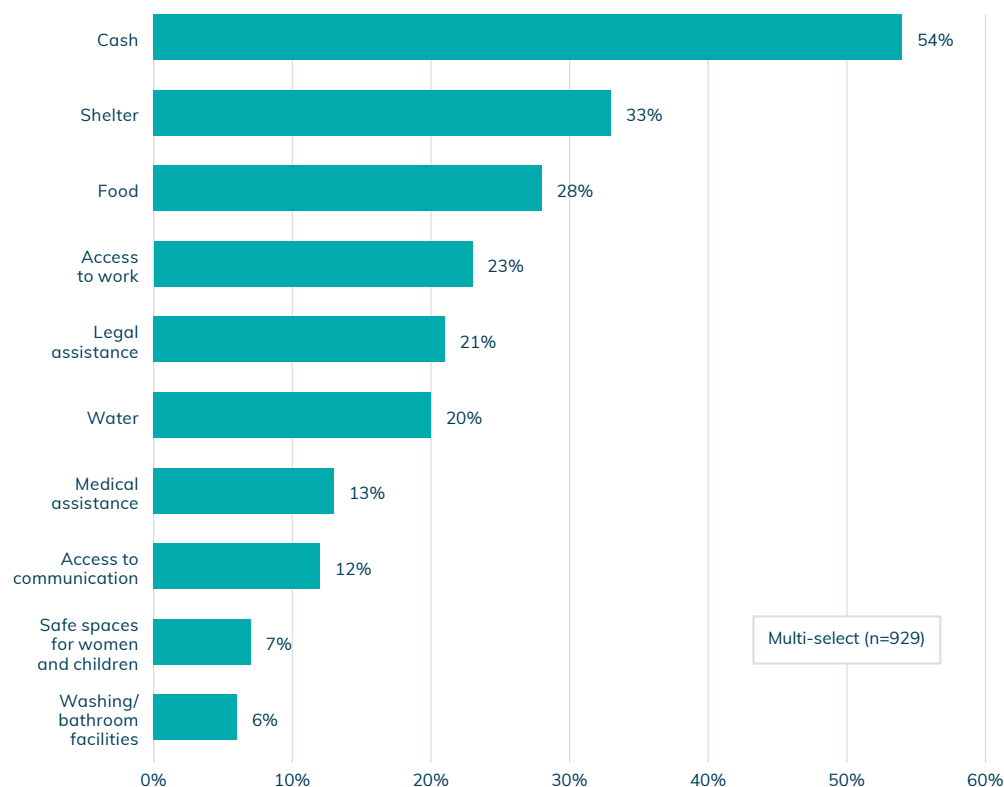
**Only 8% of respondents who received help cited NGOs, and 2% cited UN agencies, as assistance providers.** This may be due to the potential challenges humanitarian actors face in accessing and gaining trust from migrants as well as limited presence on key migration routes. Additionally, competing priorities, such as the crisis facing IDPs, may lead to humanitarian efforts potentially overlooking migrants as a vulnerable group. Assistance was most commonly provided by family or friends (59%), fellow migrants (41%), and the local population or volunteers (38%). Smugglers were cited relatively less often (16%) and the government barely at all (1%). Furthermore, a larger proportion of men than women cited family or friends (men: 62%; women: 53%) and the local population (men: 41%; women: 32%), as providers of assistance, while proportionally slightly more women cited smugglers (women: 19%; men: 14%) and NGOs (women: 11%; men: 6%). This could suggest that among those interviewed men were better integrated into social support networks, whereas women relied more often on organised agents.

## Cash assistance is a priority unmet need

**Assistance needs during the journey varied slightly from the assistance received by respondents; there was also a particular deficit in terms of cash assistance received/needed.** While 59% of all respondents did not have unmet needs during their journey, 41% stated that they had needed help but not received it. Among them (n=929), unmet needs were most often reported in Niger (45%), followed by Burkina Faso (26%), and Mali (11%).<sup>7</sup> The most frequently cited need was cash (54%), possibly attributable to the financial vulnerability underscored by the most common types of incidents experienced by surveyed migrants traveling through dangerous routes. Only 23% of respondents who received assistance benefited from cash support. A slightly larger proportion of men (25%) than women (17%) cited unmet needs for access to work, and a larger proportion of women (18%) than men (1%) cited safe spaces for women and children as among their top assistance needs.

<sup>7</sup> A small sample of respondents (n=204) also provided the names of the places where they did not get help, with the most frequently cited being Niamey (22%), Agadez (13%), and Bamako and Ouagadougou (5% each).

**Figure 4. Unmet needs during the journey? Top 10 responses<sup>8</sup>**



<sup>8</sup> Other response options included psychological support (6%), clothes/shoes/blankets/sleeping bags (6%), resettlement assistance (1%), spiritual guidance (0%), assistance to return (0%), other (1%).

