

Smuggling, risks, and abuses: dangerous locations and perpetrators (part 1 of 3)

This is the first in a series of three 4Mi snapshots looking at the conjunction between smuggling¹ and the risks and abuses faced by refugees and migrants moving through West and North Africa. It draws on 2,427 interviews conducted in Libya, Niger, Mali, and Tunisia between March and July 2021.

This first snapshot focuses on smuggling and dangerous routes, and the role of smugglers as perpetrators of risks relative to other actors in these locations. It underscores that while the use of smugglers and the risks associated with certain routes often go hand in hand, smugglers themselves are just one of a variety of actors perpetrating abuses against refugees and migrants.

This snapshot is produced in the context of a partnership with the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](https://www.unodc.org/res/som/index.html).



1 MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', one which encompasses various activities — paid for or otherwise compensated by refugees and migrants — that facilitate irregular migration. These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation, and accommodation. This approach reflects refugees' and migrants' perceptions of smuggling and the facilitation of irregular movement. Our interpretation is deliberately broader than the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants' definition. However, this does not imply that MMC considers all activities it includes in its broad understanding of smuggling to be criminal offences. MMC prefers to use the term 'human smuggling' instead of 'migrant smuggling' as smuggling involves both refugees and migrants. This publication is produced in partnership with the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) [Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants](https://www.unodc.org/res/som/index.html). The Observatory uses the word 'smuggler' when it can reasonably be assumed that the crime of migrant smuggling is constituted, as per Article 3 of the UN Smuggling of Migrants Protocol, while the word 'facilitator' is used whenever the elements of (a) irregular entry and/or (b) financial or material benefit, could reasonably be assumed not to be in evidence. www.unodc.org/res/som/index.html.

Key findings

- **Respondents who used a smuggler more often reported at least one dangerous location on their journey:** 73% of respondents who used a smuggler cited at least one location on the journey as dangerous, compared to 41% of respondents who did not use a smuggler. This suggests either that routes through a country are dangerous and necessitate the services of a smuggler, or that smugglers are linked to protection violations, or some combination of the two.
- **Among the most frequently cited dangerous locations², Libya was the place perceived to be most unsafe:** 54% of all risks attributed to the most dangerous locations were cited in relation to Libya. 24% of perceived perpetrators mentioned in relation to these risks were criminals/criminal gangs, 22% were armed groups and militias, 18% were smugglers, 17% were border guards/immigration officials and 16% were military/police.
- **Overall smugglers were not the most frequently cited perpetrator of risks:** they made up only 16% of overall perpetrator mentions.
- **Smugglers were cited most frequently as perpetrators of risks only in the Sahara Desert,** very closely followed by other actors. Smugglers comprised 26% of all mentions of perceived perpetrators for that location (followed by 25% for criminals/criminal gangs and 16% for military/police).

2 As elaborated below, this analysis is based on respondents who used a smuggler and who indicated one or more dangerous locations among the five most frequently cited: Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and the Sahara Desert (n=1,205).

Profiles and smuggler use

Between March and July 2021, a total of 2,427 surveys with refugees and migrants (32% women, 68% men) were carried out in Libya (n=908), Niger (n=477), Mali (n=471) and Tunisia (n=571). 76% of respondents (n = 1,845) said that they used a smuggler for at least part of their journey.

Respondents interviewed in Libya and Niger more often said they had used smugglers (90% and 87% respectively). Libya is considered extremely challenging to navigate without the assistance of a 'third party,'³ and previous MMC research has underscored the importance of smugglers for movement both in Libya and in parts of Niger.⁴ This contrasts with Tunisia, where 65% of respondents reported using a smuggler, and Mali, with only 52%. Therefore, the data on the prevalence of smugglers tells us something about how freely and independently refugees and migrants can move into and through a country.

To best understand the risks and perpetrators faced and perceived by those who use smugglers, this snapshot focuses on the five locations most frequently cited as dangerous by those who used a smuggler, where the majority of risks were perceived, which were Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and the Sahara Desert (n=1,205). Therefore, these results are not generalizable as the sample is structured to focus on risks and abuses.

