

Gendered smuggler-migrant interactions in the Central Sahel

As [young men make up the majority of migrants](#) using [smuggler services in the Central Sahel](#), the distinct and gendered experiences that women face during their migration journey are often overlooked. The gender of smugglers themselves also receives minimal attention, perpetuating the [misconception that smugglers are exclusively men](#) and invisibilising the role of women smugglers.

This snapshot, part of a MMC publication series examining human smuggling in the Central Sahel, seeks to contribute to the understanding of gendered interactions between migrants and smugglers. It analyses how gender and age influence contacts and perceptions between migrants and smugglers. A dedicated section on women smugglers, though drawn from a small subsample, provides preliminary insights into their roles in smuggling.

Key findings

- Women (39%), especially younger women (42%), **slightly more often rely on a single smuggler for their entire journey than men** (32%).
- **Women more often rely on family and friends to establish contact with smugglers** (39%) compared to men (29%), while **men take a more direct approach in contacting smugglers** (51% vs. 38%). Overall, migrants approach smugglers more often through in-person contact (51%).
- **Regardless of respondents' gender and age, smugglers resort more frequently to in-person engagement** (84%) than phone calls (8%) and social media (8%) when initiating contact with migrants.
- Overall, **migrants primarily view smugglers as service (62%) and information (39%) providers**. Older women more often perceive smugglers as sources of information (45%) and protection (38%).

- **8% of all respondents used the services of women smugglers.**
- **Women smugglers offer traditional smuggling services**, such as border crossings (55%) and negotiating with authorities (50%). Compared to men smugglers, however, **women smugglers stand out in providing accommodation (40% vs. 26%), food and water (40% vs. 20%), and helping other migrants find jobs** (24% vs. 6%).
- **Women smugglers were described as criminals (10%) slightly more often than men smugglers (5%),** and 20% of their users felt intentionally misled, compared to 16% of those who used men smugglers.

Profiles

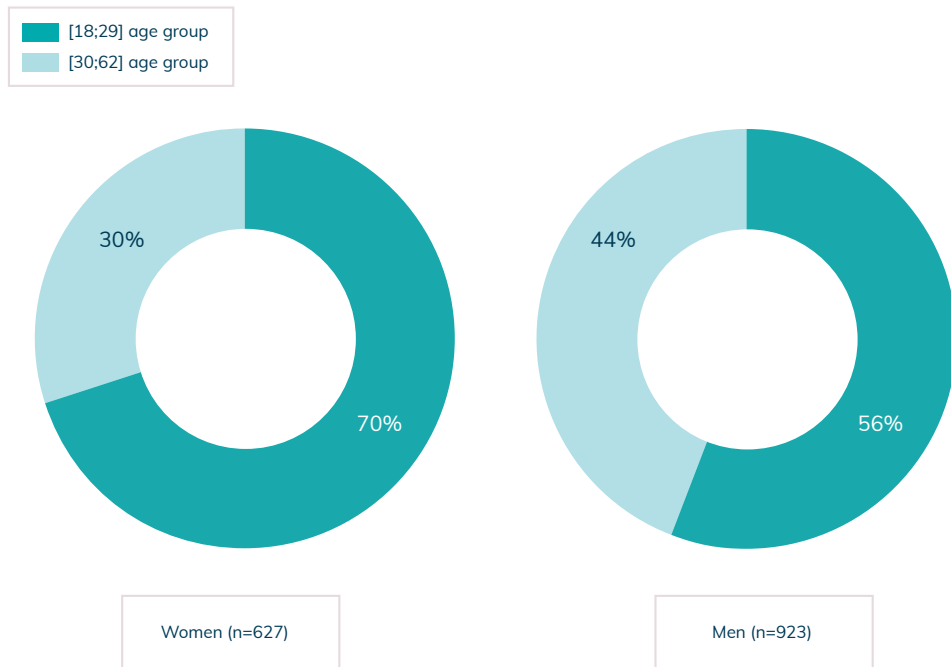
This snapshot draws on a dataset of 1,550 surveys conducted between May and August 2024 with migrants who used smuggler services and were interviewed in Niger (n=528), Mali (n=508), and Burkina Faso (n=514).¹ Most respondents originated from West African countries, with five nationalities – Nigeria (15%), Togo (11%), Côte d'Ivoire (11%), Benin (10%), and Ghana (7%) – constituting 54% of the total sample.

