Impact of COVID-19 on protection risks for refugees and migrants

This is the second in a series of global thematic updates on 4Mi data collected remotely by MMC about the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants travelling along mixed migration routes in Africa, Asia and Latin America. After the initial roll-out of our adapted 4Mi survey focusing on the immediate impact of the pandemic in April, we moved into a new data collection phase in July, further zooming in on the impact of the pandemic on mixed migration, including migrant smuggling, drivers of mixed migration and movement decision-making, and protection. This second update focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on the protection risks faced during the journey – whether refugees and migrants perceive an increase in risks. It looks at the data collected in each region, but also at differences according to legal status and gender. Similar to MMC's previous global data updates since the start of the pandemic, these thematic reports provide an aggregated overview; more detailed, thematic and response-oriented COVID-19 snapshots are developed in each of the MMC regional offices and available here.

Key messages

- Overall, respondents report that **the risk of abuse or rights violation has increased since the pandemic began, confirming that COVID-19 acts as a threat multiplier**.

- Respondents in most regions perceived an increased risk in arrest and detention, pushback/denial of entry, theft and bribery/extortion.

- While the **risk of arbitrary arrest and detention is widely perceived to have increased** since the start of the pandemic, a notably high share (83%) of respondents perceived this risk in Malaysia.

- **More than 40% agreed that domestic violence had increased in all regions**, with more than 50% of women agreeing, in all regions, except East Africa.

Region	Country	n	Percent women	Mean age
East Africa	Dijbouti	105	31%	33
	Kenya	61	38%	31
North Africa	Libya	524	32%	30
	Tunisia	629	30%	28
West Africa	Burkina Faso	329	39%	28
	Mali	404	20%	27
	Niger	347	30%	31
Latin America	Colombia	450	69%	34
	Guatemala	125	43%	35
	Mexico	87	62%	33
	Peru	207	67%	34
Asia	India	90	40%	33
	Indonesia	102	34%	29
	Malaysia	105	33%	27

Note: 4 people interviewed in Ethiopia, who were considered in all analysis, except disaggregation by country.

Profiles

3,569 respondents* were interviewed between 2 July and 30 August 2020, with 170 interviews conducted in East Africa, 1,153 in North Africa, 1,080 in West Africa, 869 in Latin America, and 297 in Asia.

In Latin America, the majority of respondents (76%) were Venezuelan, followed by smaller groups of people from Honduras (10%), El Salvador (7%), Nicaragua (5%), with other nationalities from the region making up the rest. In Asia, 65% of respondents were Afghans (interviewed in India and Indonesia), 25% were from Myanmar and 10% from Bangladesh (interviewed in Malaysia). Respondents in East Africa were mainly from within the region, and respondents in North Africa and West Africa were from a wide range of African countries.

This update also looks at the migration status of respondents: the data includes 659 interviews with asylum seekers, 262 with refugees, 981 regular migrants (including permanent and temporary residents), 1,531 migrants without a regular status (including 131 people whose permit is no longer valid). 136 respondents responded other, do not know, or refused and were not included in analysis by status. Disaggregation by migration status should be treated with caution because some countries of interview lack domestic refugee legislation and/or are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, which may impact on respondents' willingness or ability to apply for refugee status.

Methodology

A summary of 4Mi methodology can be found [here](). All figures are rounded to the nearest whole number. 82 interviews were discarded from analysis due to questionnaire incompleteness or data quality issues. 23 interviews were excluded from the analysis because the respondent either had not heard of Covid-19 (19) or refused to say whether they had heard of it (4). Sample sizes at country level are still small for some countries, and findings regarding these should therefore be considered with caution.

* These thematic updates report on the findings from the revised 4Mi COVID-19 survey implemented since July 2020. Data collected between April and July (5,906 interviews) using a different survey has been reported in a series of global updates and regional snapshots.

Note that the data here does not represent respondents' actual experience of incidents, rather respondents' direct perception of the prevailing situation, based on their own experience (this is made explicit during the interview). It depends on respondents' interpretation of the situation and contributes to an explanation of the relatively high number of neutral responses to some questions. It is an indicator of the prevalence of a phenomenon, not the severity.