## Needs at the time of interview are high

**Most respondents (88%) stated that they needed help at the time of the interview.** There were differences between the countries of interview, with the highest needs recorded in Niger (98%, compared to 90% in Mali and 78% in Burkina Faso). All respondents in Dori and Diffa stated that they needed help at the time of interview. The higher proportion of those needing help at the time of the interview as opposed to during the journey could be attributed to the interview locations. They are central migration hubs where migrants usually pause their journey for various reasons, including to seek assistance, but also to look for economic opportunities, rest, gather information, or reunite with family or friends.

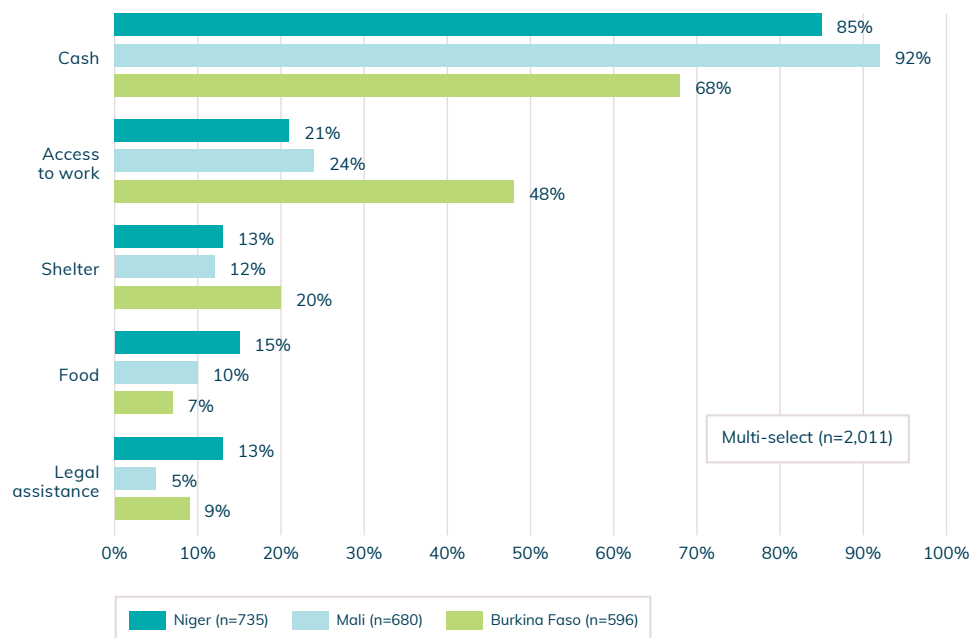
**The most frequently cited need was, by far, cash (83% of respondents who still needed assistance, n=2,011),** followed by access to work (30%), shelter (15%), and food (11%). Assistance such as psychological support, resettlement assistance, and assistance to return, were cited by less than 2% of all respondents. There were differences between genders in terms of the need for safe spaces for women and children (women: 14%; men: 1%).

**There were larger differences between countries and places of interview (see Figure 5):**

- Cash assistance was cited proportionally more often in Mali (92%), especially in **Bamako** (98%) and **Sikasso** (94%), while surveyed migrants in the same locations less often reported other needs such as food (less than 1% and 7% respectively) and shelter (1% and 7% respectively). In contrast, respondents in **Gao** and **Niamey** required in-kind assistance more often than in other locations, for example shelter (34% and 22% respectively) and food (27% and 28% respectively).
- Access to work was cited more often in Burkina Faso (48%), particularly in **Ouagadougou** (54%), highlighting the economic aspirations of migrants seeking job opportunities and who generally had been in Burkina Faso for a longer period (249 days on average) as compared to respondents in the two other countries of interview (202 days for Mali, 148 days for Niger).

- **Agadez** registered the highest proportion of respondents in need of legal assistance (23%), which is linked to the highest proportion of respondents in an irregular situation also being recorded in Agadez (56%).
- **Gao** recorded the highest scores of surveyed migrants in need of psychological support (16%) and/or medical assistance (12%). Women much more often reported medical needs (70/84), and more often reported psychological support needs (15/84). Women also frequently needed access to safe spaces for women and children (48/84), underscoring the specific medical, psychological and social vulnerability of women and children in Gao as well as along the routes that lead to this migration hub.
- Compared to averages across the sample, respondents who were still in need of assistance in **Dori** more often mentioned shelter (21%) and support in finding a job (46%). No specific need was documented among surveyed migrants in Diffa compared to the rest of the sample, except for cash assistance (73%) which was also common among respondents in Dori (80%) and in other locations.

**Figure 5. Needs at the time of interview. Top 5 responses, by country of interview<sup>9</sup>**



<sup>9</sup> Other response options included water (7%), safe spaces for women and children (6%), medical assistance (6%), access to communication (5%), clothes/shoes/blankets/sleeping bags (3%), psychological support (3%), resettlement assistance (2%), spiritual guidance (2%), washing/bathroom facilities (2%), assistance to return (0%) and other (2%); amongst overall sample.



## 4Mi data collection

[4Mi](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with migrants in Eastern and Southern Africa, North Africa, West Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: [www.mixedmigration.org/4mi](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)