The surveyed population consisted of more men (60%, n=923) than women (40%, n=627). The sample was predominantly young, with ages ranging from 18 to 62, and a median age of 28 years. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of all respondents were between the ages of 18 and 29,² with a larger share of young women compared to young men (see Figure 1).

1 Due to the sampling methods used in 4Mi, data is not representative of mixed migration and human smuggling dynamics in the region. For more information on the 4Mi methodology, visit <https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/>

2 The age division from 18 to 29 and 30 to 62 aligns with global frameworks, such as that of the [World Bank](#) and [UNDP](#), which defines young adults as those aged 18 to 29.

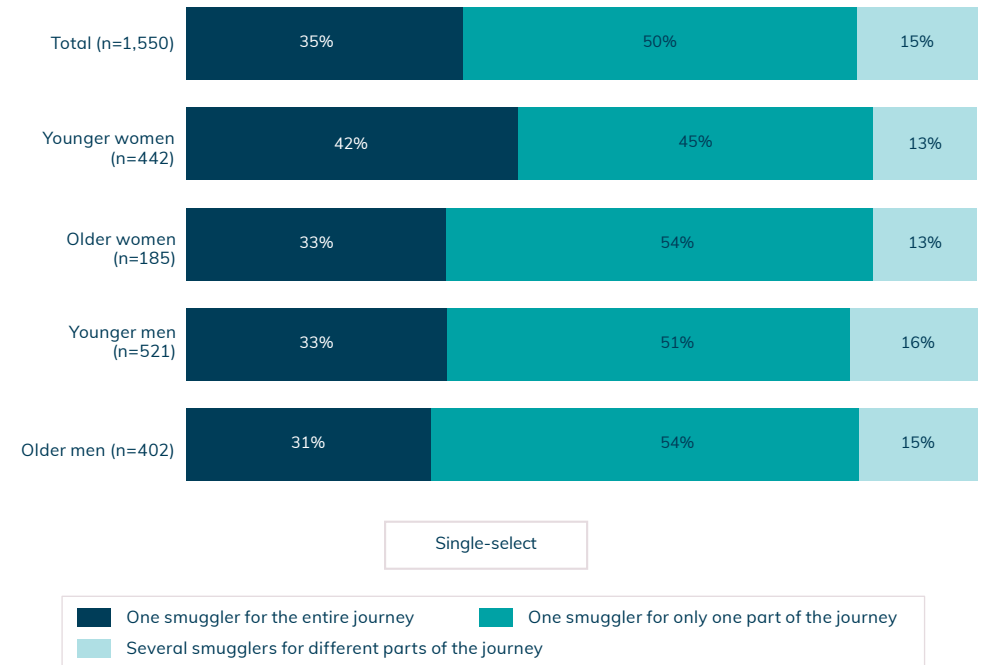
Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by gender and age groups



Young women prefer to rely on one single smuggler for the full length of their journey

Women (39%), particularly younger women (42%), more often rely on a single smuggler for their entire journey compared to men (32%). While this may reduce uncertainties associated with switching smugglers, it could also increase [vulnerability to exploitation and abuse](#), as it creates dependency on a single smuggling facilitator. In contrast, men and women who engage a smuggler only for specific segments (52% and 47%, respectively) or rely on several smugglers for different parts (16% and 13%) of their journey may find it difficult to make pre-departure plans and secure reliable arrangements in advance. They may also face greater uncertainty along the way as they seek to [establish new relationships and negotiate deals along the way](#).

