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The role of smuggling in shaping migrants' journeys, finances and risks in the Central Sahel

Executive summary

This research paper sheds light on emerging smuggling trends and resilience dynamics amid increasing movement restrictions in the Central Sahel region. The analysis employs a comparative approach to assess how the experiences of migrants who used smuggler services differ from those who travelled independently along mixed migration routes in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In 2023, these three countries formed the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS) confederation. This paper illustrates how migrants use smugglers to bypass occasional restrictions at borders between members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and to navigate dangerous routes amid growing insecurity within ASS countries. Findings suggest that while smugglers are used to travel along dangerous routes, those who rely on them tend to develop some vulnerability more frequently than independent travellers. These include greater vulnerability to indebtedness and exploitation—particularly in the case of women—as well as heightened risks of corruption.

Key findings

This paper aims to refine the understanding of the role of smugglers in facilitating migrants' movement in the context of a deteriorating political and security landscape in the Central Sahel region. It is based on 2,674 responses

to the 4Mi survey collected between May and August 2024 in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso (see Methodology below).¹

Human smuggling along mixed migration routes

- **Even migrants with valid travel documents may turn to smugglers.** Half (49%) of smuggler-users considered themselves regular migrants.² At the same time, irregular migration is not always tied to smuggling, as 26% of migrants who did not use smuggler services reported being in an irregular situation.
- **In most cases, the use of smuggler services varies according to specific context.** Respondents turned to a single smuggler more often for one part of their journey only (50%) than for the entire trip (35%).
- **Migrants often seek the assistance of smugglers when travelling further afield.** Among those who passed through multiple countries (n=1,102), 65% reported using smugglers, compared to 53% of those who did not transit (n=1,572).
- **The use of smuggler services is also driven by insecurity and movement restrictions on specific segments of the journey:**
 - **Smugglers primarily help migrants travel through dangerous routes.** Half of smuggler-users (50%) passed through dangerous locations, compared to 42% of independent travellers. **Migrants keep using dangerous routes despite risks, and they do not necessarily take long detours.** For instance, 15% of the respondents who relied on smugglers to cross borders (n=1,259) travelled through the Burkina Faso-Niger border despite increasing threats across this border zone.
 - **Smugglers also assist migrants to overcome movement restrictions with ECOWAS countries.** Among respondents who used smuggler services to facilitate border crossings, 17% transited through the Nigeria-Niger border and 7% through the Benin-Niger border, both of which were closed following the military coup in Niger in July 2023.

Financing for the journey, costs and smuggling fees

- **Smuggler fees in the Central Sahel are relatively low, with advance payments being a common practice.** Half of smuggler-users reported paying fees of USD 49 or less, and 56% made payments upfront.
- **Smuggler-users, especially women, enjoy less financial independence from the outset of their journey.** Barely a third (36%) of smuggler-users relied solely on their personal savings to finance their journey before departing, compared to 43% of independent travellers. Women who used smugglers (n=627) are the group that most often turned to their family for financial support (35%) and/or borrowed money (21%) before departure.
- **Distant journeys for smuggler-users often turn out to be more expensive than initially anticipated.** Among respondents who transited through at least one country, those who used smuggler services (n=809) more often reported insufficient pre-departure funds (41%) compared to independent travellers (n=370; 34%).
- **For women, insufficient pre-departure funds can increase the risk of exploitation along the way, regardless of whether they use smugglers.** Among those who reported insufficient pre-departure funds, 16% of women smuggler-users (n=157) and 15% of women independent travellers (n=98) reported resorting to transactional sex to cover outstanding costs.

1 All findings in this paper refer to the survey response dataset and, because of the sampling methodology, are not necessarily representative of all migrants travelling through the Central Sahel.

2 The terms "regular" and "irregular" refer to respondents' own perceptions of their legal status in the country of interview. Regular status is understood as having valid travel documents, a residence permit, or not needing any specific documentation to legally remain in the country. Irregular status, on the other hand, describes situations where respondents entered the country without proper documentation, or where their legal authorization, such as visas or permits, has expired.

Protection and risks

- **Corruption is the most common risk faced by migrants on dangerous routes in the Central Sahel**, affecting both those who used smuggler services (74% of n=771) and those who did not (66% of n=467).
- **Women risk gender-based violence regardless of smuggler use.** Both women smuggler-users (n=270; 14%) and women independent travellers (n=159; 13%) cited sexual violence as a risk in dangerous locations.
- **Migrants using smuggler services have less direct contact with officials**, such as police at border crossings (79%) and within countries (59%), compared to independent travellers (86% and 65%, respectively). When migrants have no direct contact with officials but still report exposure to corruption risks, their smugglers may have facilitated bribery negotiations with officials as part of the services they provide.
- **Smugglers are far more often cited as assistance providers (47%) than as potential perpetrators of abuse (3%).** Access to assistance is also more prevalent among smuggler-users (58%) compared to independent travellers (43%). One-third (32%) hire smugglers as a strategy to protect themselves from abuse during their journey.
- **Men more often travel along highly dangerous routes and rely on smugglers to navigate these segments.** Men smuggler-users who passed through dangerous locations (n=501) reported life-threatening (42%) and kidnapping (41%) risks more often than other gender and traveller groups.
- **The majority (83%) of smuggler-users believed that smugglers were crucial to achieving their migration goals.** Only a minority (16%) indicated that their smugglers intentionally misled them.

1. Introduction

The Central Sahel is a key transit corridor for human smuggling,³ connecting intraregional movements with routes leading to Northern Africa and Europe.⁴

The ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol (FMP) facilitates regional mobility by enabling citizens of member states to travel, live, and work within the bloc for up to 90 days without the need for visas or extensive documentation.⁵ Accordingly, by mid-2020, nearly 90% of migrants in West Africa came from neighbouring countries.⁶ But despite the FMP's provision of regular pathways, migrants often resort to informal migration routes due to several factors, including the lack of formal documents needed for travel, unawareness of their rights to free movement,⁷ and corruption on land routes.⁸ As a result, migrants often turn to smugglers to facilitate their travel across and within borders,⁹ providing forged identity documents, crucial information on routes and dangers, and facilitating interactions with local authorities.¹⁰

Increasing movement restrictions in the Central Sahel, driven by political and security challenges, have recently led to a rise in demand for smuggling services. Following military coups in Mali (in 2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023), ECOWAS sanctions, including border closures and travel bans, have restricted movement toward the Central Sahel.¹¹ Insecurity has also disrupted mobility and smuggling activities and led to heightened risks along established routes in the Central Sahel¹² while also causing a major forced displacement crisis.¹³ In this context, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have sought to strengthen cooperation through the new ASS confederation to facilitate the free movement of people and goods.¹⁴ However, cooperation among the three country's juntas remains predominantly focused on security, reflecting a common priority to stabilize their respective territories amid growing internal threats.¹⁵ Military operations against non-state armed groups, internal control measures such as checkpoints and curfews, and the ASS states' own imposition of movement restrictions with ECOWAS countries have all worsened mobility constraints. Northbound migration

routes have seen distinct developments, including a resurgence in movements toward Algeria and Libya,¹⁶ particularly after the repeal of Niger's anti-smuggling law in November 2023.¹⁷

This research paper analyses trends in human smuggling across the Central Sahel amid political instability and worsening security. The analysis is based on 2,674 surveys with migrants interviewed in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in 2024, as well as on a review of secondary sources. It compares the experiences of migrants who used smuggler services (n=1,550) with those who did not (n=1,124) **to better understand the relationship between smuggler use and migrants' routes, journey costs, and protection risks.** This report is part of a series of publications that aim to contribute to a nuanced and gender-sensitive¹⁸ understanding of the role of human smuggling in facilitating movements¹⁹ in the region.

