

Role of smugglers in decision-making and journeys of Eritrean, Ethiopian, and South Sudanese migrants in Port Sudan

Sudan serves as a key country of transit for movements along the Central Mediterranean Route, linking countries in East and the Horn of Africa to North Africa. Since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, migration routes through the country have shifted away from Khartoum and migrants from conflict-affected regions are more reliant on smuggling networks to overcome limited mobility options and restrictive visa policies in neighbouring countries.¹ This snapshot examines the role of smugglers in the decision-making and journeys of Eritrean, Ethiopian, and South Sudanese migrants in Port Sudan. It should be noted that while interviews with migrants were carried out in the second half of 2024, most respondents had been in Sudan since before the outbreak of war in April 2023 and are reflecting both on their interactions with smugglers along the journey to Sudan and once in the country. This is the second of two snapshots published on smuggling dynamics along routes to and within Sudan. The first snapshot on migrants' perceptions of smugglers is available [here](#).

Key findings

- Although half of surveyed migrants (49%) reported being influenced in their decision to migrate, almost none (4%) were influenced by their smugglers.
- Most respondents (56%) used smugglers because they knew no alternative. Of concern, 11% cited being pressured by their smugglers, which may indicate trafficking dynamics.
- Family or friends facilitated initial contact with smugglers, suggesting recruitment directly within or close to communities.
- Less than half (42%) of respondents obtained information on routes, costs, or risks before starting their journey, highlighting a general lack of information gathered by migrants about their journey.

- Smugglers were the top source of information for those who obtained information prior to starting their journey (50%), even more so for women (60%). This high percentage likely stems from the unique sampling criteria, in which all respondents used a smuggler.
- However, 28% of migrants overall considered smugglers to be the most reliable source of information, and less so among women (21%).

Data and profiles

This snapshot is based on 320 phone surveys collected between June and September 2024 with migrants who were in Port Sudan and who reported using a smuggler at some point during their journey. Almost all respondents (93%) entered Sudan before the beginning of the war, in April 2023. Eritreans make up almost half of respondents (48%), followed by Ethiopians (26%), and South Sudanese (18%).² UNHCR reports that among refugees and migrants these three nationalities have been the most frequently displaced from Khartoum since the beginning of the conflict.³ While 49% of respondents in the sample were in Port Sudan before the conflict broke out, the remainder moved to Port Sudan after April 2023 (30% from Khartoum, 6% from Gedaref, and 6% from Kassala, in line with displacement trends reported by UNCHR).⁴ All respondents reported using a smuggler at some point during their journey and 42% did it to enter Sudan. 67% of respondents are men, and almost half are adults aged 25-34 (Figure 1). Youth represent between 33% and 40% of each nationality, except for Ethiopians, of which only 7% are aged 18-24 years old.

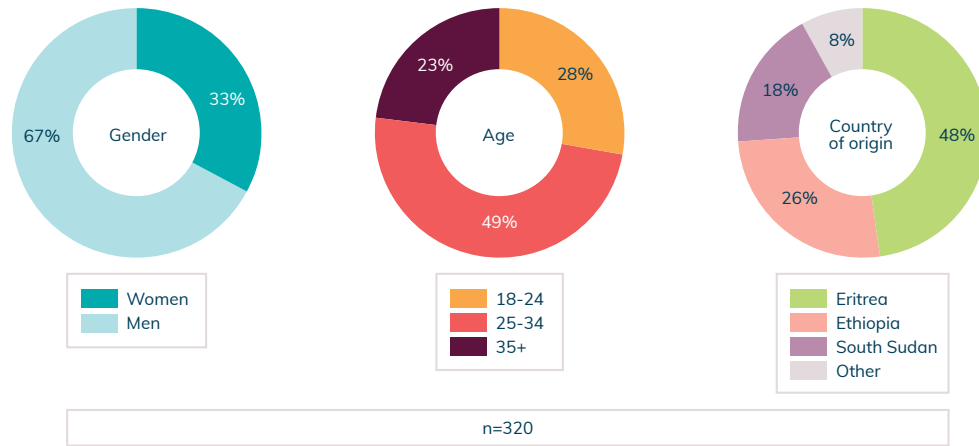
1 Global Initiative (October 2024). [Sudan: Conflict drives mass refugee movement and fuels human smuggling](#).

