UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Regional Bureau for Europe

MIXED MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE: THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Photo: Sara Faizi, a refugee from Afghanistan, opens the first Afghan restaurant in Sofia, Bulgaria
© UNHCR/Dobrin Kashavelov

BACKGROUND

Women make up half (50%) of the world's refugee population[1] and nearly half (48%) of all international migrants.[2] Their displacement and subsequent journeys are often shaped by a distinct set of risks, including exposure to violence. Additionally, research indicates that women's migration decision-making is shaped by unique factors, partly because they are more likely than men to travel with children.[3]

In South-Eastern Europe — a region that serves as both a transit corridor for people aiming to reach Western and Northern Europe and a destination in itself — women in mixed movements similarly face a range of protection challenges. Many are denied entry at borders. Those who do gain access struggle to access rights and services, including legal status, adequate accommodation, and employment opportunities. Faced with these challenges, many women intend to continue their journeys westwards. Their decisions to either move onwards or remain in their host countries are often influenced by gender-specific factors, such as caregiving responsibilities and the particular integration obstacles they face as women.

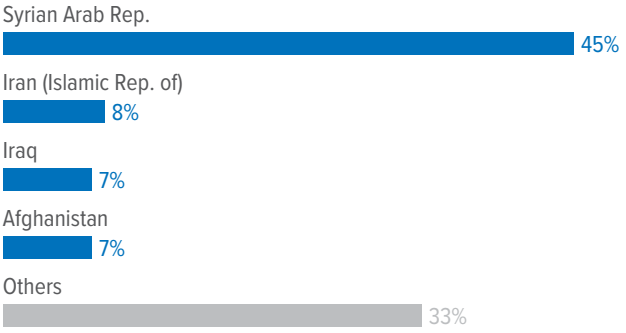
Understanding the specific risks and experiences women face within mixed movements in South-Eastern Europe is essential for developing effective, gender-responsive policies and humanitarian responses. To support these efforts, UNHCR and its partners conduct ongoing protection monitoring across the region. This report — the second in the series[4] — focuses specifically on women involved in mixed movements. It draws on 500 protection monitoring interviews conducted with women between January 2024 and April 2025 across nine countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo[5], Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia. These findings are further complemented by focus group discussions held in Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Serbia. Where relevant, the experiences and perspectives of female respondents are compared to 4,952 male respondents interviewed during the same period in the same locations.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. * S/RES/1244 (1999)

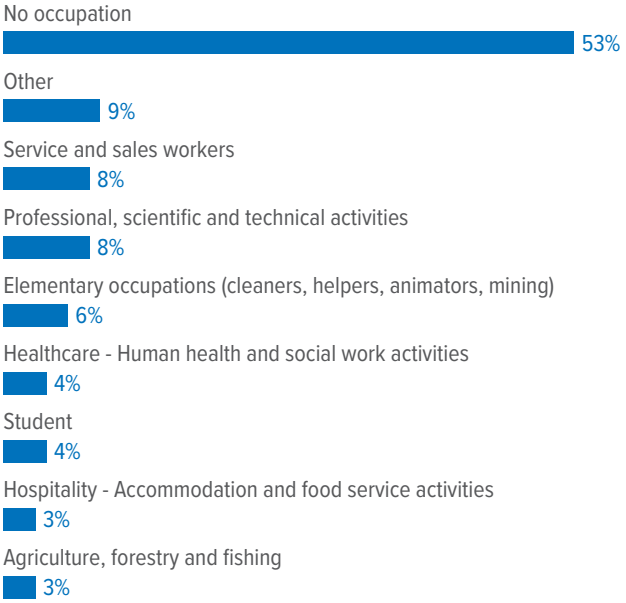
1. UNHCR, Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024, available at https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2024;
2. International Migrant Population available at https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/international-migrant-stocks-overview
3. Mixed Migration Centre, 'Horror and hope in migration: voices of women on the move', 6 March 2025, available at: https://mixedmigration.org/horror-and-hope-in-migration-voices-of-women-on-the-move/
4. See the first report here https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113053
5. Reference to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of UN Security Council Resolution 1244/1999