Context

The mobility restrictions introduced as COVID-19 was declared a pandemic have impacted on almost all aspects of refugees' and migrants' lives. People found themselves unable to continue their journey, or homeless, or losing income and unable to access the goods and services they needed. In June 2020, the UN stated that the pandemic has not only triggered health and socioeconomic crises, but also a [protection crisis](). States have [prevented people]() from seeking international protection, and even [forced people back]() across borders. MMC's [last global update]() found that refugees and migrants are generally becoming more dependent on smugglers and believe smugglers to be choosing more dangerous routes. This update looks more broadly at perceptions of risk since COVID-19: **do refugees and migrants believe that the dangers they face have increased?**
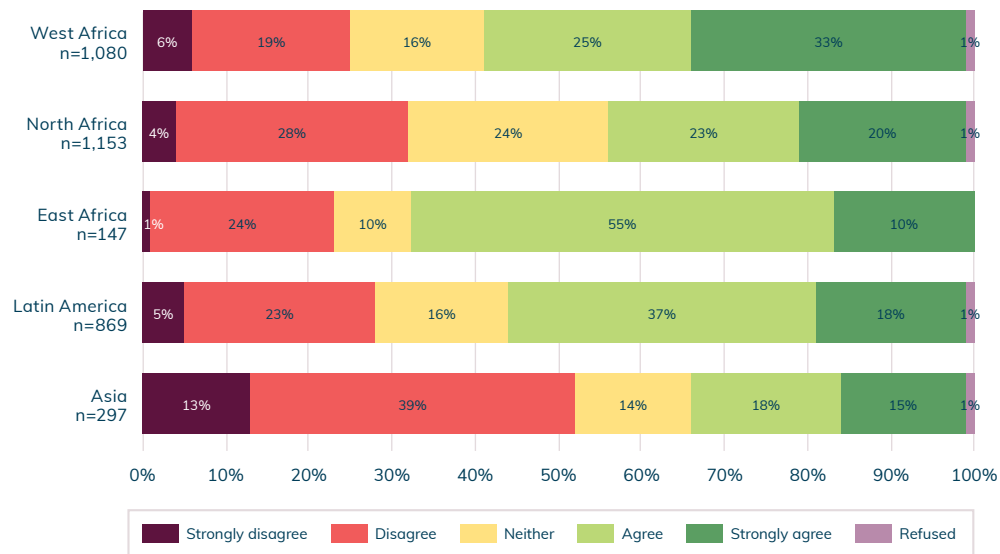
Protection risks are perceived to have increased since the pandemic began

Overall, respondents report that the risk of abuse or rights violation has increased since the pandemic began, supporting the argument that the COVID-19 crisis is a threat multiplier. In three out of five regions , a majority of respondents perceive an increase in arrest and detention, pushback/denial of entry, theft, and bribery and extortion.

Arbitrary arrest and detention

The **perception that the risk of arrest or arbitrary detention has increased is strongest in East Africa**, with 65% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement (with a higher percentage of people agreeing in Kenya than in Djibouti). **More than half of respondents also agree with the statement in West Africa (58%) and Latin America (55%).** In Asia, the level of agreement overall is relatively low (33%), due to a wide range of responses across countries, from just 3% agreeing in India **up to 82% in Malaysia perceiving an increased risk of arrest or arbitrary detention**. This finding in Malaysia is in line with reports of migrants being rounded up and detained during the pandemic.

