Profiles and drivers of Eritreans in mixed migration flows

Thousands of Eritreans are forced to flee Eritrea every year, many joining mixed migration flows and seeking asylum in East Africa and beyond. As this snapshot shows, many are driven to escape harsh conditions and conscription into military service. Men and women from 18 to 40 years old are required by law to undertake national service in Eritrea for 18 months, though it is widely reported that mandatory service is often indefinite and characterized by forced conscription and abusive situations. The need for this national service is pegged to ongoing hostilities with neighbouring Ethiopia. Despite initial optimism about a 2018 peace agreement and opening of the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia and indications of improvement of the situation in Eritrea, borders with Ethiopia are again closed and national service remains in place.

The snapshot shows that many Eritreans start their journey outside of Eritrea, some living as refugees, asylum seekers. Ethiopia is home to 172,750 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers who, until recently, automatically received asylum. As of August 2019, 123,413 Eritreans refugees and asylum seekers were living in Sudan and 18,976 in Egypt (as of March 2020). In April 2020 the Ethiopian government announced that it would end this blanket protection for Eritreans. In March 2020 it was also announced that Ethiopia's Hitsats refugee camp, home to more than 10,000 Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers was being been closed down by the government. These latest moves fuel uncertainty among the Eritrean population in East Africa, who often face high unemployment rates, lack of opportunities, and human rights violations.

Eritreans were the single largest group of migrants and refugees entering Italy by sea in 2015, but this number has drastically decreased. In the first quarter of 2020, only 56 Eritreans were reported arriving in Europe. Though arrival figures for Europe remain low, Eritreans continue to travel north, and there are concerns that they remain trapped in Libya and across North Africa in increasingly dangerous situations. IOM reported that over 8,663 Eritreans were part of the 'migrants' present in Libya in December 2019. In addition, as of the end of March, there were 5,702 Eritreans registered as asylum seekers and refugees with UNHCR in Libya.
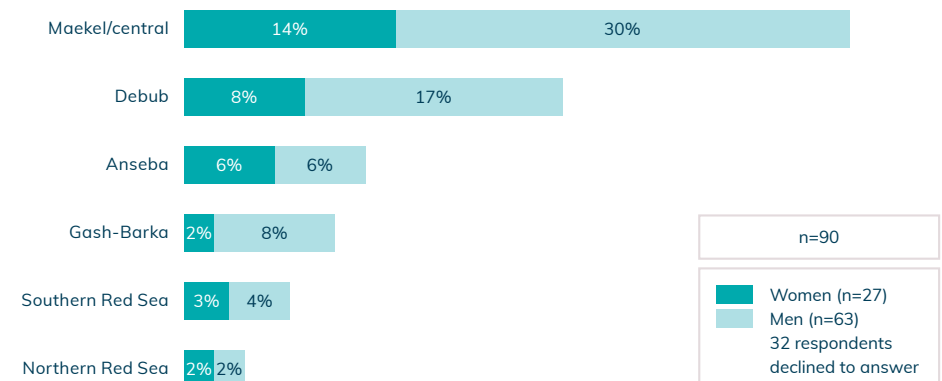
Profiles

This snapshot focuses on 122 interviews conducted with Eritreans traveling along mixed migration routes out of East Africa between June 2017 and December 2019. These interviews were conducted in Denmark (7), Djibouti (1), Egypt (8), Germany (73), Kenya (12), Norway (4), and South Africa (17).

> 💬 **122** interviews   👤 **81** men   👤 **41** women   **27** average age
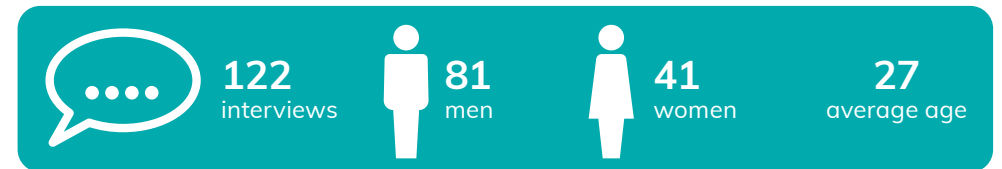
Of those interviewed, 66% of respondents were men and 34% were women. Nearly half were between the ages of 18 and 25, with the average age of 27 (for both men and women). Overall, 62% of all respondents interviewed were single, 26% married, 8% separated/divorced and 3% widowed.

