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Centre

Seeking safety, facing risks:

Mixed movement dynamics on the Northwest Africa maritime and Western Mediterranean routes toward Spain

MMC Research Report,
July 2025



Front cover photo credit:

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Disembarkation point of La Restinga, in El Hierro, Canary Islands. In 2024, La Restinga has been the main disembarkation point for sea arrivals in Spain.

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About MMC

MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs 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 mixed migration 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).

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Key findings

In 2024, 64,318 refugees and migrants reached Spain via the Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and Northwest African Maritime Route (NWAMR), an increase of 12% compared to 2023.¹ Journeys along these routes are dangerous and are marked by high fatality rates. In 2024 alone, over 10,000 people reportedly died or went missing on the NWAMR.² This report draws on 497 interviews with refugees and migrants who arrived in Spain via the WMR and NWAMR between February and December 2024. It examines the drivers of their movement, their experiences, including perceived dangerous locations, as well as information sources both before and during their journeys. Additionally, it explores the onward movement intentions of respondents and underlying motivations. The analysis concludes with a section on the implications of the data for interventions and responses aimed at enhancing protection and assistance to refugees and migrants along the WMR and NWAMR.

- **Violence, insecurity, and conflict are a main driver of primary movement as indicated by 69% of all respondents.** Violence-related drivers were the predominant choice among the various multi-select options for all but Moroccan nationals, and the sole driver for 63% of all respondents.
- **Women of all surveyed nationalities reporting violence, insecurity, and conflict as a primary driver of movement (n=83), commonly specified gender-based violence (GBV).** This included forced marriage (reported by 51 respondents) and domestic violence (reported by 49 respondents) alongside other forms GBV (reported by 53 respondents).
- **43% of respondents reported that embarking on irregular journeys was the only available option,** with a third of respondents (32%) feeling that the route used was their only option.
- Respondents consistently identified **the Atlantic Ocean as the most dangerous part of the NWAMR** while dangerous locations along the WMR included land routes in North African countries, where risks such as death, physical violence, robbery, and detention were reported.
- **Respondents reported information gaps on crucial aspects of the journey** including conditions, duration, safety, and route options. Information gaps were most commonly reported by respondents who arrived in Spain via the WMR (n=174), of which 57% did not obtain information about route, costs, journey, prior to departure, compared to 49% of those who arrived in Spain via the NWAMR (n=323).
- Respondents identified **informal networks (such as family and friends in their country of origin, in diaspora communities, and in their country of intended destination) as the most reliable source of information.**
- Most respondents (71%) reported **having reached their destination;** of these (n=352) the majority had either **applied or were intending to apply for asylum (91%).**
- **Only 10% of respondents applied for asylum before reaching Spain.** The reasons for not seeking asylum before reaching Spain varied between the NWAMR and the WMR. Along the NWAMR (n=204), primary barriers were a **lack of awareness and information about asylum procedures** (40%), while for those on the WMR (n=112), **insecurity (34%) and restricted access to asylum systems (30%)** were the main obstacle

¹ UNHCR Operational Data Portal, [Europe sea arrivals – Spain](#). Accessed on 17 January 2025

² Caminando Fronteras (2024). [Monitoring the Right to Life 2024](#)

Data, profiles and limitations

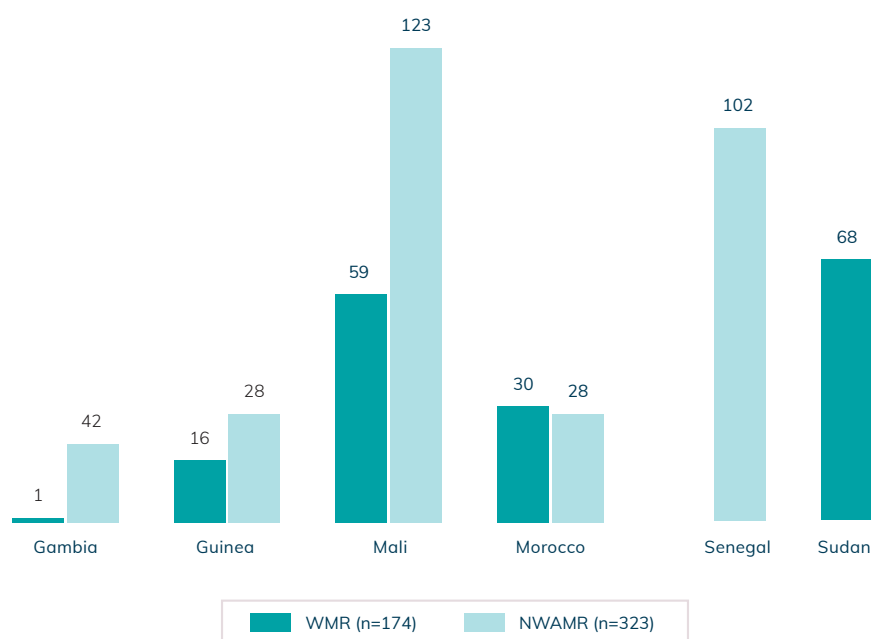
This report is based on survey interviews conducted with 497 individuals who arrived in Spain via the WMR (n=174) and NWAMR (n=323) between February and December 2024. Interviews were conducted in 12 locations³ across continental Spain (163 interviews), the Canary Islands (177 interviews), and the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla (157 interviews).

Respondents included refugees and migrants from Gambia (43), Guinea Conakry (44), Mali (182), Morocco (58), Senegal (102), and Sudan (68), who were selected purposively by UNHCR field staff during their visits to first-arrival reception centres, based on age and nationality profiles (see Figure 1). The nationalities were selected based on the primary nationalities of arrivals in Spain throughout 2023 and 2024.

Due to the nature of the sampling strategies (purposive, convenience and limited snowballing), which also relied on recruitment via UNHCR staff, findings are indicative of the sampled population only, and cannot be generalized to larger groups. Additionally, analyses on the experiences of Moroccan, Sudanese, Gambian, and Guinean respondents are limited by the small size of these nationality groups.

Of the 497 respondents, 20% were women and 80% were men (see Figure 2). Guineans were the only group with a relatively balanced gender distribution. In fact, the number of women respondents reflects the trends of total arrivals, which is characterized by more men (83%) arriving in Spain than women (7%).⁴ The mean age of respondents was 26 years, with 75% of the sample aged below 30 years, and 50% below 25 years. Only adults of age 18 and above were selected for interviews.

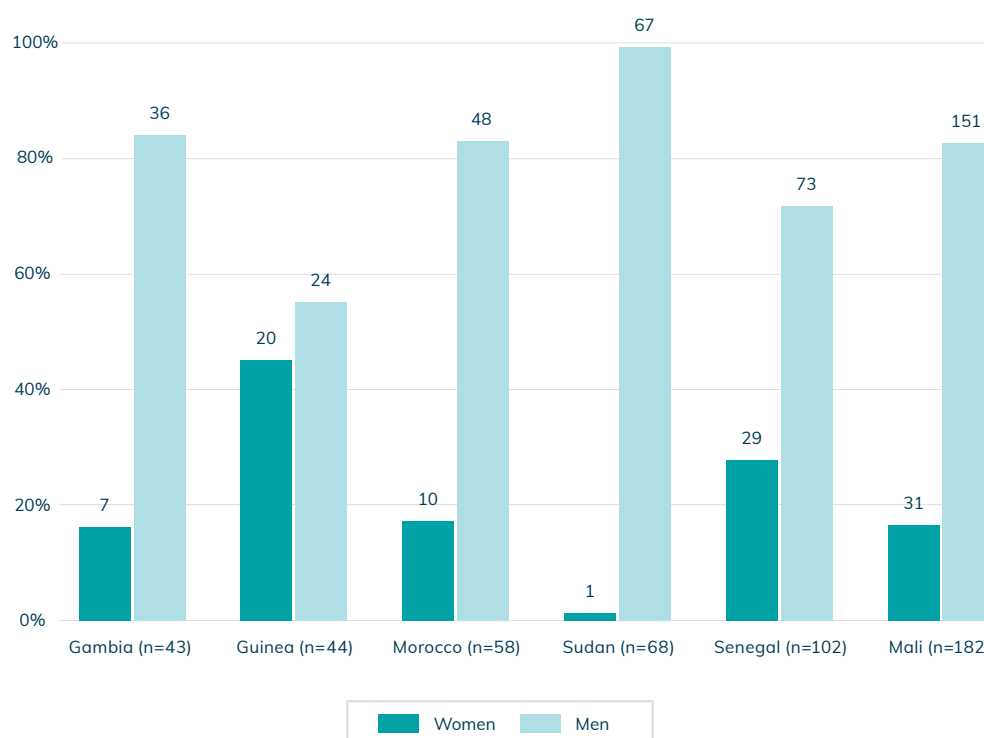
Figure 1. Nationality of respondents by route used (n=497)



³ Interviews were conducted in the following locations: Almeria (23), Cadiz (51), Ceuta (100), Cordoba (29), El Hierro (1), Gran Canaria (119), Granada (8), Lanzarote (2), Malaga (37), Melilla (57), Sabadell (15) and Tenerife (55).

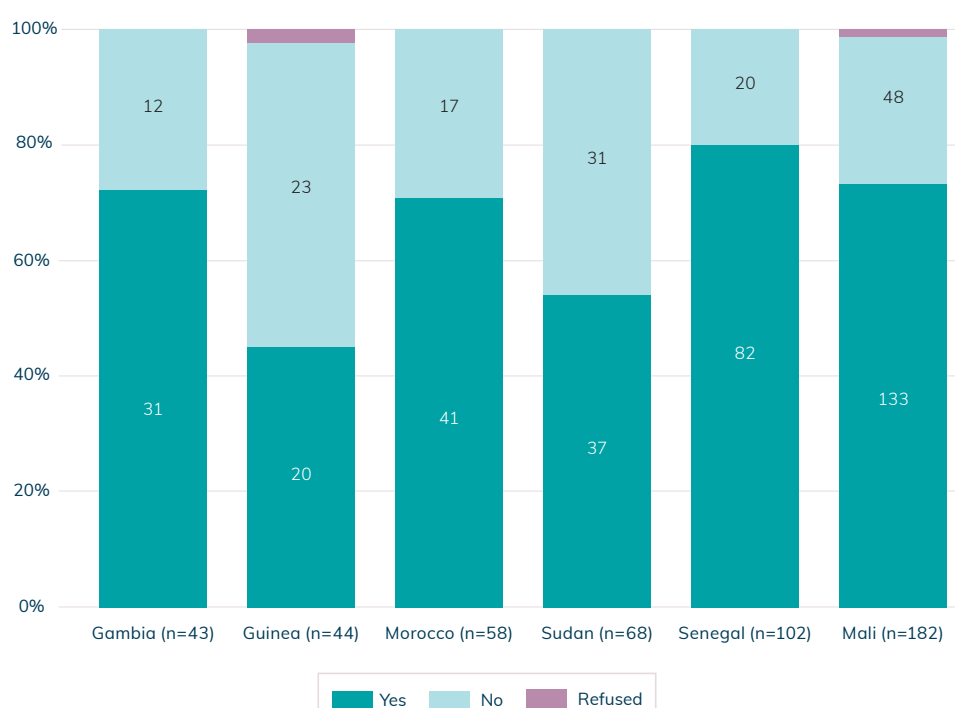
⁴ Based on UNHCR estimates. The remaining 10% includes children below the age of 18.