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES OF WOMEN RESPONDENTS

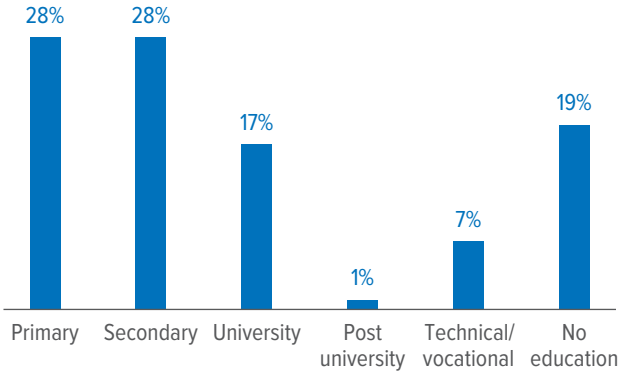
Top nationalities



Activity in the country of origin



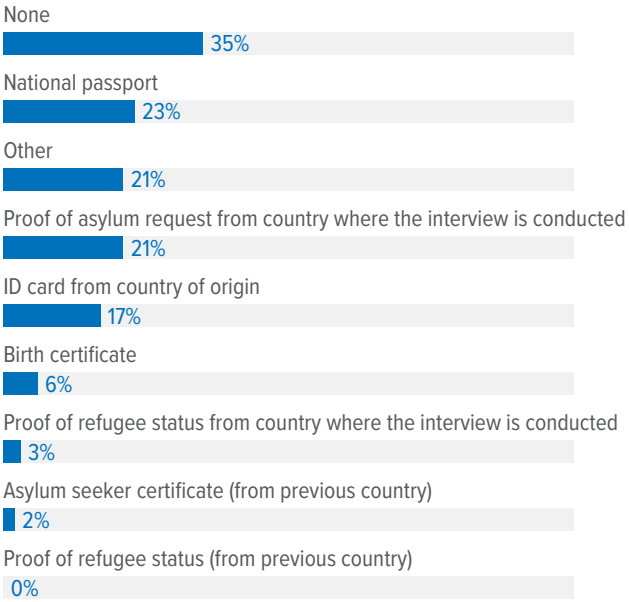
Education level



Average age of respondents

33 years

Documentation**



**Multiple responses were possible. So, the percentage can go over 100% when added.

While 35% of the women surveyed reported having none, a majority (65%) possess some form of documentation. Among the 65% who have documentation, the most common documents are national passports (35%), proof of asylum request from the current host country (32%), and a variety of other documents (32%). Additionally, 26% hold ID cards from their country of origin, with smaller percentages having birth certificates (9%) or refugee and asylum-related documents from current or previous host countries. This variation suggests that although a substantial proportion possess some form of documentation, the types and recognition of these documents vary, potentially impacting their ability to access rights and services within their host countries.

KEY FINDINGS

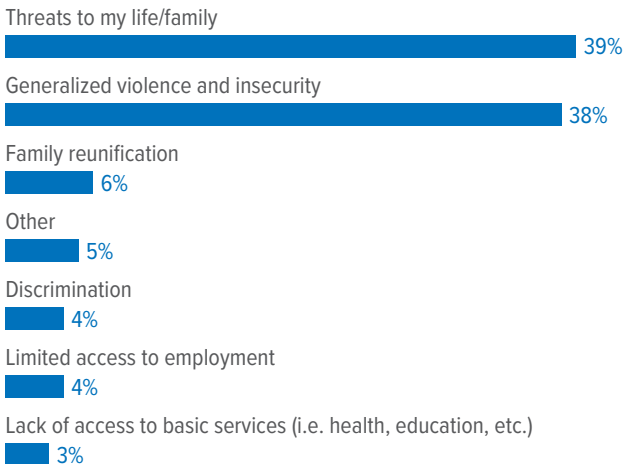
While violence drives most to leave, women cite family reunification more often than men

Both women and men most commonly reported generalized violence and insecurity and threats to their life and family as the reasons why they left their countries of origin.[6] However, there are some notable differences with female respondents more commonly reporting the need to reunite with family abroad as a reason why they departed from their country of origin – reported by 6% as compared to 1% of men. This may be partly explained by the tendency for men to depart first, based on the belief that they are more likely to survive dangerous journeys. Once they have secured safety and employment, men may then seek to reunite with their families.

