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The UN Refugee Agency

Mixed Migration Centre

“Stuck between a country we fled and a destination we may not reach”

Examining mixed movement dynamics in Madagascar

MMC Research Report, April 2026

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Sail boat on the sea, Nosy Be, Madagascar.

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MMC is a knowledge centre engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programming on mixed migration. MMC has regional hubs in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, with a global team headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and based in several countries worldwide.

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

MMC is part of 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.

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About UNHCR

This report is produced with the financial and technical support of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

UNHCR leads international action to protect people forced to flee because of conflict and persecution. We deliver life-saving assistance like shelter, water and other basic necessities; help safeguard fundamental human rights; and develop solutions that ensure people have a safe place to call home where they can build a better future.

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List of Acronyms

CDA	Centre de Développement d'Andohatapenaka
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
DR Congo	Democratic Republic of the Congo
IOM	International Organization for Migration
MGA	Malagasy Ariary
MMC	Mixed Migration Centre
OFPRA	Office Français de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides
RSD	Refugee Status Determination
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
WIOR	Western Indian Ocean Route

Summary and key findings

Madagascar serves as a host country for refugees and asylum seekers, most notably a substantial group of Pakistani asylum seekers. It also serves as a transit country for people on the move along the Western Indian Ocean Route (WIOR) towards the French overseas department of Mayotte, mainly Malagasy, Comorians, and Somalis, but also other East Africans, Yemenis, Syrians, and Iraqis.[1] Although the country's mixed movement dynamics are complex, they remain understudied. Thus, this report seeks to better understand the mixed movement dynamics to, through and from Madagascar. It does so in two parts. First it expands the evidence base through the analysis of approximately 500 4Mi surveys with Pakistani asylum seekers, carried out by the Centre de Développement d'Andohatapenaka (CDA), UNHCR's local partner in Madagascar. It examines their drivers of movement, conditions of the journey, and their preferred destinations and future intentions. Secondly, it draws on data from 21 in-depth interviews conducted on Madagascar's northwest coast with Malagasy, Comorian, Ethiopian, and Somali respondents, and a select number of stakeholders. The qualitative data focuses on drivers of movement; WIOR route dynamics, including interaction with smugglers and risks faced en route; legal frameworks and available support for people on the move; and refugees' and migrants' future movement intentions.

Key findings on the experiences of Pakistani asylum seekers in Madagascar

- **Almost all respondents (95%) indicated that they left Pakistan for reasons related to rights and freedoms.** Of these, 89% (n=474) said this was due to religious discrimination.

- **Less than one-third (28%) reported external influences on their decision to migrate.** These tended to be friends and family in another country (16%) and parents (15%).

- **The majority (71%) of respondents had obtained information about routes, destinations, costs, and risks before departing on their journey.** The most prominent sources of information were friends and family in another country (42%) and official travel agents (31%).

- **Personal connections provided reliable information, but so did less personal, more formal sources.** While friends and family in another country were most often cited as the most reliable source of information (26%), this was followed closely by travel agents (25%). Online sources were also prominent, with online networks and Google each indicated by 12% of respondents.

- **Respondents reported journeys between Pakistan and Madagascar that appeared to be regular and orderly, with all travelling by air and just 3% engaging a smuggler.** Additionally, 81% of respondents indicated that their plans had not changed during their travels, and 90% had enough money to pay for their journeys up to the point of interview.

- **Respondents expressed a strong desire for resettlement (86%), but uncertainty over their preferred destination (43%).** For those who aspired to reach specific countries, the most frequently indicated were the United States (US) (10%), Australia (7%), and New Zealand (6%). No respondent desired to remain in Madagascar.

- Just over one-third **(34%) of respondents indicated that they were "very impacted" or "somewhat impacted" by recent policy changes in the US to cut foreign assistance and refugee resettlement, likely owing to the US** being the second-most cited preferred destination.