Figure 1. Region of origin

Region	Women	Men
Maekel/central	14%	30%
Debub	8%	17%
Anseba	6%	6%
Gash-Barka	2%	8%
Southern Red Sea	3%	4%
Northern Red Sea	2%	2%

n=90

Women (n=27)
Men (n=63)
32 respondents declined to answer

Nearly half of respondents did not start migration journey in Eritrea

47% of respondents did not start their migration journey in Eritrea – only 27% started in Eritrea, and 26% didn't answer the question. Otherwise, 28% of respondents reported starting their migration journey in Ethiopia, 11% in Sudan, 5% in Kenya, and the rest in South Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia. Additionally, 62% of Eritrean refugees and migrants had lived in other regions/cities in Eritrea prior to undertaking international migration with 3% of these having lived in settlements for internally displaced persons.
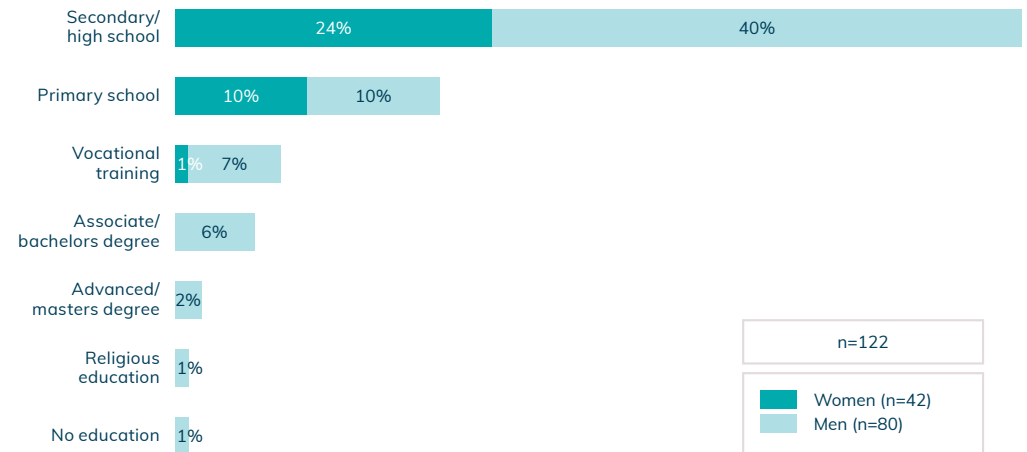
Figure 2. Country of Departure
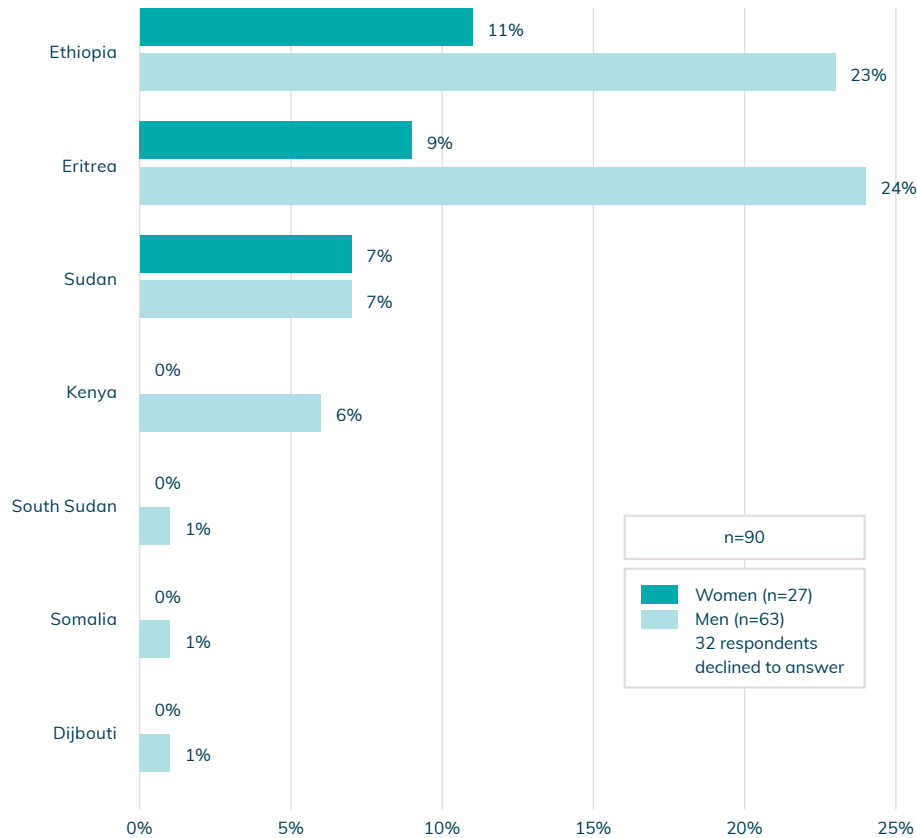
Most respondents report having secondary education