Figure 2. Different strategies in the use of smuggler services, by gender and age groups

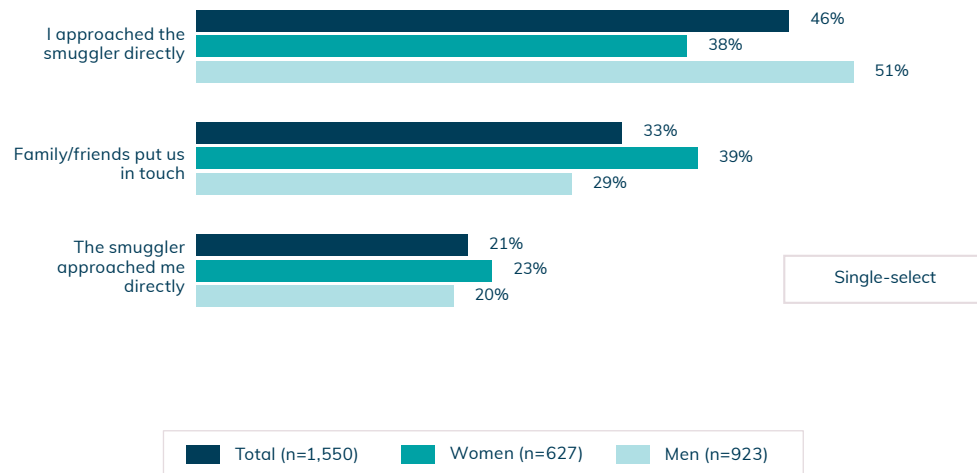


Women's decision to use smuggler services is just as intentional and driven by personal choice as men's. Overall, most women (75%) and men (76%) initially intended to use smugglers, indicating similar levels of planning and expectations regarding the use of smuggler services. Only 7% of women and 5% of men reported being pressured by smugglers to use their services. Rather, both women (28%) and men (26%) across ages reported feeling they had no alternative to smugglers, reflecting a similar perception of restricted access to regular migration pathways.

Women take a more indirect approach for initial contact with smugglers

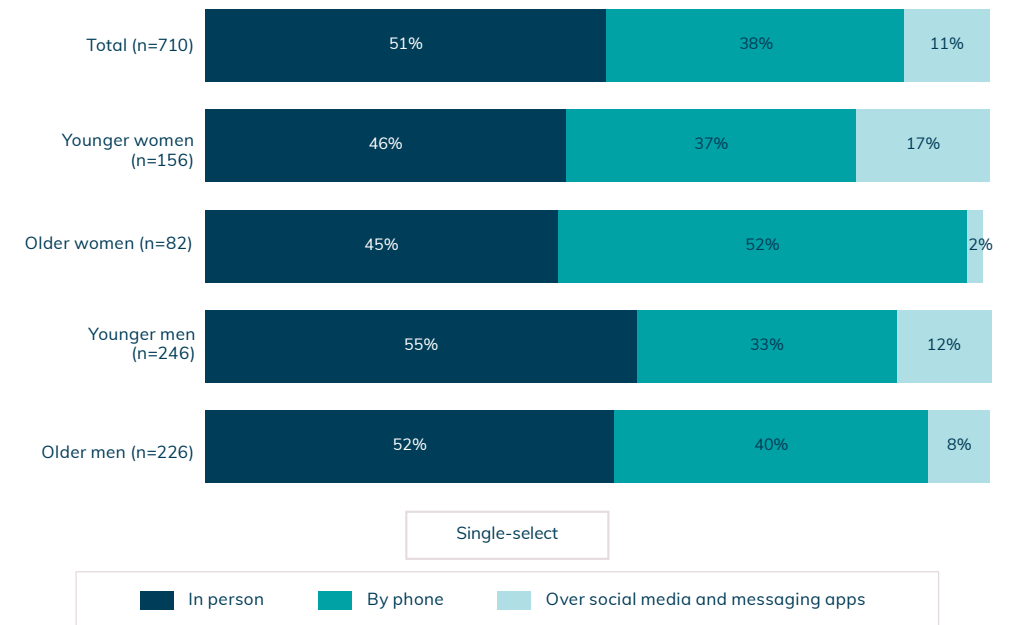
Women rely more often than men on their social networks to establish contact with smugglers. Women reported relying on family and friends for intermediation (39%) and directly approaching smugglers (38%) to get in touch with their initial smuggler. In contrast, men more frequently approached smugglers directly (51%) rather than through family and friends (29%), suggesting that men have a higher level of comfort engaging independently with smugglers. Younger women (18-29) relied on family and friends to contact smugglers slightly more often (41%) than older women (35%). Additionally, family and friends in the country of departure had a stronger influence on young women's decisions to use smugglers (46% for young women vs. 36% for older women). This suggests a more collective decision-making approach among younger women and/or a greater reliance on trusted intermediaries to engage with smugglers.