2 Other nationalities (3%) include: Democratic Republic of the Congo (4 respondents), Syria (2), Central African Republic (2), Burundi (1), Cameroon (1), Republic of the Congo (1).

3 UNHCR (June 2024). [Protection Briefing Sudan – June 2023](#)

4 Op. cit.

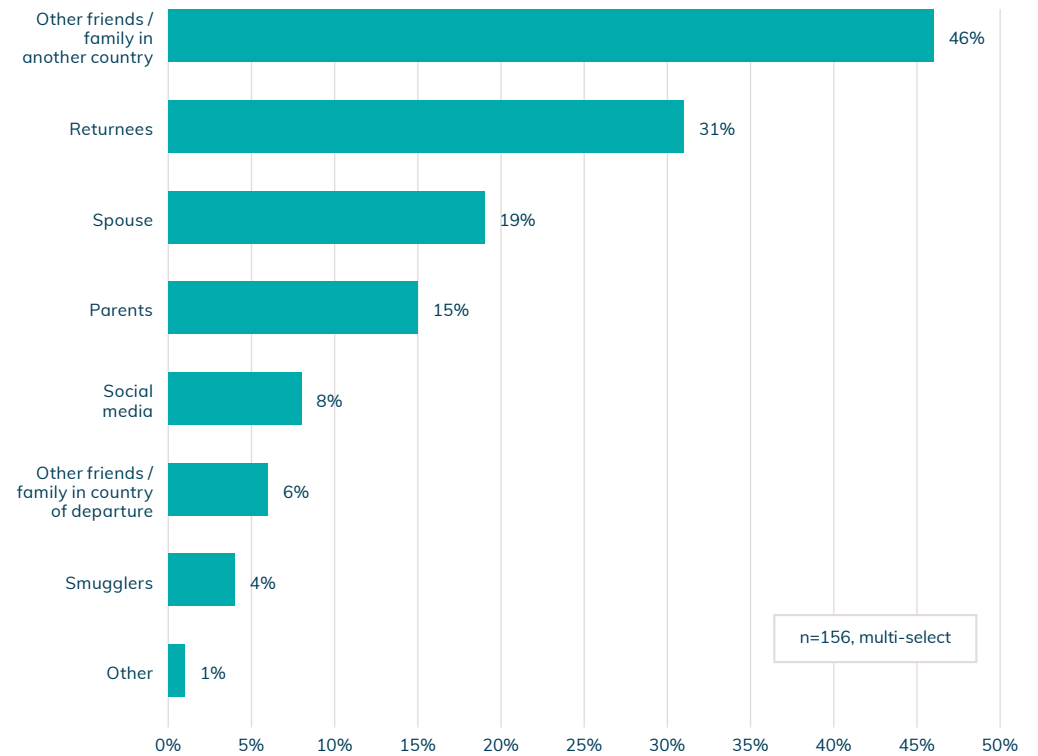
Figure 1. Overview of sample by gender, age and country of origin



Smugglers had almost no influence on the decision to migrate

Approximately half (49%) of respondents reported that their decision to migrate had been influenced (as compared to 51% who cited making the decision all on their own). When asked about the biggest influence (n=156), just 4% cited smugglers, making it the least-cited external factor. This finding contradicts popular discourse, which tends to brand smugglers as drivers of migration decision-making.⁵ Overall, the data highlight the critical role played by social networks, with friends and family in another country (46%) being the most cited part of those networks. The impact of returnees (31%) and social media (8%) also suggest that current and former migrants impact migration decisions, as they shape narratives about migration.

Figure 2. “Can you choose the biggest influences on your decision to migrate?”