Figure 2. Gender of respondents by nationality (n=497)



Sixty-nine percent of respondents reported being economically active prior to leaving their country of origin. Among this group (n=344), the majority (61%) were employed in casual or occasional work (this was the case for 56% of economically active Malians, 52% of Senegalese, 71% of Moroccans, and 68% of Sudanese). Despite unstable employment, 41% of economically active respondents were also the main providers for their households, highlighting their overall economic vulnerability. In terms of education levels completed prior to the departure, 80% of the overall sample completed either primary schooling (47%) or secondary schooling (33%). Conversely, 14% did not complete any schooling, and a residual group had completed a university degree (4%) or a vocational training (4%).

Figure 3. Were you making any money in the 12 months prior to your departure? (n=497)



Drivers of primary movement

Violence, insecurity, and conflict are the predominant drivers of primary movement

Violence, insecurity, and conflict were the most commonly reported drivers of movement among 69% of all respondents, as shown in Figure 4. Among those who reported violence, insecurity, and conflict as a driver (n=342), 63% indicated this as the sole driver. Among Malians (n=182), who make up the largest group of respondents, 67% reported violence, insecurity, and conflict as the sole driver; so did 48 out of 68 Sudanese respondents. The predominance of violence, insecurity, and conflict among these specific nationalities reflects mass displacement triggered by ongoing conflict in both Mali and Sudan.⁵

For other nationalities, reasons for leaving were more mixed, and violence-related drivers were reported in combination with other factors such as economic factors, limited access to services, and personal or family reasons. Economic factors were the most commonly reported by Moroccans and Gambian respondents.

Among women who reported violence, insecurity, and conflict as a primary driver of movement (n=83), gender-based violence (GBV) was commonly cited, including forced marriage (mentioned by 51) and domestic violence (mentioned by 49) along with other forms of GBV (mentioned by 58). This emerged particularly among Senegalese women (n=29), 25 of whom indicated violence as a driver, citing reasons relating to GBV, as well as Guinean women (16 of 20). Among men, war and conflict (n=193) were the main type of violence cited, followed by crime and general insecurity (mentioned by 66), and political unrest (mentioned by 56).

Some of these findings should be interpreted in light of the broader context in countries of origin at the time of departure. In the case of Senegal, while references to violence, insecurity, and conflict as reasons for departure do not fully align with country-of-origin information, recent socio-political and economic developments may have shaped respondents' perceptions. Between 2021 and 2024, Senegal experienced episodes of political unrest, including widespread protests met with excessive use of force by security personnel, resulting in numerous casualties and arrests.⁶ In early 2024, the postponement of presidential elections further escalated tensions, leading to violent demonstrations and a heavy-handed government response.⁷ In the Casamance region, while decades-long low-level conflict has continued, only isolated incidents of violence have been reported in recent years, with no evidence of widespread or sustained conflict affecting civilians.⁸ These combined factors may have led some individuals to cite violence and insecurity as reasons for their departure. Similarly, after a military-led coup in 2021, the situation in Guinea has remained largely peaceful. However, in 2024, protests linked to delays in the transition to civilian rule were met with excessive force, resulting in deaths and arrests. Human rights organizations reported a ban on demonstrations, suppression of dissent, and the dissolution of opposition groups, all contributing to a climate of fear and instability.⁹ These developments may explain why some respondents cited insecurity and violence among their reasons for leaving Guinea.

5 The majority of Malian respondents interviewed in Spain in 2024 cited Kayes as their region of origin and reported violence, insecurity and conflict as primary reasons for departure. While Kayes has not traditionally been at the epicenter of Mali's armed conflict, recent developments point to a deteriorating situation. In 2024 and early 2025, Islamist armed groups, particularly Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), expanded their operations into southwestern Mali, including areas bordering Senegal and Mauritania, with reports of attacks and increased insecurity and violence in Kayes. In parallel, the region has long been affected by descent-based slavery and associated communal violence, leading to displacement and long-standing protection concerns, despite the 2024 criminalization of slavery practices. In this context, claims of violence, insecurity, and conflict underscore the complexity of mixed movements and the need for fair and efficient individual asylum procedures, with reasons for departure conceivably relating to a mixture of violence and economic reasons. See, Human Rights Council, [Situation of Human Rights in Mali: Report of the Independent Expert on the Situation of Human Rights in Mali, Eduardo Gonzalez](#), 6 March 2025, para. 43; African Center for Strategic Studies, [Militant Islamist Groups Advancing in Mali](#), September 2024; MaliWeb.net, [Insécurité grandissante à Kayes : Sada Samaké annonce la réouverture des postes de sécurité supprimés](#), October 2024; Institute for Security Studies, [Timber Logging Drives JNIM's Expansion in Mali](#), 19 June 2024; OCWAR-T, [Economic Warfare in Southern Mali Intersections between Illicit Economies and Violent Extremism](#), November 2023; UNHCR, [Position on Returns to Mali – Update III](#).

6 HRW, [World Report 2024: Senegal](#), 11 January 2024; Amnesty International, [The State of the World's Human Rights: Senegal 2024](#)

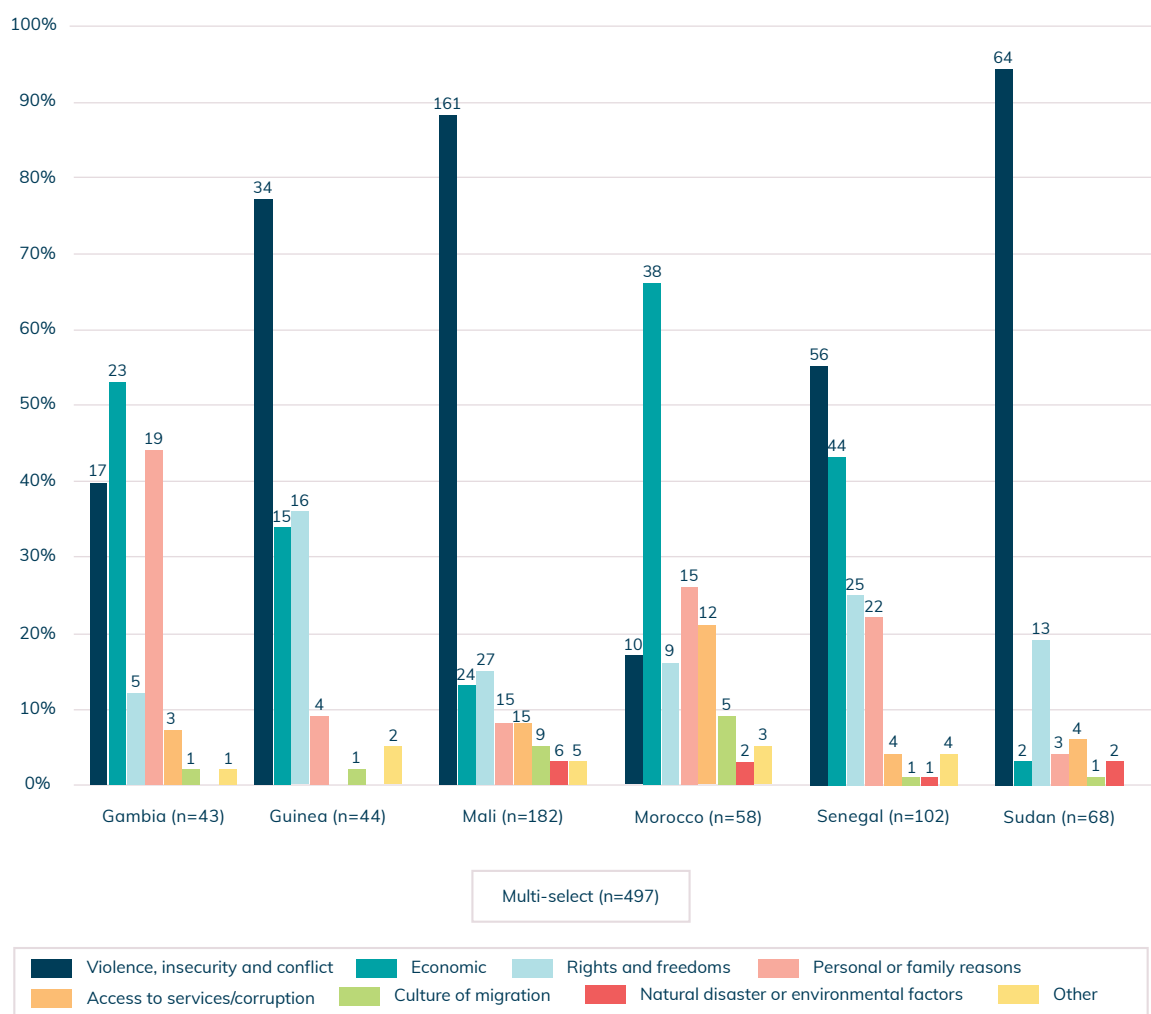
7 HRW, [Senegal: Pre-Election Crackdown](#), 22 January 2024

8 AfricaNews, [Senegal signs historic peace deal with Casamance separatists](#), 25 February 2025; The Guardian, [Senegal's troubled Casamance region hopes for peace with rise of local boy to PM](#), 28 August 2024

9 HRW, [Guinea: Rights at Risk as Promised Transition Derails](#), 2 December 2024; Amnesty International, [Guinea: Victims of Unlawful Use of Force Still Waiting for Healthcare and Justice](#), 15 May 2024

Figure 4. Why did you leave?¹⁰

Data labels above each bar indicate the number of respondents selecting the answer option (n) among the sub-sample (nationality), while bar sizes reflect the percentage (%) of respondents selecting the answer option among the sub-sample.