Figure 3. How did you first get in touch with the initial smuggler? By gender



When initiating contact with the smuggler(s), younger women prefer phone calls and social media to contact smugglers, whereas younger men more often met smugglers in person (Figure 4). Among the respondents who approached their smuggler directly themselves (n=710), younger and older men most often met smugglers in person (55% and 52%, respectively), compared to 46% of younger women and 45% of older women. The majority of older women (52%; 43/82) contacted smugglers by phone.³ In contrast, younger women were the group that reported using social media or messaging apps most often, at 17%.

Figure 4. Different methods used to approach smugglers, by gender and age groups⁴



When smugglers are the ones initiating contact with migrants, in-person recruitment methods are consistent across genders. Smugglers initiated contact with women and men at similar rates, directly approaching 23% of women and 20% of men. Among the directly contacted migrants (n=327), the majority (84%) were approached in person, while 8% were contacted by phone and 8% through social media and messaging apps, with no gender differences observed.

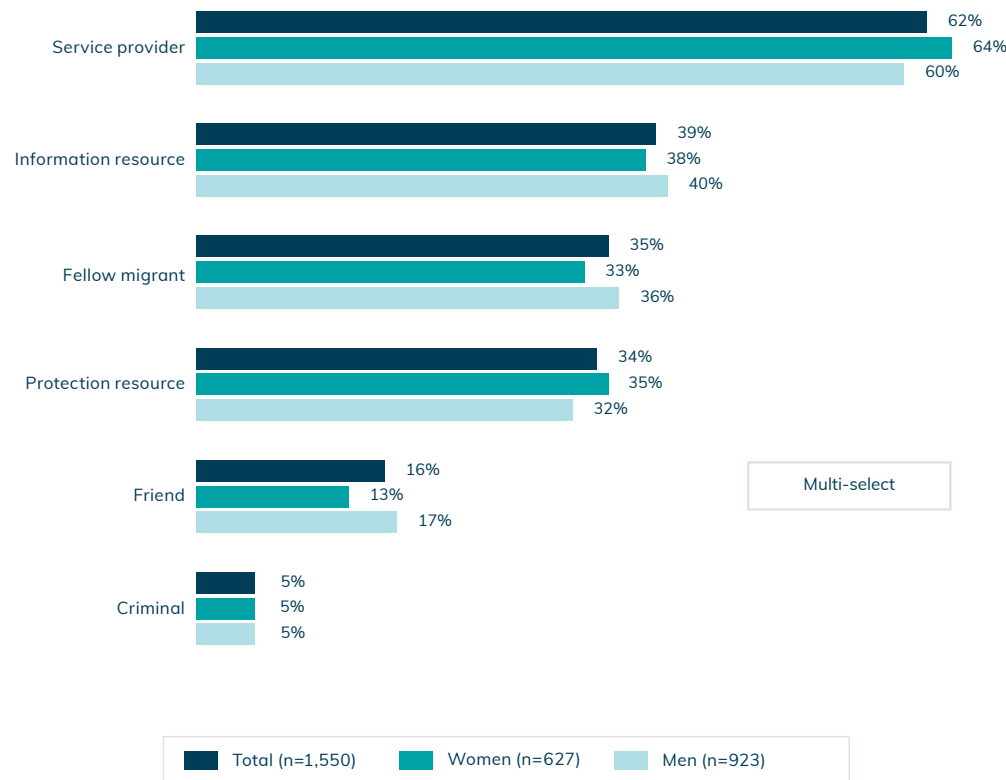
³ Given the small size of the subset, the findings should be interpreted with caution.