1 This study, including all graphs and maps, does not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of MMC and UNHCR concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city, or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Key findings on mixed movements from Madagascar to Mayotte along the WIOR

- **Poverty and the search for more secure livelihoods was the primary reason that people sought to reach Mayotte from or via Madagascar**. In almost all cases this went hand in hand with the need to provide for one's family. For two respondents from the Horn of Africa, economic factors were intertwined with conflict dynamics.

- **The influences and information that directed respondents towards Mayotte differed slightly depending on people's country of origin.** The two respondents from the Horn of Africa both referred to "agents" back home, in addition to family members in France. Malagasy and Comorian respondents often received advice from family or friends in Mayotte or observed the experiences of friends and neighbours who made the trip.

- **The majority of respondents emphasised that their decision to move had not been spur of the moment,** but researched thoroughly over a long period. At the same time, multiple respondents did not have sufficient cash for the trip and had to sell family land, take out loans, or work to generate the requisite funds.

- **Smuggling on this route occurs through organised networks and was associated with risk**. Smugglers were Malagasy or Comorian men. Scams perpetrated by smugglers were identified as a major danger faced by individuals seeking to make the journey.

- **Key informants depicted a legal and institutional landscape that offers little support to people on the move**, characterised by gaps in the national legal framework, insufficient resources for authorities, and a lack of civil society or non-governmental support for mixed movement issues.

- **Whereas three non-Malagasy respondents wished to move onward from Mayotte to France, none of the interviewed Malagasy indicated that this was their intention.** Instead, they generally wanted to settle in a legal and long-term manner in Mayotte, with an emphasis on establishing livelihoods there.

1. Introduction

There is a dearth of evidence on mixed movements in the Western Indian Ocean region and along the Western Indian Ocean Route (WIOR) from East Africa and the Great Lakes towards the French overseas department of Mayotte.[2] This report focuses on the mixed movement landscape in Madagascar, examining diverse movements to, through, and from the country, and zooms in on two dynamics: the case of Pakistani asylum seekers in the country and the position of Madagascar as a transit country along the WIOR.[3]

Findings from approximately 500 4Mi surveys with Pakistani asylum seekers shed light on a specific phenomenon: that of Pakistani Ahmadiyya who come to Madagascar fleeing religious persecution at home. In so doing, it is a reminder of the myriad unexpected routes and connections that characterise human mobility. Alongside this quantitative data, the report presents insights from approximately 20 in-depth qualitative interviews examining the experiences of people on the move with different profiles (including Malagasy and foreign nationals) in WIOR transit locations along Madagascar's northwest coast. This helps to situate Madagascar along the WIOR by highlighting the experiences and intentions of people on the move who are seeking to make or continue their journey from Madagascar to Mayotte.

After the Background and Methodology sections, the research findings are presented in two main parts, starting with the quantitative data on the movements of Pakistani asylum seekers to Madagascar, focusing on their drivers of movement, information about the journey, the journey itself, and their preferred destinations and future intentions. The second part focuses on the qualitative data on mixed movements along the WIOR from and through Madagascar to Mayotte, including drivers of movement, perspectives on overall route dynamics and journeys, interaction with smugglers and risks faced *en route*, legal frameworks and available support for people on the move, and their future intentions.

2 The Western Indian Ocean Route refers to movements towards islands in the Indian Ocean, particularly the French overseas department of Mayotte. These can occur directly from the east coast of the African continent (e.g. Somalia and Tanzania), via other Comorian islands, or via Madagascar.

3 MMC (2025). "If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn't have taken the risk" Examining onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route (Evidence to Action Brief); MMC (2025). "If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn't have taken the risk" Examining onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route (Research Report).