A majority of respondents (64%) had attained secondary school education prior to migrating, though only male respondents had attended higher levels of education (6% had a Bachelor's degree and 2% had Masters' degree).

## Figure 3. Highest level of education attained

A sizable number of Eritreans were students before migrating

When asked about their main occupation in their countries of departure prior to migration, 26% of respondents (16% of which are men and 10% of which are women) reported that they had been students. 23% overall reported they were working with the police/military. This was the most common occupation among male respondents, at 34% of men reported to have been with the policy/military. 13% of all respondents reported being unemployed prior to migrating.

As a note, men and women from 18 to 40 years old are required by law to undertake national service in Eritrea for 18 months.

Figure 4. Main occupation prior to migation
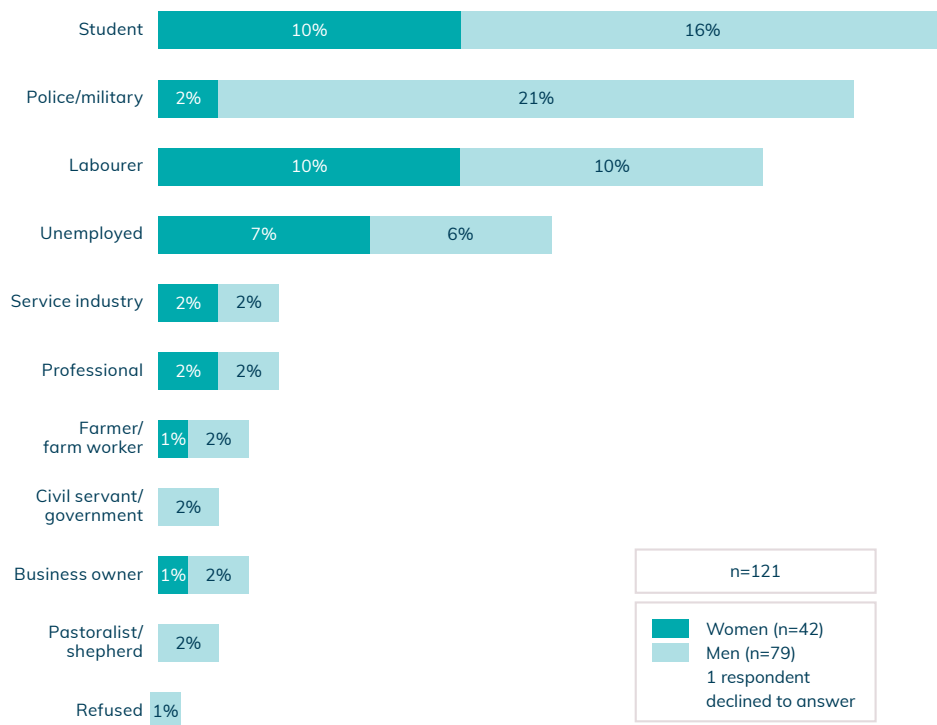
Top drivers for Eritreans are lack of rights and lack of social services

Most respondents (89%) cited a lack of rights in their country of departure as a reason for leaving the country, while personal and family reasons were cited by 7% of respondents.