3 For more information on MMC's understanding of human smuggling, visit <https://mixedmigration.org/what-is-mixed-migration/>

4 Lobe, C. (2023), *Objectivation des flux migratoires en provenance du Sahel vers l'Europe*. IRIS

5 ECOWAS (2018), *Regional migration indicators*

6 Migration Data Portal (2021) *Migration in Western Africa*

7 Golovko, E. (2022), *Sahel: imaginaries, mobility and interventions*, Migration Control

8 UNODC (2023), *Smuggling of migrants in the Sahel*

9 MMC (2021), *The many roles of migrant smugglers and movement facilitators in West and North Africa*

10 MMC (2021), *Corruption and the role of state officials in human smuggling*

11 Fereday, A. (2024), *Niger. Coup reverses 2015 human smuggling ban amid major political and security upheaval*, GI-TOC

12 Berger, F. (2024), *Mali. Human smuggling resilient amid major political and security upheaval*, GI-TOC

13 UNHCR (2024), *RBWCA – Monthly statistics – August 2024*

14 Jeune Afrique (24 November 2024), *Mali, Niger, Burkina : même passeport?*

15 Kanté, A. & Al. (2024), *Rethinking responses to unconstitutional changes of government in West Africa*, ISS

16 IOM (2024), *Matrice de suivi des déplacements – OIM Niger – Suivi des flux de populations. Octobre 2024. Rapport n°81*

17 For a discussion of the implications of this repeal, see Garver-Affeldt, J. (2023), *The criminalization of mobility in Niger: the case of Law 2015-36*, Mixed Migration Centre

18 MMC (2025), *Gendered smuggler-migrant interactions in the Central Sahel*

19 MMC (2025), *Understanding the roles of smugglers along mixed migration routes in the Central Sahel*

2. Methodology

This paper is based on the responses of 2,674 migrants surveyed by 4Mi,²⁰ MMC's flagship data collection system, between May and August 2024 in Burkina Faso (n=917), Mali (n=878), and Niger (n=879). The research also includes a literature review that contextualizes the

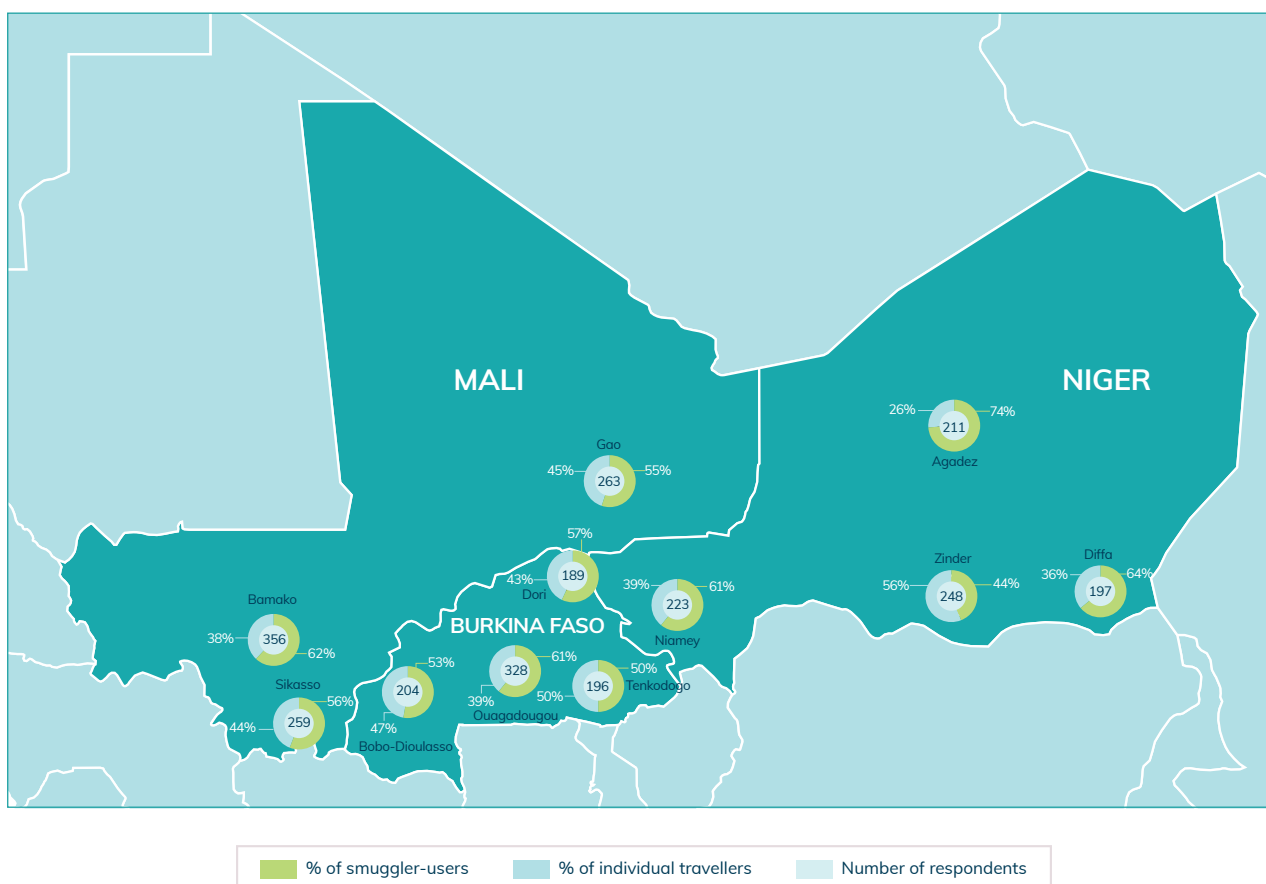
findings within existing research on mixed migration and human smuggling in the Central Sahel. Relevant consulted documents are referenced in the footnotes.

2.1 4Mi sample and respondent profiles

Sampling was purposive. Respondents who used smugglers accounted for 58% (n=1,550) of the analysed dataset and those who travelled independently 42% (n=1,124). This allowed meaningful comparisons to be drawn between the experiences of the two groups in terms of migration routes, journey costs and protection risks. 40% respondents were women (n=1,062) and 60% were men (n=1,612). The distribution of respondents who used smuggler services and those travelling independently was similar across both genders:

respectively 59% (n=627) vs 41% (n=435) among women, and 57% (n=923) vs 43% (n=689) among men. The breakdown of respondents between those who used smuggler services and those travelling independently was also similar across the survey countries: 56% vs 44% in Burkina Faso, 58% vs 42% in Mali, and 60% vs 40% in Niger. However, variations occurred between survey locations, with the highest rate of respondents who used smuggler services recorded in Agadez (74%), and the lowest in Zinder (44%) in Niger (see Map 1).

Map 1. Survey location and smuggler use



20 For more information on the 4Mi methodology, visit <https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/>.

The sample's timeframe coincided with a period of political turbulence in the region. Most respondents (77%) began their journey after the establishment of the ASS in September 2023. Among those surveyed in Niger (n=879), 93% reported starting their journey after the military coup there in July 2023 and the subsequent ECOWAS sanctions and movement restrictions.

While respondents were drawn from a total of 28 countries, 90% were citizens of ECOWAS states who, in the absence of additional restrictions or obstacles,

benefitted from the bloc's free movement protocol. The most common countries of origin were Nigeria (16%), Togo (12%) and Côte d'Ivoire (11%). The top five countries of origin in West Africa collectively constituted 56% of the entire sample, with the breakdown of respondents using smuggler services and those traveling independently only slightly varying across these nationalities (see Table 1 below). This suggests that nationality does not necessarily influence the use of smuggler services among citizens of different ECOWAS member countries.