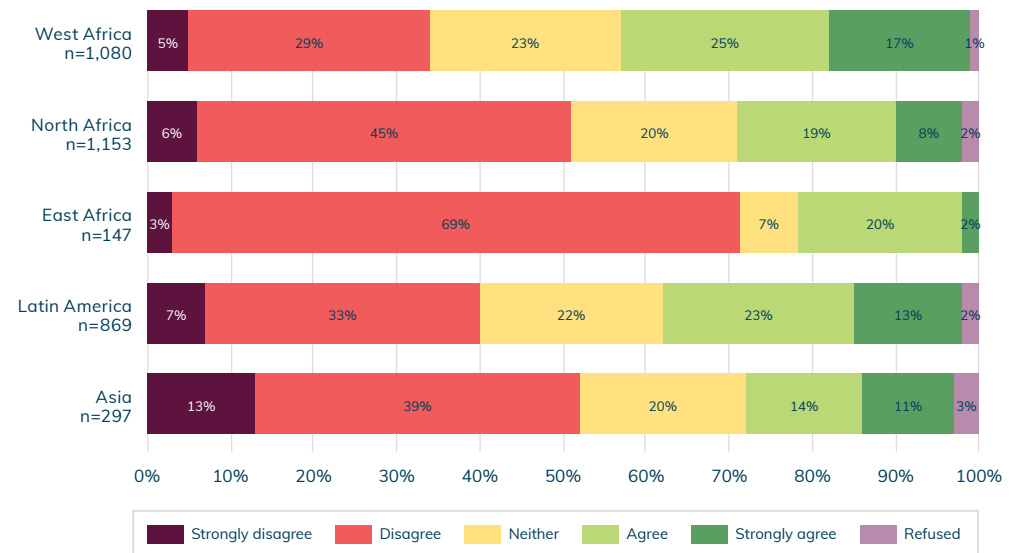## Figure 1. There is an increased risk of arbitrary arrest and detention since the COVID-19 pandemic began

The perception of risk is quite high across all legal status groups: at 44% among refugees, 46% among asylum seekers, 53% among regular migrants, and 54% among irregular migrants.

Deportation

Many countries suspended deportations after the pandemic was declared, but some continued despite appeals to temporarily halt forced returns. **Overall, deportation is among risks that respondents less frequently consider to have increased with the pandemic**, with more than half disagreeing in East Africa (71%), Asia (52%), and North Africa (51%). **Nonetheless, 58% of respondents in Malaysia agreed** that the risk of deportation had increased (compared to just 10% in Indonesia and 4% in India). In West Africa, 41% agreed that the risk had increased, ranging from 58% in Burkina Faso to 27% in Mali. The high percentage in Burkina Faso may be linked to an increase in border controls, as well as to fears of expulsion if a person presents with COVID-19 symptoms, including fever.
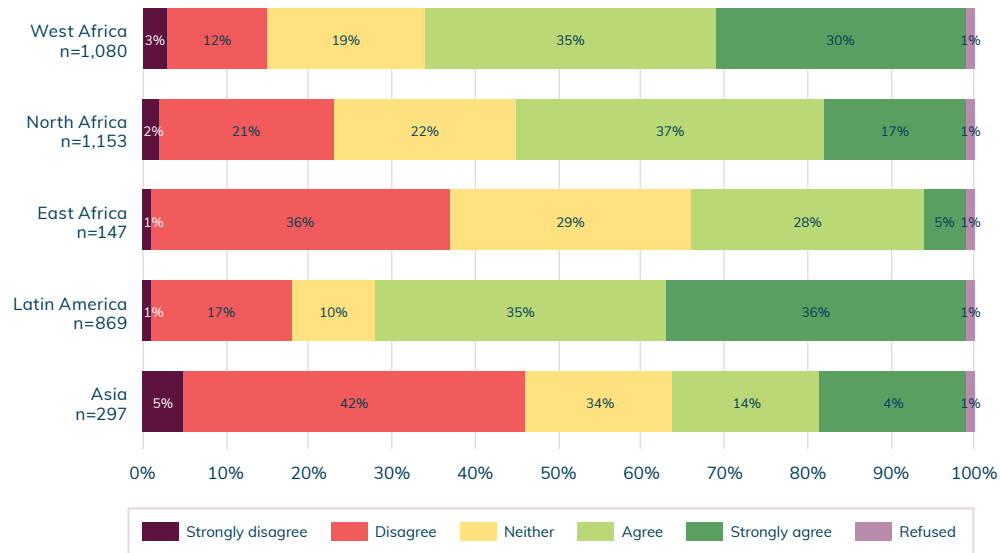
Figure 2. There is an increased risk of deportation since the COVID-19 pandemic began