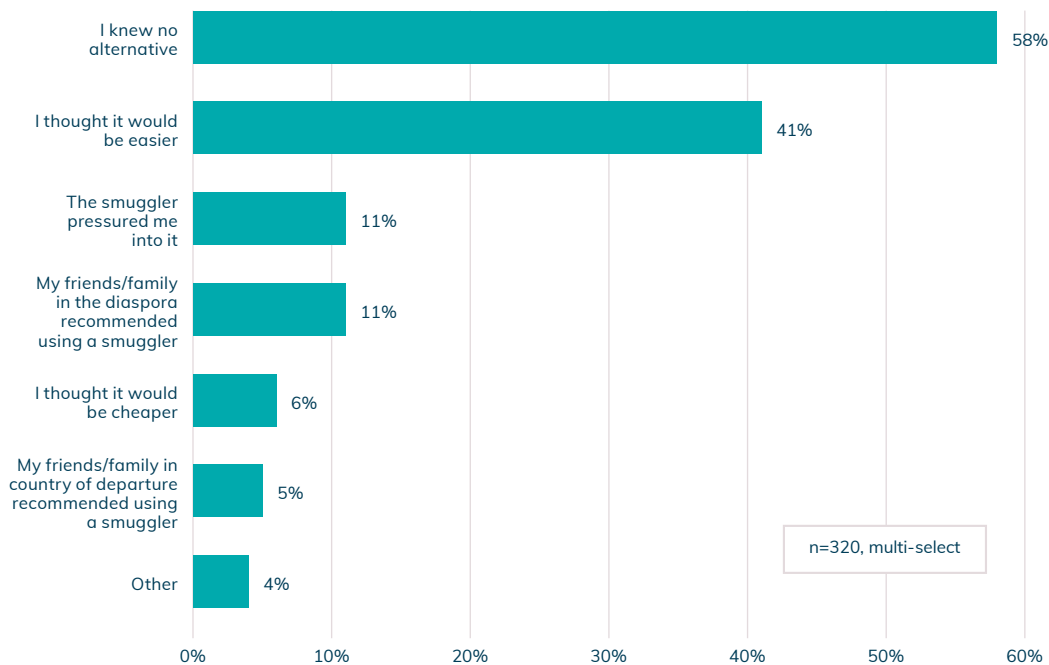


⁵ Government of the United Kingdom (October 2024), [G7 countries agree new plan to dismantle migrant smuggling gangs](#).

Most respondents used smugglers because they “knew no alternative”

More than half (58%) of respondents said they “knew no alternative”, when explaining the top reasons they used the services of a smuggler, followed by 41% who believed it would make the journey easier. The role of social networks emerges once again, as 11% said that using a smuggler was recommended by family/friends in the diaspora and 5% said it was recommended by family/friends in their departure country. Of concern for protection actors, 11% reported being pressured by smugglers into using their services, which may be an indicator of trafficking dynamics.

Figure 3. “Why did you use the services of a smuggler?”