⁴ Among respondents who approached their smuggler directly.

The transactional nature of the migrants-smugglers relationship is often mixed with more personal bonds

Men and women primarily view smugglers as service providers (64% and 60%, respectively) and key sources of information (38% and 40%), underscoring the pivotal role smugglers play in helping migrants navigate complex migration routes and make crucial decisions throughout their journey independent of the gender of the respondent.

Figure 5. How would you describe your smugglers? By gender



Migrants-smugglers relationships also have relational aspects, as some respondents perceived smugglers more personally as fellow migrants (35%) or even friends (16%). Older men emerged as the subgroup most frequently perceiving smugglers as fellow migrants (40%) and forming friendships with them (19%).

Overall, smugglers are also far more often described as protection resources (34%) than as criminals (5%). Only 16% of respondents across genders and age groups felt misled by their smugglers. **Older women were the subgroup that most often perceived smugglers as sources of information (45%) and protection (38%),** and only 12% of older women felt misled by their smugglers.

Women smugglers provide typical smuggling services, such as border crossings, while also focusing on welfare support, like accommodation, food, and jobs

Some respondents (8%)⁵ used the services of women smugglers. Among them (n=124), women were over-represented, making up 75% of those using women smugglers' services.

Women smugglers' services reflect those commonly offered on the human smuggling market in the Central Sahel, such as assisting with border crossings (55%) and negotiating with authorities (50%). These figures compare to 66% and 43%, respectively, for migrants who used the services of men smugglers (see Figure 6).⁶ These roles align with the broader operational functions of smugglers in facilitating the movement of migrants across borders.

Women smugglers stand out in providing accommodation (40% vs. 26% of men smugglers), food and water (40% vs. 20%), and helping other migrants find jobs (24% vs. 6%). This suggests that while both genders engage in core smuggling functions,

⁵ Among them (n=124), 70% exclusively used the services of women smugglers, while 30% (n=37) engaged multiple smugglers of both genders.

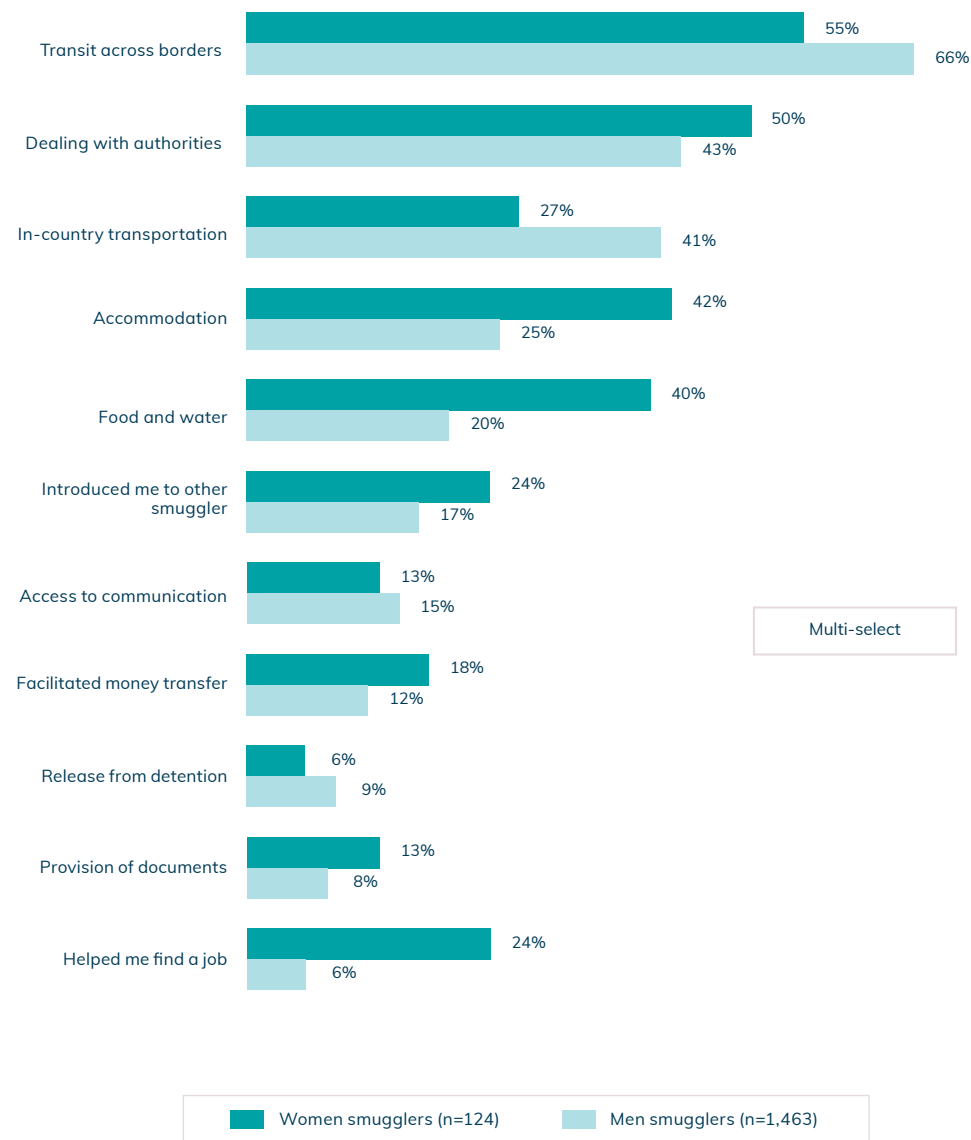
⁶ The sample size for respondents who used the services of women smugglers (n=124) is smaller than for those who used men smugglers (n=1,463). This disparity may affect the reliability of comparisons, and findings should be interpreted with caution.