Refugees (24%) and asylum seekers (29%) less frequently agreed that the risk of deportation had increased than irregular migrants (35%) and regular migrants (36%).
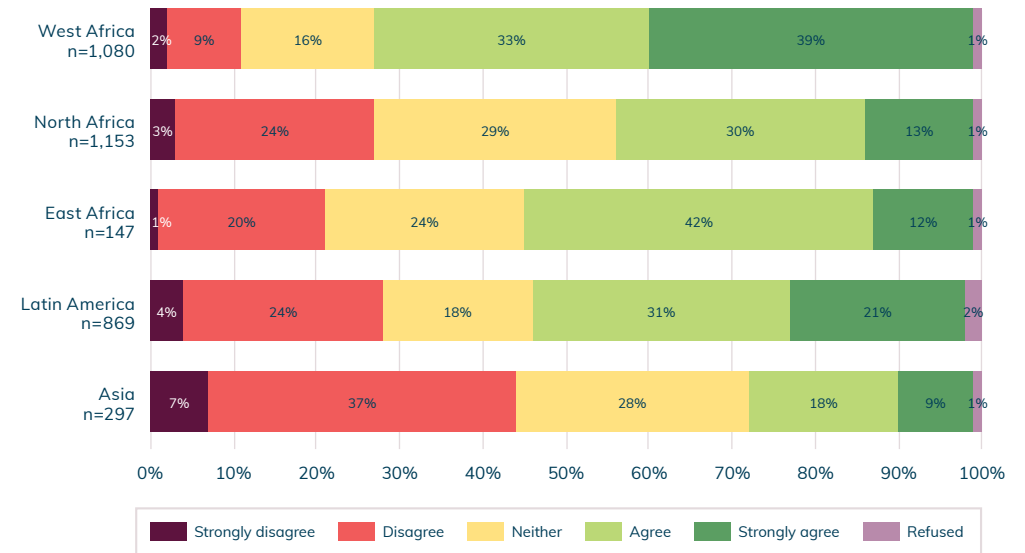
Theft

Figure 3. There is an increased risk of theft since the COVID-19 pandemic began

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	Refused
West Africa n=1,080	3%	12%	19%	35%	30%	1%
North Africa n=1,153	2%	21%	22%	37%	17%	1%
East Africa n=147	1%	36%	29%	28%	5%	1%
Latin America n=869	1%	17%	10%	35%	36%	1%
Asia n=297	5%	42%	34%	14%	4%	1%

The risk of theft is perceived to have increased according to a majority of respondents in Latin America (71%), West Africa (66%) and North Africa (54%). Among people in West Africa, 79% of respondents in Niger agreed that the risk of theft had increased (compared to 64% in Burkina Faso and 55% in Mali). There have been reports of an increase in theft and crime in urban areas of Niger since COVID-19. Numbers were much lower in East Africa (33% agreed) and Asia (19% agreed). There was not a large gender gap in agreement.

Bribery and extortion

Figure 4. There is an increased risk of bribery and extortion since the COVID-19 pandemic began

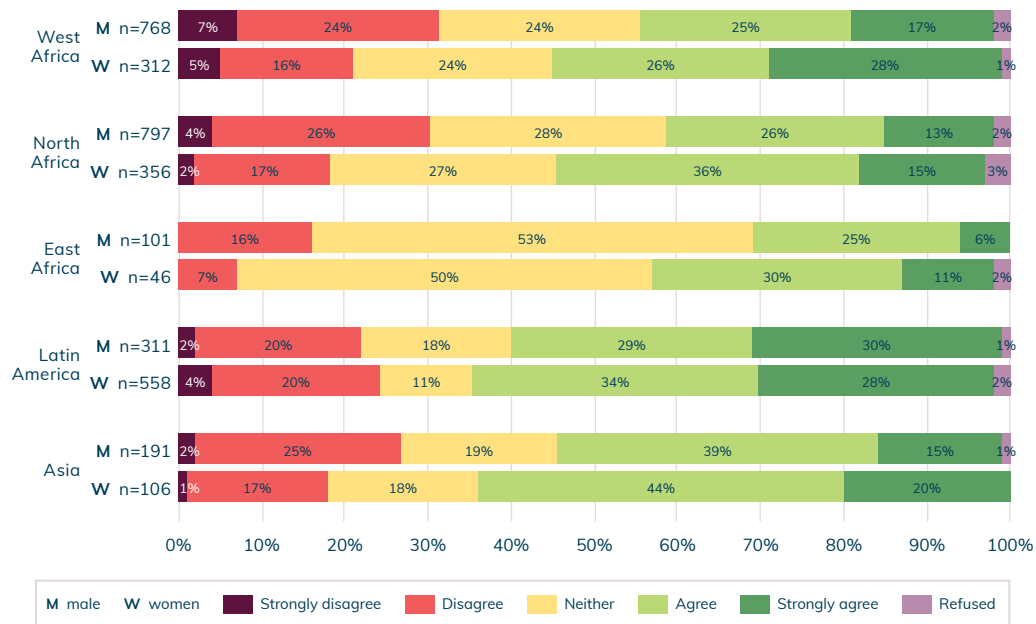|	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly agree	Refused
West Africa n=1,080	2%	9%	16%	33%	39%	1%
North Africa n=1,153	3%	24%	29%	30%	13%	1%
East Africa n=147	1%	20%	24%	42%	12%	1%
Latin America n=869	4%	24%	18%	31%	21%	2%
Asia n=297	7%	37%	28%	18%	9%	1%