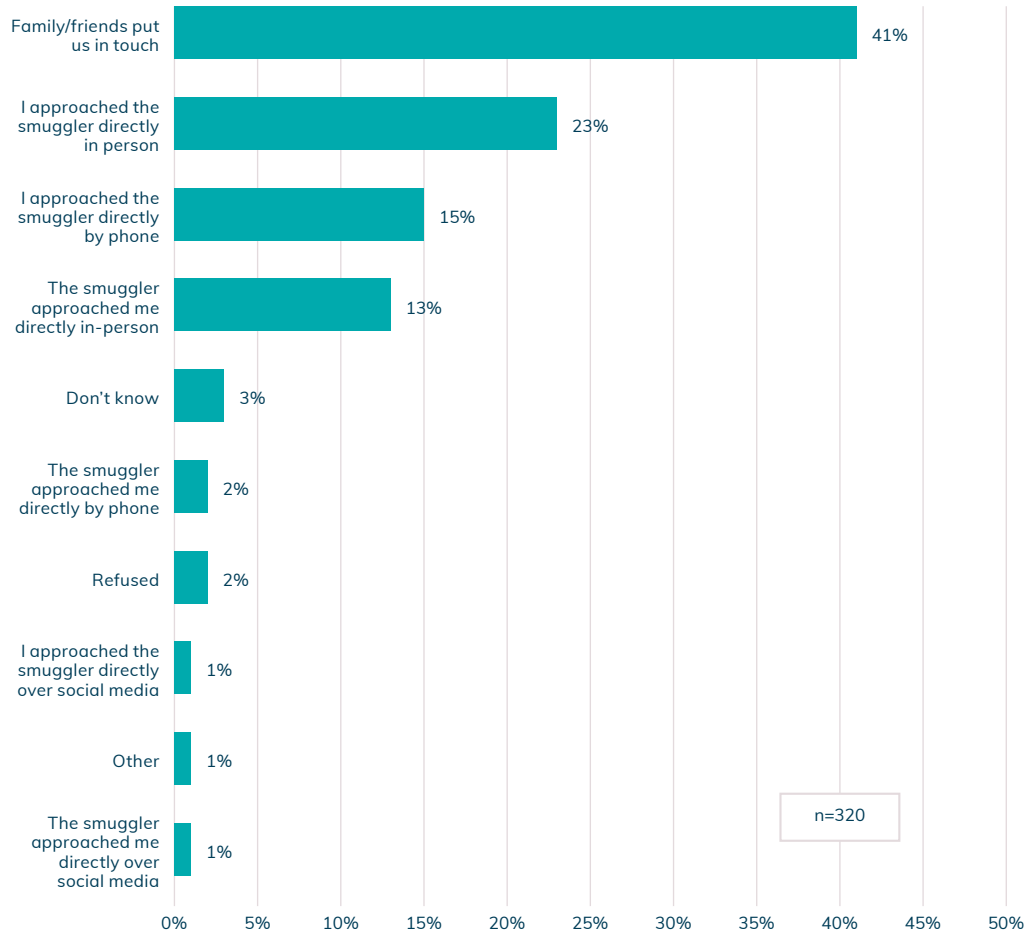
Ethiopians and Eritreans reported more often that they knew no alternative (66% and 58%, respectively, compared to 49% of South Sudanese) and thought it would make the journey easier (54% and 44%, respectively, compared to 22% of South Sudanese). This may be explained by reports of tight border controls by authorities, as well as high levels of organisation and strong local smuggling networks in these borderland areas.⁶

Family or friends facilitated initial contact with smugglers, suggesting recruitment directly within or close to communities

Respondents most often got in contact with smugglers through families and friends (41%). This suggests that smuggler networks operate within or close to migrants' home communities. In another 39% of cases, migrants reported approaching the smugglers themselves. When combined, the data show that migrants and their families actively engaged smugglers in the majority of cases (80%). By contrast, smugglers first approached migrants in 16% of cases. This aligns with previous findings that show the limited role that smugglers play in initiating the migration process. In addition, when considering that 16% of respondents were approached by smugglers and only 4% reported that smugglers influenced their decision to migrate (Figure 2), the data suggest that smugglers had targeted individuals who already had made the decision to migrate.

6 Chatham House (4 April 2024) [Securitizing the Ethiopia–Sudan border: How cross-border conflict is shaping trade and the control of land](#) and Global Initiative (October 2024). [Sudan: Conflict drives mass refugee movement and fuels human smuggling](#)

Figure 4. “How did you first get in touch with the initial smuggler?”