Of these respondents, 32% were adult women (n=383) and 68% were adult m (n=822), with an average age of 28. The main countries of nationality among this group were Nigeria (29%), Sudan (7%), Guinea (5%), Eritrea (5%), Ghana (5%), Cameroon (5%), Niger (5%), Benin (4%), Sierra Leone (4%), Senegal (4%).

After citing locations they perceived as dangerous, respondents could specify risks that they associated with these locations, and the actors or groups they perceived as perpetrating these risks or abuses.

3 UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021) [Key Findings on the Characteristics of Migrant Smuggling in West Africa, North Africa and the Central Mediterranean](#).

4 MMC (2020) [Migration and risks: smuggling networks and dynamics on the Central Mediterranean](#).

Dangerous routes and smuggler use

73% of respondents who used a smuggler cited at least one dangerous location along their journey. In contrast, only 41% of respondents who did not use a smuggler cited one or more dangerous locations along the route. This is important as it suggests either that routes through a country are dangerous and necessitate the services of a smuggler, or that smugglers are linked to protection violations, or some combination of the two.

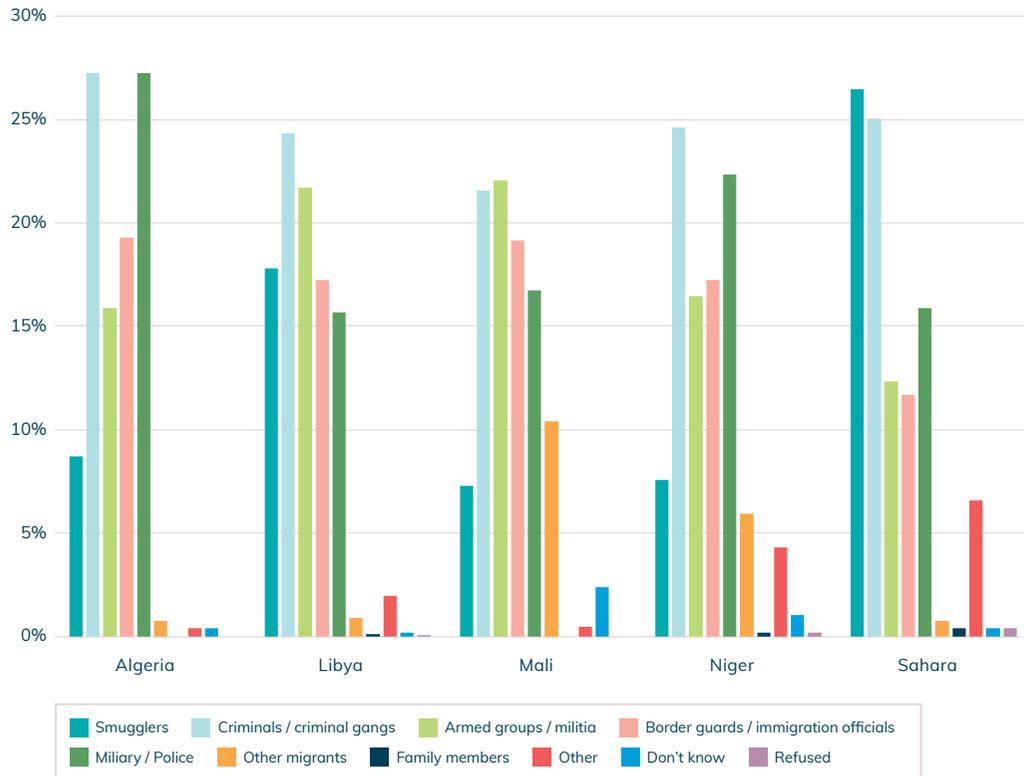
The dangerous locations most frequently mentioned by people who had used a smuggler were not always the same as those most frequently mentioned by people who did not. Those who did not use a smuggler most frequently cited Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, Tunisia and Côte d'Ivoire (followed closely by Niger). Those respondents who used a smuggler most often cited Libya, the Sahara Desert, Niger, Mali and Algeria,⁵ accounting for 87% of all mentioned risks. The fact that Libya, Mali and Niger are very prominent in both cases underscores the dangers inherent in the route itself, independent of whether or not a smuggler is used.