Figure 5. Reason for leaving
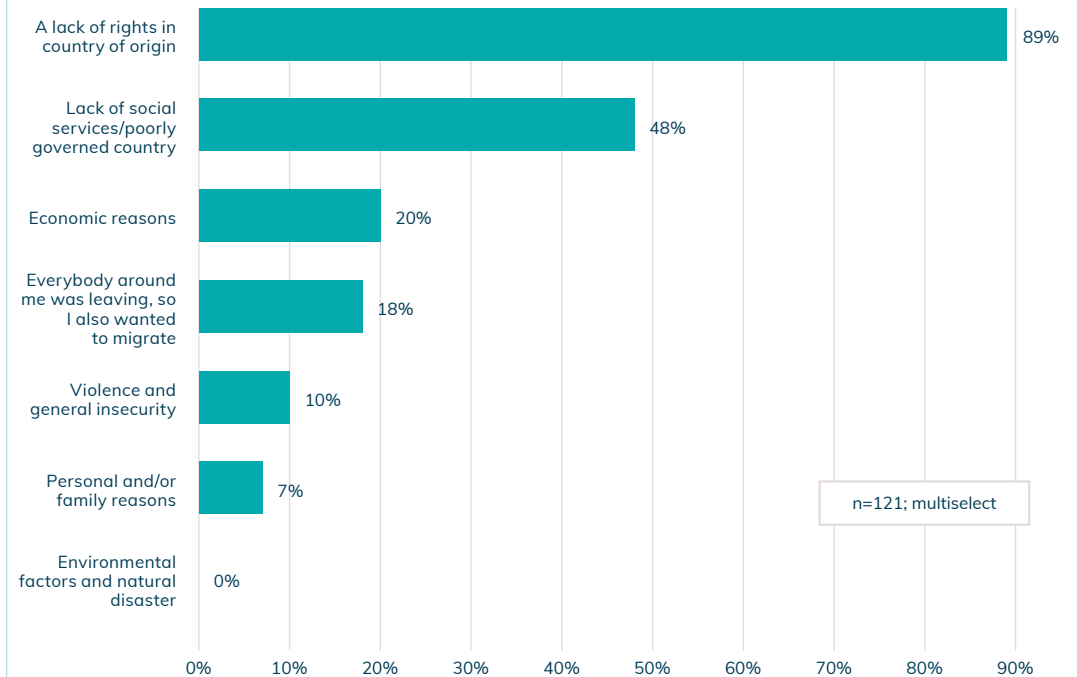
Among lack of rights (n=109), fear of conscription/forced labour (84%) and lack of freedom of expression (63%) were the most cited reasons, which corresponds to reports by the International Law and Policy Institute and other reports which outline the ongoing human rights conditions which force thousands of Eritreans to flee every year.

Figure 6. Breakdown of lack of rights

Category	Percentage
Fear of conscription/forced labour	84%
Lack of freedom of expression	63%
Political discrimination/persecution	28%
Religious discrimination/persecution	17%
Ethnic discrimination/persecution	4%
Other	3%

n=109; multiselect

Figure 7. What was the lack of social services in your country?

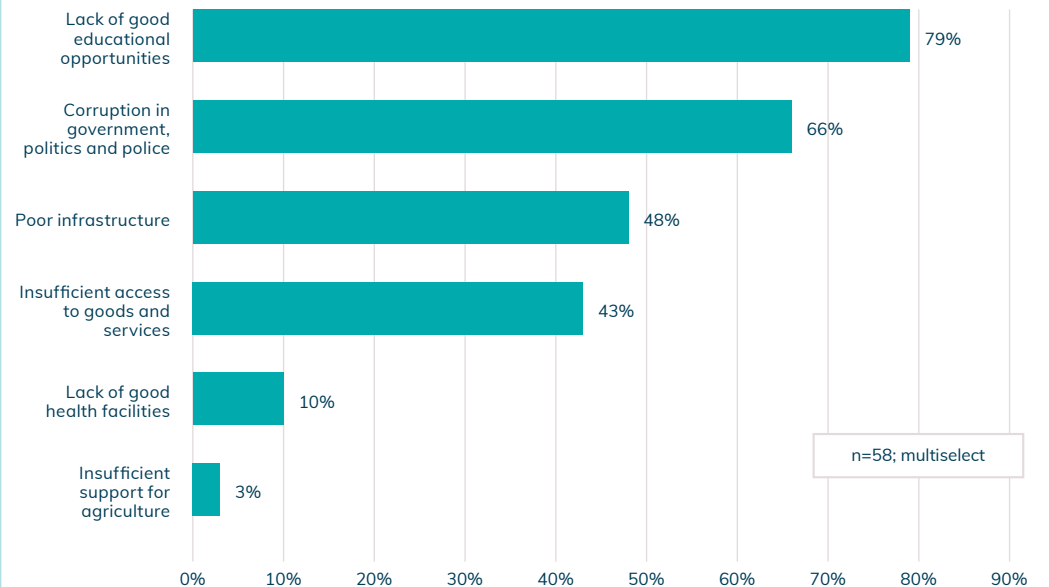| Category	Percentage
Lack of good educational opportunities	79%
Corruption in government, politics and police	66%
Poor infrastructure	48%
Insufficient access to goods and services	43%
Lack of good health facilities	10%
Insufficient support for agriculture	3%