It is important to note that, among women, the reasons for leaving vary depending on their country of origin. For example, most Syrian, Iranian, Iraqi, and Afghan women surveyed cited threats to their lives and insecurity as primary reasons for departure, while most Nepali women left mainly due to other reasons, including limited economic opportunities and lack of access to basic services.

Focus group discussions further highlighted that women also consider their children's well-being and education a key factor in their decision to leave. For example, one mother shared that she left Syria to protect her son from being conscripted into the armed forces, while another cited the need to access education and healthcare for her daughter with Down syndrome.

Reasons for leaving country of origin*



* for the top 5 nationalities

The women surveyed reported enduring long and complex journeys that spanned multiple countries and often involved extended periods in transit.

The timing of departure from their country of origin varies widely among the women surveyed. Approximately 17% left more than five years ago, while 33% departed between one and five years ago - highlighting that a substantial share have been displaced for a prolonged period. The remaining respondents left within the past year, including some in the week before their interview was conducted.

While most women reported leaving their countries of origin between one and five years ago, the majority had only recently arrived in their current host country. This suggests that many spent significant time in transit. The complexity of these journeys is further underscored by the fact that nearly 70% of respondents had transited through between two and thirteen countries on route.

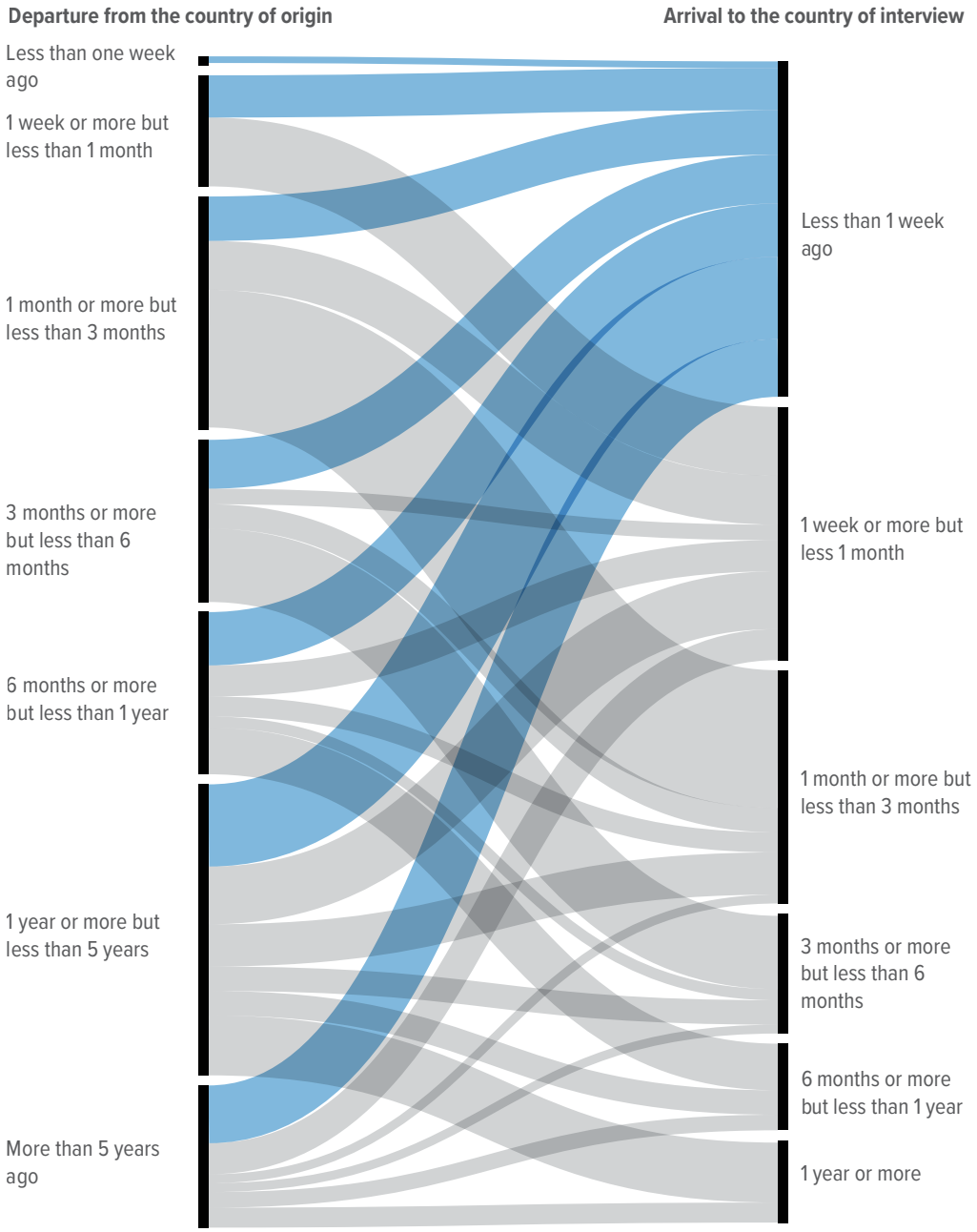
6. The answers of female respondents originating from the five most common nationalities of female interviewees (Syria, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Nepal) were compared against those of male respondents originating from the same countries, who were interviewed during the same time period.