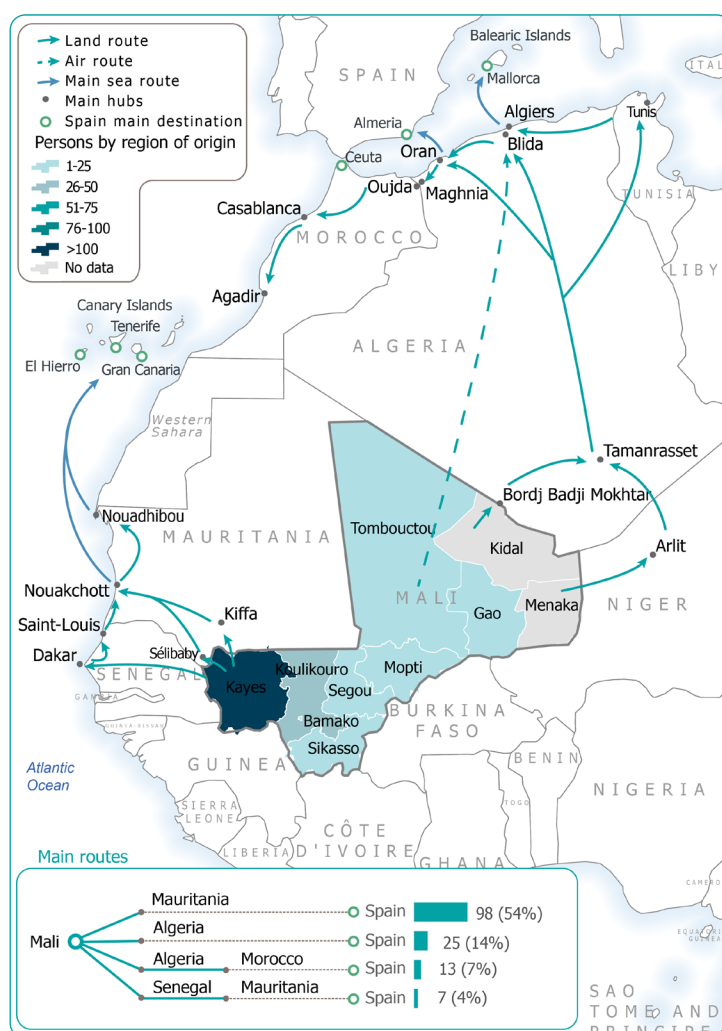
¹⁰ 1 person refused to answer and 1 person answered "Don't know". These are not reflected in the chart.

Movements along the Western Mediterranean and Northwest Africa Maritime Routes

Three quarters of respondents started their journey between 2023 and 2024, while a quarter departed prior to the end of 2022. Journeys were reportedly lengthy, particularly on the WMR where on average respondents spent 2 years and 1 month en route before arriving in Spain. Excluding Moroccans, whose journey is comparatively short and straightforward, the average journey duration increased to 2 years and 5 months. Journeys were reportedly shorter on the NWAMR with an average of 1 year and 3 months.

Routes taken along the WMR and NWAMR varied in terms of itineraries and number of countries transited, and based on country of origin,¹¹ as illustrated in Figure 5 and Figure 6. Malian respondents mainly transited through Mauritania for the NWAMR, and Algeria for the WMR. The journeys of Sudanese respondents were more complex, involving multiple routes and detours. The largest share of Sudanese respondents exited Sudan to Libya directly, while others went first into Chad. However, they eventually converge in Algeria, which serves as a key transit hub on the WMR to Spain.

Figure 5. Main routes of Malians (n=143)¹²



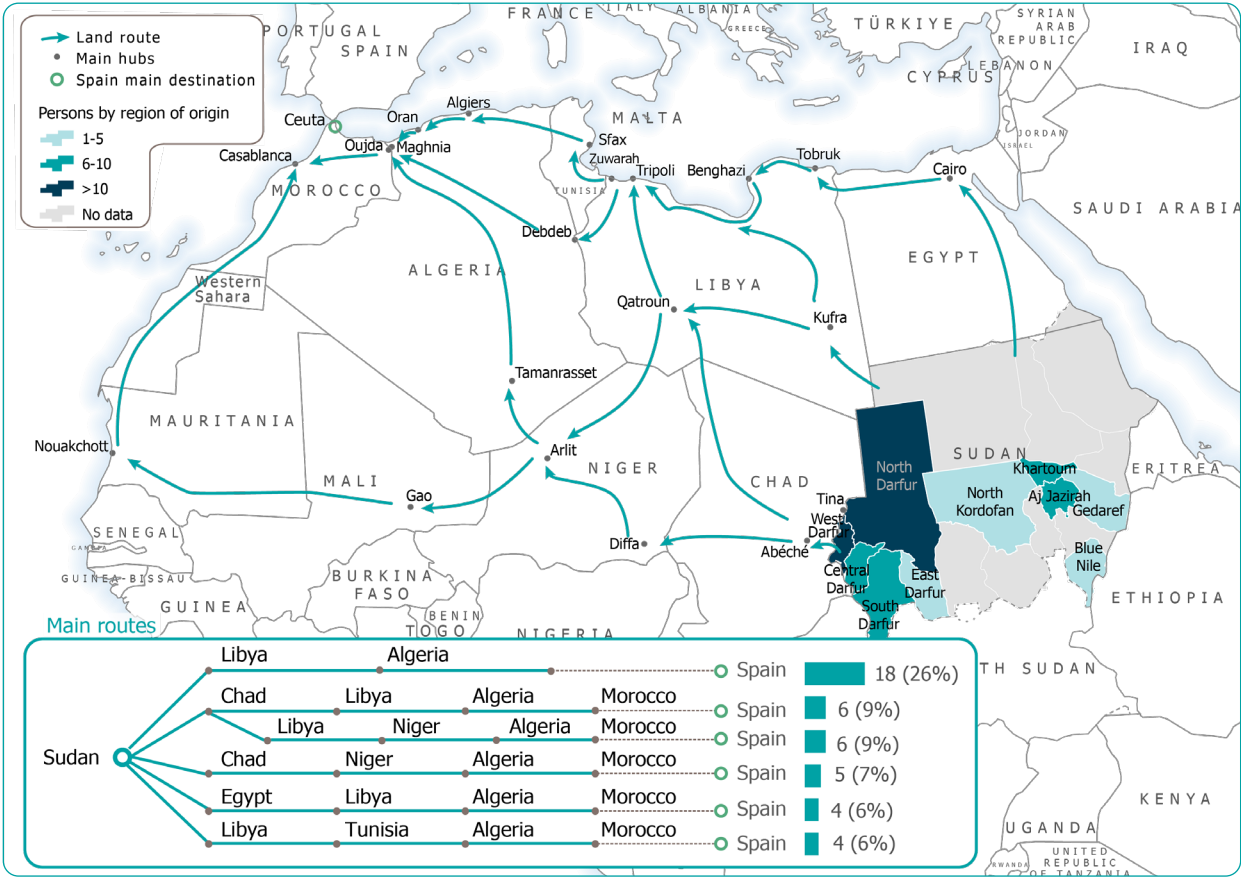
Credit: UNHCR Spain

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this and following maps do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

11 Twenty respondents reported to have begun their journey from a country different from their country of origin.

12 The map illustrates the journey of 143 out of 182 Malian respondents, corresponding to 79%. The routes of the remaining 39 respondents have been excluded to avoid excessive dispersion.

Figure 6. Main routes of Sudanese (n=43)¹³



Credit: UNHCR Spain

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined. Final status of the Abyei area is not yet determined.

13 The map illustrates the journey of 43 out of 68 Sudanese respondents, %. The routes of the remaining 25 respondents have been excluded to avoid excessive dispersion.

Cost of the journey and limited alternatives shape mixed movement routes

Respondents' route choices were influenced by lack of alternative movement options, knowledge about the route, and cost considerations (see Figure 7 and Figure 8).

Figure 7. Why did you choose that route? (Respondents who arrived in Spain via the NWAMR)

