

Decision-making, experiences, and aspirations of refugees and migrants along the Eastern Route through Somalia

This infographic examines the journeys of almost 700 refugees and migrants moving through Somalia. Using a longitudinal research design that included follow-up interviews approximately six months after an initial baseline interview, the data provide insights into how refugees' and migrants' movement intentions, exposure to abuse and hardships, and aspirations evolve along the Eastern Route.

METHODOLOGY

BASELINE

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION: In-person surveys

DATA COLLECTION PERIOD: May 2025

DATA COLLECTION SITES: Bossaso: 350, Garowe: 347

SAMPLE: 697 refugees and migrants

FOLLOW-UP

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION: Phone surveys

DATA COLLECTION PERIOD: September-October 2025

COUNTRY AND LOCATION AT TIME OF FOLLOW-UP

INTERVIEW: **Somalia (327):** Bossaso (179), Garowe (135), El Dahir (3), Qardho (2), Galkayo (2), Hargeisa (2), Ufeyn (1), Barookhle (1), Laag (1), Lascanood (1), **Saudi Arabia (5):** Jeddah (2), Dammam (1), Riyadh (1), Wadi ad-Dawasir (1), **Yemen (4):** Aden (2), Ta'iz (1), Sana'a (1) **Ethiopia (2):** Dire Dawa (1), Addis Ababa (1)

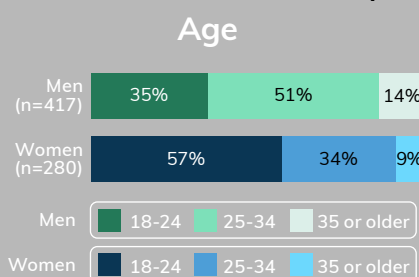
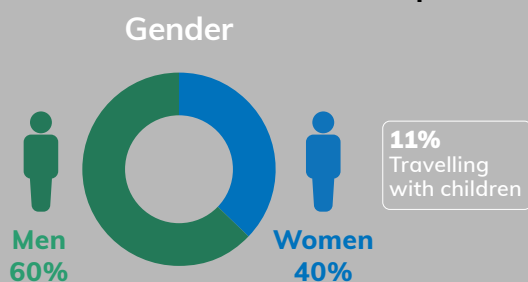
SAMPLE: There was a 57% call-back success rate whereby 339 refugees and migrants were re-interviewed out of 597 interviewed for the baseline who consented to a follow-up survey.¹

Background

- The Eastern Route to Yemen and the Gulf remains one of the world's busiest mixed movement routes, with over 100,000 people, mostly from Ethiopia, arriving in Yemen from the Horn of Africa annually.²
- Somalia occupies a key position along the Eastern Route; between January and September 2025, 36,700 refugees and migrants departed from the coast of Bossaso.³
- The maritime crossing to the Arabian Peninsula is one of the deadliest stages of the Journey. Between January and September 2025, 890 deaths and disappearances were recorded, with drowning accounting for over a quarter of these tragedies.⁴
- Efforts to curb irregular movements, including arrests of smugglers, deportation of migrants, and increased coast guard activity, have made mixed movements through Somalia riskier, translating into higher smuggler fees and greater dangers for those attempting.⁵
- Somalia is also an important host country for refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa. As of October 2025, UNHCR recorded 46,068 refugees and asylum seekers in the country.⁶
- Refugees' and migrants' experiences within Somalia are often fraught with challenges, including food insecurity, water scarcity, and exposure to climate hazards.⁷

Respondents' profiles

Respondents interviewed at baseline (n=697)



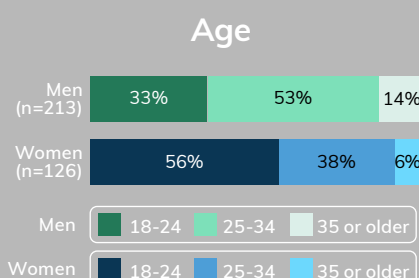
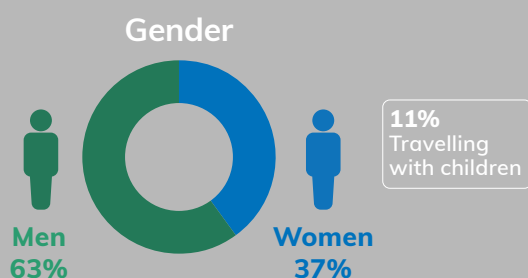
Nationality