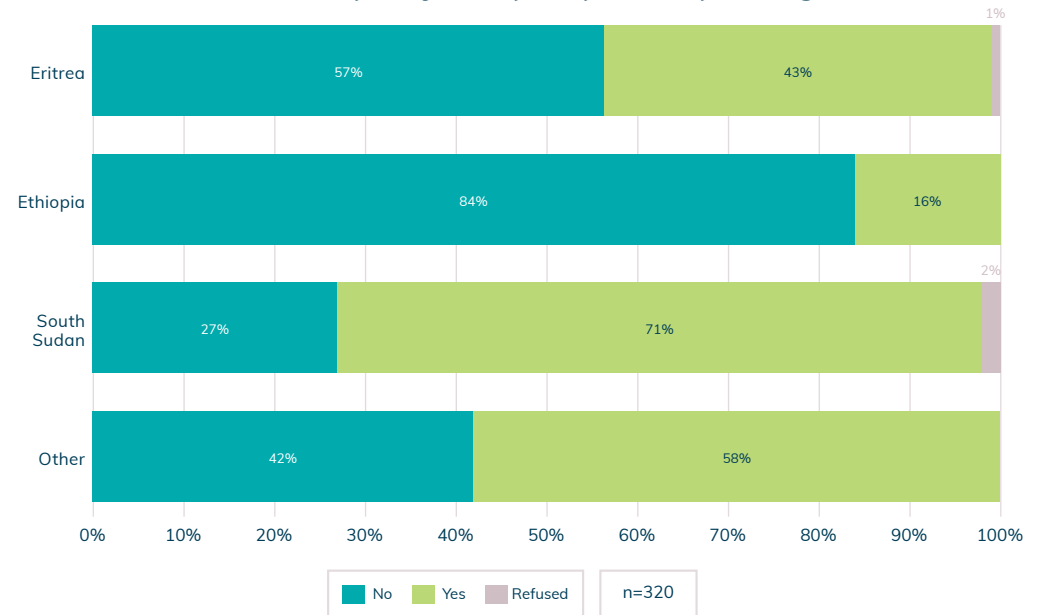


Modalities of contact with smugglers varied according to nationality. Most Ethiopians contacted smugglers through friends and family (71%). Eritreans also relied on family and friends but to a lesser extent (42%). South Sudanese respondents mostly approached smugglers by phone (32%) or were approached by smugglers in-person (24%). Almost no respondents of these three countries of origin relied on social media and messaging.

Prior to starting their journey, less than half of respondents obtained information on routes, costs, or risks; women and Ethiopians even less

Some 42% of respondents obtained information on routes, costs, or risks before starting their journey, highlighting a general lack of information gathered by migrants about their journey. This may suggest an increased vulnerability to riskier journeys for the majority of respondents, as they are less equipped to make informed decisions. Access to information varied by nationality and South Sudanese nationals obtained information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. the most (71%), followed by Eritreans (57%), compared to a minority (16%) of Ethiopians, indicating that Ethiopians might be more reliant on their smugglers during the journey and at risk of being taken advantage of.

Figure 5. “Did you obtain information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before your journey?” by country of origin