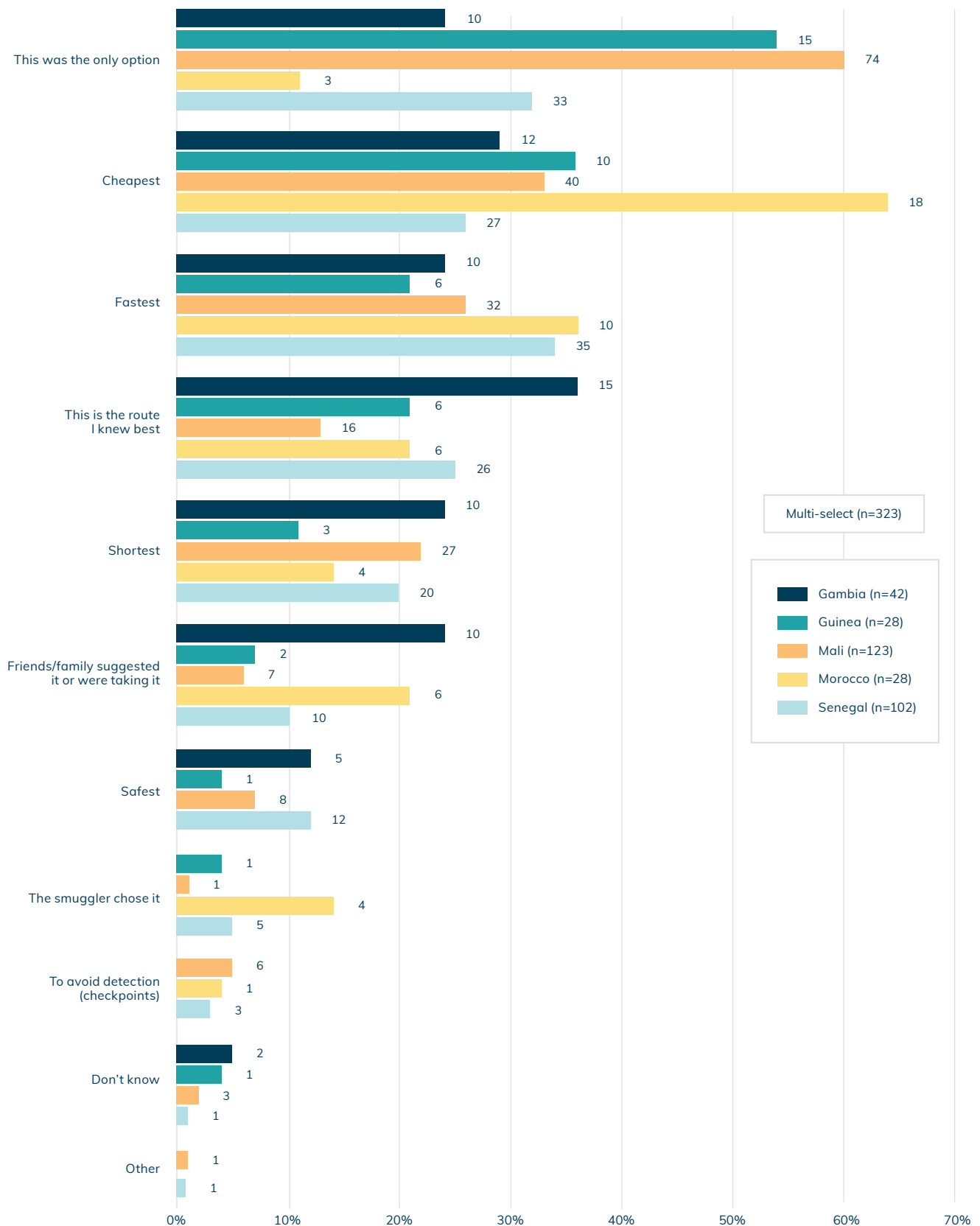
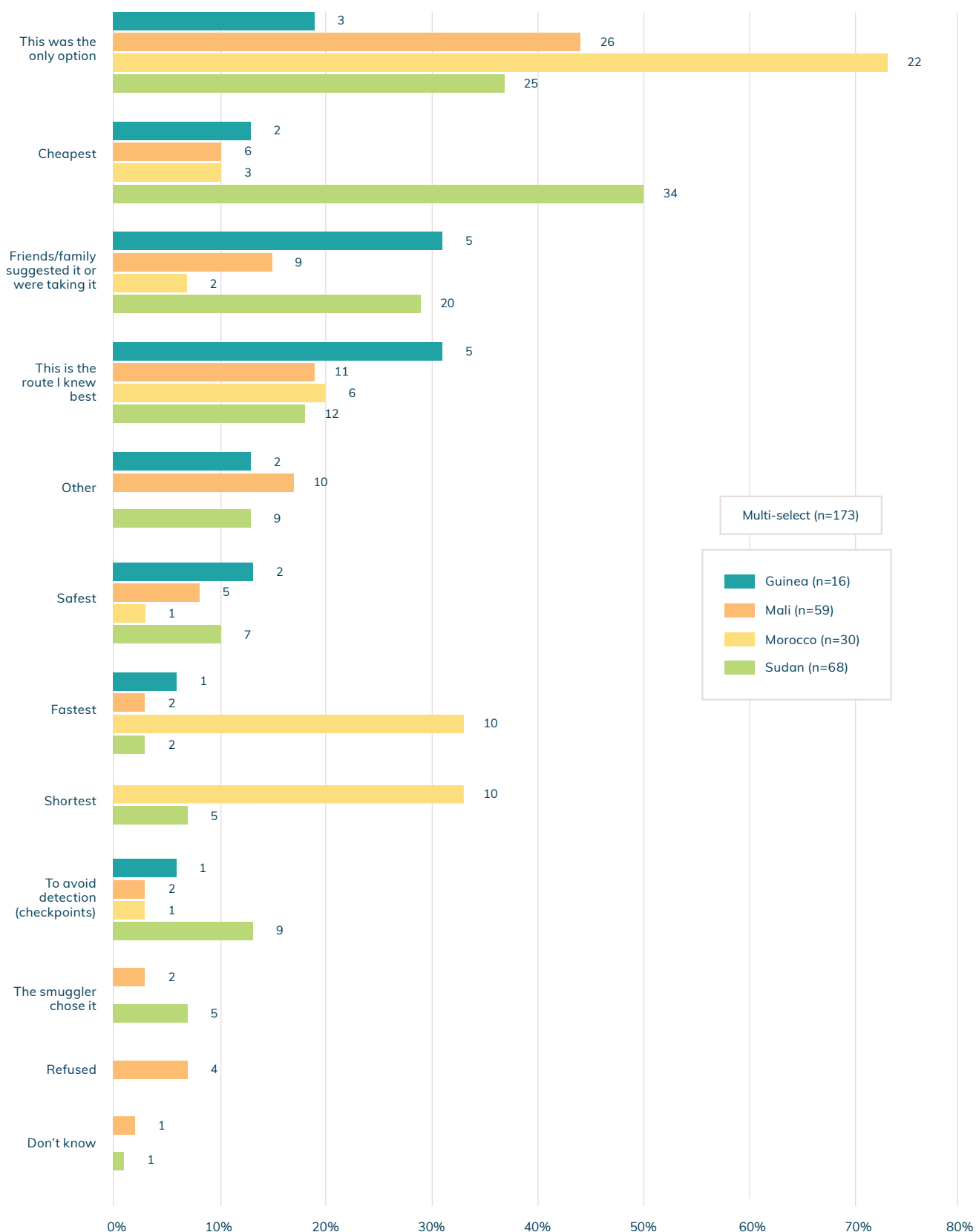


Figure 8. Why did you choose that route? (Respondents who arrived in Spain via the WMR¹⁴)



Among Malian respondents on the NWAMR (n=123), 60% felt the route they chose was their only option, irrespective of potential dangers, with only a minority (6%) reporting that the choice of their route was motivated by safety reasons. The majority of Moroccan respondents on the WMR and Guinean respondents on the NWAMR also mentioned a

¹⁴ 1 respondent from Gambia was excluded due to small n

lack of available alternatives. This is likely explained by the geographic position of Morocco vis-à-vis Spain, which limits the number of viable routes that are available to reach Europe. For Guinean respondents on the NWAMR, of 15 who considered the NWAMR the only possible route, 14 were women. Although this may suggest that Guinean women have fewer alternative options than men, the limited number of respondents warrants cautious interpretation of these findings. A lack of alternatives can arise due to external constraints, as well as internal factors encompassing individual circumstances, such as travelling with children, specific vulnerabilities, or financial capital. Reflecting the latter point, while cost considerations were reported by all nationalities, they were most commonly reported by Sudanese respondents (34 out of 68), for whom the WMR does not represent the fastest route towards Europe. Financial considerations may therefore result in longer, more fragmented and perilous journeys.

“I searched online which route was the best, and I saw that going to Algeria was not a good thing. So I decided to go through Senegal.”

26-year-old from Guinea, arrived in Spain via the NWAMR and interviewed in Ceuta

“Life took me around to these places. When you are black and poor you don’t have many more options.”

29-year-old from Mali, arrived via the WMR and interviewed in Melilla

“I tried to reach Italy from Libya, but it didn’t work out, so I continued in order to reach Europe.”

19-year-old from Sudan, arrived via the WMR and interviewed in Ceuta

High fatalities and widespread risks define the Western Mediterranean and the Northwest Africa Maritime routes

In order to understand dangerous locations and risks along the route, MMC asked respondents to first identify the most dangerous location along the route, and then to identify the main risks that they faced in that specific location.

Northwest Africa Maritime Route

Among the respondents who travelled via the NWAMR (n=323), 60% mentioned crossing the Atlantic Ocean, Mauritania (13%) and Mali (6%) as among the locations with risks, as shown in Table 1. 11% of respondents did not identify risks in any place, and less than 8% identified locations other than those mentioned above (these included locations in Senegal, Morocco, Algeria, Guinea, and the Sahara Desert).

Table 1. Countries perceived by respondents to be the most dangerous along the NWAMR

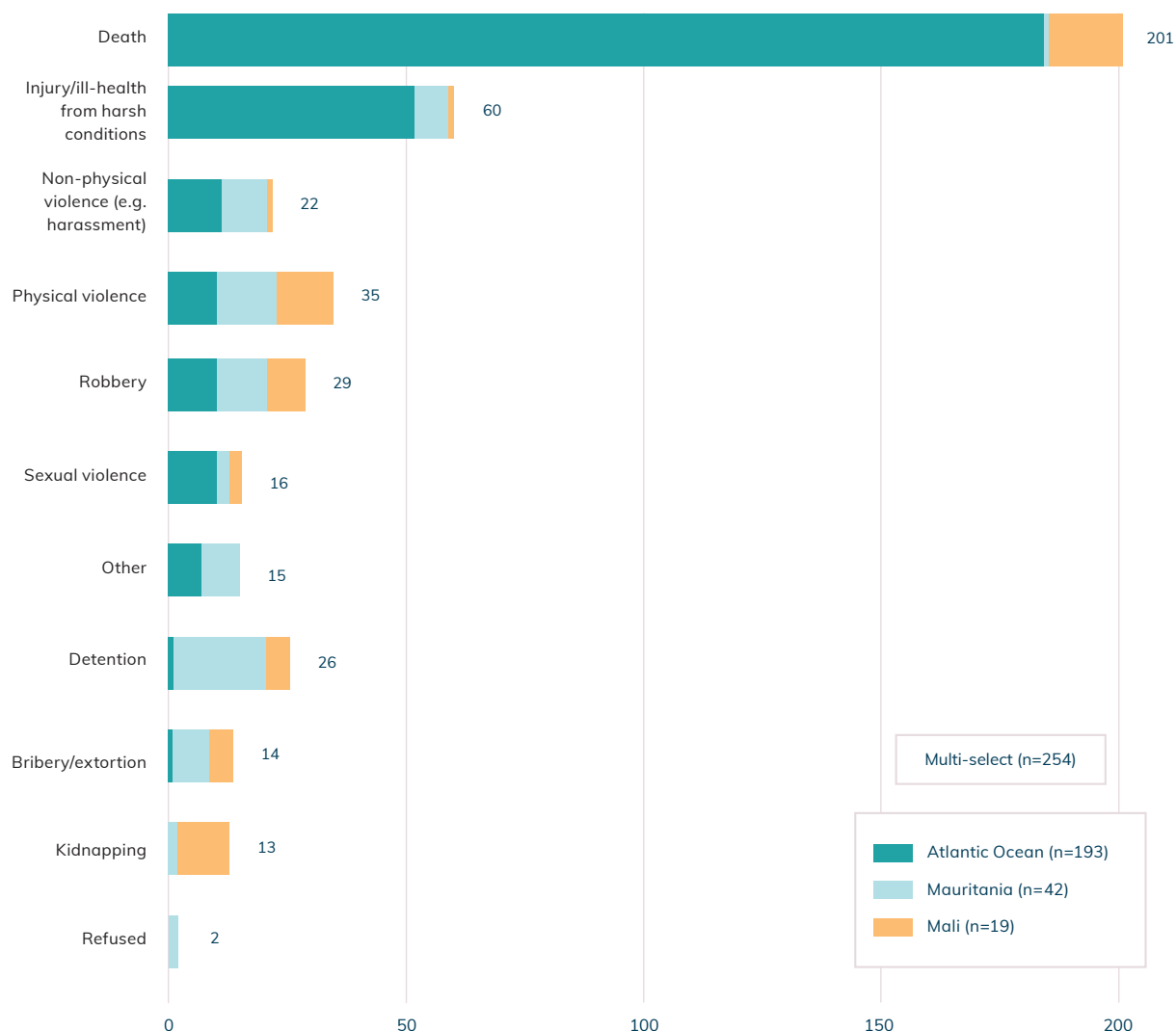
Location	Number of mentions
1. Atlantic Ocean	193
2. Mauritania	42
3. None	36
4. Mali	19
5. Morocco	8
6. Senegal	7
7. Algeria	4
8. Other	4
9. Gambia	3
10. Libya	2

Among those who identified risks in the Atlantic Ocean (n=193), the risk of death was reported by almost all, highlighting the perceived deadly dangers on this route (see Figure 9). This perception aligns with the evidence gathered by Caminando Fronteras, which reported, a total of 9,757 persons who died or went missing at sea while attempting to cross the NWAMR in 2024.¹⁵ The risk of sexual violence was reported by 10 out of 70 women who identified the Atlantic as the most dangerous location.