99% Ethiopians
<1% Yemenis, **<1%** Syrians

Legal Status

95% Irregular status
5% Asylum seeker or refugee

Respondents interviewed at follow-up (n=339)



Nationality

99% Ethiopians
<1% Yemenis, **<1%** Syrians

Legal Status

85% Irregular status
15% Asylum seeker or refugee

Note: The 4Mi sample is purposive. Data presented in this infographic cannot be considered representative of the full population.

1 It is possible that individuals who were not reached during the follow-up were unavailable because they had moved on or no longer had access to a phone due to various reasons including arrest, detention, falling victim to trafficking, or death. As a result, the percentage of those moving onward is likely an underestimate.

2 MMC (August 2025) [Smuggling routes to and through Yemen: mapping journeys, remigration experiences, and onward movement intentions](#).

3 IOM (Dec 2025) [Migration Along the Eastern Route January – September 2025](#).

4 Ibid. See also [New York Times \(August 2025\) More than 60 Migrants Dead After Boat Capsizes Off the Coast of Yemen](#).

5 MMC (November 2025) [Somalia: Unpacking smuggling networks, services, and costs](#).

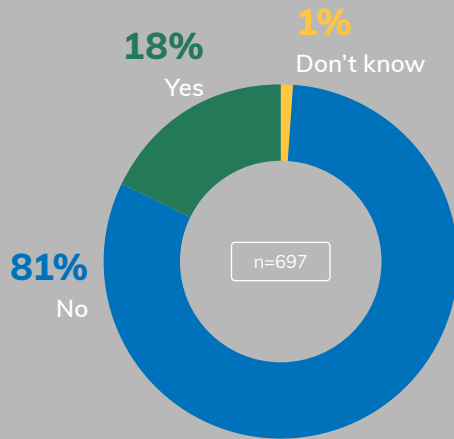
6 UNHCR (October 2025) [Somalia: Population Dashboard](#).

7 UNOCHA (August 2025) [Somalia: Monthly Humanitarian Update](#).

Tracking movements overtime

Have you reached the end of your journey?

Data from baseline

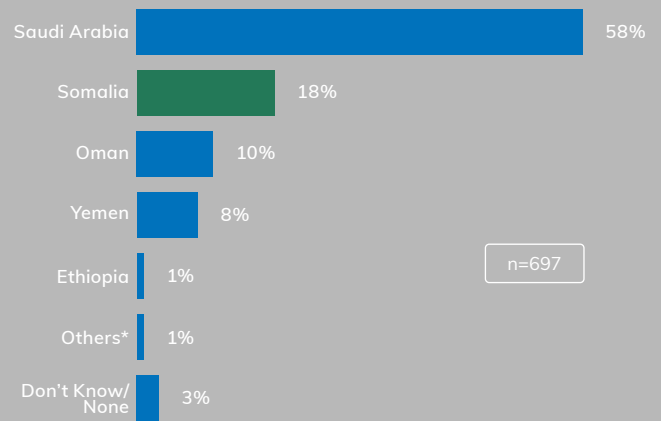


97%

of the 572 respondents who intended to move onward said they would continue their journey even if they were delayed or faced challenges