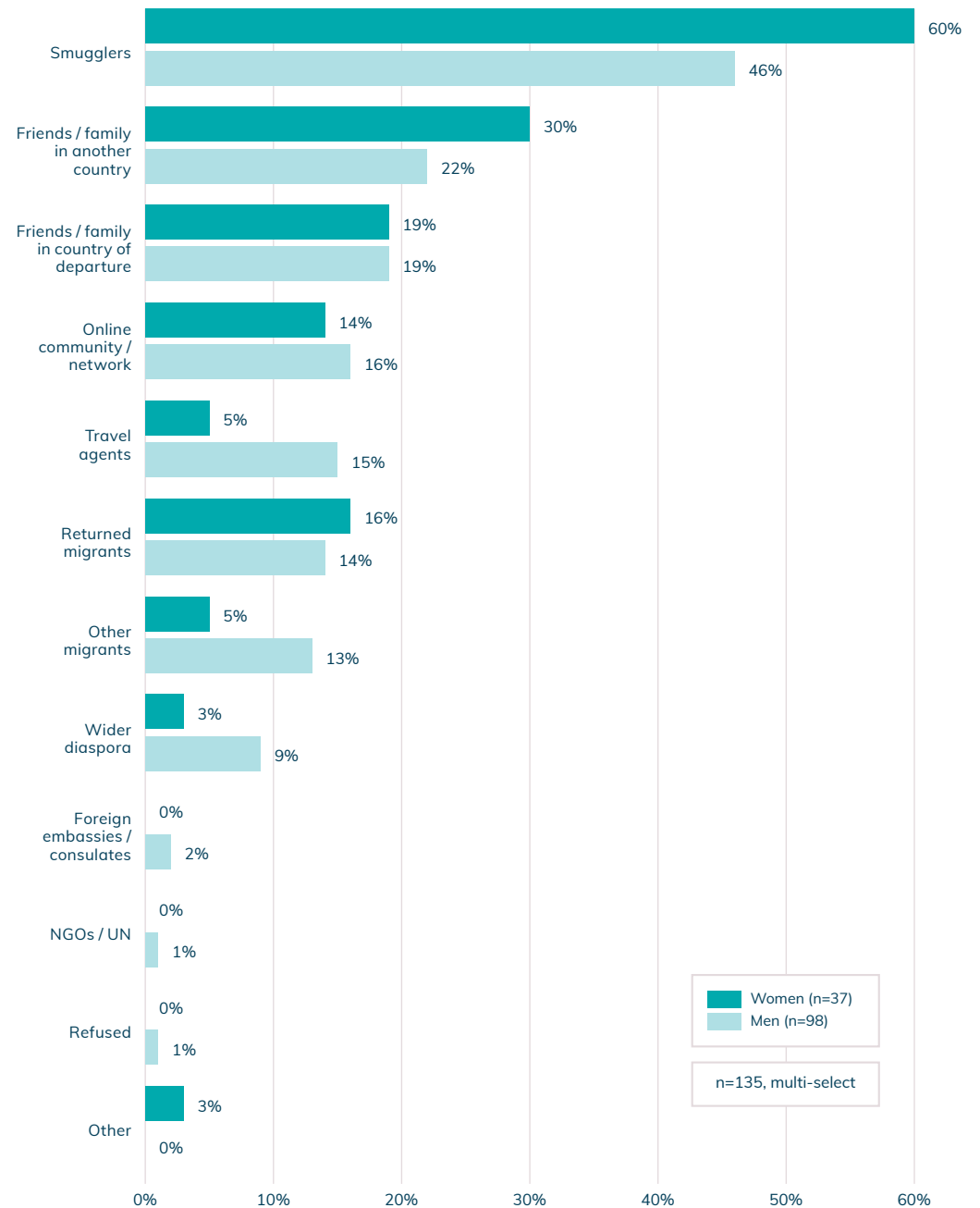


Fewer women (35%) reported obtaining information before starting their journey than men (46%). Overall, the relatively lower level of information obtained by women suggests an additional vulnerability of women to potential exploitation during their journey. As women more often cite following their spouses on their journey than men, this may also indicate that women rely on others such as family and spouses to organize their journey.

Smugglers were the top source of information for those who obtained information prior to starting their journey

Smugglers (50%) were the top source of information for those who had obtained information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before the start of their journey (n=135). This underscores migrants' reliance on smugglers for critical information about the migration process. This is truer for women (60%) than men (46%) (Figure 6). In terms of nationality, Eritrean (54%) and South Sudanese (60%) respondents reported more often relying on smugglers for such information, compared to Ethiopians (23%). By contrast, Ethiopian respondents relied more heavily on friends and family (54% compared to 32% of Eritreans and 10% of South Sudanese). This provides critical insights on how to promote diverse and reliable sources of information or share relevant information on making journeys safer, by targeting nationalities differently.