¹⁵ Caminando Fronteras (2024). [Monitoring the Right to Life 2024](#)

Among respondents who cited risks in Mauritania (n=42), they mentioned detention, extortion, and physical violence. For those who cited risks in Mali (n=19), they cited death, kidnapping, and physical violence.

Figure 9. Risks in locations perceived by respondents as dangerous¹⁶



Western Mediterranean Route

Respondents who travelled via the WMR (n=79) frequently indicated the riskiest locations along their journey across Libya and Algeria followed by the Mediterranean Sea.

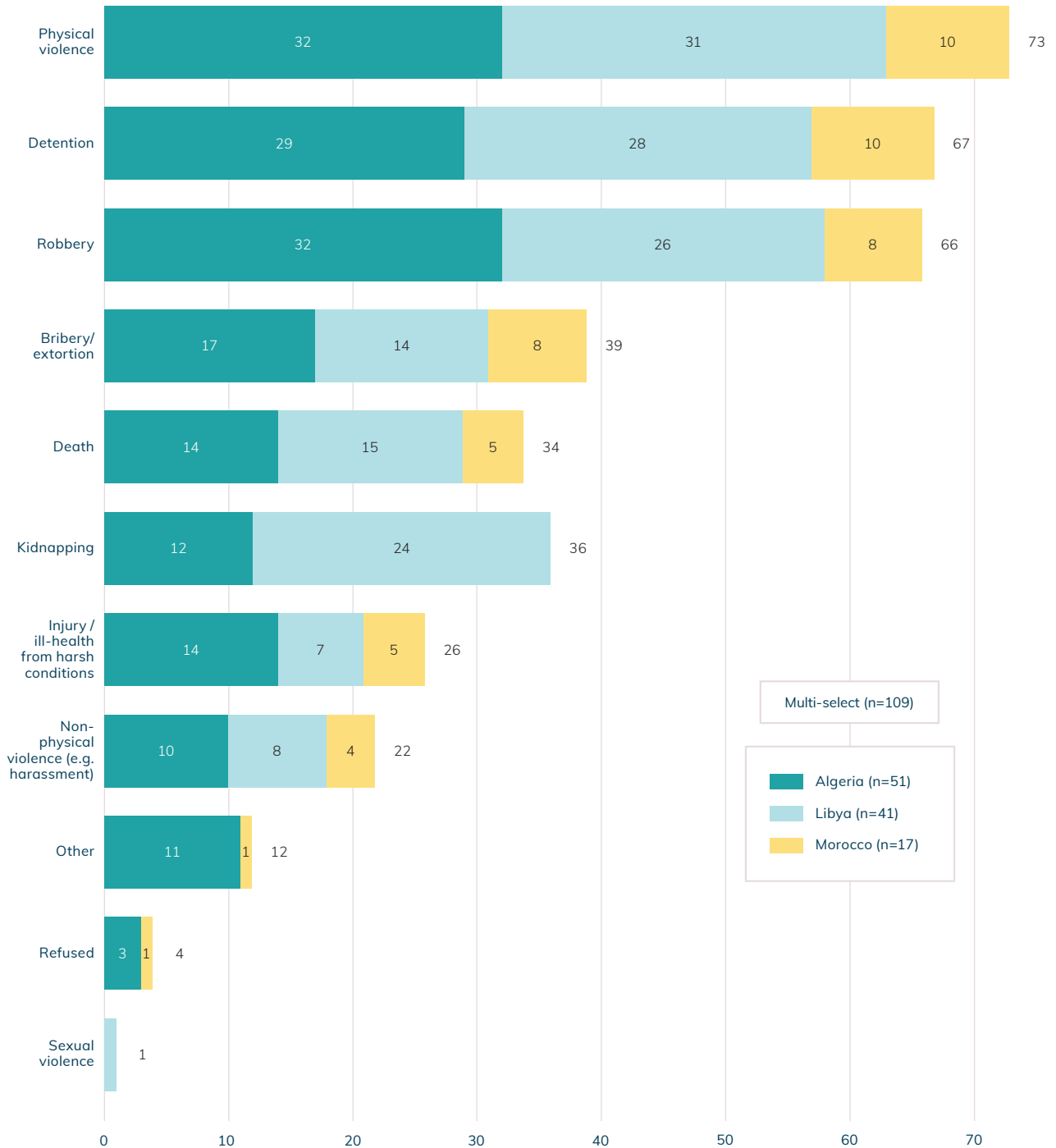
Table 2. Countries perceived by respondents to be the most dangerous along the WMR

Location	Number of mentions
1. Algeria	51
2. Libya	41
3. Morocco	17
4. Mediterranean Sea	13
5. Refused	13
6. None	12
7. Mali	10
8. Tunisia	5
9. Chad	3
10. Sahara Desert	3

¹⁶ To avoid dispersion in groups too small in size, this chart considers only the 271 respondents who indicated the most dangerous location in either the Atlantic Ocean (193), Mauritania (42) or Mali (19)

Compared to the NWAMR, perceived risks along the WMR were more widely dispersed across countries, and a higher variety of risks were reported by each respondent. This suggests an interconnected pattern of risks, contributing to an environment of systemic danger for refugees and migrants traveling along the WMR.¹⁷

Figure 10. Risks in locations perceived as dangerous¹⁸



¹⁷ See for example: MMC (5 July 2024). [On this journey, no one cares if you live or die \(Volume 2\)](#).

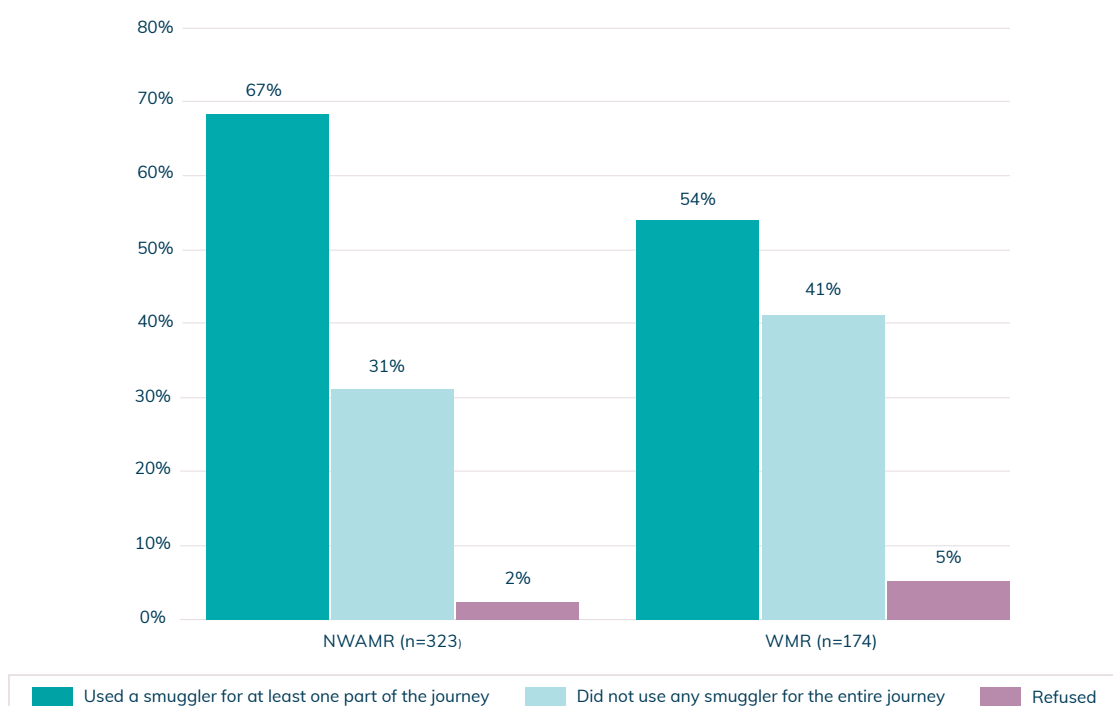
¹⁸ To avoid dispersion in groups too small in size, this chart considers only the 109 respondents who identified the most dangerous locations along their journey either in Algeria (51), Libya (41) or Morocco (17)

Many used smugglers, but not all

The use of smugglers was more frequent for respondents who moved along the NWAMR (67%) than the WMR (54%), as shown in Figure 11. This difference can be partly attributed to the presence of Moroccan respondents on the WMR sample, who often only need to cross short distances to the Spanish enclaves and may not require smuggling services. In fact, 28 out of the 30 Moroccans who arrived in Spain via the WMR did not use smugglers to cross the border.

The modalities used to cross the NWAMR for those who did not rely on smuggling services at any stage of their journey remain unclear: one hypothesis is that they were helped by fishermen (who the respondents didn't identify as smugglers), or that being fishermen themselves, they may have organized the navigation on their own, highlighting the complexity of smuggling and its link with local economies.

Figure 11. Did you use a smuggler? (n=497)



The risks and dangers faced by refugees and migrants while on the move often compel them to seek various forms of risk mitigation. Among these, the use of smugglers may be seen as a way to reduce risks and ensure safe passage through unstable or insecure territories patrolled by law enforcement, or controlled by militias/criminal gangs. In the context of the NWAMR 12% of respondents directly mentioned hiring smugglers as a specific risk mitigation measure.

Sixteen percent of respondents who identified at least one dangerous location across the NWAMR (n=286), attributed this risk to the military and the police. Conversely, only 2% identified smugglers as potential sources of danger. While the percentage of respondents identifying smugglers as agents of abuse increases to 16% among those who identified at least one dangerous location on the WMR (n=149), 49% identified armed groups and militias as possible perpetrators, and 46% identified the military and the police. In these contexts, the security offered by smugglers may have included ensuring safe passages in militia-controlled areas, or connivance of police and military forces on smuggling operations.

Access to information

The majority of respondents did not access information prior to their journey, likely linked to the forced nature of many movements

Respondents were asked about access to information prior to and during the journey. As shown in Figure 12, just under half (47%) of all (n=497) respondents reported obtaining information from various sources prior to their journey.

Figure 12. Did you obtain information about route, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before your departure? (n=497)



Almost half of Sudanese respondents (33 out of 68), and around two thirds of Malians (112 out of 182), did not obtain information about their journey before departure. This suggests limited pre-departure planning which is common in contexts of rapid displacement. However, over a half of Guinean (28 out of 44) and nearly half of Senegalese respondents (49 out of 102) also did not obtain information prior to departure.

Community and online networks are leading pre-departure information sources, while smugglers and other refugees and migrants gain influence during the journey

Across respondents who obtained information before leaving their country of origin (n= 235), friends and family in the country of origin (37%), other refugees and migrants (31%), online communities (28%), and family and friends in another country (24%) were the main sources of information prior to departure. However, differences were seen across nationalities, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before your journey?