2. Background

Madagascar is a country of origin, transit, and a (temporary) destination.[4] Entry to Madagascar is facilitated by an expansive visa policy which allows nationals from 196 countries to obtain a visa upon arrival.[5] This means that travel to Madagascar is generally undertaken in a regular and safe manner, via air. Following arrival in Madagascar, some individuals seek to move onward to Mayotte through irregular means. They are joined on these journeys by Malagasy citizens. Others arriving in Madagascar seek to avail themselves of international protection, often with the aspiration to be resettled to third countries.[6]

Madagascar remains among the poorest countries in the world. According to the World Bank, in 2022, three-quarters of Madagascar's population lived in poverty, with nearly 52% of Malagasy citizens facing extreme poverty.[7] Madagascar is also among the countries most economically affected by natural disasters, with the primary livelihood of 80% of its population based in agriculture. These economic difficulties contribute to a significant number of Malagasy citizens seeking to depart and move abroad.[8] In September-October 2025, protests against power and water cuts escalated into calls for wider systemic reform, which ultimately resulted in the overthrow of the civilian government led by former President Andry Rajoelina.[9]

2.1 Mixed movement dynamics within Madagascar

While Madagascar has made efforts to advance national asylum legislation and capacities, these are at an early stage of development.[10] The recently created 'Bureau National des Réfugiés' is not currently operational, and refugee registration is carried out by UNHCR's implementing partner, Centre de Développement d'Andohatapenaka (CDA), while strategic use of refugee status determination (RSD) is undertaken by UNHCR.[11] According to a key informant, several efforts took place in 2024 and early 2025 to progress legislation, but as of late 2025, the legal reform process appears to have stalled.[12] Nonetheless, as of November 2025, CDA has a caseload of 1,395 persons of concern to UNHCR, principally asylum seekers, comprising nationalities from Africa, Asia, and Europe. The overwhelming majority (90%) are from Pakistan. Between 2021 and 2023, a total of 82 families were resettled from Madagascar, and 80% of these were originally from Pakistan.[13]

The lack of a fully functioning asylum system means that people seeking international protection in Madagascar are not able to obtain an asylum or refugee status authorised by the national authorities. This can cause difficulties as they go about their daily lives, for instance putting them at risk of arrest when police do not recognise their UNHCR-issued identification. Additionally, this identification can be problematic when trying to withdraw money sent from abroad, as banks do not always consider it valid. Those in Madagascar seeking international protection do not have the right to work, making them dependent on support from UNHCR and CDA, and they face higher costs for education and healthcare as they are charged as foreigners rather than as nationals.[14] Pakistani refugees and asylum seekers were targeted in September 2023 when a livelihoods assistance programme drew the attention of local authorities, resulting in the police prohibiting them from taking part in any income generating activities in Madagascar, and effectively locking them out of the labour market.[15]

4 MMC (2025). "If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn't have taken the risk" Examining onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route (Research Report).
5 Burundian nationals require a visa before travel, while Palestinian nationals are not allowed admission. See: PassportRanker.org (2025) Visa Requirements for Madagascar.
6 MMC (2025). "If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn't have taken the risk" Examining onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route (Research Report).
7 World Bank (2024). Navigating Two Decades of High Poverty and Charting a Course for Change in Madagascar: Poverty and Equity Assessment
8 IOM (2020). IOM Madagascar Annual Report 2019.
9 Al Jazeera (2025). Madagascar's new prime minister named after military coup; Associated Press (2025). A timeline of all the major events in Madagascar's military coup.
10 Ministère des Affaires étrangères de la République de Madagascar (2025). Déclaration de Son Excellence Monsieur TEHINDRAZANARIVELO Djacoba A. S. Oliva Ambassadeur, Représentant permanent de Madagascar auprès de l'Office des Nations Unies et des autres organisations internationales à Genève et à Vienne.
11 Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme (2016). EC/67/SC/CRP.12 – Refugee Status Determination.
12 Follow-up inputs from key informant.
13 Follow-up inputs from key informants.
14 US Department of State (2022). 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Madagascar.
15 US Department of State (2023). 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Madagascar.