n=58; multiselect

Lack of good educational opportunities was the most highly reported factor among those saying they left for lack of social services (79% of 58 respondents), for both students and non-students undertaking migration journeys. Corruption in government, politics and police (66%), poor infrastructure (48%), and insufficient access to goods and services (43%) were also prominent concerns.
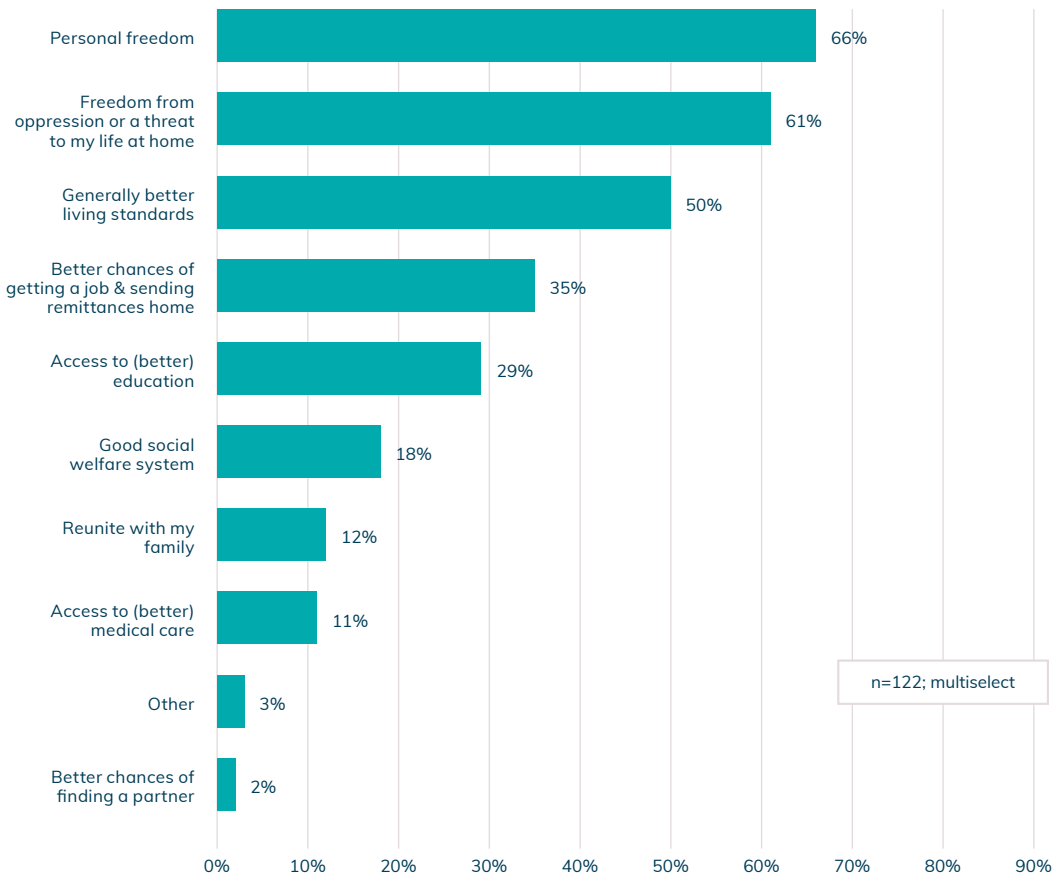
In addition, most Eritrean respondents (77%) reported that they would not have migrated if the reasons they provided did not exist (15% reported that they would have migrated anyway, irrespective of whether those drivers existed, and 8% did not know).