Smugglers not the most frequently cited perpetrator

When considering perceived perpetrators of risks in these five locations, smugglers made up just 16% of overall mentions; rarely are they considered the main perpetrators of abuse or violations. Rather they are one of many, and other actors and/or groups were more frequently perceived perpetrators of abuse in all but one location. Only in the Sahara Desert were smugglers most often cited as the perceived perpetrator in comparison to other possible perpetrators, with 26% of overall mentions, although this was the case by a very small margin, as smugglers were followed closely by criminals/criminal gangs (25%).

5 All analysis that follows is based on this group of people who both used smugglers, and cited Algeria, Libya, Mali, Niger and/or the Sahara Desert as dangerous (n=1,205). It considers risks and perceived perpetrators in relation to these five locations. Respondents could cite multiple locations as dangerous, including locations outside of these five, and they could also cite the same country as dangerous multiple times (eg Libya, Sabha; Libya, Khoms; Libya, Tripoli). They could also indicate multiple risks and multiple perceived perpetrators per location. Given these characteristics of the dataset, this analysis is generally based in times a risk or perpetrator is mentioned, rather than the proportion of respondents mentioning it.

Figure 1. Perceived main perpetrators by location



Libya was the location with the greatest number of risks cited overall, with 54% of those attributed to the five most cited dangerous locations. It was also the location with the next highest proportion of mentions of smugglers as perceived perpetrators of risks after the Sahara Desert, (18%). However, smugglers were superseded in terms of citations by criminals/criminal gangs (24%) and armed groups/militias (22%) and followed closely by border guards/immigration officials (17%) and military/police (16%).

Previous MMC research has suggested that smugglers are less likely to be reported as perpetrators of abuses in West Africa than in Libya,⁶ which this analysis also supports. Although Mali is considered a dangerous place, smugglers were mentioned as likely perpetrators less often than all other profiles (7%) and in Niger mentions of smugglers (8%) only surpassed those of other migrants (6%) and ‘other’ (4%).

6 MMC (2020) [Migration and risks: smuggling networks and dynamics on the Central Mediterranean](#).

Conclusion

It is important not to forget the role that smugglers can play in committing abuses against refugees and migrants. In several earlier MMC analyses,⁷ smugglers were found to be the main perpetrators of particular violations, specifically sexual and physical abuse, by respondents interviewed in Libya and Niger. However, this analysis shows that when looking at the larger picture and holistically examining risks faced by refugees and migrants, smugglers are not considered to be the most prominent perpetrator. While aggravated smuggling offences⁸ are perpetrated in all dangerous locations considered in this analysis, particularly the Sahara Desert and Libya, it only constitutes a piece (and in some cases a relatively small one) of the wider landscape of abuses against migrants.

7 See for instance: MMC (2020) [4Mi snapshot: Protection risks within and along routes to Libya – a focus on physical abuse](#); MMC (2019) [4Mi snapshot: Protection risks within and along routes to Libya – a focus on sexual abuse](#); Golovko, E. (2018) [Players of many parts: The evolving role of smugglers in West Africa’s migration economy](#) MMC.

8 According to the [Protocol against the smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air](#) (Article 6.3a-b) aggravated smuggling constitutes ‘circumstances that endanger, or are likely to endanger, the lives or safety of the migrants concerned; or that entail inhuman or degrading treatment, including for exploitation, of such migrants. See also: UNODC (2021). [Abused and Neglected: A Gender Perspective on Aggravated Migrant Smuggling Offences and Response](#). Vienna: UNODC. Available at: www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2021/Aggravated_SOM_and_Gender.pdf.



This snapshot is produced in the context of a partnership with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants: www.unodc.org/res/som/index.html

4Mi data collection

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

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