Sources of information accessed before departure	Gambia (n=26)	Guinea (n=15)	Mali (n=68)	Morocco (n=40)	Senegal (n=53)	Sudan (n=33)	Total (n=235)
Friends / family in country of departure	16	4	28	16	14	9	87
Other refugees and migrants	5	4	24	11	13	15	72
Online community / network	8	6	13	10	22	6	65
Friends / family in another country	5	5	20	6	7	13	56
Smugglers	2		8	7	6	5	28
Wider diaspora		2	12	5	3	5	27
Returned refugees and migrants	2		1	4			7
Refused			3	1	1		5
Other		1		1	2		4
NGOs / UN					1		1
Foreign embassies / consulates				1			1
National government / authorities							
Private employment agency							
Travel agents							

Each column is presented with a heat map gradient: the most frequently mentioned responses are shaded in the darkest colour, and the least frequently mentioned responses in the lightest.

Least mentioned  Most mentioned

After departure, slightly more people (n=257) obtained information about the journey (including routes and destinations, as well as costs and risks). As the journey progresses, the reliance on information obtained through the personal networks of family and friends in the country of origin diminishes relatively (from 87 to 77). Instead, some sources of information intensifies, such as other refugees and migrants en route and smugglers, while the reliance on friends and family in other countries is strengthened, as shown in Table 4. Additionally, data reveals a complete absence of official information sources — such as national authorities, consulates/embassies, and NGOs/UN — among the sources reported by respondents, both before and during their journeys.

Table 4. What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. during your journey?

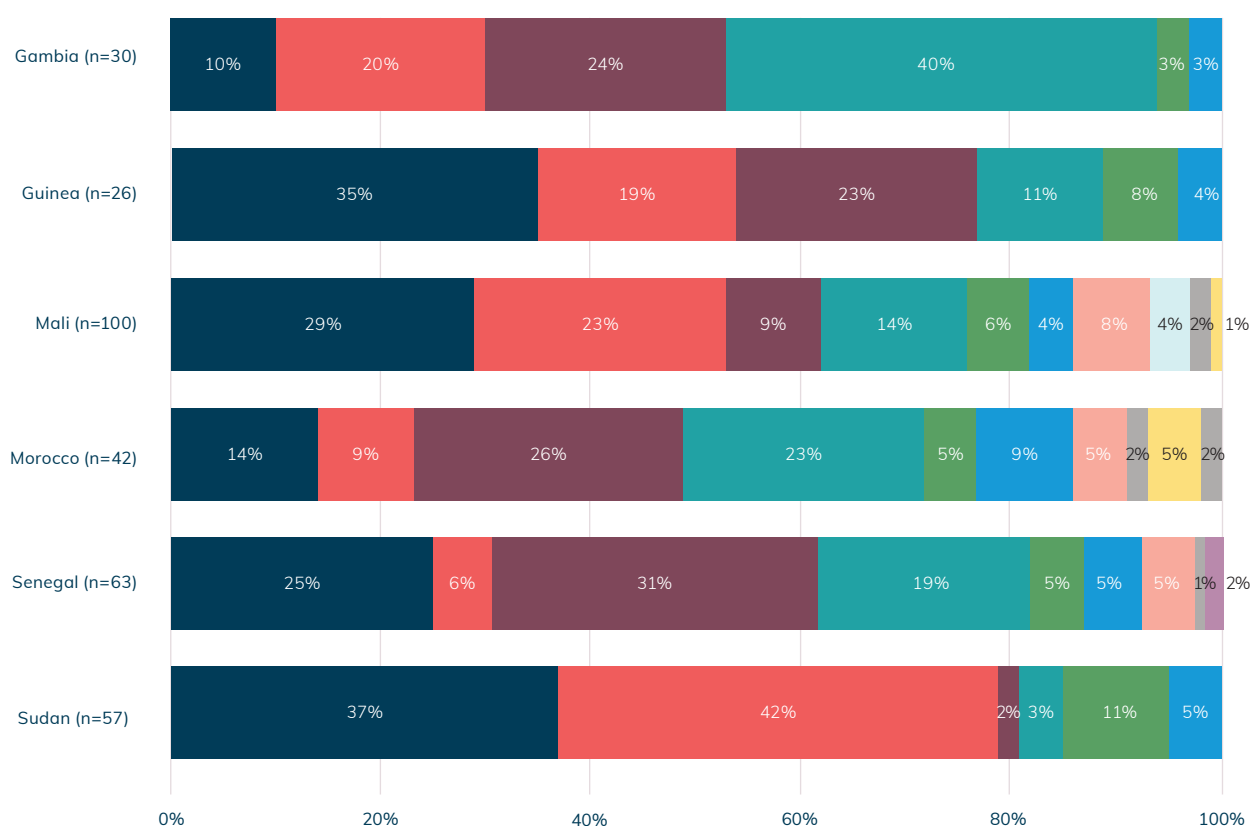
Sources of information accessed during the journey	Gambia (n=17)	Guinea (n=25)	Mali (n=89)	Morocco (n=27)	Senegal (n=48)	Sudan (n=51)	Total (n=257)
Other refugees and migrants	5	12	37	5	20	33	112
Friends / family in another country	6	9	32	2	4	26	79
Friends / family in country of departure	8	8	26	13	15	7	77
Online community / network	8	6	18	11	16	4	63
Smugglers		4	18	6	2	17	47
Local people met along the journey	2	5	14		3	9	33
Wider diaspora		4	15	1	2	10	32
Returned refugees and migrants			2	4			6
Refused			3	1		2	6
Other				2	3		5
NGOs / UN			1		1	1	3
Travel agents			1				1
Foreign embassies / consulates National government / authorities Private employment agency							

Each column is presented with a heat map gradient: the most frequently mentioned responses are shaded in the darkest colour, and the least frequently mentioned responses in the lightest.

Least mentioned  Most mentioned

Trusted sources of information align with the most prominent sources of information: informal networks (friends, family, and online communities) were reported as both the main source of information at all stages of the journey as well as the most trusted sources of information. However, trust in information sources varied by nationality and route, with 'other refugees and migrants' selected as the most trusted sources of information for Guinean, Malian, and Sudanese respondents, while Moroccan and Senegalese respondents had greater trust in online community networks than other nationalities, highlighting the importance of digital platforms. Additionally, for Gambian respondents, their local community in the country of origin was a primary and trusted source of information, as shown Figure 13.

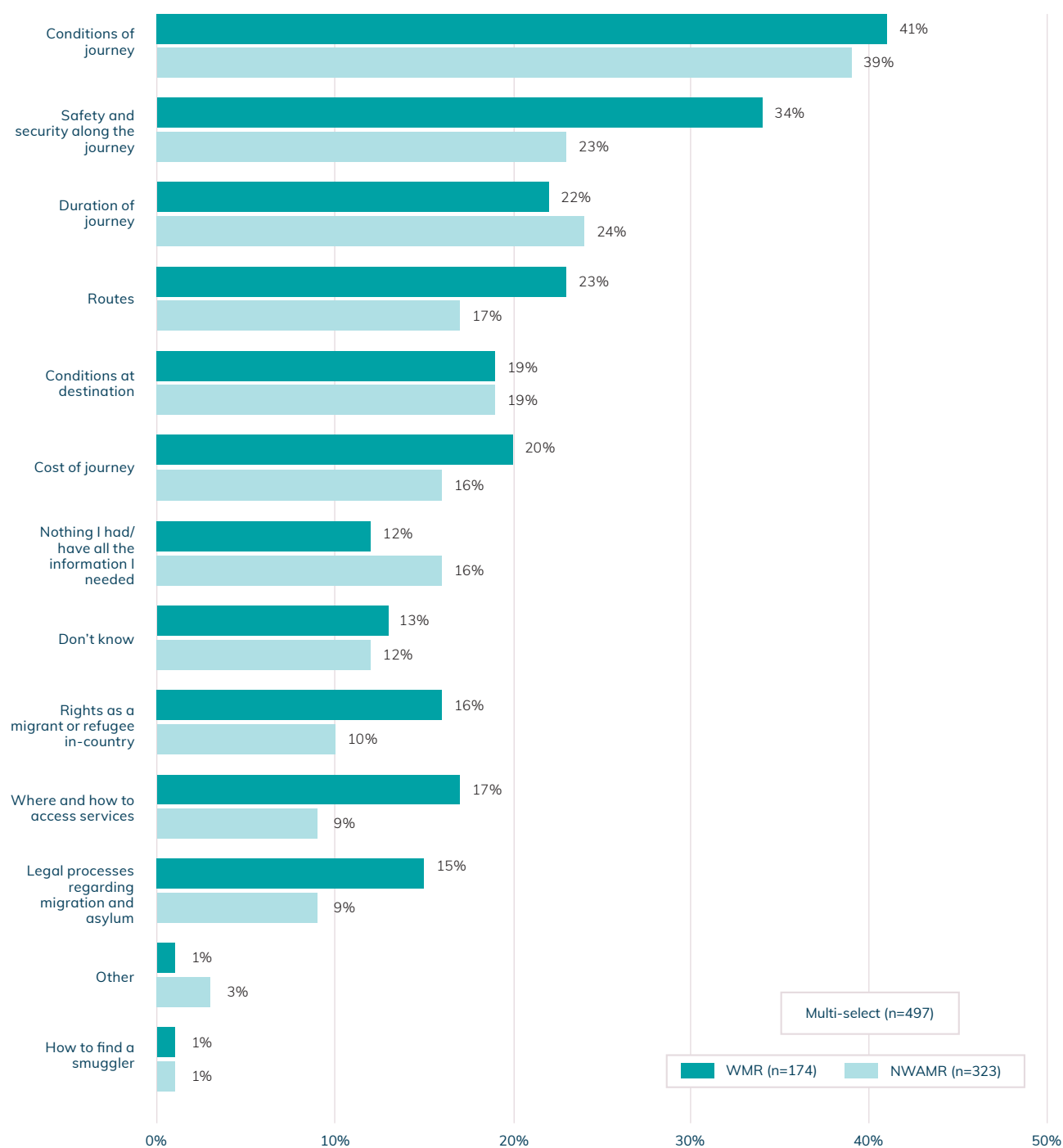
Figure 13.. Of all sources, which one has been the most reliable overall? (n=322, 4 non-responses were excluded)



Most reliable source of information	Gambia (n=30)	Guinea (n=26)	Mali (n=102)	Morocco (n=43)	Senegal (n=64)	Sudan (n=57)
Other refugees and migrants	3	9	30	6	16	21
Friends / family in another country	6	5	24	4	4	24
Online community / network	7	6	9	11	20	1
Friends / family in country of departure	12	3	14	10	12	2
None	1	2	6	2	3	6
Smugglers	1	1	4	4	3	3
Wider diaspora	–	–	8	2	3	–
Local people I met on my journey	–	–	4	–	–	–
Returned refugees and migrants	–	–	1	2	–	–
Other	–	–	–	1	1	–
NGOs / UN	–	–	–	–	1	–

When it comes to information gaps, refugees and migrants noted in particular that they had insufficient information on crucial aspects of the journey, such as conditions, safety, and duration (see Figure 14). Such a lack of information leaves individuals vulnerable to protection risks along the routes. Addressing these gaps is important to ensure that refugees and migrants are aware of the dangers they may face, which may reduce their exposure to exploitation and other forms of abuse. This emphasises the need for more comprehensive and accessible resources to enable refugees and migrants to make informed decisions, take necessary steps to protect themselves from risks, and explore and access alternatives to dangerous journeys.