Eritreans choose destinations for freedom and a better life

Eritrean refugees and migrants overwhelmingly chose destination countries based on their perceptions of securing personal freedoms (66%), freedom from oppression (61%) and better living standards (50%). These directly correlate with the main drivers for migration cited by respondents above.

Though a significant number of respondents (26%) were students prior to their migration journey, and 38% cited lack of educational opportunities as a driver of migration, better chances of getting a job ranked slightly higher (35%) than access to education (29%).
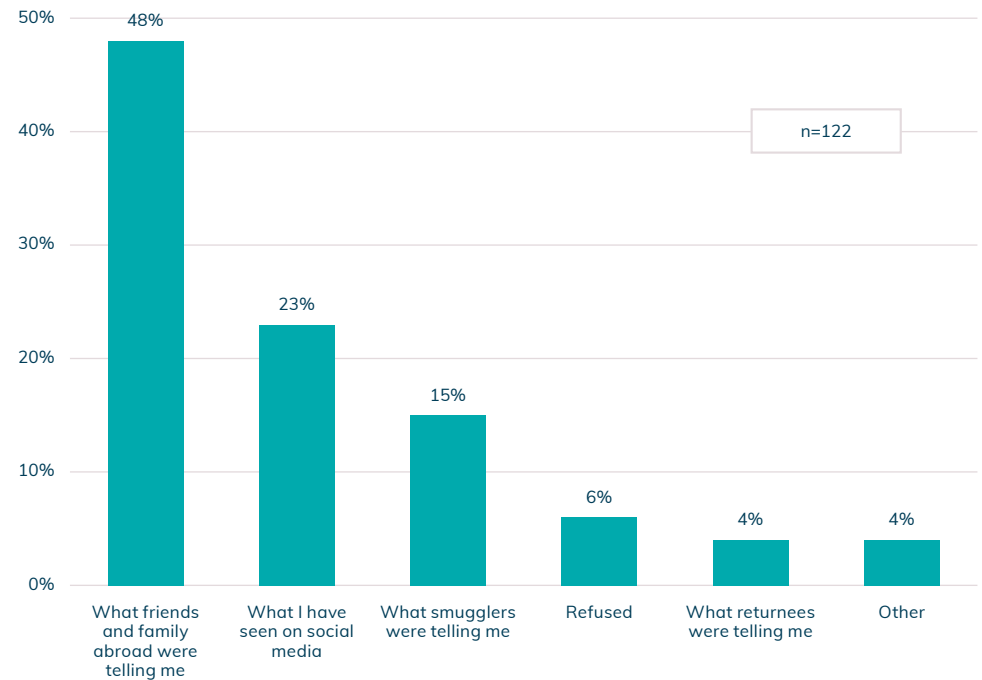
Figure 8. Why did/do you want to go to your destination country?

Category	%
Personal freedom	66%
Freedom from oppression or a threat to my life at home	61%
Generally better living standards	50%
Better chances of getting a job & sending remittances home	35%
Access to (better) education	29%
Good social welfare system	18%
Reunite with my family	12%
Access to (better) medical care	11%
Other	3%
Better chances of finding a partner	2%