Focus group discussions echoed these findings, with many participants describing irregular, often dangerous journeys across multiple borders. One participant recounted a five-day trek on foot through extreme heat, without access to food or water. Another shared her experience of traveling with her family from Iraq on foot, passing through Greece and North Macedonia before reaching Serbia. Her journey involved walking for long stretches through forests, crossing unofficial border crossings, often in cold conditions, and at one point wading through a river with water up to her chin while carrying her child.

Women experienced slightly higher rates of entry denial and exposure to violence at borders than men.

Among those surveyed, 20% of women reported having been previously denied entry to their current host country, with 9% experiencing violence during these incidents. In comparison, 17% of male respondents reported being denied entry and 5% experiencing violence. These findings suggest that women in mixed movements may face elevated risks during border crossings, including a greater likelihood of violent encounters.

Timeline: Departure from the country of origin vs arrival to the country of interview



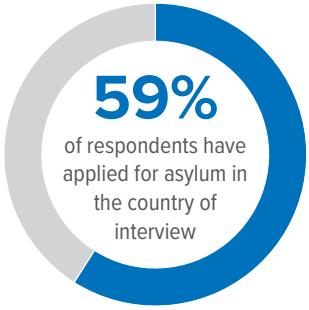
More women have applied for asylum in their current host country as compared to men, but the majority face long waiting periods and limited access to essential services.

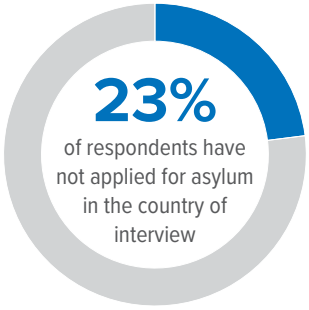
The majority of women surveyed (59%) reported having applied for asylum in their current host country, compared with 41% of men. Among applicants in both groups, most were still awaiting a decision on their asylum claims – 75% of women and 77% of men.