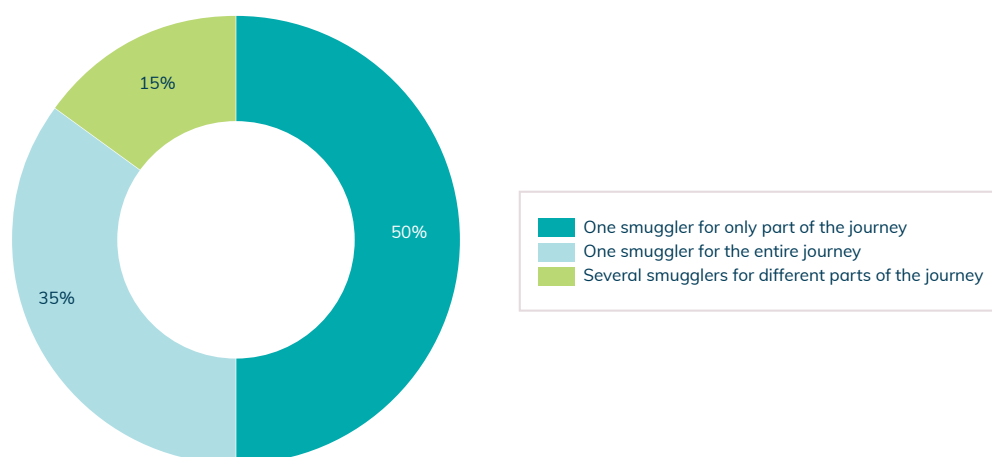
Table 1. Respondent nationalities and profiles

Nationalities	Smuggler-users		Independent travellers		Total
	n	%	n	%	
Nigeria	233	53%	205	47%	438
Togo	174	55%	140	45%	314
Côte d'Ivoire	172	59%	122	41%	294
Benin	147	56%	116	44%	263
Niger	99	56%	77	44%	176

While smugglers are often associated with irregular journeys, many migrants using smuggler services are in regular situations. Almost half of the respondents (49%) who used a smuggler reported being in a regular status at the time they were surveyed, while 38% were in an irregular situation. This aligns with previous findings confirming that smuggling in the Central Sahel is not necessarily tied to irregular journeys.²¹ Instead, migrants often use smugglers to navigate increasingly dangerous routes in the region. Conversely, independent travellers could also encounter irregular status (26%), although the majority (59%) reported having a regular status at the time of the survey.

The largest group of smuggler-users report engaging with only one smuggler for a single segment of their journey. Barely a third (35%) of respondents who used smuggler services relied on the same smuggler for their entire journey. Half (50%) of respondents who used smuggler services did so for just one part of their journey (such as at a specific border crossing), while 15% engaged with multiple smugglers for different segments of their trip (see Figure 1). This suggests that most migrants using smuggler services do not exclusively rely on smuggler-led routes; instead, their paths overlap with those of independent travellers, leading to similar experiences along these segments.

Figure 1. Types of smuggler engagement
% of respondents who used smugglers (n=1,550)



21 UNODC (2023), *Op.cit.*

3. Findings

3.1. Smugglers are used for long distance and cross-border movements

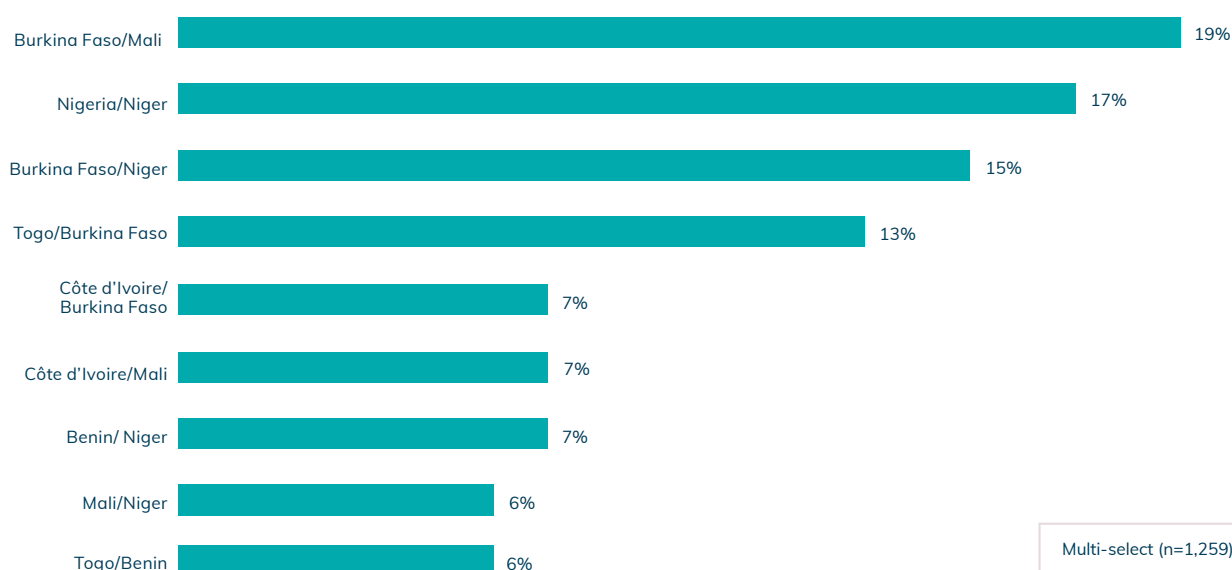
3.1.1. Longer and multi-country journeys entail greater use of smugglers

The use of smugglers increases as migrants travel farther away from their home. Respondents who travelled through at least one additional country between their country of departure and the country where they were interviewed (n=1,102) more frequently reported relying on smugglers during their journey (65%) compared to those who did not transit an additional country (n=1,572, 53%). Smuggler-users and independent travellers had similar intentions of traveling farther afield, with 70% and 65%, respectively, aiming to reach a destination outside of West Africa.²²

3.1.2. Use of smuggler services to cross borders is common

Smugglers were used both to bypass restrictions at borders with other ECOWAS countries and to overcome security challenges at borders between ASS states. Among the surveyed migrants who relied on smuggling services (n=1,550), a vast majority (81%; n=1,259) utilized these services to cross one or more borders during their journey. Figure 2 and the three case studies below highlight two concurrent trends since the establishment of the ASS and the introduction of ECOWAS sanctions: smugglers are used to navigate dangerous routes in the increasingly insecure Central Sahel, and they are seen as essential for getting through officially closed borders with non-ASS countries.

Figure 2. Which borders did you use a smuggler to get across? Top 9 responses.



22 This includes respondents who had not yet reached the end of their journey but had selected a preferred destination outside of West Africa.

Case study 1: Smuggling within the ASS confederation

Human smuggling routes between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have proved resilient amid worsening security conditions. As illustrated by Figure 2 above, the border most frequently crossed by respondents who used smugglers was that between Burkina Faso and Mali, closely followed by the Nigeria-Niger and Burkina Faso-Niger borders. Such respondents spanned a wide range of nationalities. For instance, those who crossed the Burkina Faso-Niger border (n=195) included Nigeriens (15%), Burkinabé (11%),²³ Senegalese (9%), Ivorians (8%), Guineans (8%), Ghanaians (7%) and individuals from 13 additional countries.²⁴ This suggests that migrants from various West and Central African countries do not necessarily take detours through safer transit countries like Benin and Nigeria, despite the threats they face in the Central Sahel²⁵ in dangerous areas, such as the Dori-Téra road and the Kantchari-Makalondi border crossing. Instead, they primarily rely on smuggler networks to find shorter, alternative routes through the three countries.

Burkina Faso is a critical hub in the network of smuggling routes within the region. Indeed, Burkina Faso's borders appear four times among the top five most frequently crossed with smuggler assistance. Therefore, travelling to and from Burkina Faso, which serves as a crossroad between coastal countries and the Central Sahel,²⁶ often requires smuggler assistance. Of the respondents who transited through Burkina Faso (n=440), 71% had used smuggler services.