women smugglers more often provide welfare-oriented support. Men smugglers appear to play a more prominent role in physical movement, as reflected in their higher involvement in both border crossings (66%, compared to 55% for women smugglers) and in-country transportation (41% vs. 27%).

In addition, **women smugglers frequently act as coordinators**, connecting their clients with other smugglers (24% vs. 17% for men smugglers) and arranging money transfers (18% vs. 12% for men). This positions women smugglers as both service providers and enablers within the broader smuggling network.

Despite these differences, the majority of respondents (n=1,463) used men smugglers, with only a smaller proportion (n=124) relying on women smugglers. This highlights that, while **women play an important role in smuggling networks, men remain the dominant service providers in this context**.

Figure 6. What did the smuggler provide you with? Among respondents who used women smugglers' and those who used men smugglers' services



Respondents showed greater wariness towards women smugglers than men smugglers. Women smugglers were described as criminals (10%) slightly more often than men smugglers (4%).⁷ Similarly, 20% of their users felt intentionally misled, compared to 16% of those who used men smugglers.⁸

Respondents also expressed a slightly lower satisfaction with women smugglers' services, with 75% feeling their smuggler helped them achieve their migration goals, compared to 83% in the overall sample. This suggests that women smugglers may not be reliable as other smugglers in facilitating migrants' long-term objectives, particularly in reaching their final destinations.

For those who used a woman smuggler, the decision to use a smuggler at all, regardless of gender, was often driven by necessity. Nearly half (46%) of respondents who used women smugglers' services reported having no alternative to smuggling. 25% of respondents who used a man smuggler also cited a lack of alternatives for using smugglers,⁹ possibly stemming from the need to navigate risks and/or corruption along migration routes in the absence of accessible pathways for regular migration.

7 A Chi-square test showed that the difference in smuggler perceptions between users of women smugglers and men smugglers was only marginally statistically significant ($p < 0.65$).

8 A Chi-square test confirmed that the difference in perceptions of being misled between users of women smugglers (20%) and men smugglers (16%) was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

9 A Chi-square test confirmed that the difference in citing a lack of alternatives between users of women smugglers (46%) and men smugglers (25%) was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).



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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 migration 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