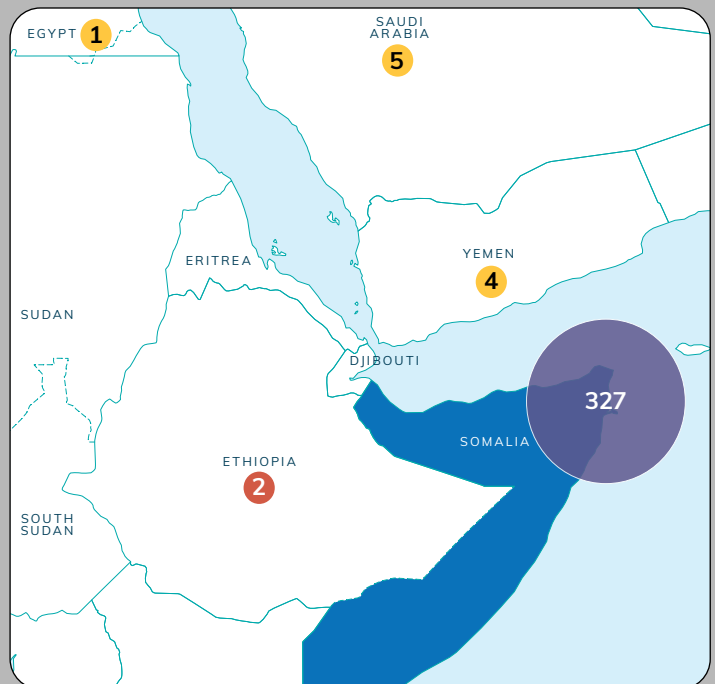
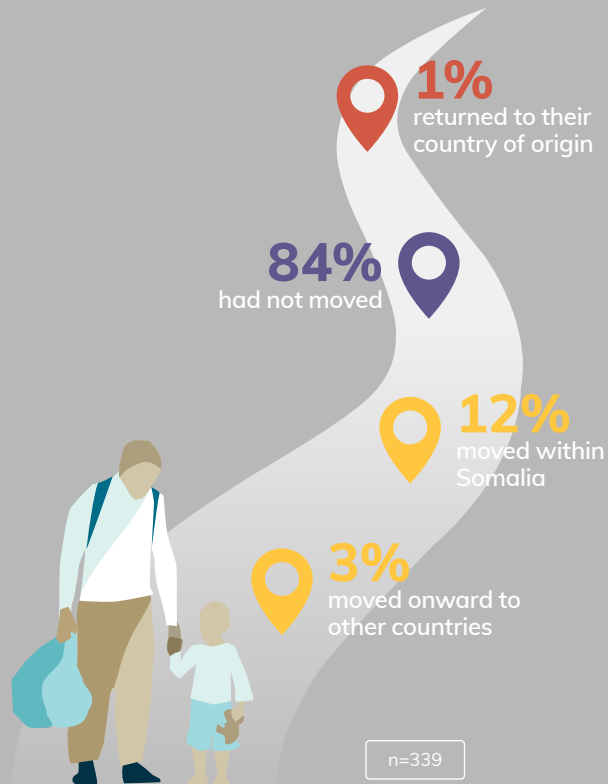
What is your intended destination?

Data from baseline



* Other countries included: Qatar (3), UAE (3), Belgium (2), Kuwait (1), Sweden (1), UK (1), USA (1), Austria (1), and Europe (1).