Case study 2: Smuggling between Benin and Niger

4Mi survey data confirms the re-emergence of human smuggling routes between Benin and Niger; these are mostly used by nationals of neighbouring countries. The use of smugglers by migrants in Benin is relatively rare.²⁷ But local smuggling networks that sprang up during COVID19 restrictions in the northern Benin town

of Malanville, a key transit hub on the Niger border, have resumed operations via boat across the Niger River since the border was closed as part of ECOWAS sanctions in July 2023.²⁸ While insecurity may have disrupted routes from Burkina Faso to Niger,²⁹ these changes did not lead to long-distance detours for migrants coming from countries further afield in West Africa. This route seems to be primarily used by nationals from neighbouring countries, such as Benin (37 of the 83 smuggler-using respondents who took this route) and Niger (29/83), even though it may be a detour for Nigeriens traveling via Burkina Faso or Mali.³⁰

Case study 3: Smuggling between Niger and Nigeria

Established smuggling networks along the Nigeria-Niger border have managed to meet the ongoing demand for cross-border passage. 17% of respondents who relied on smuggler services to cross borders transited through the Nigeria-Niger border, making it the second most used crossing among all routes. Despite intermittent and partial re-openings, movement restrictions through the Nigeria-Niger border had progressively tightened since 2019 due to stricter anti-smuggling policies and COVID-19 measures. As a result, when the border was fully closed for eight months following the July 2023 coup in Niger, smuggling networks had already adapted to evolving circumstances, employing methods such as motorbike-taxis to bypass official crossings.³¹ Smugglers at the Nigeria-Niger border are primarily linked to well-organized Nigerian human smuggling networks, which predominantly recruit Nigerians and focus on smuggling to North Africa and Europe, with routes passing through Niger and Mali.³² This is reflected in high prevalence (75%) of Nigerians among respondents who used smuggler services to cross the Niger-Nigeria border (n=212), with low diversity in the nationalities (10) engaged in these crossings.

23 Nigeriens were interviewed in Burkina Faso or Mali, while Burkinabé were interviewed in Mali or Niger.

24 Smuggler services were used by individuals of 20 different nationalities to cross the Mali-Burkina Faso border (n=245) and by individuals of 22 different nationalities to cross the Mali-Niger border (n=80).

25 MMC (2024), [Protection risks and assistance needs of migrants in the Central Sahel](#)

26 IOM GMDAC (2021), [Top 10 destination countries of migrants in Western Africa and the share of migrants in their population](#)

27 GI-TOC (2023), [Global Organized Crime Index, Benin](#)

28 Fereday, A. (2024), [Niger. Coup reverses 2015 human smuggling ban amid major political and security upheaval](#), GI-TOC

29 Fereday, A. (2024), [Op.cit.](#), GI-TOC

30 Only three other nationalities were represented: Togo (10/83), Ghana (5/83) and Côte d'Ivoire (2/83).

31 Fereday, A. (2024), [Op.cit.](#), GI-TOC

32 GI-TOC (2023), [Op.cit.](#)

3.1.3. Using smugglers does not always shorten journeys or reduce the need to stop en route

Smuggler services do not contribute to faster journeys. The majority (84%) of respondents reached the country where they were surveyed within a month after beginning their migration journey, regardless of whether they used smuggler services (84%) or travelled independently (85%).

Most respondents paused during their journeys, with minor difference between those using smuggler services (96%) and independent travellers (91%). The average number of stops was also similar, with smuggler-users (n=1,494) making an average of 2.76 stops and independent travellers (n=1,020) 2.65 stops. This suggests that pauses are a common part of the journey, and despite the support smugglers may offer, migrants using their services still make a similar number of stops as those traveling independently.

3.2. Despite being relatively cheap, longer journeys among smuggler-users correlate with increased financial dependence on others and with indebtedness

3.2.1. Smuggler costs in the Central Sahel region are relatively low

Smuggling fees increase the overall costs of migration journeys, but they make up a relatively small proportion of the total expenses. Respondents who used smuggler services reported average overall journey costs of USD390, 31% higher compared to those traveling independently (USD298).³³ The average smuggling fees paid were USD113,³⁴ accounting for 29% of the total journey costs. However, exceptional cases—such as respondents reporting high smuggler fees of up to USD2,750 due to unique circumstances³⁵—skew the overall mean. Half of smuggler-using respondents reported paying fees of USD49 or less (median). These relatively low costs reflect several trends in the smuggling market in the Central Sahel. Half (50%) of those who used smugglers did so only once, for a single part of

Migrants using smuggler services often interrupt their journey to find (new) smugglers, which offsets the fewer stops made to find paid work. Both surveyed independent travellers (n=2,266 stops) and those using smugglers (n=3,600 stops) frequently stopped for relatively similar reasons. The main reason for stopping was to find work to pay for the next leg of the journey, though independent travellers did this slightly more often (57%) than those using smugglers (50%). This suggests independent travellers might have more flexibility in finding work. Smugglers may also limit their clients' options due to pre-planned routes, and such clients may need to work less frequently when they paid their smuggler upfront. Additionally, 17% of smuggler-using respondents reported having to stop en route to find a smuggler for the next leg of their journey, which may contribute to the greater frequency of stops among this subset.

their journey (see Figure 1 above) often covering short distances in specific areas. Border crossings exemplify this pattern, with small-scale smugglers operating in highly competitive and saturated environments, such as pirogue drivers at the border between Benin and Niger or motorbike-taxi operators at the Nigeria-Niger border.³⁶

Advance payments to smugglers are standard practice, with 56% of respondents paying in full before departure. This figure rises to 69% among those using a single smuggler for the entire journey (n=543). Payments in instalments (made by 17% smuggler-users), at the destination (11%), or upon service delivery (11%) may encourage smugglers to prioritize migrant safety.³⁷ A small minority (3%) paid through labour, with the highest rate (17%) found among Togolese women (n=114), suggesting increased vulnerability to exploitation, including coerced sexual services as payment.³⁸

33 Among respondents who knew their total expenditure: 1,471 smuggler users and 1,063 independent travellers.

34 Among respondents who knew the amount paid to smugglers (n=1,158).

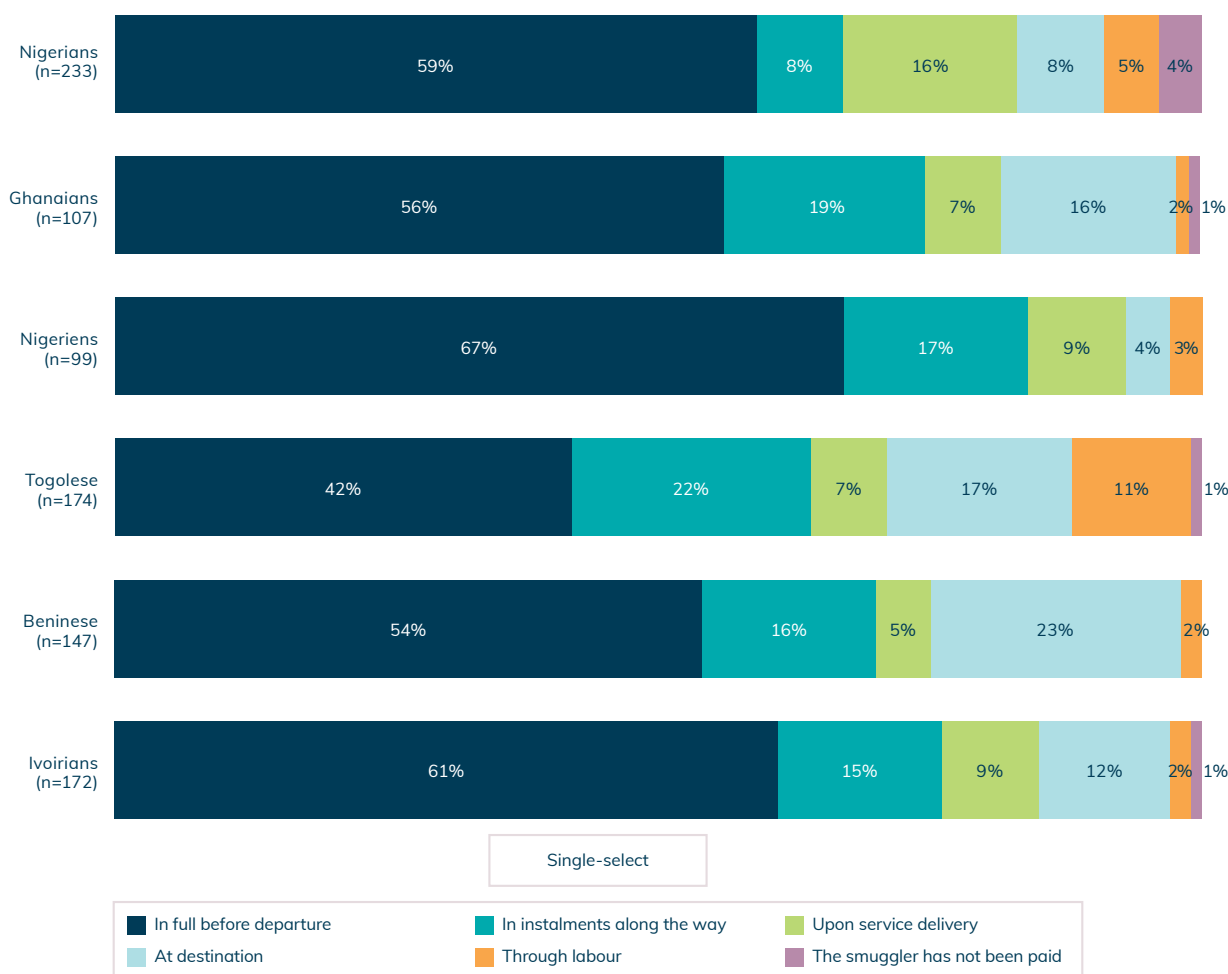
35 Such as having already crossed the Sahara desert toward North Africa, then returned to West Africa. MMC (2024), [Financing of human smuggling in West and North Africa](#)