n=122; multiselect

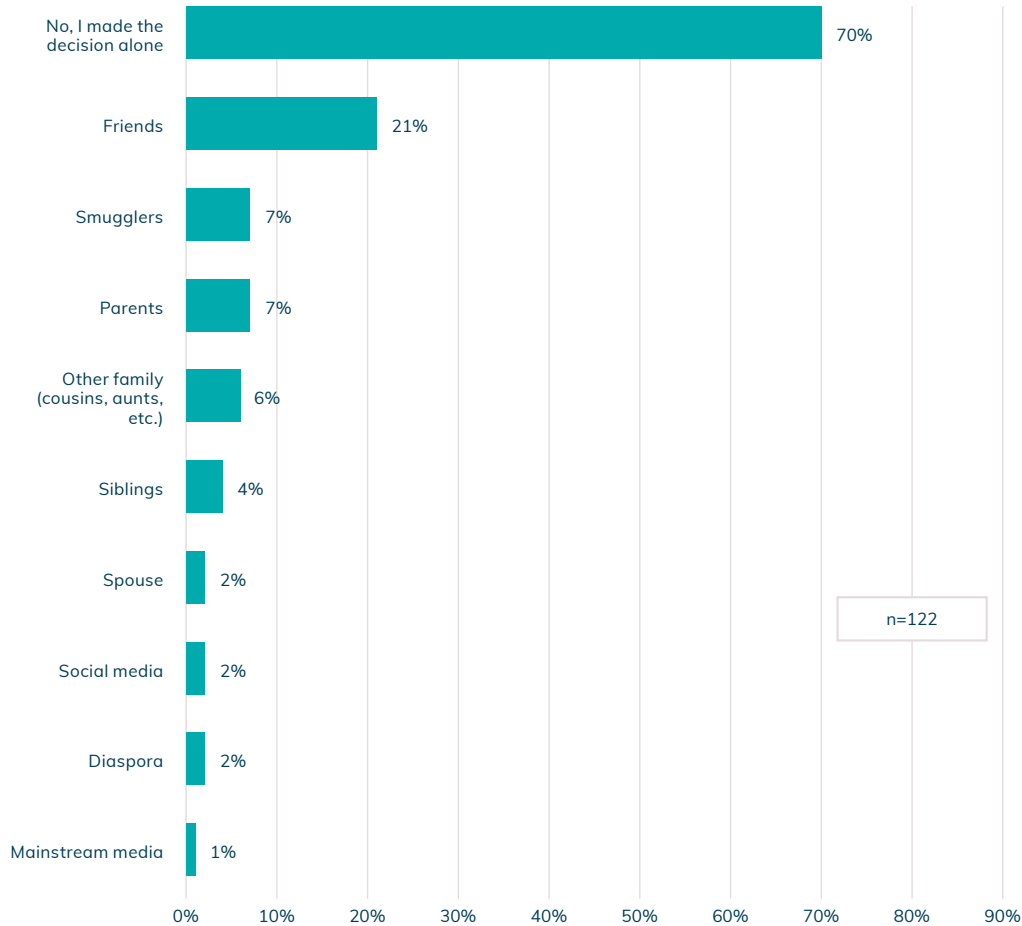## Friends and family are the main influencers in decision-making prior to departure

A large number of the respondents (48%) reported that friends and families abroad influenced their decision to migrate. Social media was the second commonly cited influencer, followed by smugglers.

Figure 9. Which factor mostly influenced your decision to migrate?

Factor	%
What friends and family abroad were telling me	48%
What I have seen on social media	23%
What smugglers were telling me	15%
Refused	6%
What returnees were telling me	4%
Other	4%

n=122

Although 48% of respondents reported being heavily influenced by family and friends on the decision to migrate, the ultimate decision was made by the respondents themselves (70% of respondents) as seen in Figure 9 below. However, 80% of respondents reported that friends and family helped them start their migration journeys and 52% further reported that friends and families facilitated the rest of their migration journeys.

Figure 10. Did anyone encourage you to migrate?