Respondents' movements after six months: Data from follow-up



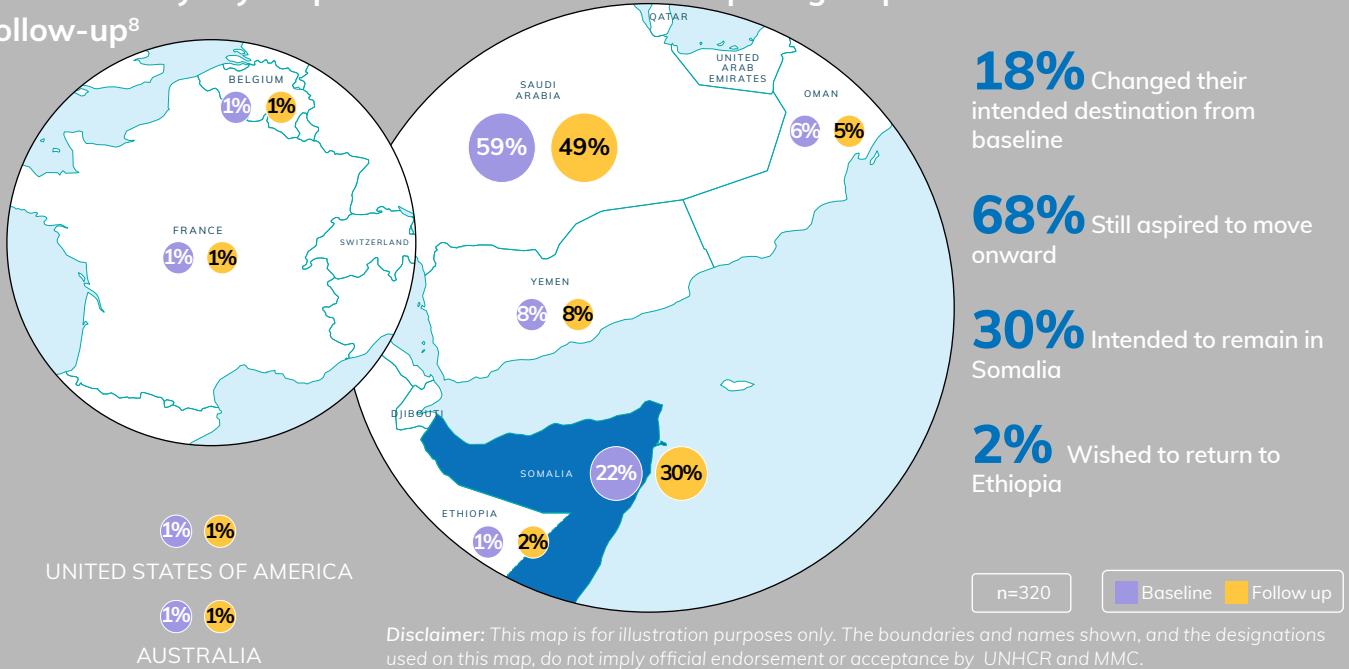
Disclaimer: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by UNHCR and MMC.

Key Findings

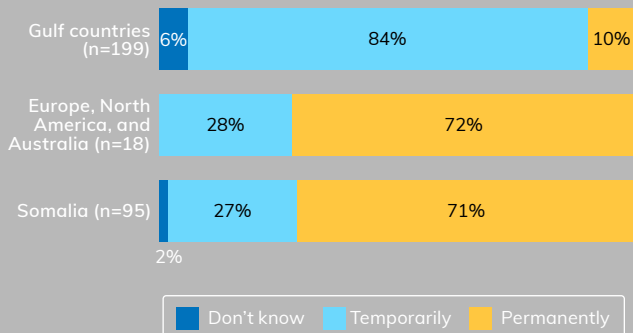
- **Disrupted journeys and immobility in Puntland.** Among those reinterviewed after six months, the majority (84%) had not moved from their initial location in Somalia at baseline. This is despite the fact that most (81%) respondents had expressed the intention to move onward from Somalia when first interviewed.
- For those who moved after six months, 12% moved within Somalia while only 3% moved beyond Somalia, and 1% returned home to Ethiopia. Most respondents who moved within Somalia moved within Puntland (39/41), with the latest share moving from Garowe to Bossaso (26/41). This suggests that **mixed movements through along the Eastern Route either have a low success rate or take extended periods** of time owing to challenges encountered during the journey.

Destination aspirations six months later

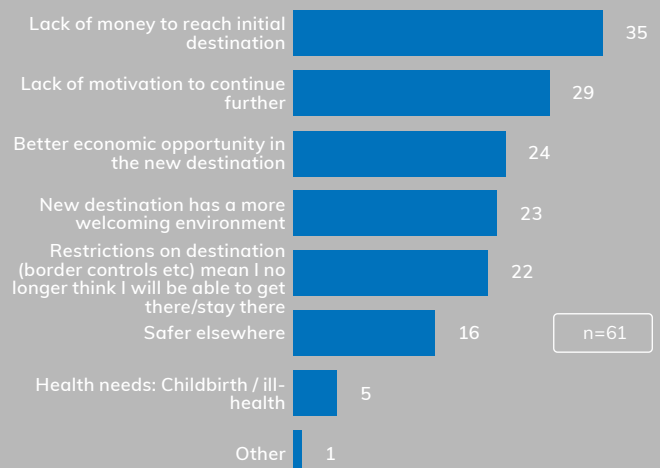
What country is your preferred destination? Comparing responses from baseline and follow-up⁸