36 Fereday, A. (2024), [Op. cit.](#), GI-TOC

37 Carling, J., Gallagher, A. & Horwood, C. (2015), [Beyond definitions: global migration and the smuggling-trafficking nexus](#), RMMS

38 UNODC (2021), [Op. cit.](#)

Figure 3. How did you pay the smuggler(s)? By country of origin (top 6 nationalities)



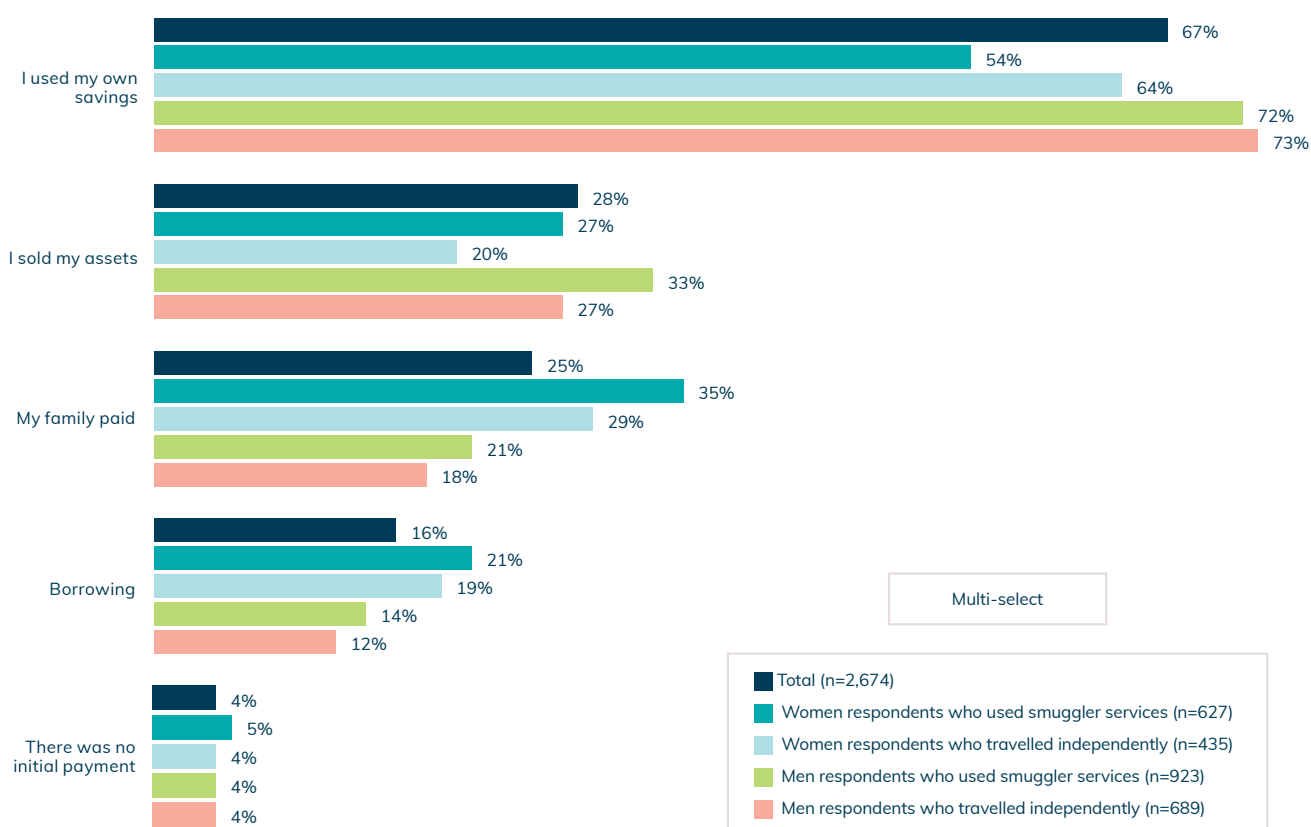
3.2.2. Women who use smugglers are less financially independent than other categories of migrant before departing

Given the higher journey costs, migrants using smuggler services often have to rely on a wider range of funding methods before departure. Among respondents who used smuggler services (n=1,550), 36% relied solely on their personal savings to finance their journey, compared to 43% of independent travellers (n=1,124). Indeed, migrants using smuggler services may incur higher costs for their journey and the majority makes advance payments (see Section 3.2.1.), prompting them to diversify their funding methods, such as selling their assets (31% vs 24% among independent travellers).

This also suggests that they are less prone to consider returning home, given the financial strain and asset liquidation involved.

Women using smuggler services are experiencing greater financial vulnerability from the outset of their journey. Among this subset (n=627), only 28% solely relied on their personal savings to finance their journey. Therefore, women who used smugglers are the group that most often turned to their family for financial support (35%) and/or borrowed money (21%; see Figure 4). This suggests that women who use smuggler services may experience greater financial vulnerability, potentially resulting in increased indebtedness.