The civil society and NGO landscape providing support to people on the move arriving in and/or transiting through Madagascar appears anemic, according to key informants interviewed for this study. One local official spoke of some foreign citizens being supported by local associations of their co-nationals, or by their consulate when detained following interception. This was echoed by a key informant from Comoros who specified that any Comorians in need of assistance would have to rely on the Comoros consulate or the Comorian association in Madagascar and Muslim associations. Furthermore, several local officials mentioned a lack of or uncertainty regarding relevant legislation. Others expressed a need for clearer and more developed laws and policies to govern prosecution of irregular movements, to facilitate better coordination on the issue, and to protect whistle-blowers who come across officials collaborating with smugglers. A few key informants also expressed challenges they faced in their work due to lack of resources, even though in one case an official said his service had an operational strategy to combat irregular movements.

2.2 Mixed movements from Madagascar towards Mayotte

The island of Mayotte, an overseas French department and geographically part of the Comorian archipelago, is situated several hundred kilometres off the northwest coast of Madagascar. Irregular maritime crossings from Madagascar to Mayotte typically depart from the outskirts of the cities of Mahajanga, Ambanja, and the island of Nosy Be, and involve *kwassa kwassa* – small fishing boats unfit for long journeys at sea. While there are no statistics available on the number of people who seek to transit Madagascar along the WIOR (primarily to reach Mayotte) without documentation, based on local media reports compiled by MMC, in 2024, at least 109 individuals were intercepted in and around Madagascar, suggesting that journeys are not always successful and that authorities are actively working to reduce irregular sea crossings.[16] This trend continued in 2025, with at least 84 people, including both Malagasy and foreign nationals, deterred from their journeys by Malagasy authorities as of September.[17]

Shipwrecks also pose a danger, as exemplified by a number of higher profile incidents in recent years. In March 2023, local media reported 34 drownings after an overcrowded boat capsized off the coast of the Ambanja district.[18] In November 2024, at least 24 Somalis drowned after two boats foundered off the coast, and in November 2025, 14 bodies were found near Mahajanga, presumably following a shipwreck.[19]

As embarkations are not always detected, these numbers do not capture the full scope of the risk, and the extent of the data gap is unclear. However, media reports and key informants characterise these movements as an increasing trend, dating from COVID-19 related restrictions which made longer routes within Africa's mainland more difficult to traverse due to the multiplicity of border crossings.[20] This was further facilitated by the ease of obtaining a visa on arrival in Madagascar, and by smuggling networks that began to actively recruit for this route.[21] Additionally, this route is used by Malagasy and foreigners alike, with nationals of Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq[22] among those identified.[23]

16 Ibid.
17 MMC (2025). Quarterly Mixed Migration Update Eastern and Southern Africa – Q1 2025; MMC (2025) Quarterly Mixed Migration Update Eastern and Southern Africa – Q3 2025.
18 InfoMigrants (2023). Naufrage au large de Madagascar : le bilan monte à 34 morts.
19 Elise, A. (2025). Madagascar:14 bodies found in the sea off Mahajanga. Africa Top Success. *MidiMadagasikara*; Mohamed, B. (2024). They threw her body into the ocean' - woman dies on boat headed for French island. *BBC*.
20 MMC (2024). Quarterly Mixed Migration Update Eastern and Southern Africa – Q3 2024.
21 MMC (2025). "If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn't have taken the risk" Examining onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route (Research Report).
22 Nationals of the Great Lakes region are among the main arrivals in Mayotte, but they appear to mostly travel via Tanzania and then by boat directly to Mayotte or with transit through one or several Comorian islands. In the case of Burundians, this may be partially due to the fact that they are not eligible to receive a visa on arrival in Madagascar, making it a less viable transit option. See: MMC (2025). "If I had known it would be this hard, I wouldn't have taken the risk" Examining onward and mixed movements along the Western Indian Ocean Route (Research Report).
23 Ibid.