Do you intend to stay at your destination permanently or temporarily? Data from follow-up



Why have you changed your preferred destination? Data from follow-up



Key Findings

- Large disconnect between mobility aspirations and reality.** Despite widespread immobility, 68% still aspired to move onward. Moreover, 79% of those who had not moved between interviews still aspired to reach their intended destination.
- Financial constraints are the main barriers to onward movement.** Almost half (46%) of the reinterviewed respondents who had not moved cited not being able to afford to continue their journey.
- Although respondents initially expressed fixed movement intentions, plans changed.** At baseline, 97% of respondents intended to continue their journey even if they experienced delays or challenges (page 2). Six months later, 18% had changed their intended destination, and 20% had changed their planned route. For those who changed their intended destination (n=61), the largest share were those who initially intended to reach Saudi Arabia (45) and then decided to remain in Somalia (21). These changes reflect the complex realities of the journey, where refugees and migrants face considerable challenges and uncertainties that force them to adapt their plans.
- Achieving international protection is linked to destination change.** Of the 61 respondents who had changed their intended destination when reinterviewed, 25 had recently received refugee status. Among the refugees, 10 decided to remain in Somalia, suggesting that receiving international protection either shaped or was shaped by their decision not to engage in temporary onward movement to the Gulf. Moreover, 11 sought to reach countries in Europe, North America, and Australia.⁹ All those with refugee status aimed to remain in their intended destinations permanently.

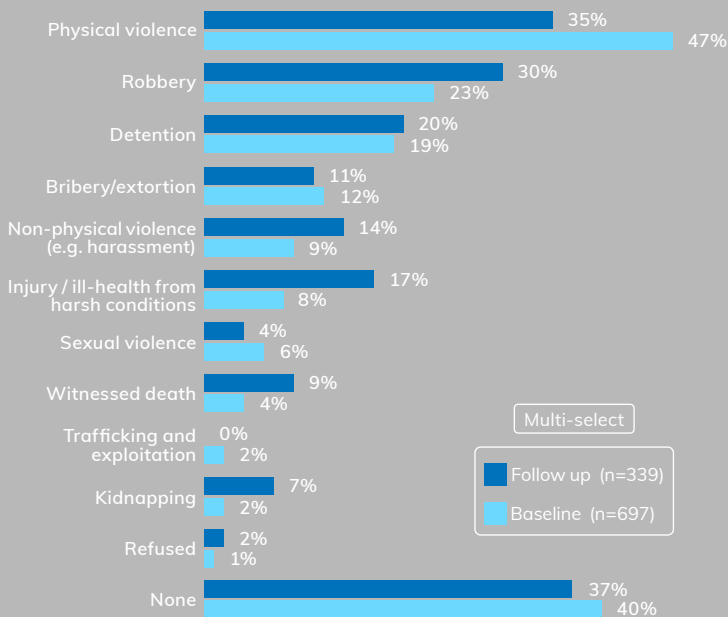
⁸ 19 respondents cited other preferred destinations with <1% each, including UAE, Qatar, Denmark, Canada, Europe, Germany, Sweden, and Norway. In addition, the initial intended destinations of those reached in the follow-up survey were similar to those not reached.

⁹ Just one respondent sought to reach Saudi Arabia and three did not know.

Protection landscape along the Eastern Route

Have you personally experienced any of these types of abuses or harms on your journey?

Data from baseline and follow-up



“There was an attempted rape against my daughter. She sustained an injury to her neck after being struck with a bottle. She fears forced deportation, and our entire family is also living in fear of deportation.”

31-year-old Ethiopian woman interviewed in Bossaso

“In Bossaso city, I was attacked at night by criminal gangs with a knife. I was injured, and I am still in pain.”