Figure 14. What information would have been most useful that you did not receive?¹⁹



¹⁹ Four respondents on the NWAMR and 15 respondents on the WMR who refused to answer were excluded from this Figure.

Asylum en route and upon arrival in Spain

Only 10% of respondents applied for asylum while along the route before reaching Spain

Seventy-two percent of all respondents transited through at least one other country before reaching Spain, where they may have had the possibility to apply for asylum. However, only 10% of them (n=359) reportedly submitted an asylum application before reaching Spain.²⁰ Sudanese respondents were more likely than others to apply for asylum en route, with 24 out of 68 respondents having done so, primarily in Morocco and Libya (see Table 5). Five Sudanese refugees applied both in Libya and Morocco. Conversely Malian respondents, who primarily transited through the NWAMR, mostly applied in Mauritania.

Table 5. Asylum applications before reaching Spain

Countries of nationality	Countries of application					Total applications
	Chad	Libya	Mauritania	Morocco	Libya and Morocco	
Gambia	–	–	–	1	–	1
Guinea	–	–	–	2	–	2
Mali	–	–	8	–	–	8
Sudan	1	2	1	15	5	24
Total by country of application	1	2	9	19	5	35

Among those who reportedly applied en route (n=35), different conditions would have encouraged them to remain in the country/ies of asylum, according to each country's specificities (see Table 6). For those who applied in Morocco, while perceived lack of safety was paramount, a multiplicity of factors would have been reportedly necessary for them to stay, ranging from access to documentation, to livelihoods and to quality basic services. In the case of Mauritania, three main conditions emerged: sufficient access to work and livelihoods, positive relationship with authorities, and safety. Finally, those who applied in Libya also prioritised their objective of continuing the journey onwards. This can be also contextualised given reports of abuse faced by refugees and migrants there.²¹

²⁰ Due to the small size of the sample, findings on the asylum applications in countries may be considered with caution. Larger samples may provide more solid findings.

²¹ UN Human Rights Council (2023) [Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya](#). See also: UN Human Rights Council (2024) [Trafficking in persons, mixed migration and protection at sea](#).

Table 6. What conditions would have led you to stay in the country / countries where you applied for asylum? Factors shaping respondents' decision to remain or move onward (36 respondents, reporting on 40 asylum applications; multi-select)

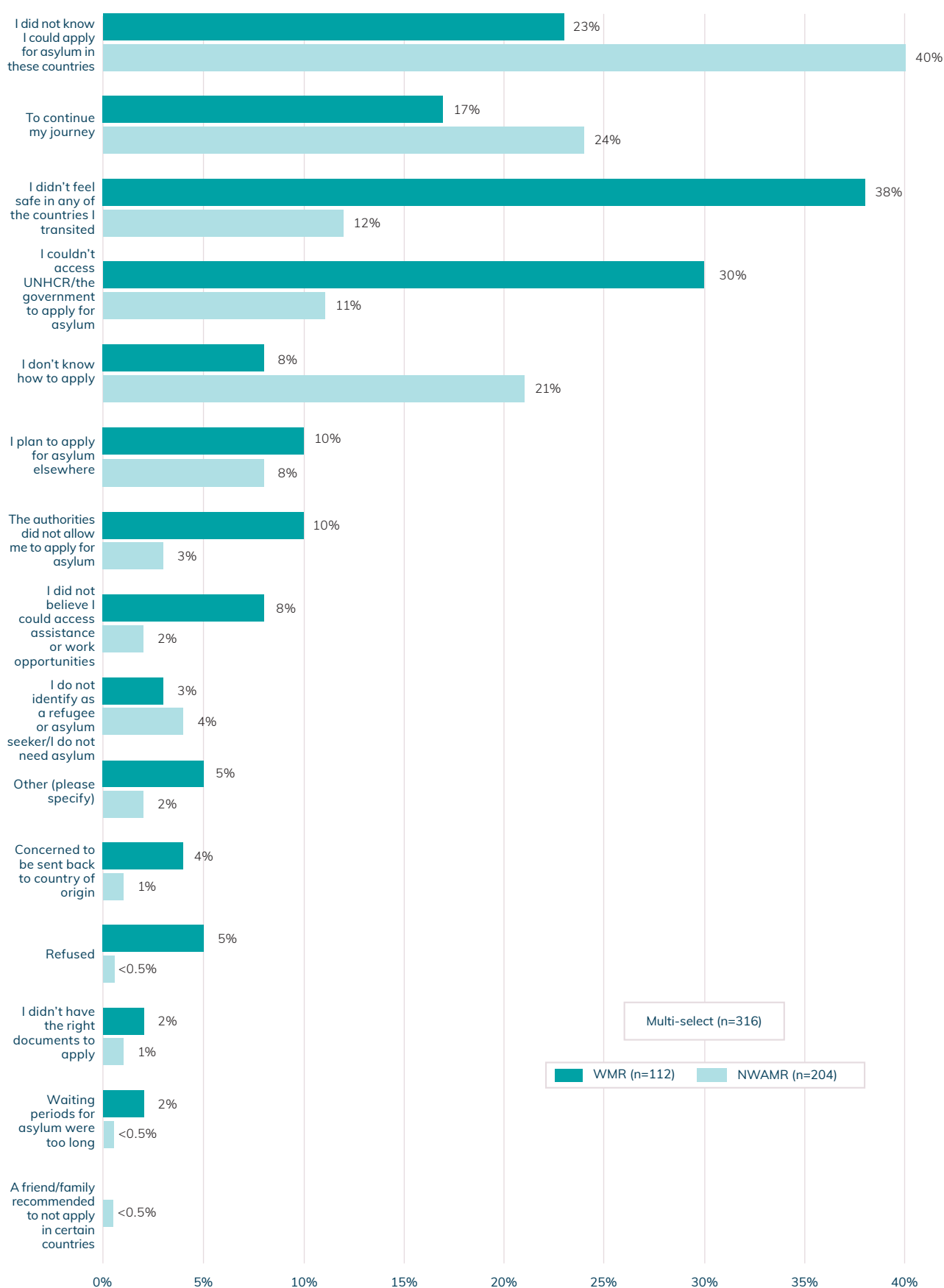
Reasons that would have led respondents to stay where they applied for asylum	Countries of asylum		
	Libya (7 applications)	Mauritania (9 applications)	Morocco (24 applications)
If I had access to asylum	2		10
If I had sufficient access to housing	1	1	13
If I had sufficient access to healthcare	1	2	13
If I had sufficient access to education	1	1	12
If I had access to official documents	2	2	13
If I had sufficient access to work/livelihoods	2	7	13
If I had access to income support from the state (cash benefits, subsidies) or another organization	1	4	11
If I had positive relations with the local population	1	4	13
If I had positive relations with authorities	1	6	13
If I felt safe in the country	1	5	15
Other (please specify)	1		1
None of these/no conditions would have led me to stay	3	1	6
Refused to answer			1

Each column is presented with a heat map gradient: the most frequently mentioned responses are shaded in the darkest colour, and the least frequently mentioned responses in the lightest.

Least mentioned  Most mentioned

The reasons given by respondents who did not apply for asylum before reaching Spain (n=316) differ between NWAMR and WMR (see Figure 15). For those who moved along the NWAMR (n=204), lack of knowledge overall was a key factor, as 40% did not know they could apply in the countries they transited through, and 21% did not know how to apply. However, one in four (24%) prioritised continuing their journey towards Spain, in line with their movement goals. Conversely, those who travelled along the WMR and did not apply for asylum (n=112), did so primarily because of the lack of safety in the countries of transit (38%) and because they could access neither UNHCR nor the government (30%).

Figure 15. Why have you not applied for asylum in any other country on your journey?



Most respondents considered Spain their final destination, had applied for asylum in Spain, or intended to apply in the future

Among all respondents, 72% reported reaching their destination in Spain, 21% reported they had not yet reached their destination, and 7% were undecided. Among those who reported having reached their destination (n=352), 91% either had applied or intended to apply for asylum in Spain, as shown in Figure 16. Malians, Moroccans, and Senegalese respondents had more frequently applied for asylum already, while a sizable proportion of Sudanese did not intend to do so (see Figure 17). An explanation can be found in their movement intentions: all 40 Sudanese who did not intend to seek asylum had not reached their destination yet. Among them, 21 intended to reach the UK, which would explain their intention of not applying for asylum in Spain. The remaining 19 may have wanted to apply elsewhere in Europe. Almost half of those who had not yet reached their final destination (23/49) indicated France was their preferred country for further movement.