Figure 4. How did you initially finance your journey? By gender and smuggler use



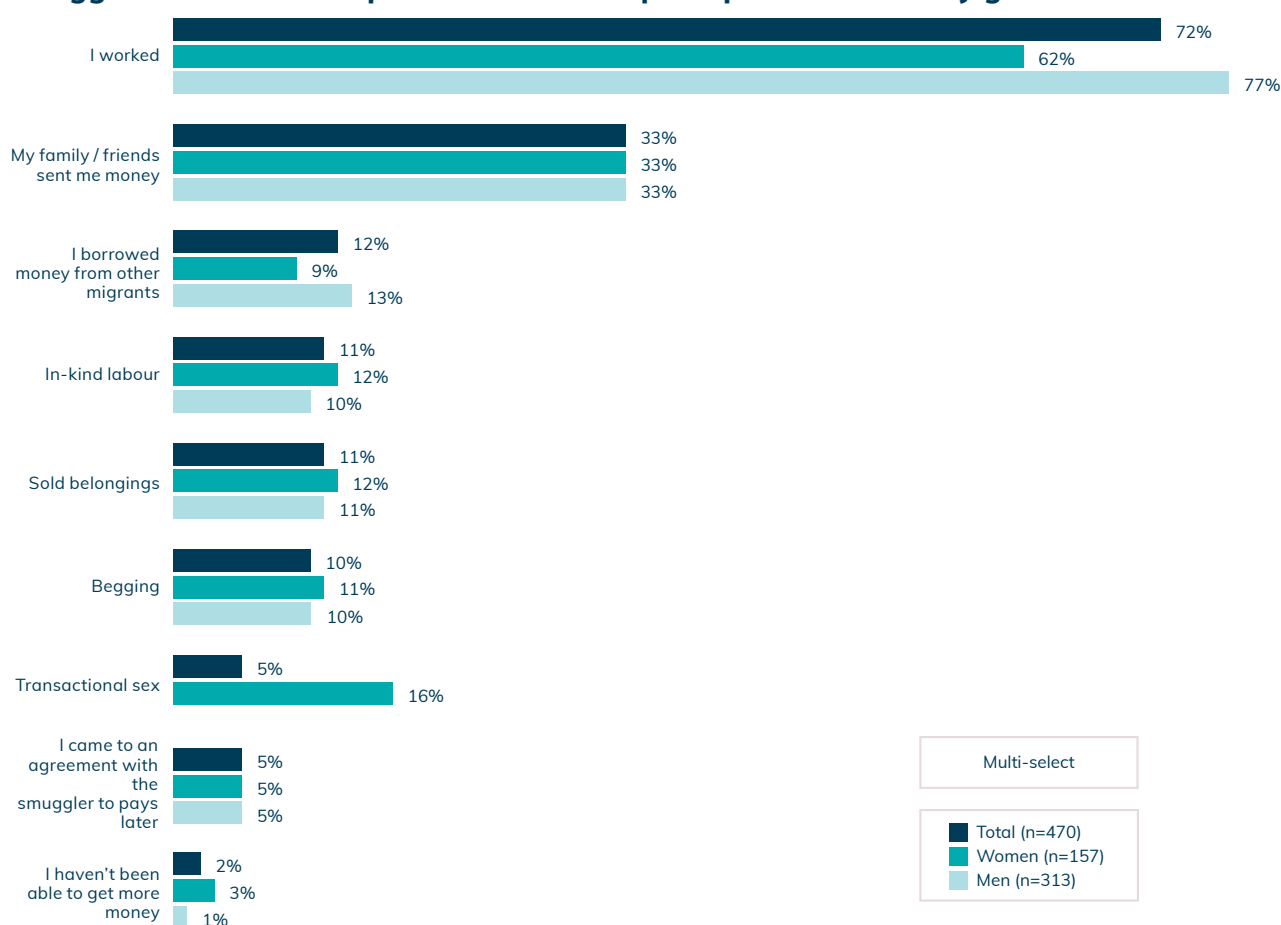
3.2.3. Distant journeys for smuggler-users often turn out to be more expensive than initially anticipated

Financial shortfalls during migration are experienced by one in three individuals relying on smuggler services, particularly among those who travelled through multiple countries and among men. Despite the majority making payment in full before departure (see Section 3.2.1.), a third (32%) of respondents who used smuggler services reported that the money they had at departure was insufficient to cover expenses during their journey.³⁹ This appears to be associated with longer, multi-country journeys among smuggler-users, as those who travelled through at least one country between their country of departure and the country where they were interviewed (n=678) represent the subgroup that most frequently reported insufficient pre-departure funds (41%). This compares to 23% among smuggler-users who did not transit through at least one additional country before arriving in the country of interview (n=809) and 34% among independent travellers (n=370). Notably, 35% of men who used smuggler services (n=923) reported insufficient predeparture funds, compared to 26% of women (n=627), suggesting gender disparities in financial preparedness, predeparture arrangements with smugglers, and costs during the journey.

Smuggler-reliant migrants with insufficient predeparture funds often rely on family and friends to cover outstanding costs. Most migrants who reported insufficient predeparture funds worked to cover their journey expenses, regardless of whether they used smuggler services (n=470; 72%) or travelled independently (n=278; 74%). However, those relying on smugglers were more dependent on financial support from family and friends (33% versus 19%). This indicates that migrants facing additional expenditures related to smuggling fees may be less able to cover costs independently. Gender influenced payment practices: among women reporting insufficient funds, transactional sex was the third most common payment method for both smuggler-users (n=157; 16%) and independent travellers (n=98; 15%), underscoring the heightened risks faced by women in such precarious circumstances.

³⁹ This compares to 26% among independent travellers.

Figure 5. How have you paid the journey since its start? Among respondents who used smuggler services and reported insufficient predeparture funds. By gender



3.3. Migrants rely on smugglers to navigate dangerous routes

3.3.1. Safety is the primary factor influencing route selection in the Central Sahel

Safety was the top criterion in route selection for 58% of all respondents, especially for those not using smugglers. Although 72% of independent travellers considered multiple factors when choosing their itinerary, safety (64%) was their top priority, far outweighing time (38%), cost (27%), or distance (28%). This focus on safety could have led them to choose longer, more expensive, or alternative routes. Independent travellers also more frequently chose familiar routes (30%) compared to smuggler-users (24%), as familiarity may offer a sense of security.

Smuggler-users may rely on smugglers to ensure their safety on dangerous routes they had intentionally planned to take. About half (54%) of them prioritized safety when choosing their itinerary. Most of the time, they selected the route independently, often relying on recommendations from family and friends (52%). Indeed,

only a quarter (25%) reported that their smuggler helped them choose their itinerary,⁴⁰ and only 6% reported that their smuggler's choice was the only factor in their route selection. Similarly, only a small minority (5%) reported being forced into using smuggler services by the smugglers themselves.

3.3.2. Smugglers facilitate travel along dangerous routes

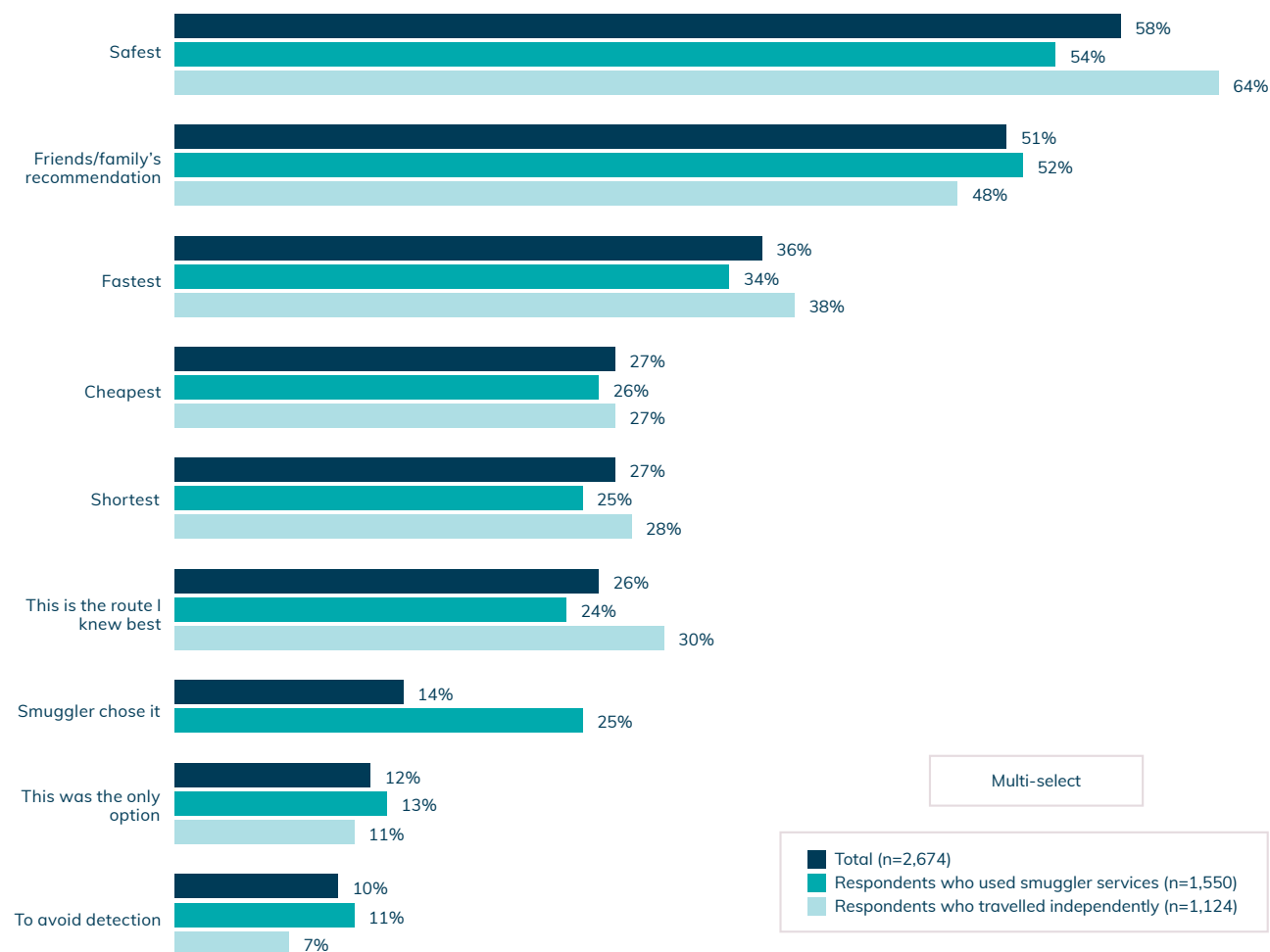
While smuggler-users more often report traveling through dangerous locations than independent travellers, smugglers help them navigate these risks.⁴¹ Half (50%; n=771) of the respondents who used smuggler services reported traveling through dangerous locations, compared to 42% of those who travelled independently.