26-year-old Ethiopian man interviewed in Bossaso

Zooming in on the protection experiences of those who moved onwards to the Gulf: Data from follow-up (n=9)¹⁰

Red Sea (n=2)

Risks: Death and physical violence

Perpetrators: Smugglers

Yemen (n=5)

Risks: Physical violence, robbery, kidnapping, and injury or ill health

Perpetrators: Smugglers, criminal gangs, armed groups, military/police, and border guards

Specific locations: Aden, Ataq, Harad, Lahj and Sanaa

Saudi Arabia (n=3)

Risks: Physical and non-physical violence, robbery, kidnapping, and injury or ill health

Perpetrators: Smugglers, criminal gangs, armed groups, military/police or border guards

Specific locations: Damam, Marba mountain and Wadi ad-Dawasir



8 out of 9

of those who had moved onward to the Gulf had directly experienced abuse and harm

7

physical violence

4

non-physical violence

3

robbery

3

sexual violence

“My migration journey was very hard and difficult. I [faced] challenges [and] many different problems during my journey on the sea and when I was crossing international border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia.”

26-year-old Ethiopian man in Wadi Ad-Dawasir, Saudi Arabia

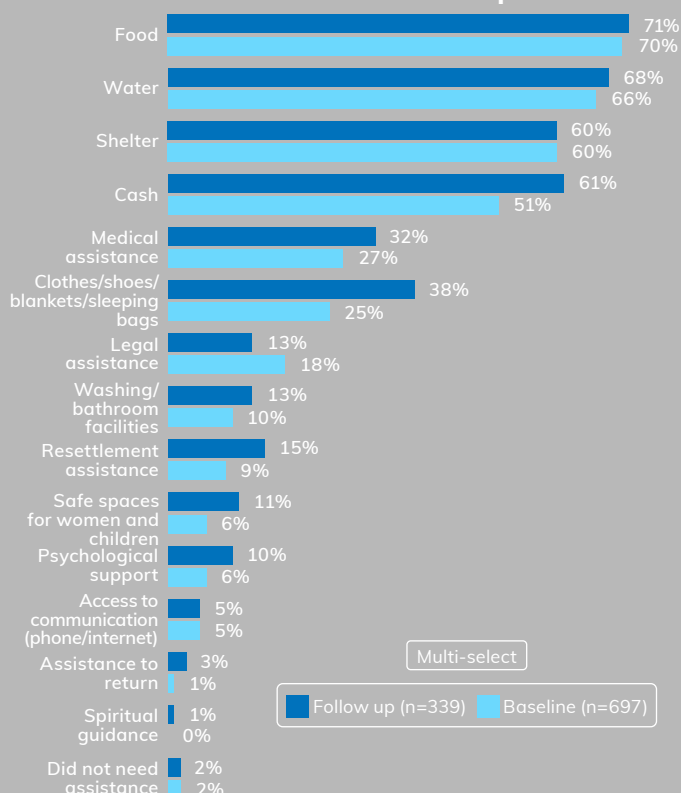
Key Findings

- Exposure to protection risks was prevalent along the journey and continued while immobile in Somalia.** Some 59% of respondents at baseline had experienced one or more protection incidents along the journey. Exposure did not increase considerably six months later (61%), however slightly more respondents experienced multiple incidents. The most cited abuse at baseline and follow-up was physical violence (47% and 35%, respectively). While the data are limited and should be treated with caution, **the nine respondents who had moved onwards to the Gulf reported very high exposure to multiple abuses and harm.**
- High adoption of coping strategies along the route.** 89% of all respondents interviewed at baseline employed one or more protective strategies along the journey, reflecting the prevalence of dangers along the route that necessitate adaptive behaviors. The reliance on group travel (58%) and avoiding carrying cash (32%) are **proactive responses to the risks of physical violence and robbery** prevalent along the route; however, the reported high rates of violence suggest these strategies are **often insufficient.**