In West Africa, 70% of respondents agreed that there was an increased risk of bribery and extortion, with more than half of those strongly agreeing. In West Africa, bribery was the most commonly reported risk before COVID-19, cited by over half of respondents, and now 70% believe that risk to have increased. In contrast, agreement was only 27% in Asia, where 43% disagreed with the statement.

Regular migrants more frequently agreed that the risk of bribery and extortion had increased (61%), followed by irregular migrants (56%), and while the figure was lower among asylum seekers and refugees, it still reached 39% and 43%, respectively.

In all regions men agreed more frequently than women, who were more often neutral.

Domestic violence

Figure 5. There has been an increase in domestic violence since the COVID-19 pandemic began

Sexual exploitation

Figure 6. There is an increased risk of sexual exploitation since the COVID-19 pandemic began
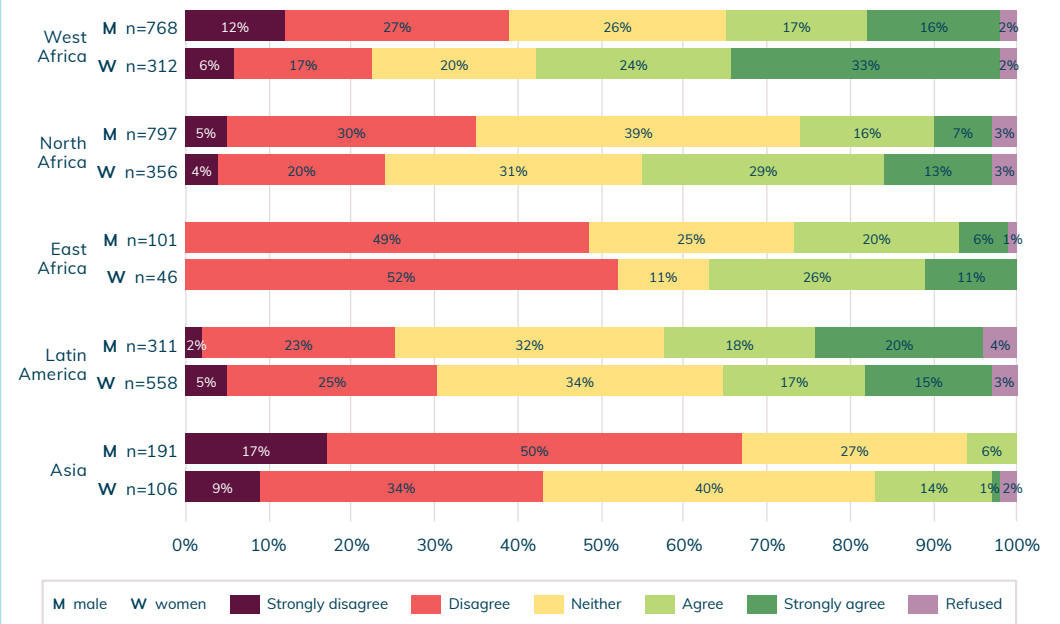

Over half of women agree that domestic violence has increased, in all regions except East Africa (41%). The highest level of agreement among women is in Asia (64%). Men are more likely to disagree (from 16% in East Africa to 30% in North Africa) than women (from 7% in East Africa to 24% in Latin America), except in Latin America, where men are more frequently neutral.