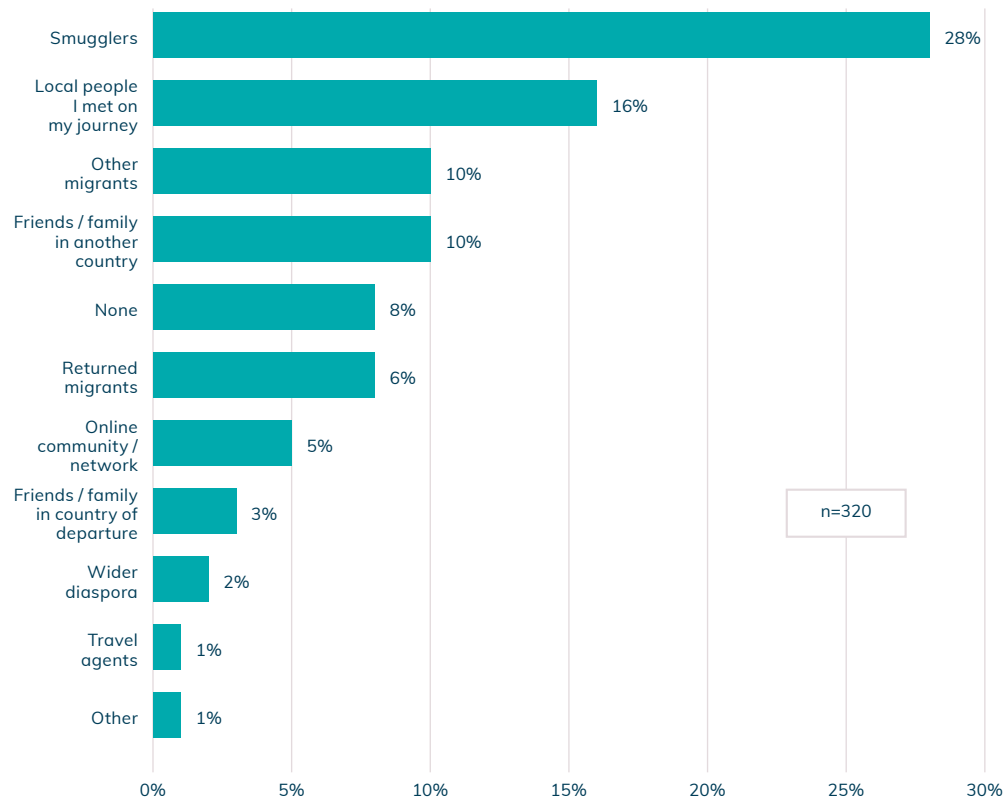
Figure 6. "What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before your journey?" by gender



Less than a third of respondents considered smugglers as the most reliable source of information

Some 28% of respondents cited smugglers as the most reliable source of information. Although smugglers were the most reported reliable source, this share was notably smaller than the proportion of respondents who received information from smugglers (50%).⁷ This indicates that while smugglers appear to be a more accessible information source, migrants are more discerning in terms of how they value the trustworthiness of this information.

Figure 7. “Of all sources, what has been the most reliable source of information overall?”



⁷ It should be noted that this finding is consistent with broader 4Mi data collected in Sudan since 2020. Of 3,107 surveys carried out in the country since 2020, smugglers were named as the most reliable source (20% of respondents). However, this finding for Sudan diverges considerably from MMC’s global 4Mi dataset, where smugglers rank fourth (cited by 11% of 56,188 respondents). It is possible that because smuggling networks in Sudan are geographically closer to respondents’ communities of origin, they are perceived as more trustworthy because they involve co-nationals and/or because respondents have yet to travel longer distances with smugglers and are not fully reliant on them, so their exposure to misinformation and abuse is relatively low.

Perceptions of smugglers as a reliable source of information vary according to nationality; fewer South Sudanese (17%) reported trusting smugglers as compared to Eritreans (33%) and Ethiopians (44%). This variation suggests different experiences with smugglers, perhaps linked to differences in smuggling networks, both those bringing respondents into Sudan and those used to flee to Port Sudan, which is closer to the Eritrean and Ethiopian borders and may involve smugglers of the same nationalities as Eritrean and Ethiopian respondents. Although women relied more often than men on smugglers as a source of information (Figure 6), fewer women reported smugglers as a reliable source of information (21%) than men (35%). In addition, more women (15%) than men (7%) said that no source of information at all had been reliable, indicating women’s high lack of trust in sources of information and possibly more exploitive experiences with smugglers.



MINISTRY OF
FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK
Danida

4Mi data collection

4Mi is the Mixed Migration Centre’s flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in East 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