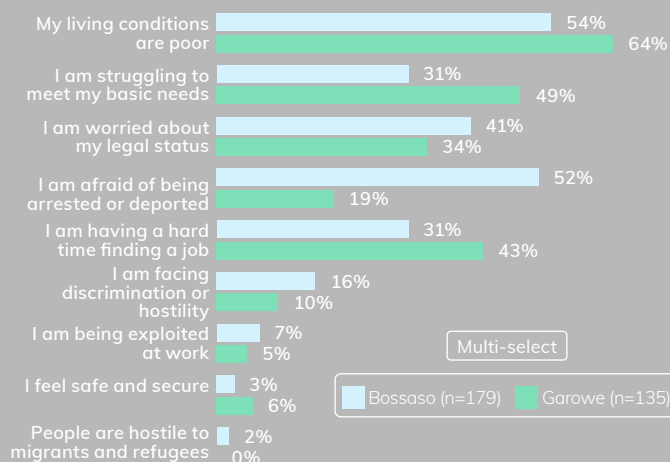
¹⁰ The sample size of those who had moved to the Gulf is very small and should be treated with caution.

Current challenges and assistance needs

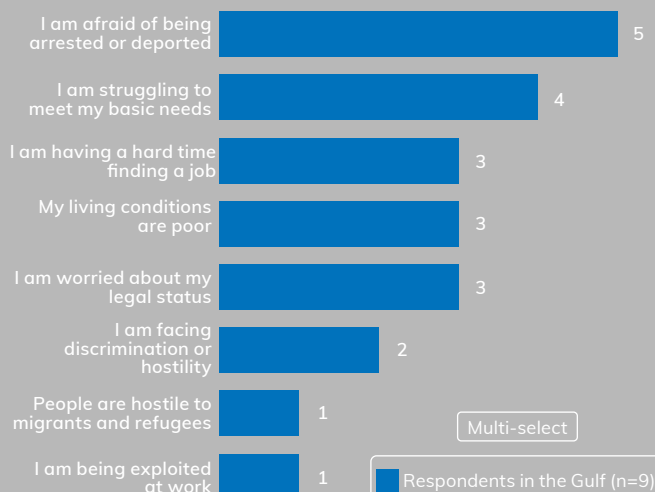
What kind of assistance do you need? Data from baseline and follow-up



Which of the following best describes your life and the challenges you face? Data from follow-up



Which of the following best describes your life and the challenges you face? Data from follow-up



“My journey from Ethiopia to Somalia was driven by the hope of finding safety and better opportunities. I left behind my home, family, and everything familiar. The journey was not easy—I faced many uncertainties, including border restrictions, limited access to food and shelter, and moments of fear. But I also met people along the way who showed kindness and solidarity, which gave me strength.”

32-year-old Ethiopian man interviewed in Bossaso

Key Findings

- High need for assistance:** Although assistance needs decreased slightly from baseline (98%) to follow-up (95%), they remained high and individual respondents reported a greater number of needs. Certain needs markedly increased at follow-up: cash (51% to 61%), non-food items (25% to 38%), and medical assistance (from 27% to 32%), **reflecting a depletion of resources**. The need for legal assistance slightly decreased (18% to 13%), which likely reflects some **respondents having attained refugee status**.
- The challenges faced by refugees and migrants differ by location.** In Garowe, respondents mainly faced challenges related to economic and living standards, with 64% citing poor living conditions, 49% struggling to meet basic needs, and 43% citing difficulty finding work. In Bossaso, in addition to living-standard challenges (54%), respondents also faced challenges related to protection and legal risks, including fear of deportation or arrest (52%) and worry about legal status (41%).
- Demand for protection assistance increases along the journey.** Zooming in on protection-specific needs, the need for safe spaces for women and children nearly doubled (from 6% to 11%), and so did the need for psychological support (from 6% to 10%).
- Local communities are the primary source of assistance** cited by 72% of respondents who had received assistance at baseline and 86% at follow-up. Formal humanitarian actors, including NGOs (15% at baseline and 16% at follow-up) and UN agencies (5% and 8%), were cited as sources of assistance by a fraction of respondents, pointing to a possible humanitarian access gap along the route.
- Women reported higher overall needs, indicating higher vulnerability.** Among respondents interviewed at baseline, women reported higher needs across all assistance categories except cash, highlighting the disproportionate and higher vulnerability among women on the move. It also reflects the dangerous and at times volatile conditions women encounter along the route, where exposure to abuse and harm is frequent.



4Mi data collection

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

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at: <https://mixedmigration.org/what-is-4mi-migration-data/>



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