Significant and multi-faceted protection and mobility dynamics play out in Mayotte. While 2023 and 2024 showed declines in asylum applications, these numbers had been on a steady upward trajectory for almost a decade previously.[24] According to France's Ministry of the Overseas, about half of Mayotte's population (of 329,282) is foreign, and the majority of these people are in an irregular situation.[25] The authorities carry out large numbers of deportations annually, totalling 106,156 from 2020-2024. In 2023 and 2024, the number of Malagasy deported from Mayotte stood at 1,069.[26] In 2024 some 809 small boats were detected by authorities, at least 493 of which were intercepted.[27]

French efforts to curb irregular migration to Mayotte have been on the rise since 2019, including through aerial surveillance and the presence of patrol boats. In April 2025, French President Emmanuel Macron promised further tough measures to ''combat irregular immigration'' in Mayotte with the announcement of "Operation Uhura Wa Shabat" (Operation Iron Wall).[28] Investigative reporting published in September 2025 revealed that methods used by French authorities to prevent *kwassa kwassa* from reaching Mayotte reportedly resulted in drownings, including of children and pregnant women.[29]

24 OFPRA (2025). Publication des premières données de l'asile 2024 à l'Ofpra; OFPRA (2024). Premières données de l'asile 2023 [Chiffres provisoires]; Assemblée Nationale (2024). Question écrite n° 5550 : Statistiques de lutte contre l'immigration clandestine à Mayotte.

25 Cann, R. (2025). La question de l'immigration clandestine à Mayotte revient au cœur du débat public. *Franceinfo*; Insee (2025). Estimation de la population au 1er janvier 2025.

26 Préfet de Mayotte (2024). Lutte contre l'immigration clandestine : Bilan de l'opération Shikandra 01/01/2023 - 31/12/2023; Préfet de Mayotte (2025). Lutte contre l'immigration clandestine : Bilan de l'opération Shikandra 01/01/2024 - 31/12/2024.

27 Decouvrir Mayotte (2025). Immigration et clandestinité à Mayotte : situation actuelle et chiffres officiels; InfoMigrants (2025). Mayotte : nette baisse des interceptions et des expulsions de migrants en 2024.

28 InfoMigrants (2023). Op. cit.; InfoMigrants (April 2025). À Mayotte, Emmanuel Macron promet un «mur de fer» contre l'immigration irrégulière.

29 Lighthouse Reports (2025). "They hit us and watched us drown".

3. Methodology

3.1 Quantitative sampling strategy and demographic profiles

This study draws upon 499 4Mi surveys with Pakistani asylum seekers carried out by UNHCR's local partner in Madagascar, CDA, in Antananarivo between September and October 2025. All respondents were part of CDA's caseload and were receiving some form of support or guidance from the NGO, which should be taken into account when reviewing the findings of this report. All respondents had been in Madagascar for 24 months or less, to capture people actively on the move and to ensure sufficient recall of respondents' journeys. To help interpret and/or clarify emerging findings from the quantitative data, insights were sought from key informants familiar with the situation of refugees and asylum seekers in Madagascar.

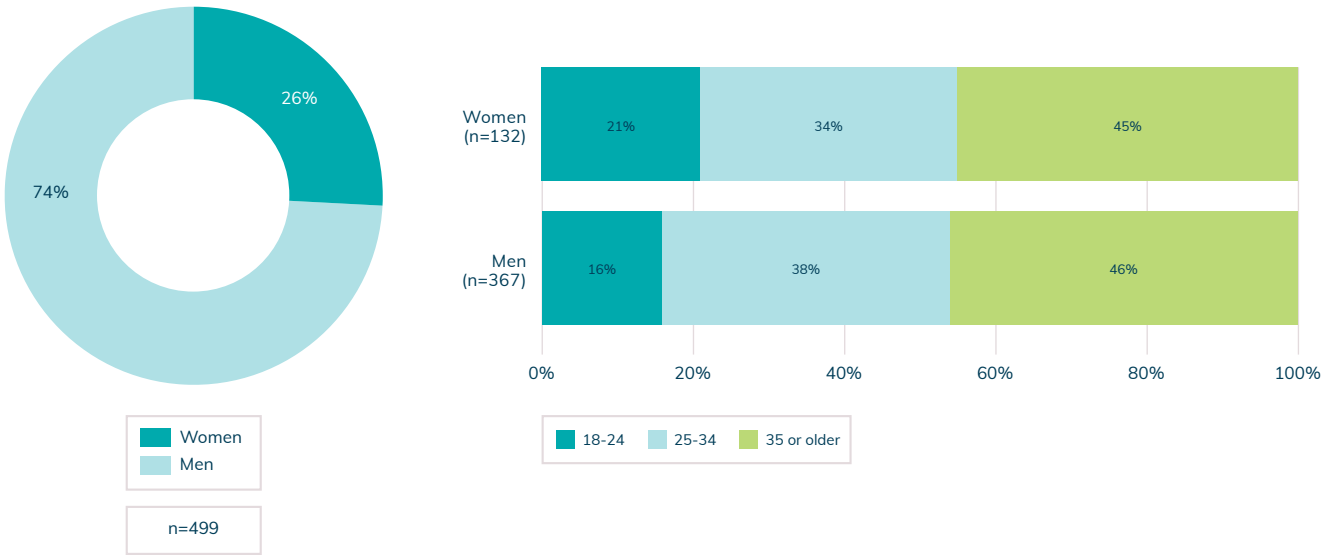
About 4Mi

MMC collects data with refugees and migrants using a survey tool known as 4Mi. The 4Mi survey is standardised and implemented across different MMC regions worldwide, allowing for cross-country and cross-regional analysis on the experiences and movements of these populations. It collects data on a wide range of themes, including but not limited to, refugees and migrants' profiles, movement drivers and intentions, routes and modes of transportation, interactions with smugglers, and experiences with and perceptions of protection abuses.

4Mi enumerators are often refugees and migrants, themselves, who have unique access to members of their co-ethnic or co-national communities and who speak the required languages. MMC enumerators benefit from comprehensive trainings as well as continuous supervision to ensure data quality, integrity, and security. Enumerators are trained on safety guidelines; data protection, research ethics, consent, and safeguarding; gender-centred approaches; protection; and DRC's code of conduct and code of conduct complaint mechanism. In particular, enumerators are trained to clearly communicate informed consent and the anonymity of survey data with respondents before, during, and after the surveys. For more information on 4Mi visit mixedmigration.org/4mi/

All respondents were aged 18 years old and above, and most (74%) were men. In terms of legal status, the overwhelming majority (98%) were asylum seekers and 2% were comprised of refugees, those with some form of residency, or those with an irregular status. Thus, this study uses the term 'asylum seekers' to refer to the overall sample.

Figure 1. Distribution of Pakistani 4Mi respondents by gender and age



Pakistani respondents were well educated overall, with 76% having completed secondary or high school, university, or vocational training. Just 6% of respondents had no schooling. The vast majority were Muslim (99%), and most of these identified as members of the Ahmadiyya movement (see below).[30] Most (61%) had children, and the majority of these (90%, n=304) had travelled with children under the age of 18.

About Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan

Ahmadiyya Muslims are a minority religious group in Pakistan. The Pakistani penal code forbids Ahmadis from calling themselves Muslims, requiring that they sign a declaration stating that they are not Muslim in order to obtain basic civil documents such as birth certificates or passports, join the civil or armed services, or exercise their right to vote. They are also prohibited from almost all expressions of their faith at the risk of fines, imprisonment, or death. Persecution of Ahmadis occurs with impunity, and is characterised by destruction of Ahmadiyya mosques, desecration of graves, targeted killings, hate speech and harassment, and boycotting of businesses.

While connections between Madagascar and the Ahmadiyya community in Pakistan are not widely known, a key informant described family-to-family communication providing the initial linkage between Madagascar and Pakistan, as well as a network in Pakistan that advises Ahmadis [about Madagascar] in exchange for money. Upon arrival in Madagascar, Ahmadis are welcomed and assisted in finding housing and informal employment by the community. A missionary-run Ahmadiyya mosque supports religious festivities and children's education and provides some assistance with health.

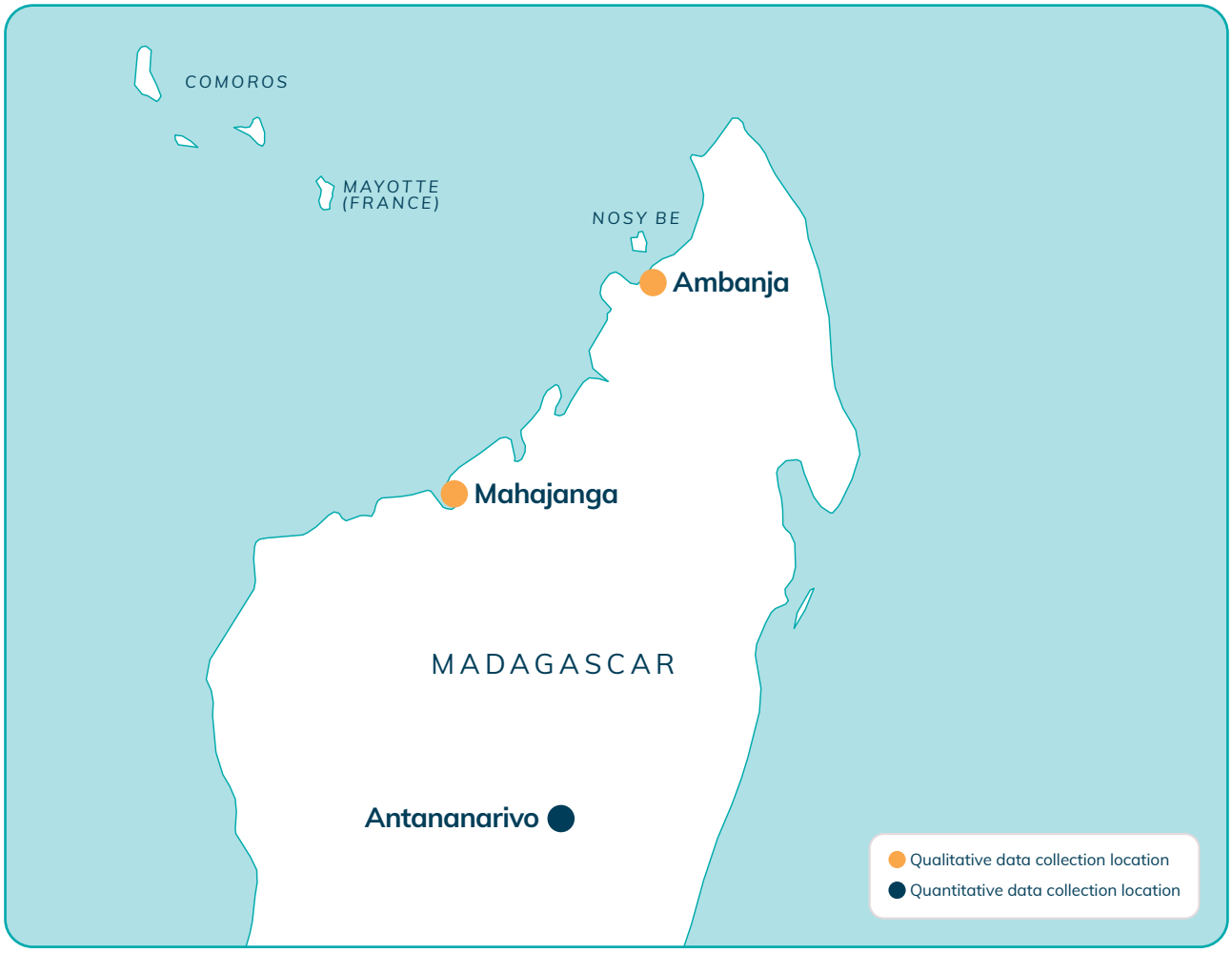
3.2 Qualitative sampling strategy

Qualitative data collection was carried out in November 2025 in Ambanja and Mahajanga along Madagascar's northwest coast (Map 1). Respondents represented a range of profiles, comprising people on the move, smugglers and movement facilitators, and a variety of local officials. Interviewed refugees and migrants included both Malagasy and foreign nationals, and were selected based on whether they had either previously attempted the journey to Mayotte or intended to journey to Mayotte.