Focus group discussions highlighted that prolonged waiting periods for asylum decisions are a key concern for women. One participant reported waiting over three years for a decision. While their applications are pending, many women face financial instability, legal and administrative restrictions on employment, and limited access to essential services such as banking. One focus group discussion participant, for instance, reported difficulties accessing her pension from her country of origin due to her inability to open a bank account. A participatory assessment in Bosnia and Herzegovina highlighted similar challenges, noting that asylum-seekers were unable to open bank accounts while their applications were pending as banks did not recognize their asylum-seeker cards as valid identification.

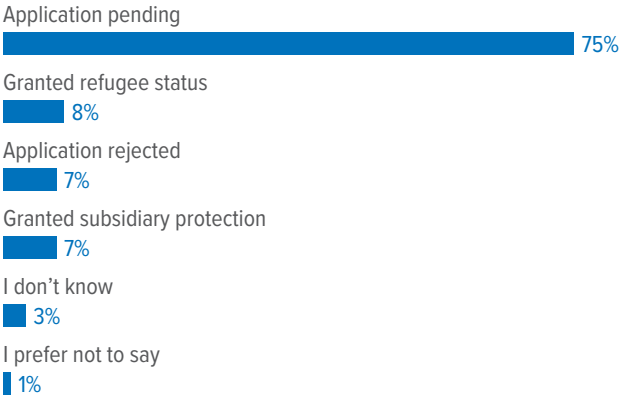
An additional 17% of women expressed an intention to apply for asylum but had not yet done so at the time of the survey. Meanwhile, 23% reported neither having applied nor intending to apply – significantly lower than the 38% observed among men.

Among those who had not applied, onward movement plans were the most common reason cited by both men and women. However, this motivation was more pronounced among men: 85% of men who did not apply planned to move onward, compared to 77% of women. Other barriers to asylum applications cited by women included the length of the asylum procedure (6% of women vs. 3% of men) and lack of awareness about the process (3% of women vs. 2% of men).

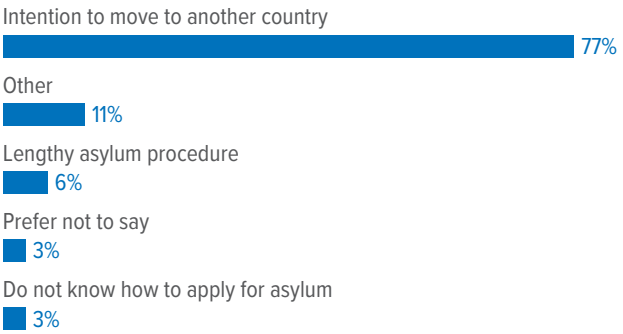




Asylum application status



Reasons for not applying for asylum



The majority of women surveyed live in reception centers, where many reported poor living conditions and a lack of privacy as serious concerns.

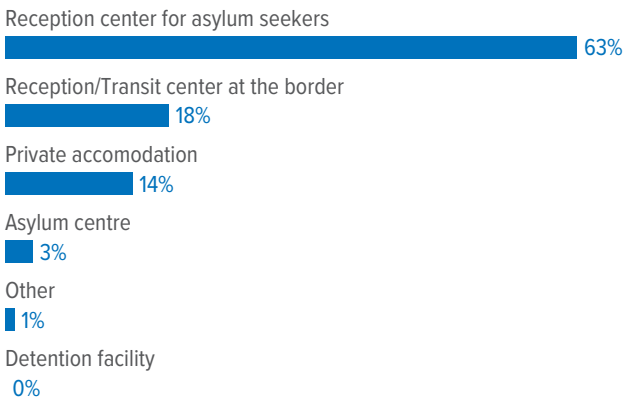
The majority of women surveyed (66%) live in reception centers for asylum seekers, making this the most common form of accommodation. Another 18% reside in reception or transit centers at the border, while 14% live in private accommodation. Smaller shares are accommodated in other types of accommodation.