Figure 16. Have you applied for asylum in Spain? (n=497)²²

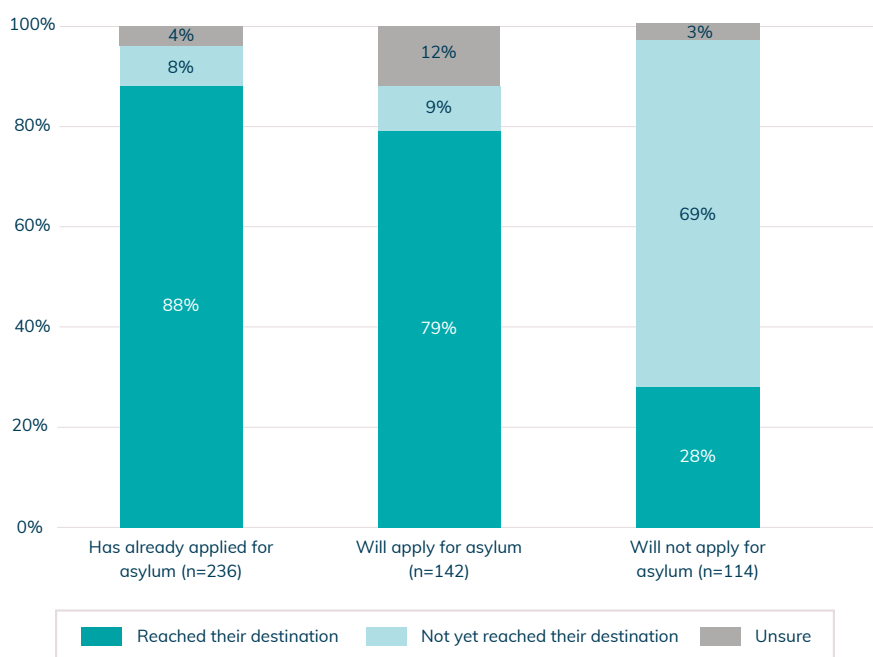
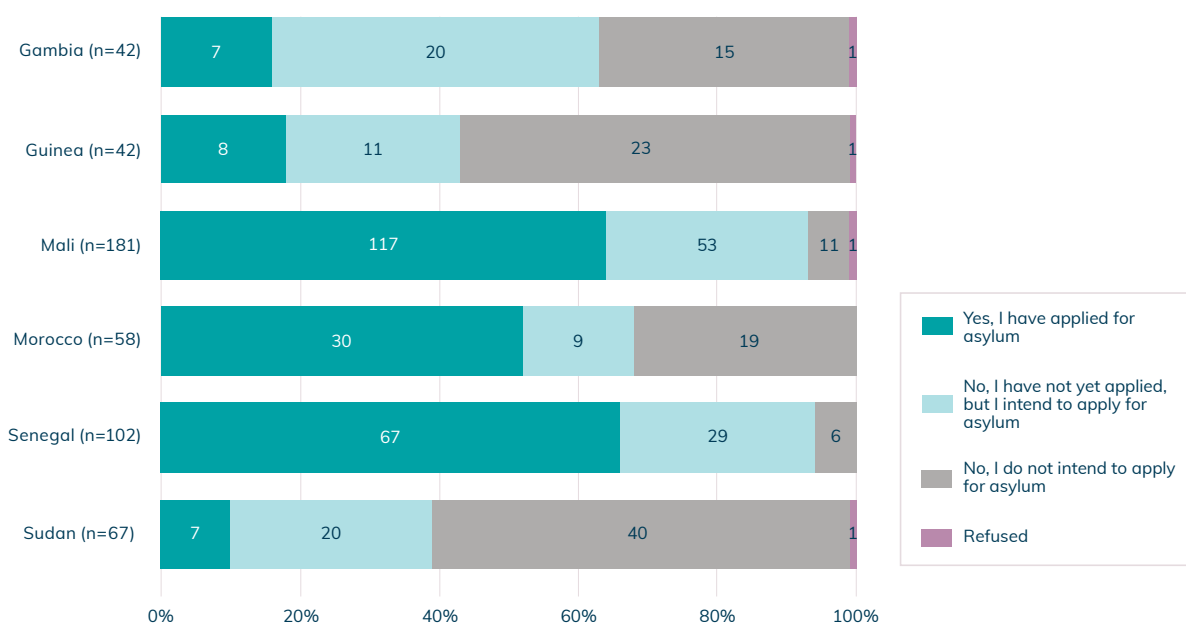


Figure 17. Have you applied for asylum in Spain? (n=497, by nationality)²³

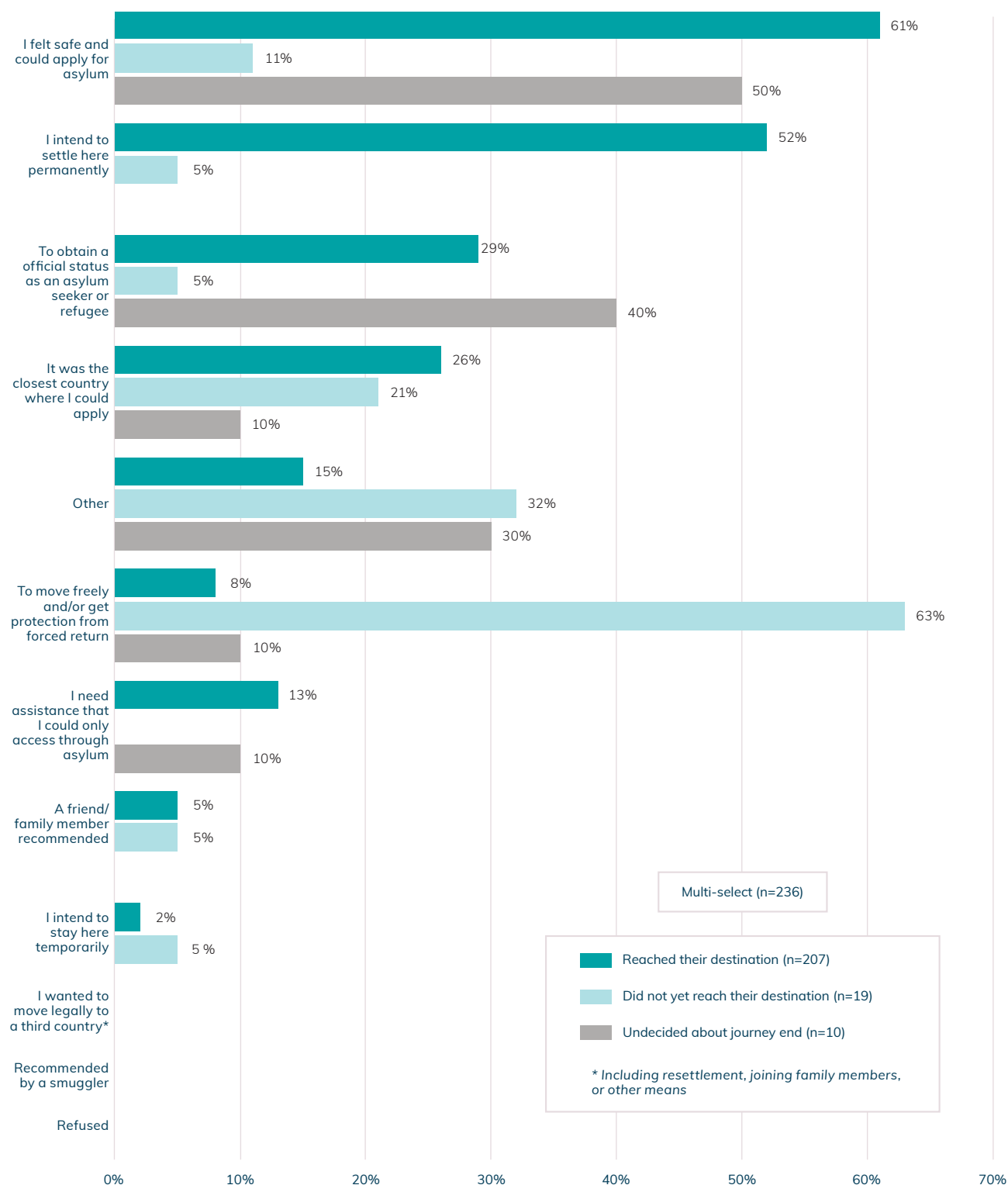


²² 5 non-responses (don't know, refused to answer) were excluded from the Figure.

²³ 5 non-responses (don't know, refused to answer) were excluded from the Figure.

Among respondents who applied for asylum in Spain and reported having reached their destination (n=207), the main reason cited for seeking asylum was the feeling of safety (61%), followed by the intention to settle permanently in Spain (52%) and the desire to obtain an official status as asylum seeker or refugee (29%). Additionally, some chose to apply in Spain because it was the closest country where they could seek asylum (26%). A minority reported applying for asylum for the freedom of movement and protection from expulsions that is guaranteed by being an asylum seeker (13%). Among the respondents who intended to continue their journey (n=112), 32 had nonetheless applied (19) or intended to apply (13) for asylum.

Figure 18. Why have you applied for asylum in Spain? (Respondents who have applied for asylum in Spain)



Implications for programming

The analysis above offers some key observations which can inform the responses of UNHCR and other humanitarian actors, authorities, and development partners to enhance protection, access to assistance and solutions for refugees and migrants attempting to reach Spain via the Western Mediterranean and Northwest Africa Maritime Routes:

- **Protection risks along routes:** Protection-focused programming should address the high risks identified along the WMR and NWAMR. Interventions should include enhanced search-and-rescue operations, particularly in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of West Africa, and coordinated efforts to mitigate reported risks on land such as detention, extortion, and physical violence in transit countries. Partnerships with local and international actors are critical to improving safety along these routes.
- **Gender-sensitive protection needs:** Data highlights that GBV is a primary driver of movement for women as well as one of the protection risks faced by people on the move. Programming should take these gender-specific vulnerabilities into account, including the prevalence of forced marriage, domestic violence, and other forms of GBV in countries of origin and en route. Trauma-informed and survivor-centred GBV response on the move and upon arrival in Spain is critical for women arrivals.
- **Information gaps on journey conditions:** Many refugees and migrants reported having had insufficient information on journey risks, conditions, costs, and routes, particularly among groups who were forcibly displaced. This suggests a need to develop targeted communication strategies using trusted networks, including online platforms, and community outreach to provide reliable information, ensuring accessibility for all demographics. Increasing awareness of risks along the routes, and the location of protection and assistance services, would enable people on the move to make more informed decisions.
- **Information gaps on asylum before reaching Spain:** The lack of awareness about asylum rights and procedures along the NWAMR highlights an information gap that may influence onward movement. In this regard, targeted communication efforts should ensure that people on the move have access to clear, timely, and multilingual information on asylum options in countries along the route, enabling individuals to make informed decisions about seeking protection.
- **Reliance on informal networks:** to reinforce the previous point, given that informal networks are often the main sources of information for people on the move, especially en route, programmes should consider how best to engage with these trusted community networks to share reliable information on the risks associated with irregular movements, potentially enhancing protection outcomes.
- **Limited regular and safe pathways:** The absence of alternative, safe pathways appear to contribute to the use of high-risk routes and reliance on smugglers. This underscores the importance of continuous advocacy efforts with asylum, transit and destination countries to establish regular and safe pathways that could help to mitigate risks associated with dangerous movements.
- **Economic vulnerability among youth:** With a large portion of respondents under 30, economically active but in precarious conditions, programming may need to consider investment opportunities in the countries of origin, as well as the long-term integration needs of a young, economically vulnerable population in countries along the route.

Note on Terminology

MMC applies the term “mixed migration” to refer to cross-border movements of people, including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and economic opportunities. In order to avoid confusion, UNHCR - among many other humanitarian actors - applies the term “mixed movement,” defined as: the cross-border movement of people, generally in an irregular manner, involving individuals and groups who travel alongside each other, using similar routes and means of transport or facilitators, but for different reasons. People travelling as part of mixed movements have different needs and profiles, and may include asylum-seekers, refugees, victims of trafficking, unaccompanied or separated children, stateless persons and migrants (including migrants in irregular situations or migrants in vulnerable situations, see [UNHCR Master Glossary for Terms](#)). In light of the partnership between UNHCR and MMC in publishing this snapshot, the terms “mixed movement” and “refugees and migrants” are used.

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 detail on methodology at: www.mixedmigration.org/4mi



MMC is a global network engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programmatic development on mixed migration, with regional hubs 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 mixed migration 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: www.mixedmigration.org

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