Overall, more than 40% agreed that domestic violence had increased with the onset of the pandemic in all regions except in East Africa (at 34% agreement). The high proportion of men in the overall sample means that domestic violence is likely to be underreported; this is supported by the higher overall level of agreement in Latin America (61%), where women make up a greater share of the sample. The perceived increase in domestic violence is also high in Asia (57%), in contrast to a number of other risks where Asia scores lower. There is a wide range in responses, from 28% agreeing in Indonesia, to 62% in India and 76% in Malaysia.
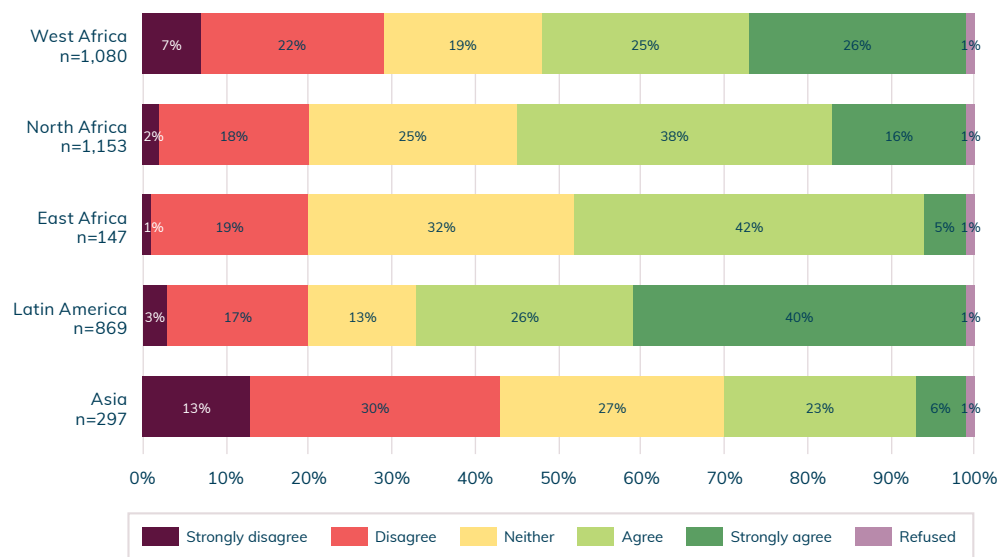
In all regions, except Latin America, women are more likely than men to agree that the pandemic has increased the risk of sexual exploitation. In West Africa, 57% of women agree, more than half of whom strongly agree. In contrast, 43% of women in Asia disagreed, compared to 67% of men (by far the highest frequency of disagreement).

West Africa is the region where most respondents agreed that the pandemic resulted in an increased risk of sexual abuse (40%). In East Africa 28% agreed, but this was split between no agreement in Djibouti and 76% agreement in Kenya. 59% of respondents in Asia disagreed.

Labour exploitation

Figure 7. There is an increased risk of labour exploitation since the COVID-19 pandemic began

In Latin America, 67% of respondents agreed that the risk of labour exploitation had increased, reflecting reports of migrants being paid less for the same work, In all other regions the figure was much lower, with only 29% agreement in Asia (although 51% agreed in Malaysia). The high level of neutral responses in other regions may be because respondents are not working or looking for work. There were no large gender gaps in agreement across the regions.

Dangerous places

Respondents are asked about the most dangerous place on their journey, what kinds of incidents were likely, and who were perceived as the main perpetrators.

Here we consider countries in which a relatively large sample of respondents moved to or through, and look at the perception of protections risks in those countries: Libya, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Colombia.