While overall perceptions of safety were generally positive – 90% of respondents said they felt safe in their current accommodation, and 6% reported feeling neutral – 4% indicated they felt unsafe, signaling that some women do face risks in these settings.

Despite an overall sense of safety, focus group discussions revealed several concerns about living conditions, particularly in reception centers. Participants described poor hygiene, bathrooms with holes in the walls enclosed only by curtains rather than doors, and infestations. A lack of privacy was also mentioned as an issue, with some women reporting male staff entering their rooms unannounced.

Women living in private accommodation faced different challenges. Several focus group discussion participants reported high rental costs, which they believed were sometimes inflated by landlords targeting refugees, as well as difficulties securing social housing due to their legal status. One participant shared that she was denied social housing because it was reserved only for nationals.

Current accommodation

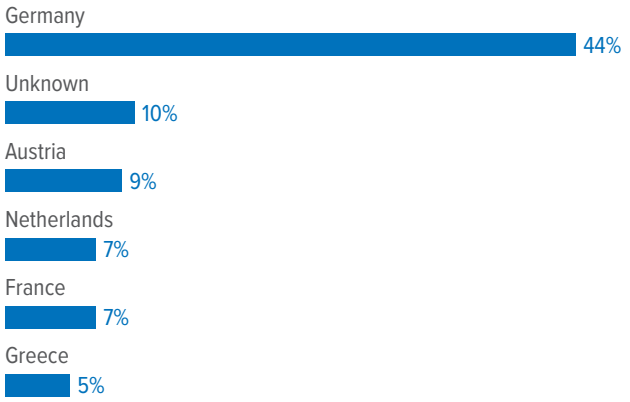


Women prioritize family ties and safety when selecting their final destination

A majority of women surveyed (77%) reported having a specific destination country in mind, closely mirroring the 80% of men who indicated the same. Germany emerged as the preferred destination for both groups, chosen by 44% of women and 41% of men.

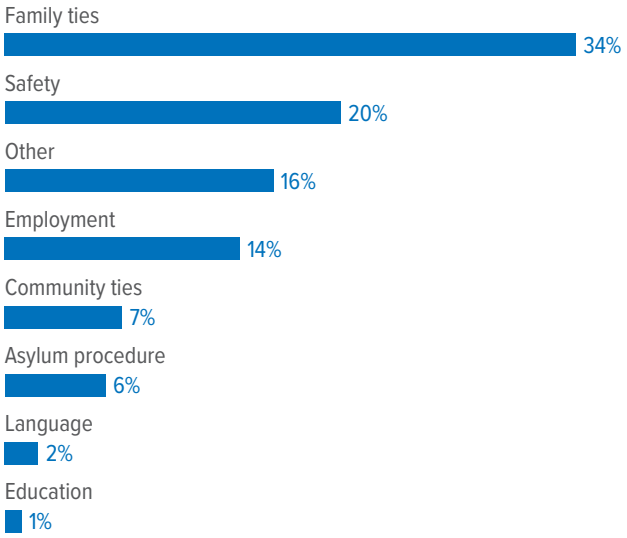
Beyond this shared preference, gender-specific patterns appeared. Women showed greater interest in Austria (9%) and Greece (5%), countries that did not feature among the top destinations for men. In contrast, 17% of men selected Italy – making it their second-most preferred destination – compared to just 5% of women. France and the Netherlands were common choices for both genders, though with slight variations in proportion. Spain, which was among the top five for men (5%), did not appear in the top destinations for women.

Top intended destination countries



The motivations behind destination choices also differed. Women most often cited family ties (34%) as their primary reason, followed by safety (20%) and employment opportunities (14%). In contrast, men prioritized economic and social factors, with employment opportunities as the top reason (28%), followed by family ties (25%) and community connections (15%).

Reasons for choosing destination country



Over half of the women surveyed (53%) expressed willingness to stay permanently in their current host countries if granted access to certain rights such as legal status and employment.