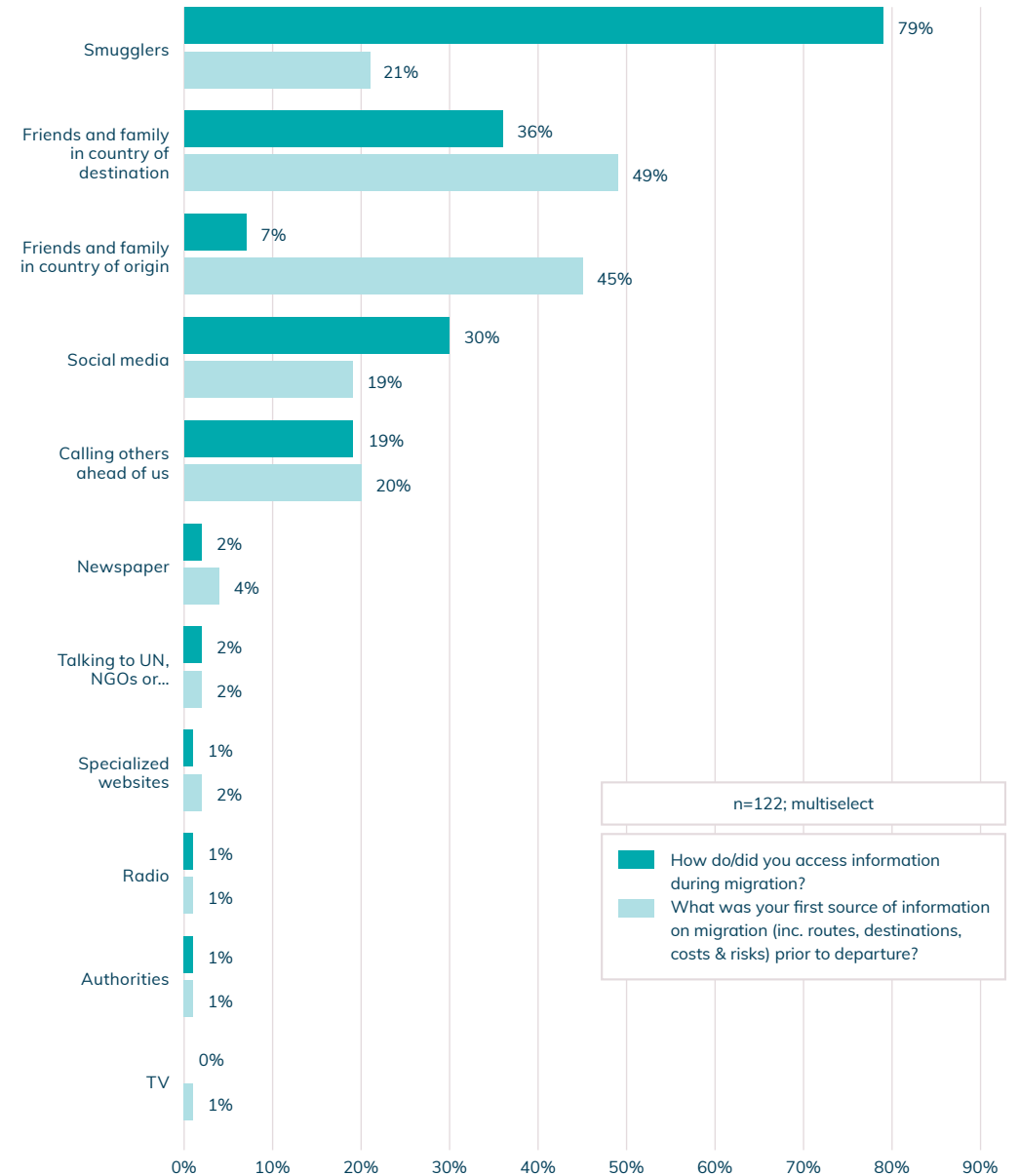|	
No, I made the decision alone	70%
Friends	21%
Smugglers	7%
Parents	7%
Other family (cousins, aunts, etc.)	6%
Siblings	4%
Spouse	2%
Social media	2%
Diaspora	2%
Mainstream media	1%

n=122

Smugglers are the main source of information during migration

Before the journey, respondents used very different information sources compared to during the journey As Figure 8 shows, only 21% of respondents noted relying on smugglers before a migration journey, however a striking 79% of respondents report relying on smugglers for information during their migration journey.

However, 34% of respondents reported that smugglers lied to them about routes, 54% thought they lied about costs, and 46% thought they lied about the conditions of travel. Another 23% thought they lied about the safety and security of the route, and 6% that they lied about conditions and regulations at the destination country.

Figure 11. Sources of information prior to and during migration

	During migration	First source
Smugglers	79%	21%
Friends and family in country of destination	36%	49%
Friends and family in country of origin	7%	45%
Social media	30%	19%
Calling others ahead of us	19%	20%
Newspaper	2%	4%
Talking to UN, NGOs or…	2%	2%
Specialized websites	1%	2%
Radio	1%	1%
Authorities	1%	1%
TV	0%	1%

n=122; multiselect

- How do/did you access information during migration?
- What was your first source of information on migration (inc. routes, destinations, costs & risks) prior to departure?

The Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (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 monitors are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in West Africa, East Africa and Yemen, North Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America.

Sample sizes are clearly indicated and represent a limited section of those on the move. The findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make any inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi