



Mixed  
Migration  
Centre

# Hidden hardship of an unnoticed workforce

The economic lives of refugees  
and migrants in Tunisia

MMC Research Report,  
November 2021



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Migration  
Centre



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG  
TUNISIA

**Photo credit:** © Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas

A woman is carrying hay to feed her employer's animals.  
Zarzis, Tunisia, May 21, 2020.

# Acknowledgements

**Written and researched by:** Jim van Moorsel, Imen Aouani

**Reviewed by:** Dr. Ayla Bonfiglio, Yadh Bousselmi, Flannery Dyon, Roberto Forin, Jane Linekar, Ana-Maria Murphy-Teixidor, Fabian Heppe, Heike Loeschmann and Wajdi Filali

**Layout and design:** Simon Pegler

**Copy editing:** Peter Mackenzie

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## About MMC

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a global network consisting of six regional hubs (Asia, East Africa and Yemen, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa & West Africa) and a central unit in Geneva. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of, and governed by, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector. The position of the MMC does not necessarily reflect the position of DRC.

For more information on MMC visit:

[www.mixedmigration.org](http://www.mixedmigration.org)

## About HBF

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is a catalyst for green perspectives and projects. The foundation is affiliated with the German Green Party. It works with partners in over 60 countries and currently has 34 international offices, including the one in Tunis. The foundation works for a healthy and sustainable environment for current and future generations and defends human rights including those of migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons.

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## Acronyms

BIAT	Banque Internationale Arabe de Tunisie
CAR	Central African Republic
CIES	Centro Informazione e Educazione allo Sviluppo
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
CSO	Civil society organisation
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
HBF	Heinrich Böll Foundation
ILO	International Labour Organization
INS	Institut National de la Statistique (National Institute for Statistics)
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KI	Key informant
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex +
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PPE	Personal protective equipment
SMIG	<i>Salaire minimum interprofessionnel garanti</i> (guaranteed minimum wage)
TAMSS	Tunisian Association for Management and Social Stability
TND	Tunisian dinar
UGTT	<i>Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail</i> (Tunisian General Labour Union)
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USD	United States Dollar



# Foreword

Tunisia's 2011 Revolution not only resulted in unprecedented political freedoms for Tunisian citizens, but also triggered new migration dynamics in North Africa. During the last ten years, social unrest and economic crisis have been regularly followed by increases in emigration, predominantly by young Tunisians, towards Europe. The deepened economic recession in Tunisia owing to the COVID-19-crisis and concurrent rise in Tunisian arrivals to Italian shores is the most recent testament to this trend. At the same time, Tunisia is relatively safe for refugees and migrants, compared to its neighboring countries. In Libya, widespread protection violations against refugees and migrants are prompting some to cross the border into Tunisia, while Algeria conducts mass deportations of Sub-Saharan Africans. Moreover, open visa regulations for arrivals from, particularly, Western African countries as well as a very vibrant civil society that allows for the creation of migrant networks and organizations, makes Tunisia an attractive location for people who look for jobs and better lives, or wish to study at Tunisian universities. Others seek refuge from war and persecution. These developments indicate that migration patterns have changed since the revolution and become much more complex.

Tunisia is not solely a country of departure or transit, but also a country of destination, however temporary, for many refugees and migrants, including those whose initial intention may not have been to settle in Tunisia. All too often, this is overlooked while Mediterranean Sea crossings receive disproportionately more national and international public attention. Yet, migrants and refugees are visible in Tunisia's everyday life. Although many live irregularly in Tunisia and face challenges in obtaining a residence permit, we can see them working in restaurants and cafés, as well as on construction sites. We also notice them on their daily commute to school. They sometimes open their own shops and businesses, organize cultural events and get-togethers or - in rarer cases - even settle down in Tunisia to start a family. Migrants and refugees from Sub-Saharan African countries as well as from Libya, have become a reality in the Tunisian society and contribute to its culture and economy. With limited access to regular work opportunities, as this report shows, the contributions of refugees and migrants and the potential for migration to bolster Tunisia's development often goes unnoticed and remains institutionally unrecognized. Additionally, some migrants and refugees live in marginalized communities in urban areas, further inhibiting their access to services, and some experience cases of discrimination, xenophobia and exploitation. This is linked to a lack of clear assistance pathways, irregular hiring, a lack of access to social rights and the absence of a domestic legislation on asylum or a national migration strategy.

The Heinrich Böll Foundation in Tunis wishes to strengthen the knowledge production about intra-African migration movements, particularly towards Tunisia. A fact-based understanding is essential for a constructive debate about migration policies and their benefits for both migrants and Tunisians. At the same time, we want to decouple the migration debate from European security concerns and place a particular emphasis on the nexus of migration and development. Migration can be both an economic opportunity and a social catalyst, for migrants and refugees, as well as for the host-country.

The present study examines the livelihoods of migrants and provides important insights into the ways they navigate legal and socio-economic constraints. It gives visibility and voice to a hard working but largely hidden workforce from Sub-Sahara-Africa that is often deprived of basic rights. To develop a cohesive Tunisian migration strategy while providing effective protection for migrants and refugees, it is pivotal to understand their realities and needs.

Finally, we would like to thank the team of the Mixed Migration Centre for their expertise, reliability and professionalism, particularly under the difficult circumstances in the implementation period due to COVID-19 restrictions. We believe that the testimonies, conclusions and recommendations of this report are an important step forward in advancing the migration debate in Tunisia.

**Heinrich Böll Foundation Tunis, October 2021**

 **HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG**  
**TUNISIA**





**Photo credit:** © Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas  
A young man is gardening in the property of his Tunisian boss. Zarzis, Tunisia, May 21, 2020.



# Key findings



## **Tunisia lacks key legislation to protect the economic rights and livelihoods of refugees and migrants.**

The country has not ratified international migrant worker conventions and lacks provisions within the national migration strategy to safeguard the rights of migrant workers. A national asylum law has yet to be adopted. At the same time, migration dynamics in Tunisia are changing, with a growing importance attributed to thinking about the labour rights and participation of refugees and migrants in the Tunisian economy.



## **While often employed in the informal sector, refugees' and migrants' access to work and types of employment vary considerably by gender.**

Women often reported engaging in domestic work, while men often reported working in construction, agriculture, industry and manufacturing. Key informants noted that, particularly in Southern Tunisia, it is challenging for women to find work, as most opportunities are in the construction sector. While women would have previously been able to find work in services, particularly in tourism, the COVID-19 crisis has heavily constrained employment in this sector. At the same time, findings show that among respondents, relatively more women were working, and not necessarily earning less than men.



## **Also sub-Saharan students must often turn to informal work to cover their costs of living.**

Grants offered by educational institutions are often not aligned with the costs of living or university fees. This, combined with the fact that international students cannot legally be employed in Tunisia, forces many students and graduates to engage in informal work similar to other refugees and migrants in Tunisia, often not relevant to their studies and skills, according to key informants.





**Most surveyed respondents noted that their income in Tunisia was not sufficient for sending remittances to family members in their origin countries.**

Those who did send remittances, mostly West and Central African respondents, most often reported using a mobile credit system offered by mobile phone providers.



**A large majority of respondents reported a lack of access to banking services.**

Surveyed refugees and migrants noted a lack of clarity around the type of documentation that banks require. Key informants cited that either a residence permit or an official work contract is obligatory, requirements that block access for certain refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants. Some refugees and migrants noted that they could open a bank account to deposit, safely store and withdraw money, but could not receive or transfer money from other accounts as they lacked the right documentation for a fully-fledged bank account.



**Refugees' and migrants' contributions to the Tunisian economy and its development often go unnoticed, since most engage in informal employment activities.**

Refugees and migrants fill gaps in several sectors by providing manpower and often working in physically demanding, largely low-skilled and informal jobs.



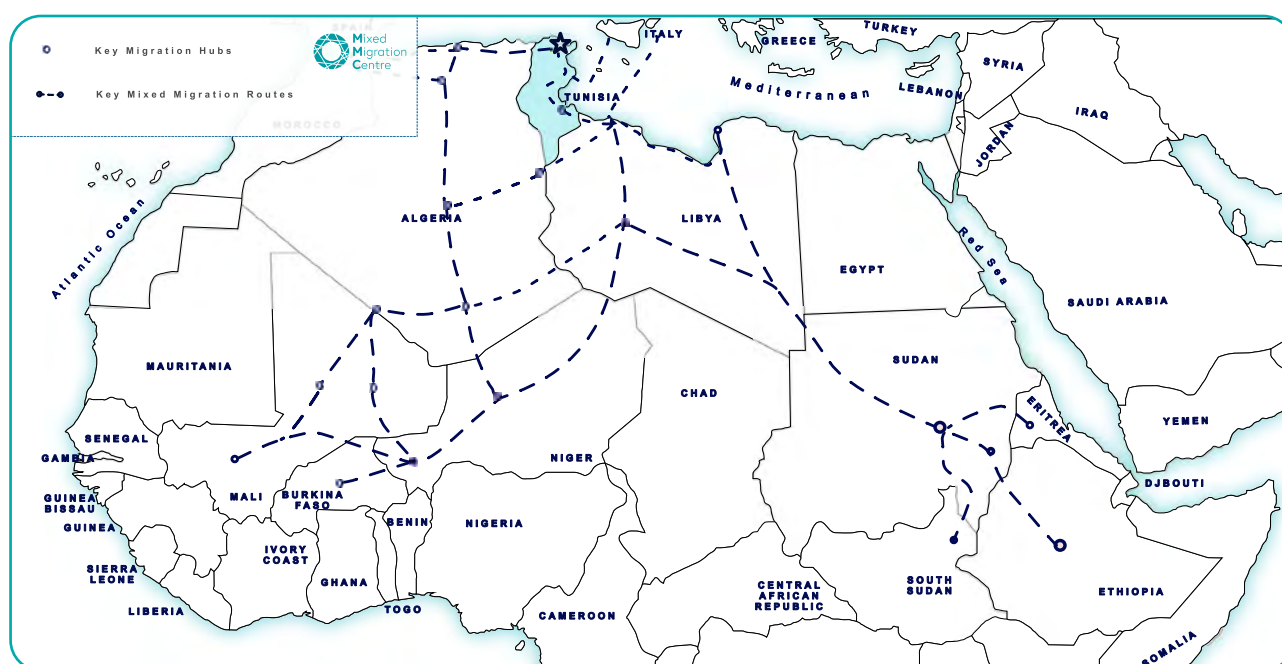
**Photo credit:** © Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas

A migrant and his Tunisian employer are restoring a hotel in the South of Tunisia. Zarzis, Tunisia, June 2, 2020.

# 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, migration patterns and dynamics in Tunisia have undergone a shift. While migration research and policy have often described it as a country of departure, Tunisia is increasingly a transit and destination country for refugees and migrants journeying along the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR, see Map 1)<sup>1</sup> from countries in North, West, Central, East and the Horn of Africa. While updated government statistics on the number of migrants in the country are unavailable,<sup>2</sup> the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) estimated that in 2019 roughly 57,000 sub-Saharan migrants (including registered refugees and asylum-seekers) were residing in Tunisia.<sup>3</sup> This included people seeking to study at one of the country's higher education institutions, to work and provide for their families in their origin countries, or to obtain safety and security. As of 30 June 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had registered 8,465 refugees and asylum-seekers in Tunisia, while the number of recognised refugees<sup>4</sup> stood at 2,688 (32%).<sup>5</sup>

**Map 1: Central Mediterranean Route to, in and from Tunisia**



- 1 The Central Mediterranean Route refers to routes that refugees and migrants take through North Africa towards sea crossings in the central area of the Mediterranean, often departing from Tunisia or Libya or to a lesser extent from Algeria, towards Italy and Malta. Refugees and migrants travelling on this route are a part of mixed movements originating from different regions, including West, North, Central, East and the Horn of Africa, as well as the Middle East and Asia.
- 2 Between July 2020 and March 2021, the Tunisian [Institute Nationale de Statistiques](#) (INS) and the [Office National des Migrations](#) (ONM), with the support of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), launched a nationwide migrant census. The objectives of this census were 'to quantify the presence of migrant populations to inform Tunisia's migration policy-making, and to study the causes, drivers, dynamics and consequences of international migration and the migration-development nexus.' The findings of this census are scheduled to be published from May 2021 onwards.
- 3 UNDESA (2019). [International Migrant Stock 2019: Country Profile Tunisia](#).
- 4 Individuals who are effectively granted refugee status after seeking international protection.
- 5 [UNHCR](#) (2021).



The legal situation for many refugees and migrants living in Tunisia is unclear due to Tunisia's lack of domestic refugee legislation and its visa-free entry policy for select nationalities, including many from Central and West Africa. Visa-free entry means that many foreigners are able to arrive in the country via regular means, but after three months if they do not find an alternative status they become irregular and begin to accrue fines, which accumulate on a weekly basis. A small number might be eventually granted refugee status through applying for asylum with UNHCR, who is responsible for refugee status determination in the absence of a domestic legal framework. For those in an irregular situation, the majority risks ending up with increasing debts, unable to pay the accrued fines, or to return to their country of origin. Due to a restrictive legal framework, regular employment is highly challenging. Instead, refugees and migrants take on informal work, often as day labourers, construction workers or in restaurants and cafés, making them reliant on their employers and putting them at risk of exploitation.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Tunisia in March 2020 and the subsequent movement restrictions and confinement policies, the situation for refugees and migrants has deteriorated significantly. According to data through the Mixed Migration Centre's (MMC) 4Mi survey collected from April to June 2020, 94% of those who were working before the outbreak lost at least part of their incomes during the pandemic. While the situation since then has changed, with the partial reopening of the economy, the various phases of confinement have had a lasting impact on livelihoods.<sup>6</sup>

This study sets out to fill data, research and knowledge gaps on the complex daily economic realities and mobility strategies of refugees and migrants residing in Tunisia. It aims to: 1) map migration routes and assess drivers of mixed migration to Tunisia; 2) examine refugees' and migrants' economic situations in-country; and 3) highlight their role in broader Tunisian economic development. The research findings will provide evidence for proposals to strengthen the legal framework for refugees and migrants in Tunisia.



**Photo credit:** © Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas  
A refugee calls his daughter who stayed in his country of origin. Port of Zarzis, Tunisia, January 26, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Mixed Migration Centre (2020). [4Mi Snapshot: The impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants in Tunisia - a focus on employment and livelihoods](#).



**Photo credit:** © Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas

A migrant biking after a day at work, with clothes covered in paint.  
Zarzis, Tunisia, May 28, 2020.



## 2. Methodology

To examine the mobility strategies, economic realities, and participation in the labour market of refugees and migrants in Tunisia, MMC used a mixed methods approach, triangulating quantitative and qualitative primary data sources. Quantitative data was collected through MMC's flagship project, 4Mi. MMC collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews with expert key informants and refugees and migrants in selected locations.

### What is 4Mi?

Set up in 2014, 4Mi is a unique network of field enumerators situated along frequently used migration routes and in major migratory hubs. It offers a regular, standardised, quantitative and globalised system of collecting primary data on mixed migration. 4Mi uses a predominantly closed question survey to invite respondents to anonymously self-report on a wide range of issues. This results in extensive data on individual profiles, migratory drivers, means and conditions of movement, the smuggler economy, aspirations and destination choices. 4Mi data allow MMC and its partners to inform migration policies, debates and protection responses for people on the move through the production of high-quality quantitative analysis grounded in evidence.

### 2.1 Quantitative data

MMC launched the current iteration of its 4Mi survey in February 2021, collecting primary quantitative data on mixed migration dynamics, including individual profiles, mixed migration drivers, intentions and aspirations, conditions and means of travel, interactions with smugglers<sup>7</sup> and protection abuses. The survey includes questions that aim to better understand the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis and assistance needs related to the ongoing pandemic. For this study, carried out with the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF), an additional module was added to better understand the complex economic realities of refugees and migrants in Tunisia, including questions on their livelihood strategies and remittance-sending behaviours.

Respondents were surveyed across Tunisia. The largest number was interviewed in Greater Tunis (49%), while others were surveyed in Médenine (23%), Sfax (18%), and Sousse (6%). Surveyed refugees and migrants represented more than 30 nationalities from Africa and the Middle East, most notably Sudanese (15%), Ivorians (12%), Eritreans (8%), Cameroonians (8%) and Syrians (6%). Just under a third of those surveyed were women (31%) and the remainder were men (69%). Their ages ranged from 18 to 51, with a mean age of 27. Just under 14% reported travelling with children in their care.

This study also draws upon a second dataset: MMC's 4Mi COVID-19 survey. This was conducted from April 2020 to February 2021 to serve as a reference point for the impacts of COVID-19 on people on the move in Tunisia. The location of interview and demographic breakdown of this second dataset aligns with the smaller sub-sample outlined above. Table 1 provides an overview of this study's data sources. Given the non-random nature of the sampling as well as the moderate sample sizes, the study's quantitative findings should be treated with caution.

### 2.2 Qualitative data

Qualitative data collection took place in March and April 2021 in Greater Tunis, Sfax and Médenine. MMC conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 10 expert and stakeholder key informants (KIs), including local authorities, a UN agency, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), members of civil society and a labour market expert. MMC also interviewed 18 African refugees and migrants about their economic situation and access to the labour market

<sup>7</sup> MMC uses a broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling,' one that 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. MMC's interpretation is deliberately broader than the one contained in the UN Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants. However, this does not imply that MMC considers all the 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.



in Tunisia. For this second group of qualitative interviews, MMC trained 4Mi enumerators in Sfax and Médenine to conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with their peers, working with selection criteria to maintain a balance in gender and country of origin.

**Table 1: Primary data sources present in findings**

Tool	Period of data collection	# of interviews
4Mi COVID-19 survey	April 2020 – February 2021	4,325
MMC-HBF quantitative module (within the MMC 4Mi Migrant Survey 2021)	February – April 2021	312
Qualitative interviews with refugees and migrants	March – April 2021	18
Qualitative interviews with KIs	March – April 2021	10

## 2.3 Analysis

MMC generated descriptive statistics using 4Mi quantitative data to understand the experiences of refugees and migrants who found work in Tunisia, as well as the drivers of the decision to migrate, their economic situation and role in broader Tunisian economic development. Data were disaggregated by country of origin, gender and legal status to tentatively examine whether and how such factors play a role within these themes.

MMC thematically analysed qualitative data from key informants, refugees and migrants using an inductive (arising from the data itself) approach, within the broad themes of the objectives. As with the quantitative data, where possible the research team analysed various themes arising from the data across various age, gender and legal statuses. MMC triangulated the findings using quantitative 4Mi data and qualitative data from secondary literature.

## 2.4 Validity and limitations

Some refugees and migrants are uncomfortable discussing their experiences with enumerators, which may impact internal validity. MMC mitigated concerns about social desirability by working with enumerators (4Mi enumerators) integrated in local refugee and migrant networks.

Enumerators received training on how to conduct the 4Mi survey as well as the particular questions linked to this research, while MMC trained two enumerators (one in Médenine and one in Sfax) to carry out in-depth qualitative interviews. The MMC team carried out qualitative interviews with key informants and with refugees and migrants in Greater Tunis.

This study did not employ randomised sampling. As is always the case with MMC data, findings from the 4Mi survey and qualitative interviews cannot be generalised to the entire refugee and migrant population. Given the partly hidden nature of refugees and migrants in irregular situations, it is likely that the research team was unable to reach the most vulnerable communities to identify their protection needs and risks.



**Photo credit:** © MMC / Samuel Abraham Micheal  
A worker originally from Mali, cleaning at a construction site. Zarzis,  
Tunisia, October 2021.

# 3. Migration policy framework from a labour perspective

This section provides an overview of legislation impacting refugees' and migrants' participation in the Tunisian economy. It outlines international legal frameworks the country has adopted as well as current national policies.

## 3.1 International legal frameworks

Tunisia has ratified multiple international agreements that impact refugees' and migrants' access to the Tunisian labour market. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which guarantees the rights to work, to equitable working conditions and remunerations, and to unionise; and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

Tunisia is a signatory (through succession after becoming independent) to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has acceded to its 1967 Protocol, which guarantees the protection of refugees and asylum seekers and their access to the national labour market. While succession *de facto* means adherence, this has yet to be fully formalised by a national asylum law, a draft of which has remained at an impasse since 2012. Key informants asserted that there is a lack of political will and social support to pass such legislation. There are arguably two main reasons for resistance among Tunisian decision-makers: first, there is a fear that the law would further a process of European externalisation of asylum procedures in North Africa, with Tunisia becoming more susceptible to mounting pressure from the European Union on migration management. Second, asylum legislation is not a high priority within Tunisian public opinion.<sup>8</sup> The absence of such legislation impacts migrants' right to international protection and asylum in Tunisia. Through an agreement with the Tunisian authorities, since 2011 UNHCR has the responsibility to review asylum applications and issue refugee and asylum seeker documentation. However, residency is required to access the labour market, and obtaining a refugee ID does not necessarily lead to residency. It is not explicitly prohibited for refugees and asylum-seekers to work in Tunisia, but there are no specific legal provisions ensuring that refugees' rights and working conditions are respected.<sup>9</sup> The most vulnerable cases among registered refugees in Tunisia are identified as eligible for temporary rent and financial assistance from UNHCR.

Tunisia is also a signatory to the 2003 Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (the 'Palermo Convention'), which criminalises trafficking in persons. In 2016, conforming with this Convention, Tunisia adopted a national law against trafficking in persons,<sup>10</sup> which protects refugees and migrants as well as nationals from becoming victims of human trafficking or other forced and exploitative labour activities.

Tunisia is not a signatory to several International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, including the 1949 Migration for Employment Convention, which stipulates recommendations to provide labour migrants with access to information concerning emigration and immigration rights, sufficient medical protection and treatment comparable to nationals in terms of working conditions, access to unions and social welfare. Tunisia has also not ratified the 1975 Convention on Migrant Workers, which recommends combatting irregular emigration and illegal labour, granting fundamental rights to all migrant workers including those in irregular situations, granting equal work and professional opportunities to migrant workers and facilitating family reunification for labour migrants. Finally, Tunisia has not ratified the 1990 Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, which grants migrant workers and their families the right to equal treatment and the same working conditions as nationals.

## 3.2 National policies

The Tunisian Labour Code adopts the principle of 'national preference' regarding the labour market, impacting the economic participation of refugees and migrants in Tunisia. This allows Tunisians to be prioritised over foreigners with equal qualifications, thereby restricting access to employment for foreigners, particularly for those who have received

<sup>8</sup> German Council on Foreign Relations (2021). [Walking a Tightrope in Tunisia: The Aspirations and Limitations of Migration Policy Reform](#).

<sup>9</sup> This is seemingly contradicted by Law n° 68-7. Tunisia has ratified an international convention that takes a more expansive view of the rights of refugees, but in the absence of national asylum legislation, the current labour legislation suggests that all foreigners are prohibited from working unless authorized by the Secretary of State.

<sup>10</sup> [Organic law n° 61-2016](#).



less education and lack a particular skillset. Migrant workers can only access regular labour if they are responding to a specific demand, under specific conditions and for a defined period.<sup>11</sup> According to key informants, the employment preference for nationals is likely to stay in place as long as unemployment rates remain high, especially among young Tunisians. Reports have raised that Tunisian labour unions have played a role in maintaining this narrative, framing foreign workers as a threat to the status and conditions of Tunisian employees.<sup>12</sup>

The most recent version (2017) of the National Migration Strategy advocates for including migration within Tunisia's development policies, while promoting an 'organised and respectful migration, adhering to migrant rights.' The strategy aims to encourage an open and positive view on migration and to value links between migration and development. Current political rhetoric, however, suggests a lack of prioritisation of migration issues within national development.<sup>13</sup>

Two legal texts regulate access to the Tunisian labour market by refugees and migrants. First, Law n° 68-7 (1968) stipulates that 'all foreigners are prohibited to perform a profession or to have a remunerated activity in Tunisia if not authorized by the competent Secretary of State,' specifically the Department for Professional Training and Employment within the Ministry of Youth. Second, the Tunisian Labour Code (Articles 258 to 269) underlines that for a foreigner to carry out a professional remunerated activity in Tunisia, he or she should be provided with a work contract with a special mention. The Ministry reviews and processes work contracts and issues work visas, which allow foreigners to apply for residence permits. This process applies the principle of 'national preference.' In practice it is hard to establish that no Tunisian is available to be contracted for low-skill or low-qualification positions. Foreigners can only obtain authorisation to work if they are staying regularly in-country with a residence permit (*carte de séjour*).<sup>14</sup> If a migrant worker does not apply for a residence permit, or if the application is refused, he or she is subject to a fine of 20 Tunisian dinars (TND) for each week of irregular stay, which can accumulate until it reaches a cap of 3,000 TND.<sup>15</sup> Migrants in debt are not able to leave Tunisia through regular channels of departure unless they apply to UNHCR for refugee status or to IOM's voluntary return programme. Successful applicants' debts are forgiven according to agreements with the Tunisian authorities. For those not successful, they are left with a choice of irregular stay, increasing debt, a risk to be deported, or irregular departure.

Foreign students receive a student residency permit that is valid for their period of study at a Tunisian university or vocational institution. The Tunisian Labour Code stipulates that students with this permit are not allowed to work or perform any remunerated activities. Foreign students are expected to leave Tunisia after completing their studies, with no path to integrate into the labour market and apply their skills. Several key informants noted the rigidity of the Tunisian legal framework and that delays in administration for the provision of documents can therefore leave international students in irregular situations. Universities sometimes take a month or longer to provide a certificate of enrolment, which students need to apply for a student residence permit. The administration does not take into account this delay in terms of entry visas. While Ivorians and some other nationalities (see footnote 20) can stay in-country for up to three months on an entry visa, this is not the case for countries without a bilateral agreement with Tunisia. Students from Cameroon, for example, fall into irregularity after two weeks in Tunisia without a residence permit.

The most recent Tunisian constitution (2014) guarantees that every individual, regardless of nationality, has 'the right to live, in dignity, and with respect of private life' on Tunisian soil. In 2018 Tunisia adopted a law to eliminate every form of racial discrimination. Nonetheless, it is unclear to what extent refugees and migrants enjoy such rights. Many remain at risk of other forms of discrimination, for instance based on sexual orientation, as homosexuality remains penalised by law in Tunisia, leaving all LGBTQI+ members, including Tunisians, at risk in the country.

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11 Nasraoui, M. (2017). [Les travailleurs migrants subsahariens en Tunisie face aux restrictions législatives sur l'emploi des étrangers](#). *Revue européenne des migrations internationales* 33 (4), 159-178.

12 Geissner, V. (2019). [Tunisie, des migrants subsahariens toujours exclus du rêve démocratique](#). *Migrants & Société* 177 (3), 3-18.

13 Terre d'Asile Tunisie (2020). *L'accès au travail des migrants en Tunisie. Du cadre juridique à la pratique*.

14 There is an exceptional provision in Tunisian legislation for Moroccan, Algerian and Libyan workers, who do not need a *carte de séjour* to work in Tunisia.

15 Respectively around USD 7.16 and USD 1,074 as of 16 September 2021.



**Photo credit:** © Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas  
Migrants who recently fled Libya, in their rented apartment. Zarzis, Tunisia, May 22, 2020.

## 4. Migration dynamics to Tunisia

This chapter analyses key trends for refugees and migrants in Tunisia over the course of the last two decades, exploring the profiles of refugee and migrant populations, key migration routes and drivers to Tunisia.

### 4.1 Key events and trends: 2000 to 2021

While long known as an origin country, exemplified by the numerous bilateral labour migration agreements with European countries,<sup>16</sup> Tunisia's role as a country of transit and destination has been less recognised by researchers and policy actors. This section traces some of the key events in the last two decades that have shaped the migration patterns to Tunisia that we see today.

In 2003, the African Development Bank relocated from Abidjan to Tunis at the height of civil war in Côte d'Ivoire. While the bank returned to Abidjan in 2014, some central functions remained in Tunis, requiring staff to stay there. Many support workers (including drivers, cleaners, gardeners and couriers) reportedly preferred to stay in Tunis rather than return to Abidjan due to the former's better and safer living conditions.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, an Ivorian woman interviewed in Tunis explained her experience as a part of this movement of workers (see box).<sup>18</sup> While this event did not have a significant impact on the volume of movement to the country, it nevertheless shaped the profile of people moving to Tunisia. Combined with a visa-free entry policy for Ivorians, it helped to establish an important movement corridor between Côte d'Ivoire and Tunisia. Ivorians are estimated to be among the largest groups of refugees and migrants in the country, and they represent the top country of origin among refugees and asylum-seekers registered by UNHCR.<sup>19</sup> Quantitative and qualitative data collected by MMC show the Ivorian population in Tunisia to be heterogeneous in terms of profiles (including victims of political and social persecution, those identifying as part of the LGBTQI+ community and survivors of trafficking in persons), while they also report coming to Tunisia for economic reasons, among other migration drivers.

*"I arrived for the first time in Tunisia in 2004. In Abidjan, I worked for people who were at the African Development Bank. When the war broke out, I came with them to Tunis. I stayed here for 10 years, but I met someone, a great French man, and in 2014 he offered that we go to Abidjan together, where I got pregnant. In January 2016, my son's father said he had to return home for a month. He was due to return [to Abidjan] in February but he never did...I said to myself that I could come back [by myself] to Tunis, because I knew it well. It is better than Abidjan for work and safety."*

**44-year-old Ivorian woman, Tunis**

Since the 1990s, to reinforce its political outreach towards the rest of Africa, Tunisia has adapted its visa regime to allow nationals from 22 African countries<sup>20</sup> – at current count – to legally reside in Tunisia for a period up to 90 days after arrival.<sup>21</sup> This has facilitated the movement of nationals from these countries to Tunisia to pursue education or work. Key informants reported that private universities in Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse are actively conducting marketing campaigns and offering scholarships in order to recruit international students in their home countries, as these students' tuition fees are higher than those of nationals. This aligns with previous MMC research that found that some student respondents were already in touch with university recruiters or intermediaries while in their home countries. Interviewed students noted that Tunisia is an attractive destination for study since it offers a high quality of education in French and sometimes English, a favourable Mediterranean climate and visa-free access. While no official statistics

16 For example with [Belgium](#) (1969), [The Netherlands](#) (1971), [Portugal](#) (1974), and more recently with [Italy](#) (2017). A formal migration cooperation agreement with the European Union was signed in 1976 and came into effect in 1976. See, for example: Limam, M. (2020). [Sur un pont aux ânes. La coopération entre l'UE et la Tunisie en matière migratoire](#). Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

17 Nasraoui, M. (2017). *Ibid.*

18 This interview was conducted by MMC for a different research purpose in May, 2021. Consent was given by the interviewee for the quote above to be included in this study.

19 [UNHCR](#) (2021, 30 April).

20 Individuals from the following countries of origin have the right to reside in Tunisia on a tourist visa that is valid for 90 days: Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, Seychelles and South Africa.

21 Knoll, A. & Teevan, C. (2020). [Protecting migrants and refugees in North Africa. Challenges and opportunities for reform](#). European Centre for Development Policy Management.



are available on international students' fields of study, MMC's research findings reveal that student respondents were often enrolled in business and tourism courses.

Since 2011, protracted conflict in Libya has spurred the movement of Libyans and third-country nationals in Libya to Tunisia, a country of relative safety in the region. These include migrants who moved to Libya to find work as well as refugees from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> Between March and October 2011, an estimated 770,000 migrants crossed the Libyan borders into neighbouring countries, of which around half into Tunisia.<sup>23</sup> At its peak between 2013 and 2015, there were an estimated 250,000 to one million Libyans (not including third-country nationals coming from Libya) in Tunisia.<sup>24</sup> Since 2018, the number of Libyans in Tunisia (including those temporarily residing in-country or moving back and forth) has decreased to less than 100,000.<sup>25</sup> Depending on the outcome of the December 2021 elections in Libya, Tunisia could maintain its role as a country of relative safety, or it could diminish in importance as an alternative to Libya.

## 4.2 Demographics of refugee and migrant populations in Tunisia

Alongside greater recognition of Tunisia's position as a country of origin, transit and destination for refugees and migrants,<sup>26</sup> key informants suggested that refugee and migrant populations are increasing and have diversified. While statistics on the size and profiles of these populations in Tunisia remain unavailable at the time of writing, service providers, NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) have their own databases. MMC found in an earlier study<sup>27</sup> that two main trends have continued over the last couple of years: an increase in the number of refugees and migrants residing in the country, particularly in the bigger cities, and a diversification in terms of status, country of origin, gender and reasons for movement. Organisations have reported a recent increase in survivors of trafficking in persons residing in Tunisia, including people forced into domestic servitude and international sex trafficking networks, and particularly Ivorians.<sup>28</sup>

UNHCR statistics on the 8,465 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Tunisia (as of 30 June 2021) also reflect a diversification in terms of region of origin. The main nationalities among this group are Côte d'Ivoire (42%), Syria (25%), Guinea (6%), Cameroon (5%) and Sudan (4%). The majority reside in Greater Tunis, Sfax and Médenine.<sup>29</sup>

Tunis, Sfax and Sousse remain the most popular destinations, key informants reported, as they are centres for employment and educational opportunities, as well as services and assistance. One key informant from Terre d'Asile Tunisie stated that "If [refugees and migrants] cross from Algeria into Kef or Jendouba governorates, they [police] bring them to Tunis. If it is further south, they go to either Médenine or Sfax. From Libya, it is usually to Médenine." A key informant from Médenine reported that these decisions are made at a national level: "I do not understand what is the national strategy behind the concentration of migrants in Médenine, as we are never informed or kept in the loop." While the respondent acknowledged that Médenine's proximity to the Libyan border made it an obvious reception location for refugees and migrants arriving from Libya, the city does not have the capacity to host refugees and migrants long-term, integrating them in society and providing livelihood opportunities. It remains unclear whether the unequal distribution of refugees and migrants could be considered a coordinated strategy or whether geographical proximity to borders and concentration of services and economic activities are stronger explanatory factors.

## 4.3 Key routes and drivers of migration to Tunisia

Refugees and migrants arrive through different routes in Tunisia, stopping at a multitude of places along routes. MMC's 4Mi data finds that less than half (40%; n=1,740) of refugees and migrants travelling along the Central Mediterranean Route surveyed from April 2020 to February 2021 arrived from West and Central African countries, while 27% arrived from East African countries as well as Sudan (n=1,140).<sup>30</sup> Key cities of transit along the route from West Africa included

22 Mixed Migration Centre (2020). [Urban Mixed Migration Tunis Case Study](#).

23 Boubakri, H. (2015). [Migration et asile en Tunisie depuis 2011 : vers de nouvelles figures migratoires ?](#) *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 31 (3/4).

24 Leaders (2014). [Les Libyens de Tunisie : Combien sont-ils ? Comment vivent-ils ?](#)

25 Alcaraz, E. (2018). [Les migrants libyens en Tunisie : un enjeu majeur des dynamiques migratoires dans l'espace maghrébin](#). *Revue Internationale des Études de Développement* 236 (4), 9-31.

26 Camilli, A. & Paynter, E. (2020, 22 January). [Tunisia: North Africa's overlooked migration hub](#). *The New Humanitarian*.

27 Mixed Migration Centre (2020). [Urban Mixed Migration Tunis Case Study](#).

28 OHCHR (2020, March). [Contribution de la société civile à l'examen du sixième \(VI\) rapport de la Tunisie pour l'application du Pacte International relatif aux Droits Civils et Politiques](#).

29 UNHCR (2021, 30 June). [Registration Fact Sheet](#).

30 This includes respondents arriving from the Middle East who made part of their journey by land. These were mainly Syrians flying to either Sudan or Egypt, then making their way to Tunisia over land via Sudan.

Bamako (Mali), Niamey and Agadez (Niger), before entering Algeria or Libya, whereas those along the route from East Africa and Sudan included Kassala and Khartoum (Sudan), before entering Libya, and then arriving in Tunisia. The remaining 33% of respondents (n=1,435) flew directly to Tunis, often transiting via Casablanca when no direct flights were available. Most respondents arriving via plane were West Africans, likely due to Tunisia's visa-free entry policy. Previous MMC research showed that the percentage of surveyed respondents who arrived in Tunisia by air was higher in Greater Tunis than in other locations.<sup>31</sup>

Key informants noted an increase in refugees and migrants arriving in Tunisia over land from Algeria since the COVID-19 outbreak, citing income losses and a lack of access to health facilities in Algeria as the main drivers of movement towards Tunisia. Whereas conflict and security concerns in Libya were often considered the main drivers of movement into Tunisia, income losses during the COVID-19 crisis have reportedly contributed to a diversification in nationalities arriving in Tunisia. A civil society activist in Sfax noted: "Since the pandemic, we have seen groups of people from Gabon, Bangladesh and Sierra Leone come into the country. These are nationalities we would not really see before in Tunisia."

*"I arrived in Tunisia after passing through Algeria. After we crossed the border, the Tunisian authorities stopped us and drove me, my child and a lot of other migrants to a camp [shelter] in Médenine."*

**31-year-old Malian woman, Sfax**

Some refugees and migrants arrived after being intercepted or rescued at sea. Since mid-2020, sea journeys on the Central Mediterranean Route have started to increase again after a decrease during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the third quarter of 2020, MMC found that Italy received more than three times as many arrivals as in the same period in 2019. This trend was sustained in 2021, with quarter two of 2021 seeing three times as many arrivals as the same period in 2020. Subsequent periods have also shown increasing figures. Moreover, at the same time there has been an increase in reports of shipwrecks and of refugees and migrants brought to the coast by the Tunisian Coast Guard.<sup>32</sup>

*"I arrived here in Sfax on January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020. After being imprisoned and tortured [in Libya], we paid to be released and to cross the Mediterranean on board an inflatable boat. Unfortunately, the boat capsized at sea and several people on board died, including two of my brothers. The Tunisian navy came to help us and took us to Sidi Mansour [Sfax]. The maritime authorities registered us and we spent a few days there."*

**23-year-old Sudanese woman, Sfax**

Survey respondents were asked to detail why they decided to depart their country of origin. Economic reasons were cited by more than half of respondents (54%; n=1,560, see Figure 1), and a lack of rights and freedoms by close to half (45%; n=1,313). Other reported factors include limited access to services (25%; n=724), personal/family reasons (25%; n=720) and (non-domestic) violence (25%; n=719).<sup>33</sup> 61% of respondents noted a multiplicity of factors motivating their movement (n=1,761), reflecting the complexity of migration decision-making. The diversity of profiles, drivers, intentions and aspirations among survey respondents was also expressed in multiple qualitative interviews with refugees and migrants (see box).<sup>34</sup>

*"I lost my father and brother during conflict in my home country and migrated to Cameroon with my mother. After we returned home, the situation worsened, and I decided to leave. An acquaintance was in Tunis and informed me that Tunisia was a viable destination for students and to build up a life. I lost my mother after two weeks in Tunis, so I had to quit school and start working to support myself."*

**Central African man, Tunis**

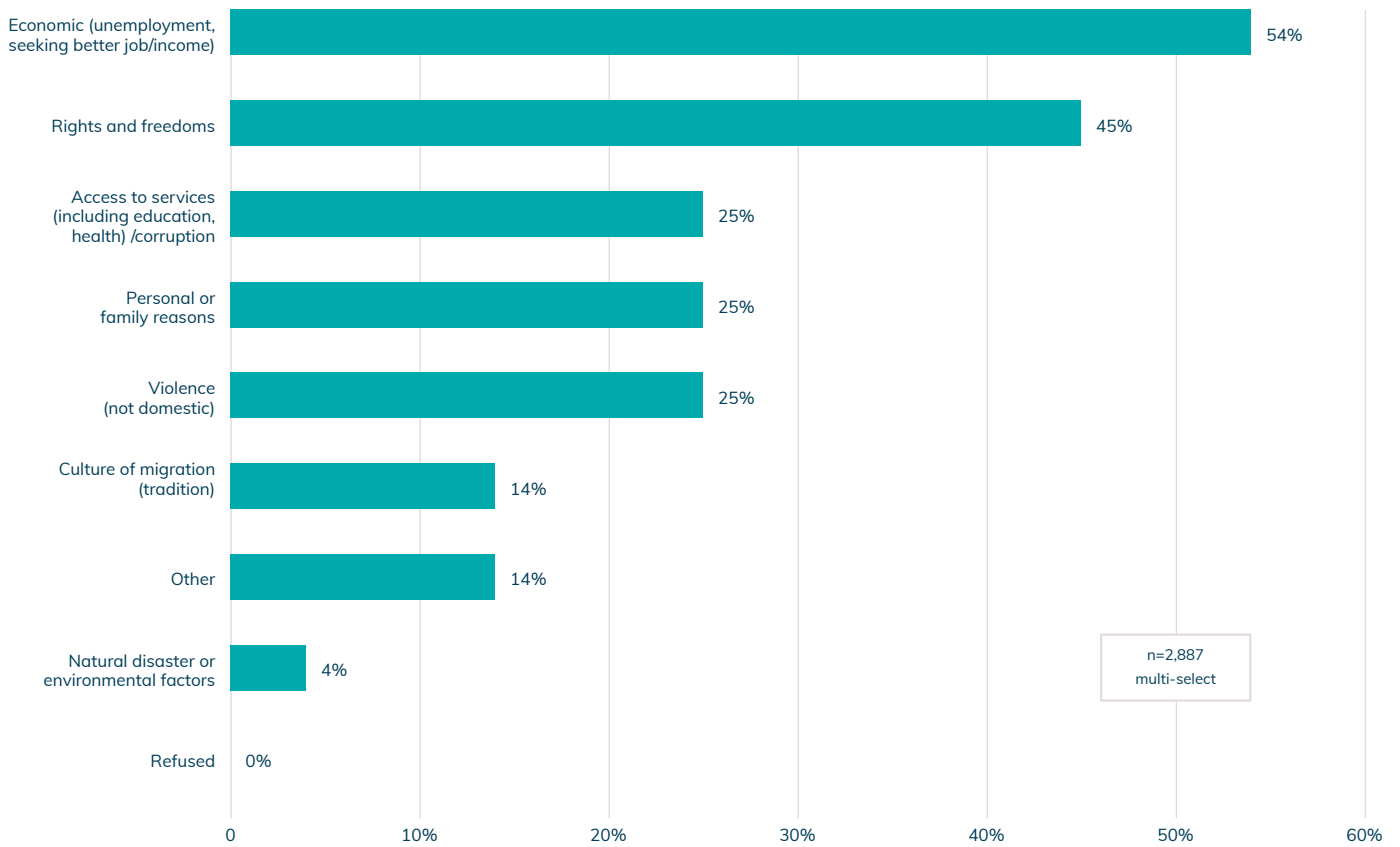
31 In the [MMC Tunis case study](#) published in November 2020, 4Mi data collected between January and March 2020 in Greater Tunis revealed that nearly half of respondents entered Tunisia by air, as compared to other cities in Tunisia where more than half of respondents arrived by land.

32 In its [Quarterly Mixed Migration Updates \(QMMUs\)](#), MMC reports on departures, arrivals, interceptions and rescue operations in the Mediterranean as reported by UNHCR, authorities and local and international media.

33 This question was only asked in phase 2 of MMC's 4Mi Covid-19 Survey, which had a smaller sample of 2,887 respondents.

34 From the Central African Republic (CAR), age not disclosed.

**Figure 1: For what reasons did you leave?**







**Photo credit:** © Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas  
'Pretty even with a mask,' says this graffiti in South Tunisia.  
Medenine, Tunisia, May 26, 2020.



## 5. Economic situation of refugees and migrants in Tunisia

This section analyses the economic situation of refugees and migrants in Tunisia, specifically looking into employment availability, working conditions and risks, viability of livelihoods compared to cost of living and access to financial services to manage income and send remittances. It dedicates a final analysis to the risk-multiplying impacts of COVID-19 on these themes based on findings from 4Mi data.

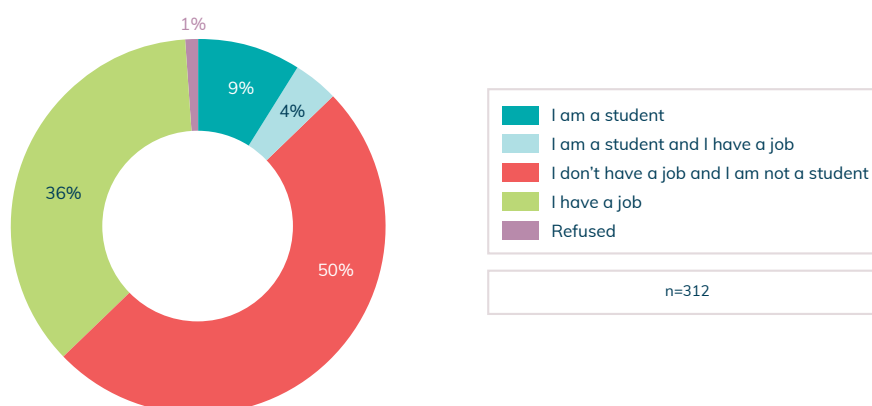
Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Tunisia's economy shrank by almost 9% in 2020. This downturn continued over the early months of 2021 due to the impact of the pandemic on vital industries and services, particularly tourism. Official unemployment stood at 15% in February 2020,<sup>35</sup> whereas it had grown to almost 18% in the first quarter of 2021.<sup>36</sup> The damage wrought by COVID-19 has exacerbated structural weaknesses in Tunisia's economy that have hampered sustainable growth for the last decade, as highlighted in previous studies.<sup>37</sup>

In 2020, the National Institute for Statistics (INS) estimated that roughly 46% of Tunisia's workforce was employed in the informal sector. This indicates, that nearly half of all employed workers lacked access to social services linked to formal work contracts.<sup>38</sup> In earlier figures, it was found that more than one-third (39%) of economic activities are not declared to tax and regulatory authorities.<sup>39</sup> Informal employment is reportedly particularly elevated in the sectors of agriculture and fisheries (up to 86%), construction and public works (69%), and small businesses (65%).<sup>40</sup> As a result of a lack of access to residency and work permits, a large majority of refugees and migrants finds work opportunities in the informal sector, without contracts or access to social security. While this study focuses on refugee and migrant populations, Tunisian employees working informally encounter the same difficulties accessing social security and welfare.

### 5.1 Searching for opportunities: access to and availability of labour

The quantitative data reveal a fair amount of discrepancy in refugee and migrant respondents' access to labour. Of the refugees and migrants surveyed between February and April 2021, half neither had a job nor were students (49%). Over a third of respondents noted that they were working (36%), and 4% were students and had jobs at the same time.

**Figure 2: What is your current occupation in Tunisia?**



35 Bouazza, R. (2020, February). [Tunisia's slow economic growth fails to generate employment opportunities](#). The Arab Weekly.

36 Reuters (2021, May 15). [Tunisia's economy shrank 3% in the first quarter of 2021](#).

37 OECD (2018). [Tunisia: New structural reforms needed to revive growth and job creation](#).

38 Kapitalis (2020). [En Tunisie, le secteur informel emploie 46,4% du total des occupés](#).

39 Tunisia Inclusive Labor Initiative (2013). [Toward Economic Inclusion. Transitioning Tunisia's Informal Workers into the Formal Economy](#).

40 El Ouardani, H. (2020). [COVID-19, Challenges and Opportunities](#). The Case of Tunisia. Center for Mediterranean Integration.

Of the 125 respondents engaged in some form of work, most had part-time (60%) rather than full-time employment (40%). Refugee and migrant key informants similarly reported that they were much more likely to find daily jobs or 'short projects'.

*"Yes, I work for two or three days per week, but I never had a stable job. Right now, I work as a gardener one day in Montfleury and another day in l'Aouina. I worked before on a farm in Borj Youssef, where I looked after sheep, and I also worked at an event hall where I did maintenance. Finally, I also worked in a factory where agricultural materials were imported. So yes, I occasionally find work but it is always with a verbal agreement and never with a contract. This is the case for all my sub-Saharan brothers."*

**32-year-old Ivorian man, Tunis**

In general, respondents reported finding work relatively quickly. 64% (n=80) of those who reported working had found employment less than two months after their arrival in Tunisia, with an additional 10% finding work between two and three months after their arrival (n=12), and 26% finding work more than three months after arrival (n=32). An Ivorian man in Sfax noted: "There is no delay in getting a job; with some luck you can find one in the same day, but sometimes you can spend a month without finding any work."

Refugees and migrants found work through various avenues, including the online social media platform Africa Market (37%; n=46), co-national networks (26%; n=32) and smugglers (11%; n=13). Previous MMC research found Africa Market to be a central hub for finding jobs, while respondents reported that some refugees and migrants serve as intermediaries or brokers between employers and workers, charging fees to identify the right job candidates. In this way, information shared on the group is a valuable source of income.<sup>41</sup>

Those who reported finding work through smugglers (n=13) were all located in Greater Tunis, and all originated from Francophone West or Central African countries, including Cameroon and Côte d'Ivoire. Some migrants noted that they obtained their first job through established contacts, sometimes before leaving their country of origin. This was particularly the case for those who traveled directly to Tunisia by plane from their country of origin. Those who relied on smugglers and their intermediaries in their country of origin reported that these work opportunities did not come for free, leaving refugees and migrants indebted during their initial period in the country, as intermediaries take months of their pay or oblige them to participate in other activities to pay off their debts. A 33-year-old Ivorian woman in Tunis noted that part of the offered opportunity to come to Tunisia for work was that she had to bring goods with her that had already been sold to customers in Tunisia.

Access to or success in the labour market appeared to vary by location within Tunisia, country of origin and gender. The data revealed particularly high rates of unemployment among respondents in Sfax (80%; 45/56) and Médenine (66%; 48/73). In Greater Tunis, 36% of respondents noted that they were currently unemployed (54/152). Respondents in Médenine noted they often had to go to the nearby city of Zarzis to look for opportunities.

*"It's not easy to find a job here...Over 90% of the migrants here go to Zarzis every day searching for a job around the city. You go to construction sites or just sit in the café with work clothes on and wish for someone to approach you and ask if you want to work. You will probably go back home empty-handed."*

**39-year-old Eritrean man, Médenine**

The data suggest a difference in job access between respondents from Francophone<sup>42</sup> and non-Francophone countries of origin. While 59% of Francophone respondents (93/157) had jobs at the time of their interview, this was only the case for 21% of non-Francophone respondents (32/155). Substantially more non-Francophone respondents had no job and were not students: 77% (119/155) versus 23% (36/157). East Africans in particular reported experiencing difficulties finding job opportunities in Tunisia, making them more likely to consider returning to Libya or continuing their journey.

41 Mixed Migration Centre (2020). [Urban Mixed Migration Tunis Case Study](#).

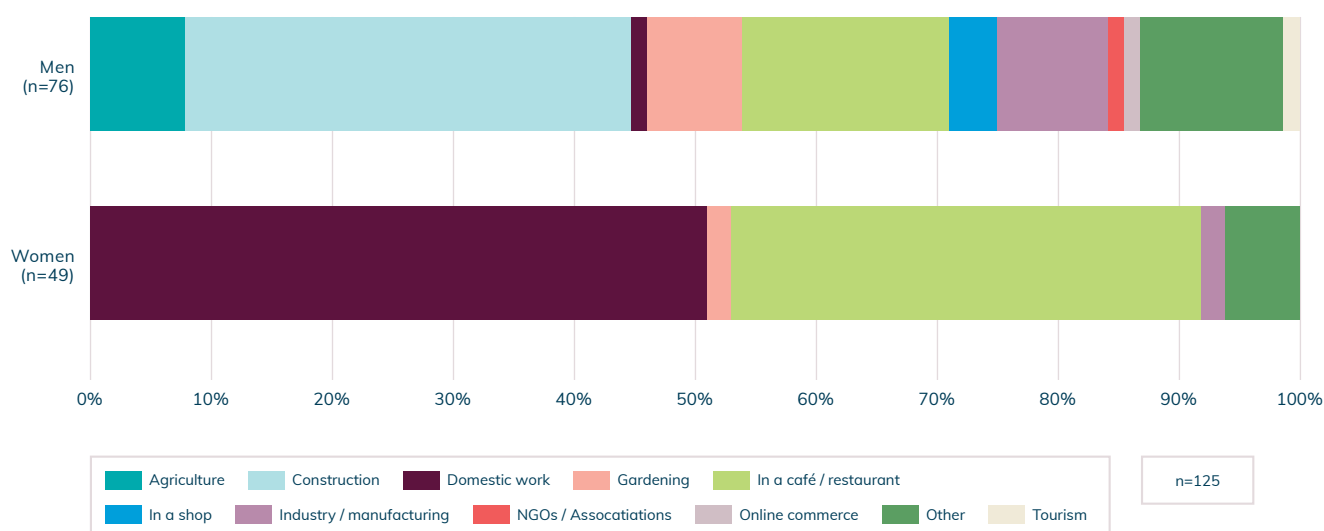
42 Francophone sub-Saharan African countries include: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Congo-Brazzaville, Djibouti, Gabon, Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Seychelles and Togo.



Due to cultural and linguistic similarities, two key informants noted that Sudanese were probably the least likely to experience barriers while looking for jobs. In general, those with a good command of spoken Arabic were reportedly likely to encounter more sustainable job opportunities. However, out of 48 Sudanese respondents surveyed in March and April 2021, 37 noted they were not working and were not students. This seeming contradiction between the qualitative data and the 4Mi survey data may be due to the small sample size or may suggest that Sudanese are perceived by other refugees and migrants as being more advantaged than they are in reality. Further research should explore this distinction and its impact. The importance of the ability to speak Arabic was also highlighted by a 21-year-old Ethiopian man in Médenine: “I started my job after a month of my arrival. I went to a liquor store to buy some drinks and I asked the owner if he is looking for any employees. Then he asked me some questions to understand if I could speak Arabic well, and he gave me the chance to prove I can do a good job. Now [one year later], I am still working with him.”

Half of the surveyed women held jobs (n=49), as compared to 36% of the surveyed men (n=76). The type of work varied considerably between genders, with women often engaging in domestic work (cleaning) or work in the service industry (primarily in restaurants and cafés) and men more often working in construction, agriculture, industry and manufacturing. While more often employed, women reported much less variety in employment than men, with over 50% of surveyed employed women engaging in domestic work, primarily cleaning houses and offices and sporadically providing daycare. Key informants noted that particularly in Southern Tunisia, especially Médenine and Zarzis, it is challenging for women to find work as most opportunities are in the construction sector. While women would have previously been able to find work in services and particularly in tourism, the COVID-19 crisis has heavily constrained employment in this sector, according to two key informants in Médenine. 4Mi data finds 14 out of 16 women surveyed in Médenine reported not having job nor being a student.

**Figure 3: In which sector is your current main job?**



“It is absolutely hard to find jobs here. We came together as 267 Eritreans from Libya to the Médenine shelter. Only two of us found regular jobs. So most of the others went back to Libya and tried to take boats to Europe from there. It is super sad and frustrating to be for two and a half years in Tunisia with no job or educational opportunities, which is especially the case for East Africans here. As a refugee or asylum seeker in this country we need a minimum of expertise and capacities to be able to live.”

**26-year-old Eritrean man, Tunis**

Some sectors were perceived by refugees and migrants as easy to access for irregular work, as they were considered 'unpopular' among Tunisians. A Central African man in Tunis noted: "Irregular work is fairly easy to find, namely on construction sites and in some call centers where they take you without a contract, where Tunisians don't work and don't want to work. But better jobs are hard to find because the economic situation is bad. There is no real future here." At the same time, he noted that having Tunisian friends in good professions could open doors: "I found my job through the Rotary,<sup>43</sup> who intermediated with the company, and where I have a Tunisian friend. We were together in school and that's how I got to know the Rotary."

Refugee and migrant key informants expressed that the lack of specific legislation meant that despite refugees theoretically having access to the Tunisian labour market, this is not possible in reality as employers all require a passport for a position. A 26-year-old Eritrean man in Tunis talked about how difficult it is for him to access employment: "I am not working now. It is not by choice. I keep looking for jobs, but I can't find any. Access to jobs here is difficult. I was asked many times to provide a passport to get accepted."

With no national asylum law in place to guarantee their right to access the labour market, and often without access to documentation such as a passport, some refugees and asylum seekers are prevented from obtaining formal employment. The Tunisian Association for Management and Social Stability (TAMSS), a UNHCR partner, acts as an intermediary between employers and refugees and asylum seekers, providing legal work opportunities with legal contracts and conditions equal to those of Tunisian employees in several employment sectors, including manufacturing, heavy industry and services, while trying to match skill sets with available positions.

## 5.2 Working conditions and risks

MMC 4Mi data collected in March and April 2021 show that nearly all respondents who were working held verbal work contracts (88%; n=110) while only seven had a written contract. While this may respond to demands in the informal sector and contribute to labour market flexibility in Tunisia, it puts many refugees and migrants in precarious employment situations.

The few refugee and migrant key informants who had found employment with a written contract did not know whether their contract was legally binding and authorised by authorities, especially as they were not in possession of a *carte de séjour* as stipulated in Tunisian legislation. This could render their employment irregular and impede their access to insurance and social services. A Central African man working in a call centre in Tunis with a written contract explained: "On the contract, only my fixed salary and the number of hours is stated. There is a *caisse sociale* [social benefits programme], which we would receive documents for, but we have not yet received them. I am not sure exactly how this works in detail and which benefits we will have."

TAMSS works as an intermediary between refugees and employers to guarantee appropriate contracts, salaries and working conditions that are up to national standards. A similar agreement can be reached for asylum applicants of certain nationalities, indicated by the Tunisian authorities.<sup>44</sup> Without assistance, refugees and asylum seekers are not sufficiently protected by Tunisian law and will likely face informal working conditions and potential risks as irregular migrants.

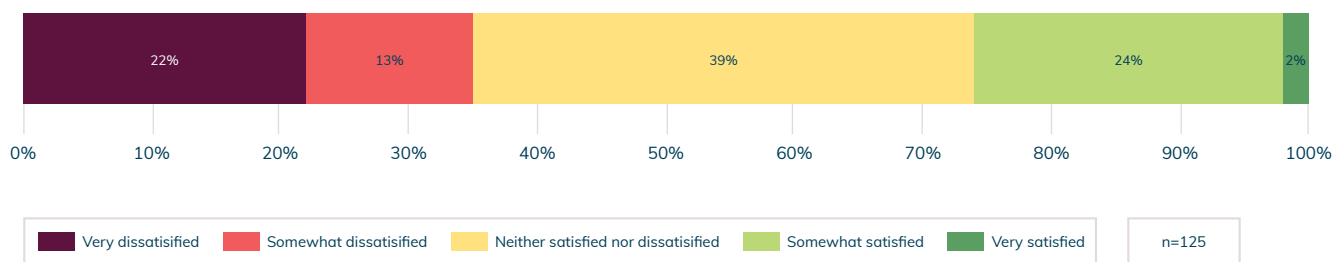
35% of respondents who were working reported being dissatisfied with their current working conditions, while 39% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied). Just over a quarter of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with their current working conditions. Disaggregating these data further by gender, location, country of origin and sector of employment did not provide any insights into why respondents were satisfied or dissatisfied. However, out of 57 respondents who were refugees or asylum seekers at the time of the survey, 25 reported being very dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied, while 18 cited being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Comparatively, out of 36 respondents who reported that their permit was no longer valid or had expired, 24 noted being neither satisfied nor dissatisfied and 9 cited being very or somewhat dissatisfied. Though the sub-sample is limited, this may suggest that migration status impacts how respondents perceive their working conditions, suggesting could expectations 'colour' satisfaction, in line with the migration policy analysis set out in Section 3.

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43 [Rotary International](#) is an international service organisation with the purpose to bring together business and professional leaders to stimulate goodwill and peace and provide humanitarian services.

44 According to TAMSS, asylum applicants from Iraq, Palestine, Syria and Yemen do not have to wait until they are granted asylum status to have legal access to the Tunisian labour market.

**Figure 4: To what degree are you satisfied with your current working conditions?**



Key informants reported widespread exploitation of refugees and migrants working without a contract. Several argued that employers are benefiting from the precarious livelihoods of refugees and migrants and the absence of legal frameworks. Beyond a lack of formal employment schemes and contractual rights, the main reported risks in the workplace included verbal abuse (46%; n=57), employers not paying wages on time (38%; n=37) and a lack of job security (26%; n=32).

Verbal abuse was reported to be a risk for those working in both informal and formal employment. A 25-year-old Comoran woman studying in Tunis noted: “It was during these internships [in hotels] that I experienced such exceptional cases of racism, as some clients refused to be attended by ‘blacks.’ I understood it as really a matter of a closed mentality, and it feels impossible that one day black people will integrate easily and calmly in other communities.” In terms of communication at work, while some reported having good experiences others noted that they felt excluded from interactions with Tunisian colleagues. Within this regard, a Central African man in Tunis expressed: “At my current job, there are less risks as I have a written contract. I have a good relation with my supervisors, and I feel all employees are heard and taken into account in this company. There is a good atmosphere.” On the other hand, a 49-year-old Burundian woman in Tunis reported: “My Tunisian colleagues talk in Arabic and do not translate later. This is disturbing and unprofessional. Also, they take some decisions and organise small meetings without including me, as they think it is easier to just talk in Arabic.”

Apart from not receiving wages on time, a large majority of interviewed refugees and migrants reported having experienced occasions when they did not receive their salary or received a lower amount than initially agreed. This risk seems to affect informal jobs in all sectors. Respondents often saw no other option than to leave their position without getting paid, feeling unable to claim their rights and file a complaint with the police given the informality of their job and their status in-country. Key informants confirmed that another consequence of not being protected by law is that refugee and migrant workers often receive lower salaries than their Tunisian peers in similar roles. Several refugees and migrants reported that they often worked longer hours than their Tunisian colleagues, received shorter breaks or felt obliged to carry out extra tasks.

Job insecurity is increased by the short-term opportunities that are common in the informal sector, where refugees and migrants experience periods of unemployment. The risk of getting fired is elevated for those working without a contract.

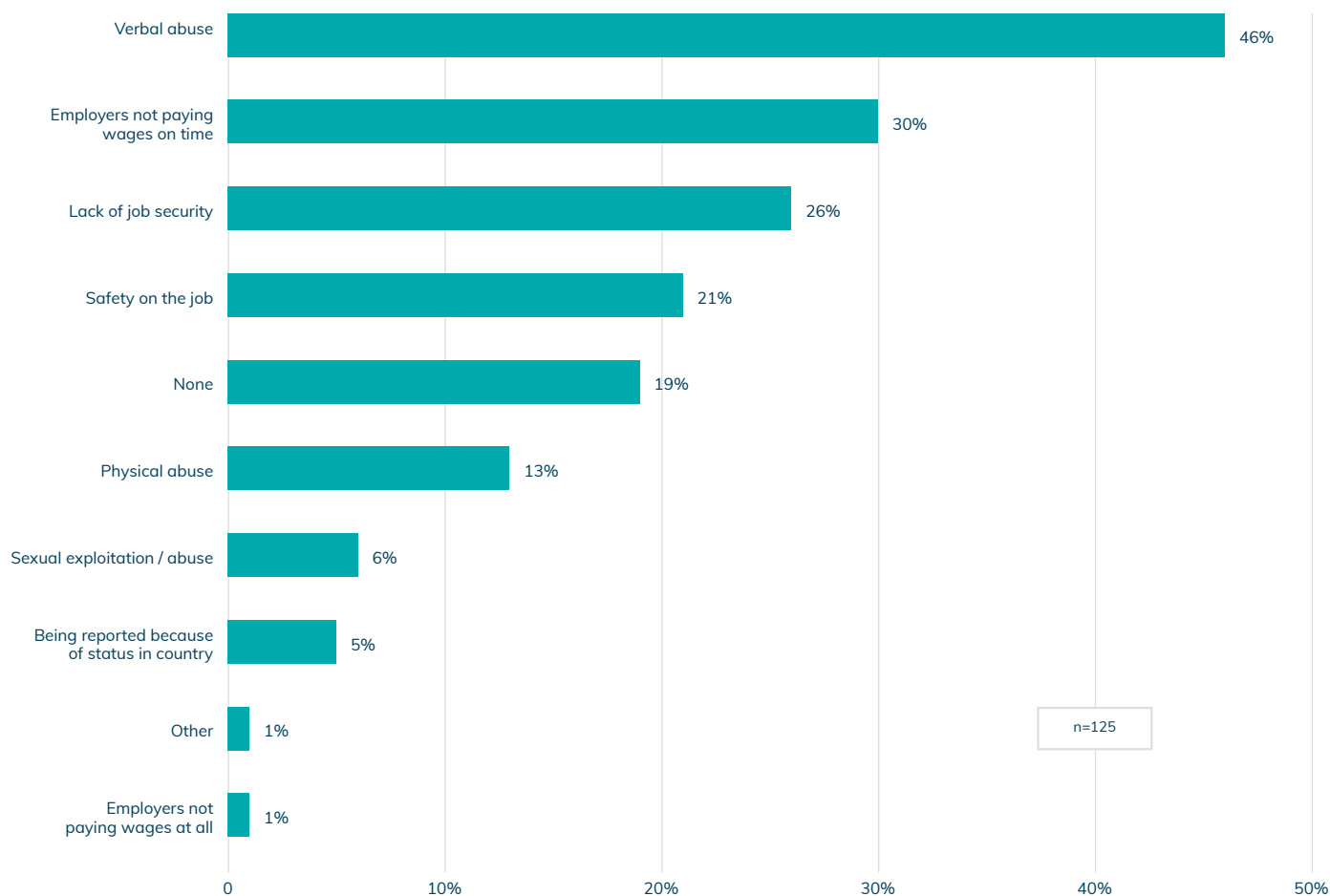
*“I only fear for my safety because there have been times when an employer has told me that he is not going to pay me because he is not satisfied with my work, although I did what he asked. So at this moment we got into a fight and he is a man I can’t stand against. So I walked away... If I live another day I can make the money again but if I am in bad shape or there is a worst-case scenario then that’s it.”*

**Nigerian woman, Médenine**

Key informants noted that dangerous situations at the workplace were particularly concerning for refugees and migrants working in the construction sector. With no access to social security, in case of an accident they would be on their own in terms of accessing and paying for medical services. Basic personal protective equipment (PPE) to safeguard against COVID-19 is reportedly often unavailable and is expected to be provided by the worker. A Central African man in Tunis reported: “Before this job, I worked in construction, where I had an accident at work. Something hit my head and I lost consciousness for 2 hours. The employer did not take charge of any expenses and I had to take care of it myself.”



**Figure 5: What are the key risks faced in this job?**



### 5.3 Viability of livelihoods and cost of living

The monthly salaries reported by surveyed refugees and migrants varied by employment type. Those with part-time jobs had monthly salaries ranging from 100 to 800 TND per month (USD 35 to 295), whereas those with full-time employment earned salaries from 300 to 1,000 TND a month (USD 110 to 365). Most (62%; n=78) had monthly salaries between 401 and 600 TND per month (USD 145 to 220). The highest average monthly salaries were reported by those working in shops (550 TND or USD 200) or in industry and manufacturing (525 TND or USD 191), while those working in agriculture had the lowest average monthly salary (283 TND or USD 103).<sup>45</sup> Most respondents earned salaries above Tunisia's 366 TND monthly national minimum guaranteed salary (SMIG) for a full-time job (40 hours per week). However, this finding should be read with caution, as many 4Mi respondents came from urban locations with relatively high costs of living. Most relied less on work contracts than on verbal agreements, so reported salaries are not guaranteed to always be paid on time or at all, and no guaranteed access to social welfare or other benefits. Moreover, only a minority was employed full-time, while the majority earned a fraction of a full-time salary.

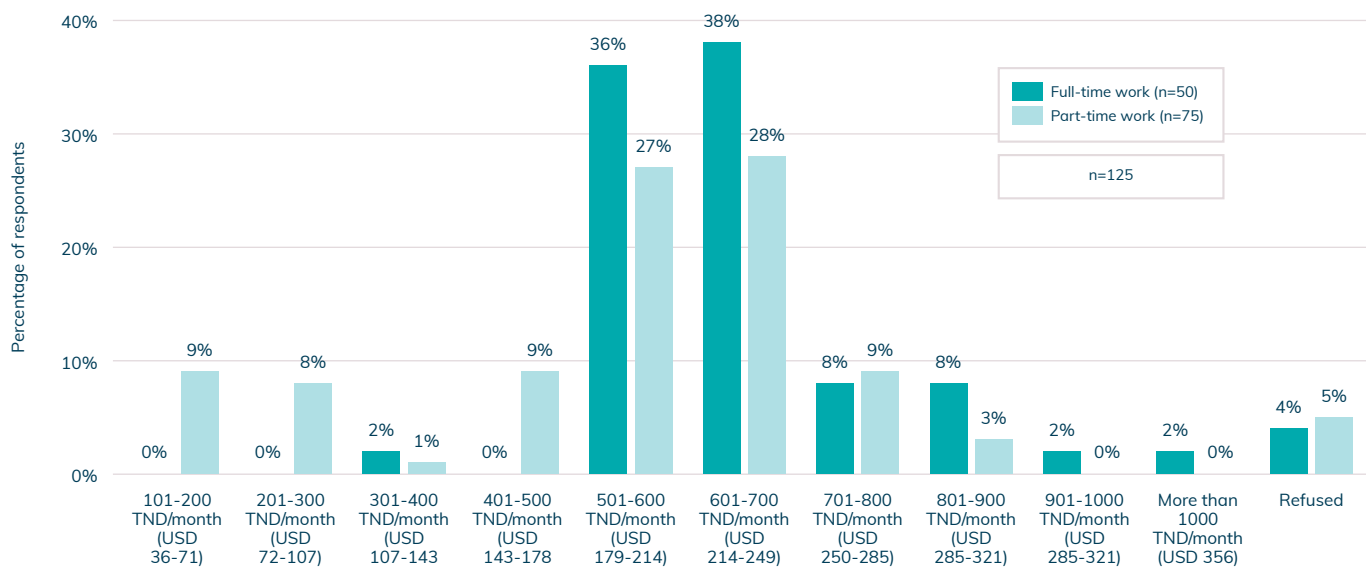
4Mi data also show geographical variations in salary. Among respondents with full-time employment (n=50), the highest average monthly earnings were noted in Greater Tunis, particularly Ben Arous (n=3, 783 TND or USD 287) and Ariana (n=8, 638 TND or USD 234).<sup>46</sup> The lowest average monthly salary was reported in Sousse (n=11, 477 TND or USD 175). For domestic work, the average monthly salary was reportedly 550 TND or USD 202 in Ben Arous and Ariana and 475 TND or USD 174 in Sousse. Respondents working in cafés or restaurants reportedly earned an average monthly salary of 650 TND or USD 238 in Sfax and Médenine and 450 TND or USD 165 in Sousse. Those

<sup>45</sup> Calculated by considering the mid-point in each income category bracket.

<sup>46</sup> For ease of reading and comparison, Tunis, Ben Arous, Ariana and Manouba are often presented together in this study as Greater Tunis. However, in this particular case 4Mi data show notable differences among the different localities in the capital and so they are presented separately in Figure 7.

employed in the industrial and manufacturing sector earned an average monthly salary of 750 TND or USD 275 in Ben Arous and Ariana and 550 TND or USD 202 in Sfax. Due to the small sample sizes, these figures should be read with caution.

**Figure 6: How much do you earn per month in your job?**



**Figure 7: Average monthly salary for full-time employment per location**



\*Two respondents with full-time employment refused to report their monthly salaries

Refugees and migrants engaged in informal employment noted that their income was usually not enough to cover their basic monthly living expenses. One frequently mentioned coping mechanism was to share housing with multiple

individuals in order to save on rent. Earlier MMC research found that in Greater Tunis<sup>47</sup> some refugees and migrants experiencing constrained livelihood opportunities opted for cheaper rent arrangements in neighbourhoods that were considered less safe. Some refugees and migrants reported that they had relied on or were currently relying on donations or loans from members of their co-national communities to pay expenses.

Also students in Greater Tunis or Sfax noted they could not sustain their basic needs, and they often had to engage in informal work as the grants or financial support from family they received were often not sufficient. University fees are high and access to public universities and vocational training is restricted, so most sub-Saharan students are likely to enroll in private universities. Key informants reported that many foreign students and recent graduates ended up in an endless cycle of irregular internships, not matching living expense costs. Their employers made use of their lack of access to the labour market by paying them little or no stipends and did not offer them opportunities to advance to regular paid positions.

*“There is currently high demand in the telecom sector in Tunisia, and a lot of sub-Saharan students find internships there. These are remunerated but not really remunerated, as they really get paid the lowest stipends possible. Maybe they only get reimbursed for transport fees, some coffee breaks, and that’s it. [Businesses] want to recruit young graduates but the work contracts remain problematic. Particularly when it comes to access to social services, which is often not well-determined. Here in Tunisia, the situation is really fluid and so is the border between formal and informal work. In the end, these interns have the same profiles as irregular migrants, as they have to pay all their bills to access social services themselves and are really left to their own devices.”*

**Key informant, Sfax**

The expiration of student visas upon the completion of studies and the potential for exploitative internships have rendered some sub-Saharan students vulnerable to falling into irregularity while trying to access the labour market. Since options to regularise status through work are scarce, some opt for other pathways.

*“I lost my father and brother during the conflict in my country, and I migrated to Cameroon with my mother. After we returned to CAR, the situation worsened further and I decided to leave. An acquaintance was in Tunis and informed me that Tunisia was a viable destination for students and to build up a life ... I am an asylum applicant with UNHCR, but the procedure is still ongoing. They gave me an applicant card in the meantime, so that is my current status. I initially entered Tunisia legally as a student (in international commerce), but I became an irregular migrant when I had to start working, and now I am an asylum applicant.”*

**Central African man, Tunis**

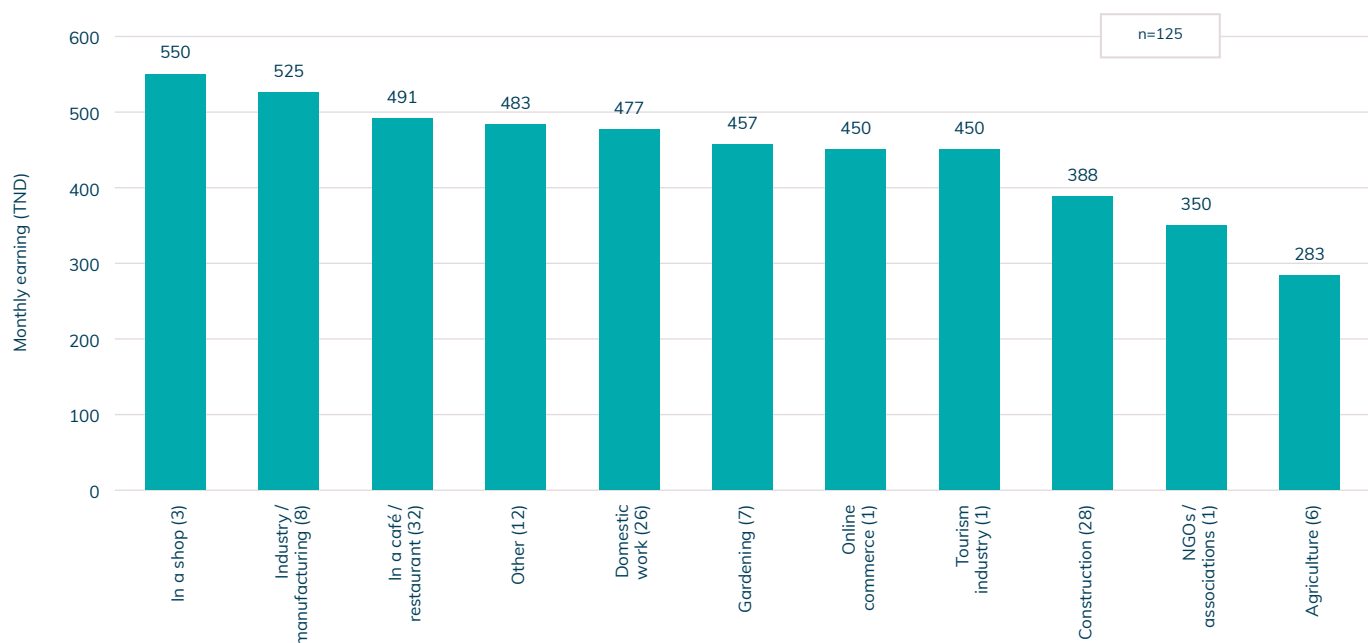
*“As a student, my living situation is not very easy here...I am an instructor at a gym...My incomes are: my salary, although I work just on weekends, and remittances I receive from my family. With this, I can pay off my elementary bills.”*

**25-year-old Comoran man, Sfax**

<sup>47</sup> Mixed Migration Centre (2020). [Urban Mixed Migration Tunis Case Study](#).



**Figure 8: How much do you earn per month in your job? (per type of job)**



Most surveyed refugees and migrants with more stable employment noted that their income was sufficient to meet their basic needs, but they were not able to afford extras or to save, although this was likely not generally much different from the Tunisian population. Key informants reported that temporary unemployment caused by the COVID-19 crisis and increases in the cost of living in Tunisia have eroded refugees' and migrants' livelihoods. Many used up their savings while temporarily unemployed due to the COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns, and they turned to borrowing money. In addition, the 4Mi data shows that a number of migrants (n=40; 13%) arrived in Tunisia with debts related to their journey, while almost a third (n=98; 31%) reported accumulating debt since their arrival, mostly due to their living expenses, linked to prevalent losses of income and job insecurity. Refugees and migrants in particularly precarious conditions and with limited access to support mechanisms have been obliged to move from one housing arrangement to another. In some cases, landlords have accepted delays in rent payment, and some interviewees reported still owing money. A 26-year-old Guinean man in Médenine explained: "No, I'm not [saving money]. Since Corona started I've been in such a huge crisis. We're still paying off debts like rent, so there is no way to save money."

Difficult living conditions were often linked to future intentions. Several key informants, particularly those interviewed in Médenine, reported an uptick in reverse migration back into Libya as livelihood opportunities in Tunisia have become scarcer due to the COVID-19 crisis. Many refugees and migrants search for employment or ways to travel towards Europe. An increase in sea crossings was reported in Sfax, a common point of departure for journeys to Italy. One key informant representing a CSO in Sfax noted: "Accidents at sea have really doubled or even tripled. We can say that the situation in Tunisia is so precarious for them that they prefer to risk their lives." An increase in irregular journeys due to economic distress might seem contradictory as these journeys can be costly, with estimates as high as 3,000 to 4,000 TND (USD 1,075 to 1,433) from Sfax. Multiple key informants explained that, if livelihood opportunities seem precarious and hopeless, refugees and migrants might turn to negative coping mechanisms, including rationing or skipping meals, in order to save up for an irregular boat crossing.

## 5.4 Managing finances: access to services and remittances

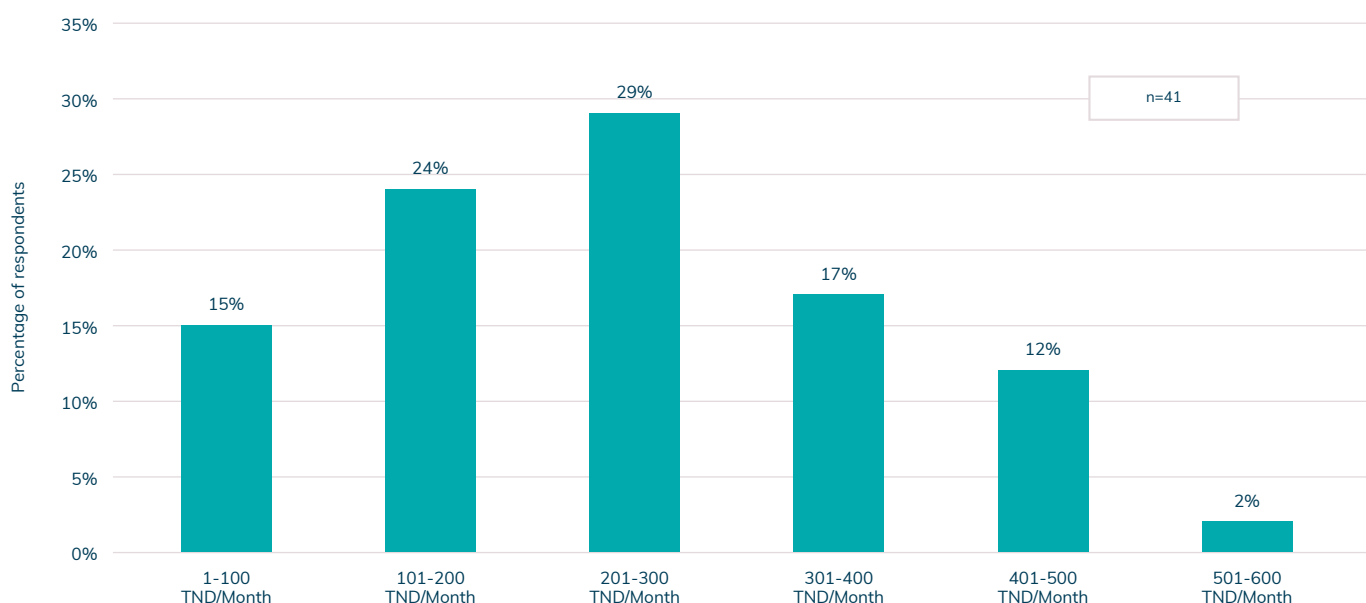
For refugees and migrants in a position to save part of their income, access to banking services posed another challenge. Most respondents reported that foreigners experienced difficulties opening bank accounts in Tunisia, based on their own experiences or those of their peers. Refugees and migrants noted a lack of clarity around the type of documentation that banks required. A key informant from TAMSS confirmed that banks in general asked for either a *carte de séjour* or an authorised work contract.

In some cases, a passport was accepted as documentation, as a 27-year-old Congolese<sup>48</sup> man in Sfax explained: “This is not really a bank account but a prepaid card, or a *portefeuille*. Opening it was very simple, as I received all the necessary information about how to top up money to the card.” However, a Central African man in Tunis noted that, while one bank provided this opportunity to safely store money, this did not provide a solution for him as it remained impossible to receive his salary through this type of account, which did not allow for sending or receiving transactions.

Multiple key informants noted that refugees and migrants who successfully manage to set up their own businesses often succeed sooner or later in obtaining a residency permit and are then able to access banking services in Tunisia. A 45-year-old Central African man in Sfax who owns his own import-export business and employs five staff noted: “I have two bank accounts: one at Attijari Bank for my current transactions and one at BIAT for my savings. It was very easy to open them.”

Out of 312 surveyed respondents, 13% (n=41), all of whom currently had jobs in Tunisia, mentioned sending remittances to their home countries. The highest number of these respondents sent 201-300 TND or 75-100 USD per month.

**Figure 9: How much would you typically send in one month?**

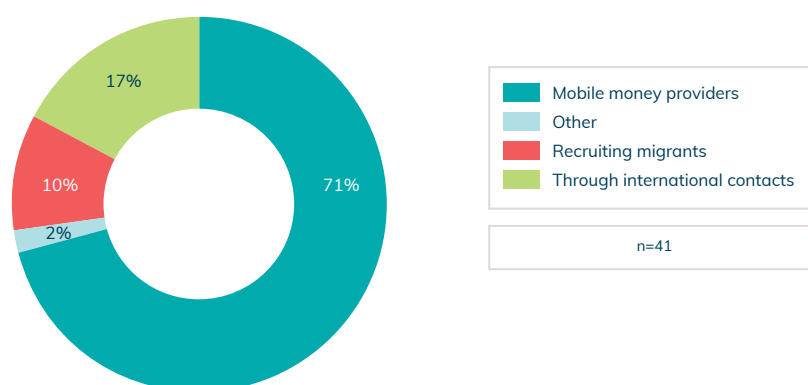


Most interviewed refugees and migrants noted that their income level did not allow them to send remittances home, although some wished to do so. Instead, these interviewees reported having to spend all their money on basic expenditures, bills and accumulated debts from periods of unemployment. They also noted difficulties in sending money from Tunisia. This corresponds with earlier MMC research in which surveyed refugees and migrants noted that Tunisia’s closed banking system<sup>49</sup> and their lack of a *carte de séjour* deprived them of access to Western Union’s services, and they were often obliged to use other means of remitting funds to their families in their countries of origin, including sending cash in person with someone travelling. There does exist a credit system in which money can be transferred through a mobile money account, which seems to be a preferred option for some West African communities. 29 of the 41 respondents who reported sending remittances used this method. Other common methods included sending money with returning peers, using international contacts who could carry out transactions or conducting money exchanges with peers in Tunisia or between families in countries of origin. A 49-year-old Burundian woman in Tunis with an authorised work contract and a salary in USD noted: “Yes, I do sometimes [send remittances]. I send to my brothers and sisters back home to support their small projects. This is possible for me as my salary is in USD. I transfer the money directly from my account.”

48 From the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

49 This system does not allow flows of money out of Tunisia (including bank transfers) without the special authorisation of the Tunisian Central Bank.

**Figure 10: When sending money home, which is the main method you use?**



## 5.5 The stress multiplier effect of the COVID-19 crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent movement restrictions have significantly impacted refugee and migrant livelihoods in Tunisia. A 31-year-old Malian woman in Sfax told interviewers: "The arrival of the coronavirus has changed many things. Working hours are reduced due to the curfew and salaries are now lower." Prior MMC research<sup>50</sup> found that COVID-19 has exacerbated refugees' and migrants' lack of access to regular income, involuntary immobility, and high levels of stress, thereby serving as a risk-multiplier. Loss of income has pushed some refugees and migrants to move to parts of the city that offer cheap but less secure rent agreements and poor, overcrowded housing conditions. Individuals with little or no savings, especially those in debt, have been forced to make trade-offs between health, security, comfort and price.

*"I have my own business and I employ 5 people...As an employer, I see that work opportunities have become more and more difficult to find with the COVID-19 crisis, as business does not run as usual...My monthly revenues are not stable, but I have been able to handle my bills and pay my employees."*

**45-year-old Central African man, Sfax**

50% (n=2,155) of the respondents to the 4Mi COVID-19 survey conducted between April 2020 and February 2021 mentioned having lost income due to COVID-related restrictions. Similarly, 54% (n=2,338) of refugees and migrants reported having reduced access to work due to the COVID-19 crisis. Key informants noted that while most refugees and migrants with jobs are now back at work, many face precarious conditions. This could be partly ascribed to job insecurity spurred by COVID-19 restrictions and recurring lockdowns. They also noted that the informal sector does not receive any formal assistance from the authorities compensating for COVID-19 response measures. In terms of employment less affected by COVID-19, reporting from Sfax suggested that the agricultural sector kept on attracting labour movements towards the olive fields in Sfax.

50 See, for example: Mixed Migration Centre (2020). [Urban Mixed Migration Tunis Case Study](#), and Mixed Migration Centre (2020). [4Mi Snapshot: The impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants in Tunisia – a focus on employment and livelihoods](#).



**Photo credit:** © Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas

An Ivorian couple has converted their employer's garage into a small studio. Zarzis, Tunisia, May 21, 2020.



## 6. The role of refugees and migrants in Tunisia's economy

This section focuses on the contribution of refugees and migrants working in Tunisia to the local and national economy and its development through formal and informal employment. As official statistics on the employment of refugees and migrants remain unavailable, this analysis focuses on reported perceptions, contributions, good practices and legal and societal considerations.

### 6.1 Perceptions of contributions and labour market flexibility

Key informants noted that since most refugees and migrants are employed in the informal sector and are unable to access formal employment opportunities, their contributions to the Tunisian economy often go unnoticed. They expressed the belief that refugees and migrants often obtain jobs that are poorly paid and undesirable to Tunisians, filling a gap in the market providing essential or needed services.

*“They contribute to the labour market pool, particularly in the construction sector. It would be difficult to satisfy the labour market demand in construction without their presence, as there is really a lack of manpower. Tunisians also refuse to take these opportunities as they prefer to work in commercial activities, which are physically less demanding and often better paid.”*

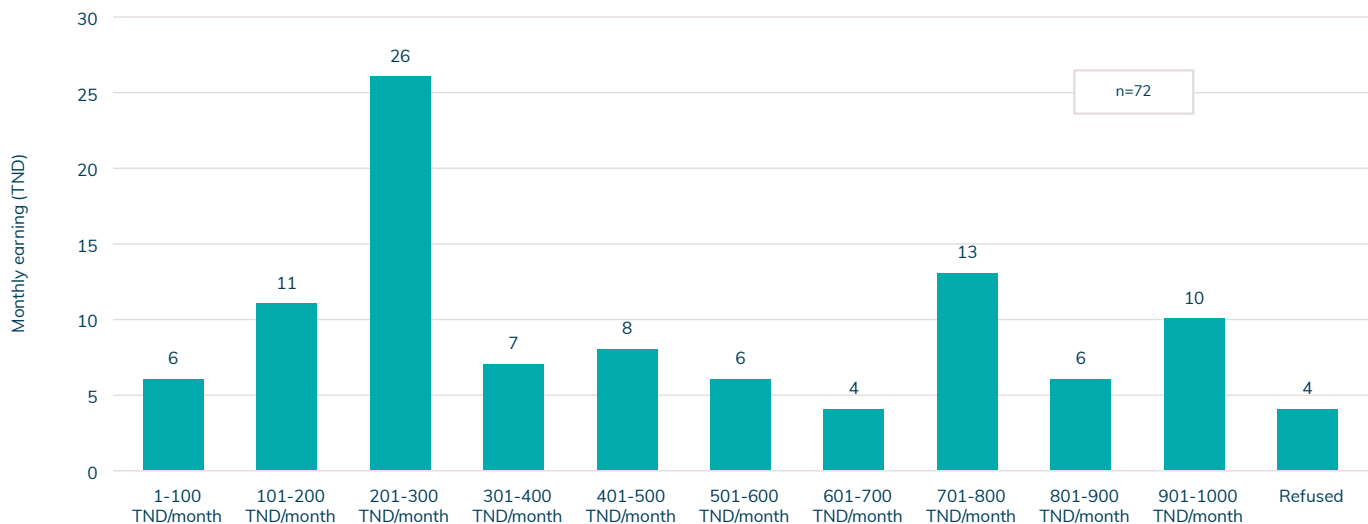
**Key informant, Médenine**

Most key informants argued that rather than awaiting the adoption of new asylum and migration laws, the Tunisian Labour Code should be amended to give refugees and migrants formal access to the labour market. This would allow refugees and migrants to make visible contributions to Tunisia's economy and its development through tax-paying, investment and consumption. Through engagement in formal employment, refugees and migrants would be more likely to regularise their status and obtain a *carte de séjour*.

Several key informants noted a preference for refugee and migrant workers because of their higher productivity and efficiency. However, refugee and migrant workers are also at risk of being as preferred because unscrupulous employers in the informal sector can more easily exploit them. Evidence that refugee and migrant workers contribute to overall labour market flexibility and increase productivity should be considered with caution. An ILO key informant mentioned: “All studies show the positive effect of refugees and migrants on the labour market in terms of manpower, but there are no exact figures. A regularisation process would put their contribution in the spotlight.”

13% of respondents noted sending remittances home from Tunisia and 23% (n=72) received remittances in Tunisia to support their daily living costs, increasing their consuming power of services and basic goods in-country. Of those receiving money from family at home, 25 were students, 9 were students who were also working, 25 currently did not have a job in Tunisia and 13 had a job. They reported receiving remittances either through an international bank account or through irregular means of receiving cash.

**Figure 11: How much would you typically receive in one month?**



Key informants noted that refugees and migrants consume local products, transport and services, supporting the local economy. They also bring with them from their country of origin a variety of products that are not widely available in Tunisia, creating new channels for trade, transport and distribution of products, and contributing to a more diverse range of international products and services for consumers and more opportunities for import-export businesses and start-ups to specialise in certain products and services. In the long run, informants noted, this makes Tunisia's economy in the region more competitive, dynamic and able to cater to a wider range of international companies and individual customers.

*"We started to see an increase in activities linking Tunisia with sub-Saharan countries, and Tunisia becoming a more dynamic and popular destination rather than a transit point, including economically speaking. There are already more direct air connections to sub-Saharan capitals. Before there were two, now there are five or six. New embassies have recently opened in Tunis, notably the Burkinabe one, and others are scheduled to open."*

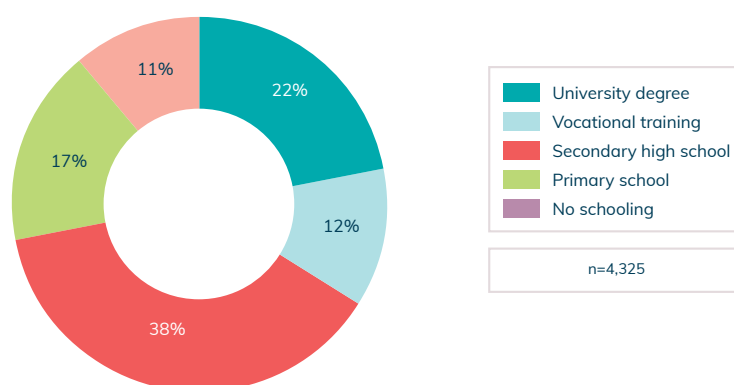
**CSO key informant, Sfax**

Tunisian authorities and universities have an interest in attracting foreign students, particularly from Francophone countries. One key informant argued that this development has given Tunisia's bigger cities, notably Tunis, Sfax and Sousse, a more dynamic and international character. The increase in international students has spurred demand for import-export businesses and other services linking to their countries of origin. It has also contributed to the growth of universities, which are now employing more personnel and investing in new buildings and infrastructure. The influx of foreign students has contributed to increased demand in the housing market, which has negatively impacted students as rents have gone up, particularly in Greater Tunis.

## 6.2 Skills and human capital versus demand and access to opportunities

More than one-fifth (22%; n=956) of respondents surveyed between April 2020 and February 2021 reported possessing a university degree, while an additional 12% had completed vocational training (n=510) and 38% had finished secondary/high school (n=1,638), with education degrees either obtained in Tunisia or abroad before arriving.

**Figure 12: What is the highest level of education you have obtained?**



While a considerable number of surveyed refugees and migrants had received specialised education or training, multiple key informants noted that their skills and backgrounds are generally not considered by employers, who are mostly interested in filling gaps with cheap labour. The restrictive legal framework often means that refugees and migrants with higher degrees cannot access employment in sectors relevant to their studies. A key informant representing the municipality of Médenine stated that: “Their education levels do not really matter. Because of their irregular situation, they take any casual jobs. Médenine has no industries, so refugees and migrants with degrees won’t be able to find suitable jobs.” Moreover, key informants highlighted that also migrant students who graduate in Tunisia with recognised diplomas and certificates, seem to struggle to access the labour market.

One key informant pointed out that there may be exceptions among refugees and migrants who are skilled in a practical technical specialisation. For instance, those who have spent time working on large construction sites in Libya or in their country of origin have often acquired such a specialisation. Multiple key informants perceived a lack of specialised technical professionals in the Tunisian labour market, as the tendency among nationals has been to train multi-skilled, versatile individuals “who know how to do a bit of everything.” While no data was collected on particular skill sets, 4Mi data collected in March and April 2021 (n=312) show that 39 out of 98 women (40%) and 112 out of 214 men (52%) were engaged in income-generating activities in their countries of origin before departing. Amongst working women, most worked in small businesses and others in domestic work. Similarly, the largest numbers of men worked in small businesses; industry; construction; transportation and agriculture, pastoralism and fishing.

## 6.3 Legal and societal considerations: initiatives and good practices

While legal restrictions challenge refugees’ and migrants’ access to the Tunisian labour market, often leaving them obliged to participate in informal activities, key informants discussed a couple of initiatives and good practices.

First and foremost, refugees and migrants have set up their own businesses. Key informants noted that, due to the restrictive character of Tunisian labour legislation, it was not evident that refugees and migrants could start their own businesses in Tunisia, but there had nevertheless been success stories. A key informant from TAMSS in Sfax noted that starting one’s own business provides a major administrative advantage as it is one of the few ways to obtain a residence permit and regularise one’s status. Refugees and migrants who become entrepreneurs or investors are not legally obliged to obtain a work visa, nor are they subjected to the principle of ‘national preference’ by the Tunisian Labour Code. They do not need authorised work contracts for determined periods of time to comply with this principle. Finally, migrant investors can receive a *carte de séjour* with a duration of five years, compared to one year for most foreigners residing in Tunisia.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> For more information on the legal framework for migrant entrepreneurs and investors, see: Terre d’Asile Tunisie (2020). *L’accès au travail des migrants en Tunisie. Du cadre juridique à la pratique.*



**Photo credit:** © MMC / Samuel Abraham Micheal Lucas  
Details of a workplace in Zarzis, Tunisia, October 2021.

Multiple NGOs and CSOs are actively helping refugees and migrants to start up their own businesses. TAMSS supports micro-entrepreneurship by refugees and asylum seekers through financial and legal support. African Business Leaders, based in Sfax but operational in the whole territory, has set up a system of incubators providing refugees and migrants with access to microcredit to start businesses. They focus on establishing links between Tunisia and countries of origin and bringing in investments for Tunisia. Their aim is to not only provide economic opportunities for refugees and migrants, but also to change societal perceptions:

*“Through investments linking to sub-Saharan countries, we hope to change perceptions on migration locally [in Tunisia]. We also want to improve perceptions of migrants who wish to migrate towards the Maghreb and Tunisia. They will start to see Tunisia more as a destination country. Behind that, there will be an economic contribution [to the Tunisian economy].”*

The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) announced its opening to refugee and migrant workers of all nationalities regardless of status in December 2020. On December 4th, the first membership cards were handed to sub-Saharan migrants working in Tunisia.<sup>52</sup> This followed the creation of so-called Espace Migrants in Tunis, Sfax and Sousse in 2018, in cooperation with ILO. These spaces offer refugee and migrant workers, regardless of their status, access to reliable information on legislation, basic services and other matters as well as specific training on topics such as financial education and protection mechanisms in the event of abuse, and concrete assistance such as conciliation services and dispute resolution mechanisms.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Mixed Migration Centre (2021). [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update North Africa – Quarter 4 2020](#).

<sup>53</sup> ILO (2018). [Inauguration de deux « Espaces-Migrants » à l'UGTT Tunis et Sousse destinés aux travailleurs migrants étrangers en Tunisie](#).





**Photo credit:** © MMC / Samuel Abraham Micheal

A 21-year-old migrant from Cameroon working at a construction site.  
Zarzis, Tunisia, October 2021.



# 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

## 7.1 Conclusion

This study sought to better understand and provide an updated overview of the economic situation of refugees and migrants in Tunisia, including their access to the labour market and their contribution to the local and national economy. Refugees and migrants residing in Tunisia have diverse profiles, including those fleeing war and civil unrest either in their country of origin or in Libya and those seeking education and employment opportunities. These are not clear-cut and segregated categories. Rather, refugees and migrants engaged in mixed migration in Tunisia often report multiple migration drivers.

Most refugee and migrant workers are employed in the informal sector, which allows them to make a living and sometimes send remittances home. However, working without a contract or access to social services, and without legal protection, they are vulnerable to different types of protection risks, including exploitation, job insecurity and non-payment of salaries. Those who do not or cannot find work often accrue debts, not being able to pay their bills through alternative sources of income. While often represented as a separate category, many sub-Saharan students enrolled in Tunisian universities likewise engage in informal activities to top up their incomes in case of insufficient grants. Refugees' and migrants' fluid legal status in Tunisia, where they may fall in and out of irregularity, is intrinsically linked to the country's legal framework. With no comprehensive legislation on migration and asylum in place, refugees' and migrants' rights and access to the labour market remain unprotected and unguaranteed.

This study argues, based on MMC 4Mi data and qualitative interviews, that refugees' and migrants' skills and knowhow are often undervalued due to a lack of access to the formal Tunisian labour market. Consequently, their contributions to the Tunisian economy and its development remain largely invisible and unrecognised. While waiting for legislative reform on migration and asylum, key informants urged that refugees and migrants should be given access to legal employment so that they can qualify for residency and solidify their economic contributions through increased consumption and tax payment. Increased socio-economic integration for refugees and migrants could further strengthen important links between Tunisia and their countries of origin, forging stronger economic and social ties and enhancing the Tunisian economy's international ties.

**Photo credit:** © Morgane Wirtz / Hans Lucas  
Migrants unloading a truck. Zarzis, Tunisia. June 2, 2020.



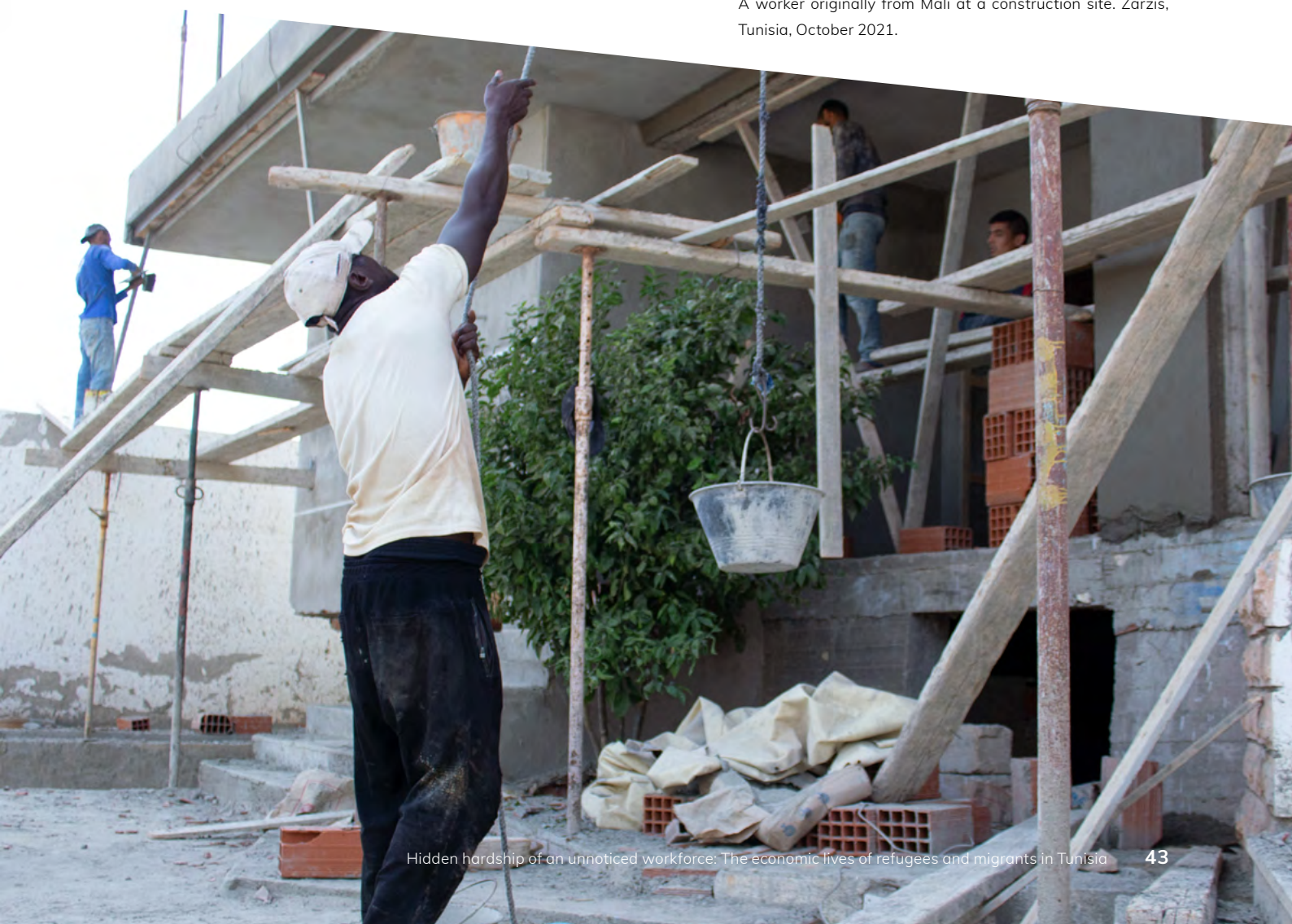
## 7.2 Recommendations

### Tunisian authorities (national and local)

- Incentivise the inclusion of refugees and migrants in the Tunisian labour market at the local/municipal and national level by amending the Tunisian Labour Code and conducting sensitivity and awareness campaigns aimed at employers and Tunisian workers.
- Include refugees and migrants in national employment strategies based on added value, experience and skills vis-à-vis required expertise.
- Create and increase pathways to internships and junior-level employment for international students who graduate from Tunisian universities, to be operated after amending the Tunisian Labour Code which now stipulates the “national preference rule”.
- Improve awareness, particularly of employers, of refugees’ and migrants’ rights in Tunisia based on international conventions to which Tunisia is a signatory as well as national legislation, particularly focusing on anti-discrimination campaigns.
- Provide information on application processes for residence permits in multiple languages (English, French and Arabic) and support coordination between national and local/municipal administrative bodies to process application requests.
- Improve coordination between and among municipalities and local organisations (NGOs and CSOs) in supporting the socio-economic inclusion of refugees and migrants at the local level.

**Photo credit:** © MMC / Samuel Abraham Micheal

A worker originally from Mali at a construction site. Zarzis, Tunisia, October 2021.





## International organisations and civil society

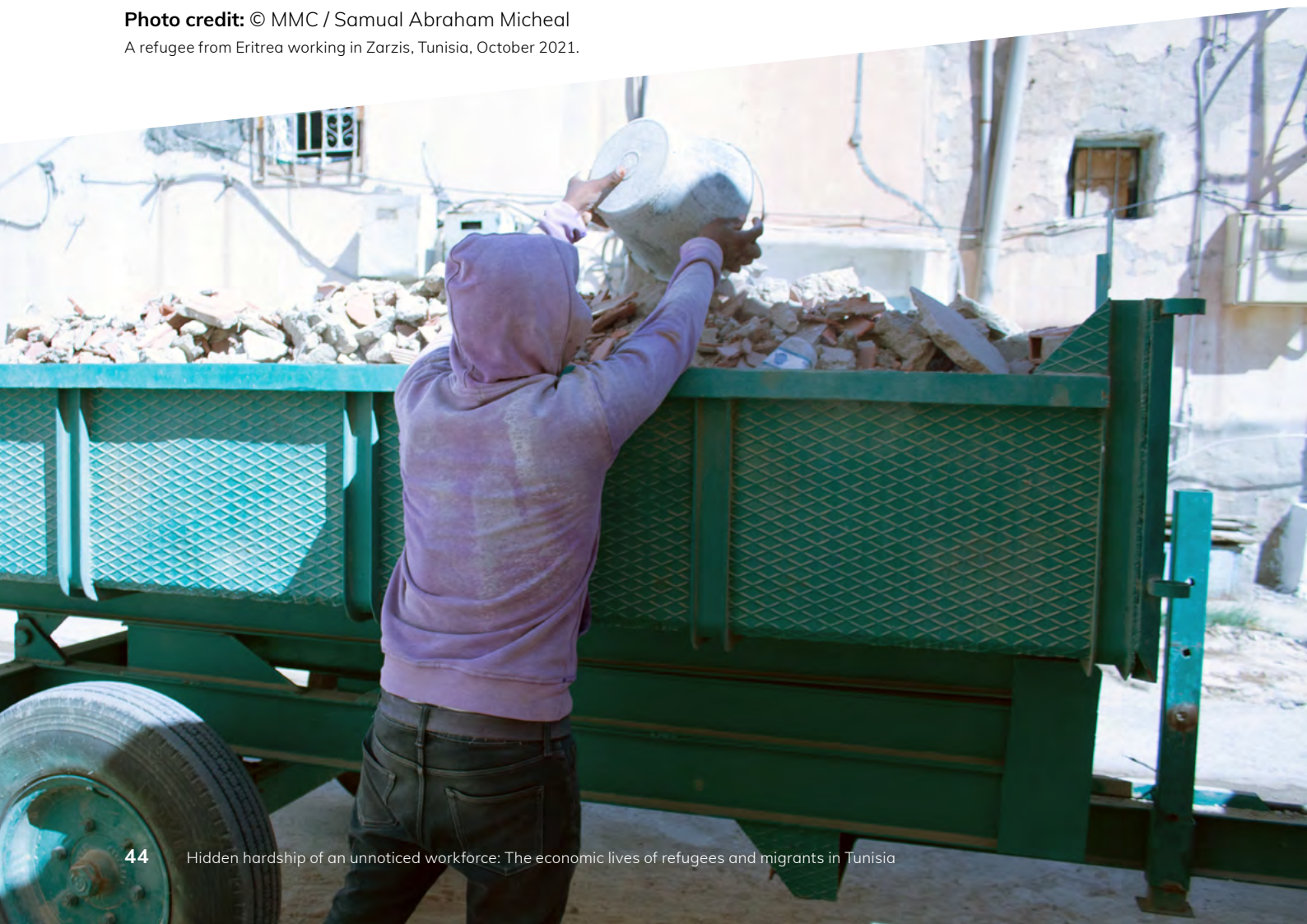
- Improve information-sharing and better coordination between actors to address protection gaps faced by refugees and migrants employed in Tunisia.
- Continue advocating for structural change in the Tunisian Labour Code, providing more opportunities for foreigners to access the Tunisian labour market.
- Advocate for the rights of international students to be protected in Tunisia, including while they are arriving in-country and awaiting administrative processes.
- Move beyond the refugee-migrant dichotomy and develop programming that reaches all refugee and migrant workers in inclusive local societies.
- Increase advocacy efforts targeting Tunisian employers and labour unions on refugee and migrant workers' rights, equal working conditions, contracted work, access to social services and job security.

## Research

- Conduct further research, in collaboration with local authorities and civil society, on the contribution of refugee and migrant workforce within specific employment sectors.
- Fill the gap in quantitative data on the number of refugees and migrants residing in Tunisia, and their particular skillsets, education background and work experience.
- Collaborate with advocacy efforts aiming at highlighting the contributions of refugees and migrants to the Tunisian economy and its development.

**Photo credit:** © MMC / Samuel Abraham Micheal

A refugee from Eritrea working in Zarzis, Tunisia, October 2021.





# Annex 1. Qualitative data collection

## Key informants

Date of interview	Organisation	Location
15/03/2021	Municipality of Médenine	Médenine
16/03/2021	Maison des Associations	Médenine
17/03/2021	TAMSS	Sfax
17/03/2021	Civil society activist (I)	Sfax
18/03/2021	Civil society activist (II)	Sfax
18/03/2021	Terre d'Asile	Sfax
23/03/2021	ILO	Tunis (remote)
24/03/2021	CIES <sup>54</sup> Tunisie	Tunis (remote)
09/04/2021	African Business Leaders	Tunis (remote)
12/04/2021	Labour market expert (ex-Ministry of Labour)	Tunis (remote)

## Refugees and migrants

Date of interview	Country of origin	Location	Sex
13/03/2021	Nigeria	Médenine	Female
15/03/2021	Eritrea	Médenine	Male
17/03/2021	Guinea	Médenine	Male
18/03/2021	Cameroon	Médenine	Male
18/03/2021	Ethiopia	Médenine	Male
18/03/2021	Mali	Sfax	Female
19/03/2021	Sudan	Sfax	Female
22/03/2021	Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)	Sfax	Male
23/03/2021	Central African Republic (CAR)	Sfax	Male
26/03/2021	Comoros	Sfax	Male
27/03/2021	South Sudan	Sfax	Male
06/04/2021	Côte d'Ivoire	Tunis	Female
07/04/2021	Côte d'Ivoire	Tunis	Male
07/04/2021	Eritrea	Tunis	Male
08/04/2021	CAR	Tunis	Male
08/04/2021	Sudan	Tunis	Male
11/04/2021	Comoros	Tunis	Female
12/04/2021	Burundi	Tunis	Female

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## Annex 2. Supplementary 4Mi module

1. When you arrived in Tunisia, did you have any debts related to your journey?
2. Did you accumulate new debt since arriving in Tunisia?
3. What is your current occupation in Tunisia?
4. How long after you arrived in [location] were you able to find a job?
5. How did you find a job in Tunisia?
6. How many income-generating activities do you currently have in [location]?
7. In which sector do you work?
8. Is this employment full-time?
9. What type of employment agreement do you have?
10. What are key risks faced within your employment?
11. How much do you earn a month with this job?
12. Do you send money to people in [country of origin]?
13. When sending money home, which methods do you use?
14. If so [sending money home], how much would you typically send in one month?
15. Do you receive money from people in [country of origin]?
16. When receiving from home, which methods do you use?
17. If so [receiving money from home], how much would you typically receive in one month?



**Photo credit:** © MMC / Samuel Abraham Micheal  
A worker originally from Mali, cleaning at a construction site.  
Zarzis, Tunisia, October 2021.





## About HBF

The Heinrich Böll Foundation is a catalyst for green perspectives and projects. The foundation is affiliated with the German Green Party. It works with partners in over 60 countries and currently has 34 international offices, including the one in Tunis. The foundation works for a healthy and sustainable environment for current and future generations and defends human rights including those of migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons.

### For more information visit:

[tn.boell.org](http://tn.boell.org) and follow us at [@boell\\_tunis](https://twitter.com/boell_tunis)

## About MMC

The MMC is a global network consisting of six regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Geneva, Turin, Dakar, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Dhaka.

### For more information visit:

[mixedmigration.org](http://mixedmigration.org) and follow us at [@Mixed\\_Migration](https://twitter.com/Mixed_Migration)