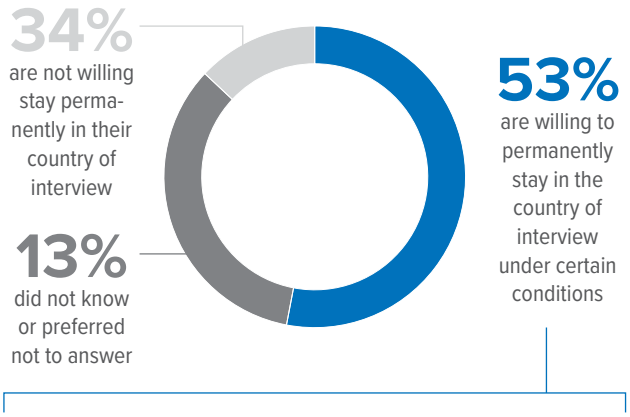
More than half of the women surveyed (53%) expressed a willingness to remain permanently in their current host countries – provided specific conditions were met, including obtaining legal status and access to employment. This figure is notably higher than the 42% of men who indicated the same, suggesting a stronger inclination among women to settle where they are, if conditions allow.

Focus group discussions reinforced these findings. In Bulgaria, women expressed a strong desire to stay, emphasizing the time and effort they have already invested in settling there. Several also mentioned a desire to contribute to the economy and integrate into society. These sentiments were shared in both Serbia and Montenegro, pointing to safety, community ties, and access to education for their children as key reasons for wanting to stay. Many participants expressed an interest in settling down and rebuilding their lives, voicing exhaustion from constant movement.

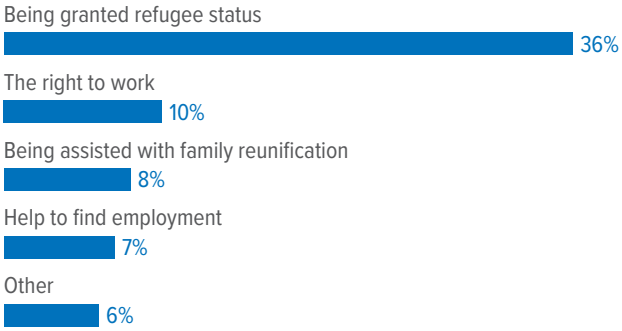
The most important factor for remaining in the current host country was the granting of legal status, cited by 36% of women who expressed willingness to stay. During focus group discussions women emphasized the need for faster processing of asylum claims and legal recognition, highlighting legal status as a crucial factor in deciding whether to stay or move onward. Additionally, 17% said they would be willing to stay if granted the right to work or supported in finding employment. Focus group participants repeatedly stressed the need for better employment opportunities and access to childcare services as a prerequisite for their entry into the labour market. Language courses were also frequently mentioned as essential for enabling access to work and supporting integration, with many calling for more tailored and accessible programmes. This emphasis on economic participation is further reflected in women's prior experience: 38% had been employed in their country of origin, in sectors such as service and sales, scientific and technical fields, healthcare, and agriculture.

Focus group discussions revealed that access to education and safety for their children not only motivated women to leave their countries of origin but also plays a key role in their decision to remain long term in host countries. Many participants highlighted access to education as a critical factor in their choice to stay, with some describing it as an urgent current need.

Overall, both the survey and focus group discussions revealed that access to legal, economic, and social support is often prioritized over the choice of a specific destination. Ensuring such support in current host countries could therefore reduce the need for dangerous journeys in search of better conditions.



Conditions to stay permanently in their current host countries



Lack of rights and services drives onward movement.

Without adequate access to rights and essential services in their current host countries, many women are likely to continue their journeys. Survey data shows that 10% of women had already been recognized as refugees in another country prior to arriving in their current location. However, many left previous countries of asylum due to challenges—most commonly the inability to secure employment and limited access to education for themselves or their children. These gaps in support systems play a direct role in shaping onward movement decisions.