Some respondents (32%) hired smugglers to protect themselves from abuse and crime during their journey, regardless of whether they travelled through dangerous locations (34%) or not (29%). Only 2% of all respondents

40 This proportion was highest among Nigerians (31%) and lowest among Togolese (17%).

41 UNODC (2023), [Op. cit.](#)

Figure 6. Why did you take this route? By smuggler use



reported avoiding smugglers to protect themselves from abuse, and just 3% of smuggler-users who travelled through dangerous locations identified their smugglers as potential perpetrators of abuse.

Dangerous routes in the Central Sahel are unsafe regardless of whether smugglers are involved.

Collectively, respondents identified a total of 1,715 dangerous locations. Among respondents traveling through dangerous places (n=1,238), both those who used smuggler services (n=771) and those traveling independently (n=467) reported passing through an average of two dangerous locations during their journeys. Both groups of respondents most frequently identified Dori and Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso as the most dangerous locations, followed by Agadez in Niger.⁴²

3.3.3. Smuggler-use intersects with gendered patterns of vulnerability to risks

Bribery and extortion are, by far, the most prevalent risks faced by migrants on routes through the Central

Sahel, with women smuggler-users being particularly vulnerable. Among respondents who passed through dangerous locations (n=1,238), a greater proportion (74%) of those who used smuggler services (n=771) reported facing bribery and extortion than of those who travelled independently (n=467; 66%). Women who used smuggler services (n=270) most frequently reported facing corruption (75%; see Figure 7).

Migrants need to bribe officials during their journey, regardless of whether smugglers are used.⁴⁴ Both those using smuggler services and those travelling independently reported similar rates of bribe payments to the police at borders (65% and 68%, respectively) and within countries (41% and 37%). However, migrants relying on smuggler services are slightly less often in direct contact with the police both at border crossings (79%) and within countries (59%) compared to independent travellers (86% and 65% respectively). Indeed, smugglers presumably take care of managing interactions with authorities as part of the services they offer, including paying the bribes.⁴⁵

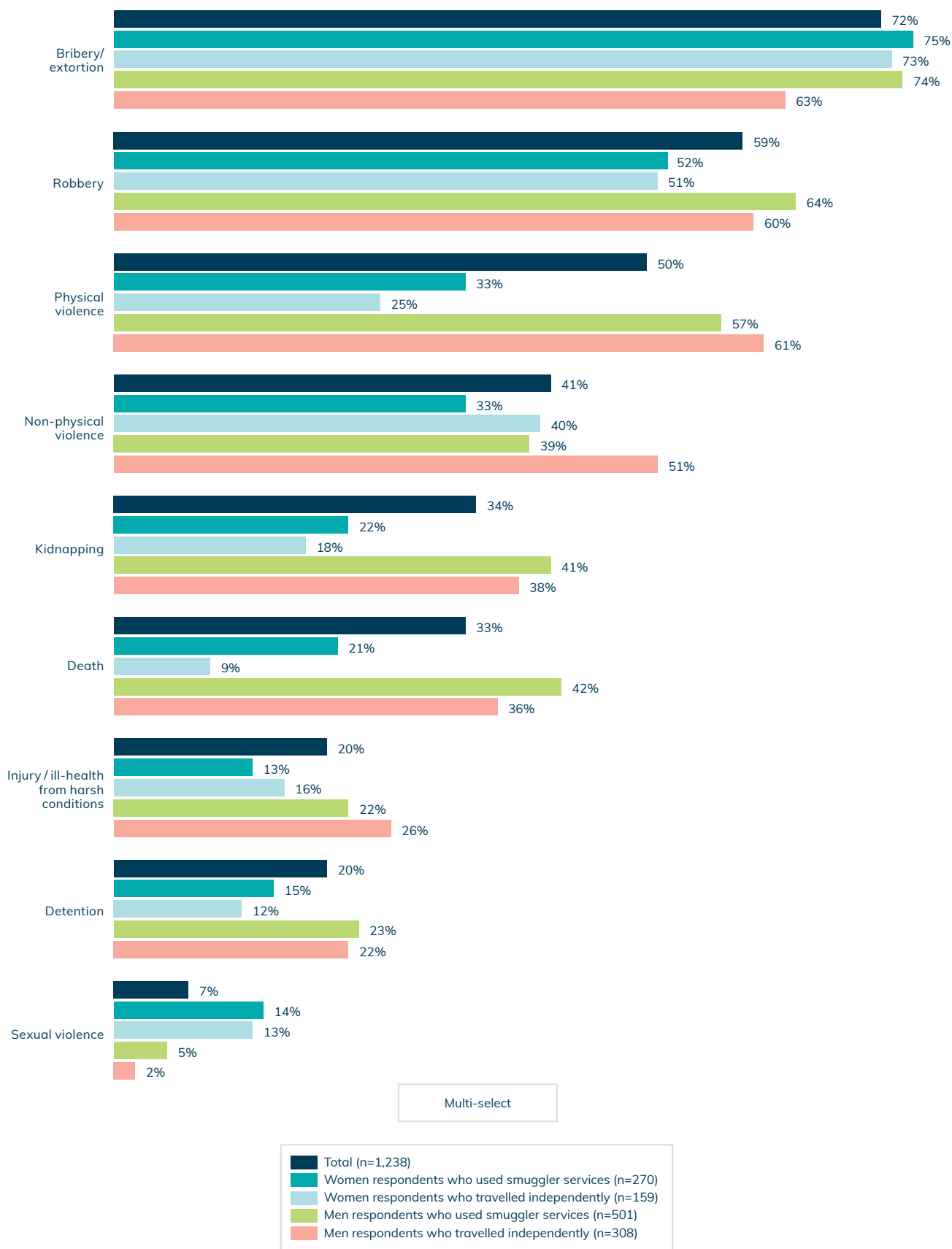
42 Dori was mentioned by 144 respondents (92 smuggler-users; 52 independent travellers), Ouagadougou by 127 respondents (76; 127) and Agadez by 97 respondents (70; 97).

43 Frouws, B.; Brenner, Y. (2019), *A persistent reality: the role of corruption in mixed migration* MMC

44 Merkle, O. ; Reinold, J. ; Siegel, M. (2017), *A gender perspective on corruption encountered during forced and irregular migration*, UNU-MERIT

45 MMC (2021) *Corruption and the role of state officials in human smuggling*

Figure 7. What were the main risks in [dangerous location]? By gender and smuggler use⁴⁶



46 Among respondents who travelled through dangerous places. Respondents could identify up to 5 dangerous locations and were asked the question for each.