Table 1. Perception of protection risks in key countries of transit and destination

	n	Death	Phys. violence	Sexual violence	Robbery	Deten-tion	Kidnap-ping	Bribery / extor-tion	Non-physical violence	Other
Libya	481	38%	66%	26%	40%	59%	37%	23%	35%	4%
Burkina Faso	103	19%	57%	14%	52%	31%	17%	30%	17%	5%
Mali	181	28%	75%	10%	53%	49%	29%	29%	15%	6%
Niger	189	13%	41%	14%	53%	22%	12%	23%	21%	6%
Colombia	319	30%	40%	15%	81%	11%	15%	23%	10%	5%

Respondents who point to dangerous locations in Libya tend to perceive multiple severe risks. **Over half of respondents in Libya report physical violence and detention as perceived risks.** Kidnapping, death and non-physical violence such as harassment are also frequently reported. **In West African countries, respondents frequently mention the risk of physical violence and robbery.** 75% of people who name places somewhere in Mali mention the risk of physical violence; 53% mention robbery and 49% detention. Over half of people who report a dangerous location in Niger consider robbery a primary risk, followed by physical violence. Similarly, in Burkina Faso robbery and physical violence are considered the main risks. A large majority who perceive locations in Colombia as dangerous report robbery (81%) – which is in line with the high proportion of respondents saying the risk of theft has increased (above) – followed by physical violence, then death.

Table 2. Perpetrators

	n	Govern ment	Armed groups/ militias	Smugg-lers	Criminal gangs	Other migrant	Family	Other	Don't know	Refused
Libya	481	33%	54%	37%	47%	2%	0%	5%	1%	0%
Burkina Faso	103	18%	39%	7%	49%	13%	0%	8%	5%	0%
Mali	181	28%	54%	15%	53%	26%	2%	3%	6%	1%
Niger	189	25%	28%	11%	48%	14%	0%	10%	5%	2%
Colombia	319	17%	20%	20%	60%	14%	0%	14%	4%	0%

54% of people named a location in Libya as dangerous reported armed groups as the likely perpetrators, 47% mentioned criminal gangs and 37% smugglers. In Colombia, 60% reported that criminal gangs were the most likely perpetrators of abuse. In Mali armed groups and criminal gangs were both most frequently reported, and in Niger and Burkina Faso criminal gangs.

Refugee and migrant voices

"… On our way we lost a couple of people with whom we started the journey together. Some of the women who were travelling with us were raped and sexually assaulted. …"
32 -year-old man from Somalia interviewed in Kenya

"… As a woman and a mother of two children, I have always feared that if something happened to us, how I am going to save my two […] children because there are too many people have been arrested or died along the way."
32-year-old woman from Myanmar interviewed in Malaysia

"I already got to Texas USA once. They captured me, detained me and deported me to El Salvador. I spent 3 days in my country and tried again in February. As in March they closed the borders, I got stuck in Guatemala but I plan to go back to the US. The most dangerous place to cross is Mexico, you have to bring keys[2] for criminal organizations and money for the authorities to let you pass. I hope to cross soon."
35-year-old man from El Salvador interviewed in Guatemala

"The current situation is very difficult, especially at the borders. At the border you have to pay a lot of money to the police to cross. The police ask you to pay the equivalent of your smuggling fees."
28-year-old woman from Liberia interviewed in Mali

"Yes, during my migratory journey I experienced violence, moral torture, psychological violence. The police arrested me saying that my permit has expired, they asked for money that my family paid after I was held for two days in bad conditions."
33-year-old man from Chad interviewed in Niger

4Mi & COVID-19

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. Normally, the recruitment of respondents and interviews take place face-to-face. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face recruitment and data collection has been suspended in all countries.

MMC has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by changing the data it collects and the way it collects it. Respondents are recruited through a number of remote or third-party mechanisms; sampling is through a mixture of purposive and snowball approaches. A new survey focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants, and the surveys are administered by telephone, by the 4Mi monitors in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia and Latin America. Findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make inferences about the total population of refugees and migrants, as the sample is not representative. The switch to remote recruitment and data collection results in additional potential bias and risks, which cannot be completely avoided. Further measures have been put in place to check and – to the extent possible – control for bias and to protect personal data. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi

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2   Editorial note: translation from Spanish 'claves'; meaning is unclear.