Focus group discussions echoed this pattern. One participant, for instance, stated that her decision to remain is contingent on obtaining legal status; without it, she would feel forced to move on. Such accounts highlight how legal insecurity and limited access to opportunities serve as key push factors, even for those who have previously secured international protection.

CONCLUSION

Women on the move in South-Eastern Europe face a unique set of challenges that shape their journeys and decisions. Often traveling with children and enduring complex, high-risk routes, their experiences are shaped by gender-specific factors such as family responsibilities, exposure to violence, and barriers to legal status, employment, and essential services. Female respondents highlighted the importance of family reunification both as a motivating factor in their decision to leave their countries of origin and also when determining their final destination. These findings highlight the critical need to expand and strengthen legal pathways for family reunification, which would offer safer alternatives to irregular movement and reduce exposure to protection risks, particularly for women and children.

While women expressed greater willingness than male respondents to remain in their current host countries, this is largely contingent on access to rights and gender-specific integration support. Without such support, women feel compelled to move onwards, including those who have previously secured international protection elsewhere. These findings highlight the urgent need for tailored, gender-responsive policies that address the specific needs and priorities of women in mixed movements. Doing so is not only essential for upholding protection standards, but also for fostering long-term stability and reducing the risks associated with irregular onward journeys.

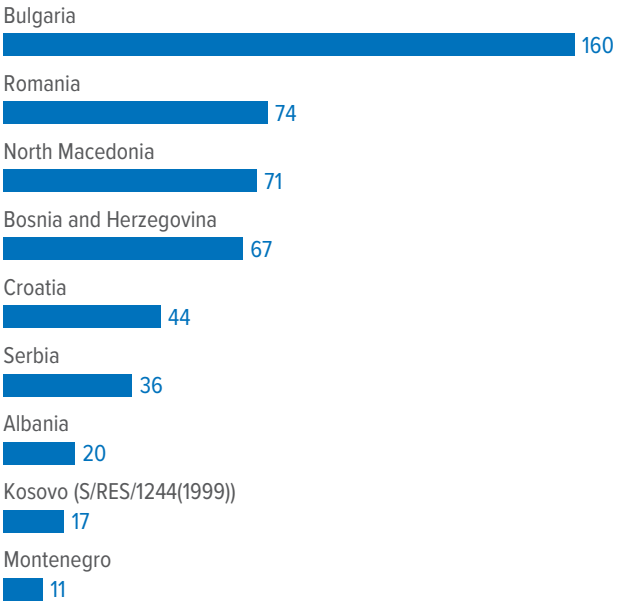
METHODOLOGY

Protection monitoring enables UNHCR to develop evidence-based programmes and advocacy efforts grounded in the experiences of forcibly displaced and stateless individuals. In this context, UNHCR systematically gathers information on mixed movements in South-Eastern Europe. This includes interviewing individuals arriving in the region as part of mixed movements, to understand the motivations behind their journeys, their experiences while traveling, their opinions on available services, and their future intentions. Between January 2024 and April 2025, 500 interviews were conducted with women in nine countries/territories.

Given the fluidity of the target population, which limits the use of full probabilistic sampling methods, protection monitoring follows a convenience sampling approach, based on accessibility and availability of the target population to the enumerators at particular locations in a given country context, including in reception centres for asylum-seekers and migrants, transit centers and asylum centers. Operations aimed to minimize potential sampling bias by diversifying data collection locations and selecting respondents randomly rather than prioritizing specific profiles.

The results presented in this report should be considered only as indicative of the profiles and situation of women arriving or transiting in the covered locations during the reporting period, but they cannot be considered representative of all women engaged in mixed movements in the region.

Considering that the number of interviews in the countries under coverage varies depending on capacity and availability of the targeted population, for this regional analysis, a relative population weight was developed, using the following procedure:

- A targeted distribution of interviews per country was calculated based on the estimated number of new arrivals during 2024 as well the number of new asylum applications registered;
- A comparison between the distribution of interviews in the sample versus the targeted distribution was used to calculate the weights for each country.

# of respondents by country