Men more often face risks that are associated with the perception of immediate danger to their lives, such as physical violence, kidnapping, and death (see Figure 7). More specifically, men using smuggler services (n=501) mentioned a risk of death (42%) and kidnapping (41%) more frequently than any other respondent subset did. This does not necessarily mean that smugglers deceived men respondents about the dangers of certain routes, or that they directly posed a threat to their clients. In fact, only 18% of men respondents felt they had been intentionally misled by smugglers, and just 3% identified smugglers as potential perpetrators of abuse. Conversely, it does appear that men may more often travel along highly dangerous migration routes and use smugglers to navigate these perilous segments. The same pattern can hold for women using smuggler services, although to a lesser degree than men, as they reported more frequently facing a risk of physical violence (33%) and death (21%) compared to those traveling independently (25% and 9%, respectively).

Men were also more vulnerable to theft, regardless of whether they used smuggler services. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of men respondents reported perceiving a risk of robbery during their journey, compared to half (52%) of women respondents. The higher perception among men of a risk of could be due to their greater use of more dangerous migration routes, which often expose them to criminal actors. Indeed, 46% of men respondents identified criminal gangs as the primary potential perpetrators in the dangerous locations they cited, compared to just 25% of women respondents. These perpetrators may target men as primary earners, perceiving them as more lucrative targets for theft. This view could stem from the assumption that men carry more valuable resources or cash, especially given their role in supporting their families or funding migration journeys with their own savings.

Women face the risk of gender-based violence regardless of whether they use smuggler services. Close to 14% of all women respondents—both smuggler-users (14%) and independent travellers (13%) —who passed through dangerous locations mentioned sexual violence as one of the risks they might face in such locations.

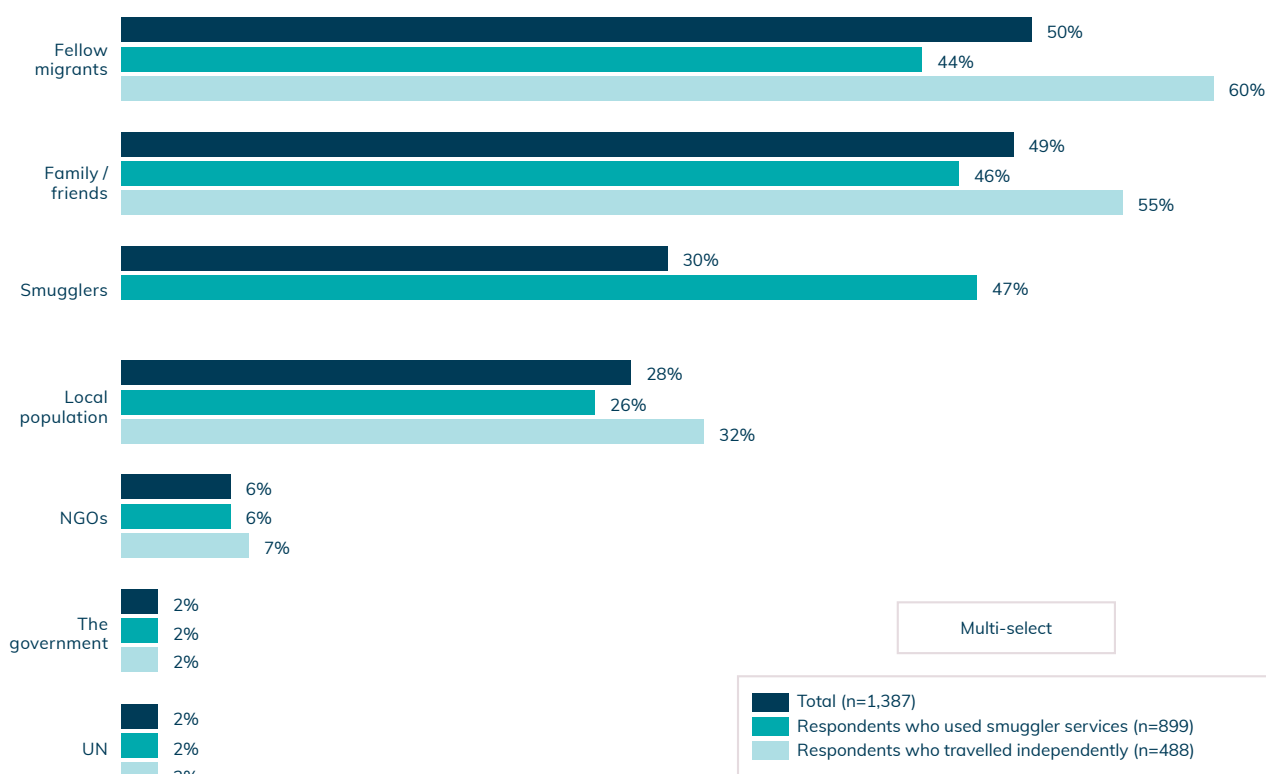
3.3.4. Smugglers play a central role in delivering and facilitating access to assistance

Smuggler-users, particularly women, have greater access to assistance during their journey. More than half of smuggler-users (58%) reported receiving assistance during their journey, compared to 43% of respondents traveling independently. However, the use of smuggler services did not affect the type of assistance received. Across all respondent groups who received aid en route (n=1,387), the most common forms of support

were in-kind assistance addressing basic needs: food (70%), water (66%), and shelter (43%).

Smugglers are the primary, though not the sole, providers of assistance to their users. Nearly half (47%) of respondents who used smuggler services and received assistance along their journey (n=899) reported relying on multiple sources of support. This is comparable to a similar proportion (45%) among those traveling independently (n=488), indicating that the use of smuggler-led routes does not limit the ability to access diverse sources of assistance. Among smuggler-users, smugglers were the most frequently mentioned providers (47%), closely followed by family and friends (46%), fellow migrants (44%), or local populations (26%). In contrast, only 6% cited NGOs, and just 2% mentioned UN agencies as sources of assistance. Therefore, smugglers are far more frequently cited as providers of assistance than as perpetrators of abuses (3%). In fact, most respondents (83%) who used smuggler services reported that smugglers played a role in helping them achieve their migration goals, while only 16% felt that their smugglers intentionally misled them.

Figure 8. Who did you receive assistance from? By smuggler use⁴⁷



4. Conclusions

Smuggling services help migrants navigate increasing uncertainties and movement restrictions in the Central Sahel. They facilitate border crossings, particularly when regular routes are inaccessible, such as at the Benin-Niger and Nigeria-Niger borders. Smugglers also enable travel along dangerous routes, like the Burkina Faso-Niger border, avoiding lengthy detours and offering critical assistance to those in need. This assistance contributes to positive perceptions, with 83% of smuggler-users stating that their smugglers helped them achieve their migration goals and only 16%

indicating that their smugglers intentionally misled them. Similarly, only 3% of respondents identified smugglers as potential perpetrators of abuse. Therefore, the majority of smugglers in the Central Sahel appear to offer their services without resorting to violence or exploiting migrants. Policy responses to human smuggling should account for these nuanced roles of smuggling networks – and how they differ from one geography or migration route to the other – and not conflate it with human trafficking, of which exploitation is a defining characteristic.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Among respondents who received assistance along the way.

⁴⁸ Litzkow, J.; Frouws, B.; Forin, R. (2021), *Smuggling and mixed migration. Insights and key messages drawn from a decade of MMC research and 4Mi data collection*, MMC



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Agadez, Niger. January 2024.

Migrants sit in the back of pickup trucks, holding sticks that stop them falling off, after waiting over night for a convoy to leave, travelling further north to Dirkou and Libya, under the protection of the army. The route is travelled by many people looking for work in mines in northern Niger, some hoping for work in Libya, and others trying to get to Europe.