In total, 21 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including 11 people on the move and ten key informants. Interviews focused on: drivers of movement; perspectives on overall route dynamics and journeys, including interaction with smugglers and risks faced *en route*; legal frameworks and available support for people on the move; and their future intentions. The sample size was determined based on access to respondents within the timespan of the research, since those departing to Mayotte are largely a hidden population. Key informants were interviewed in Ambanja and Mahajanga, representing local authorities and government institutions, as well as two smuggler intermediaries or recruiters. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the profiles of the people on the move interviewed.

30 The sample also included three Christians and three Hindus. See: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2021). Factsheet Ahmadiyya Muslims.

Map 1. Data collection locations



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.

Table 1. Overview of interviewed people on the move

Nationality	Gender	Age	Location of interview	Date
Malagasy	Female	40	Ambanja	11/11/2025
Malagasy	Male	43	Ambanja	11/11/2025
Malagasy	Female	24	Ambanja	12/11/2025
Malagasy	Female	40	Ambanja	12/11/2025
Malagasy	Female	25	Ambanja	12/11/2025
Malagasy-Comorian	Male	30	Ambanja	14/11/2025
Malagasy	Male	29	Mahajanga	19/11/2025
Comorian	Female	28	Mahajanga	20/11/2025
Ethiopian	Male	34	Mahajanga	21/11/2025
Somali	Male	32	Mahajanga	21/11/2025
Malagasy	Male	26	Mahajanga	21/11/2025

3.3 Ethics

Quantitative interviews were conducted by enumerators from CDA, trained by MMC in issues of consent and safeguarding, data protection, sensitive interviewing techniques, and DRC's code of conduct. They took place in safe and private locations on the premises of CDA, agreed to by respondents. Qualitative interviews were carried out by Cabinet Ambivert, a local research partner who ensured ethical data collection and protection in coordination with MMC and strict adherence to DRC's code of conduct. Prior to both the quantitative and qualitative interviews, informed consent was obtained, and respondents were advised that they could skip any question, stop the interview at any time, and withdraw their data up until the point of publication. Qualitative interviews were not recorded, as no explicit agreement of the respondents was provided (also see Limitations below). In all cases, no personally identifiable information was collected, and responses were registered and/or noted in a way that preserved confidentiality. As quantitative respondents were identified through the caseload of UNHCR's local partner CDA, it was made clear that participating in the study was voluntary and was not linked to status determination or resettlement, or receipt of services or assistance.

3.4 Limitations

While expanding the evidence base on mixed movement dynamics in Madagascar, this report is not representative of the experiences of all people on the move to, through, and from the country. Rather it provides targeted insights on the mobility experiences and intentions of Pakistani asylum seekers, alongside in-depth qualitative perspectives on mixed movements to Mayotte from the northwest coast of Madagascar.

While one objective of this report is to shed further light on Madagascar's role as a point of origin or transit for mixed movements to Mayotte, challenges in accessing respondents meant that carrying out large-scale quantitative data collection along Madagascar's northwest coast was not possible. This is primarily due to the generally quick and clandestine nature of transit through this zone. Therefore, a more limited qualitative approach was decided upon given the short timeframe for the study. Even with this approach, the dearth of humanitarian actors, or experts in general, operating in this area made it harder to access expertise on this topic. Access to respondents was further reduced due to the political unrest that preceded – and continued during – the data collection period, and by early arrival of the rainy season rendering some roads impassable.

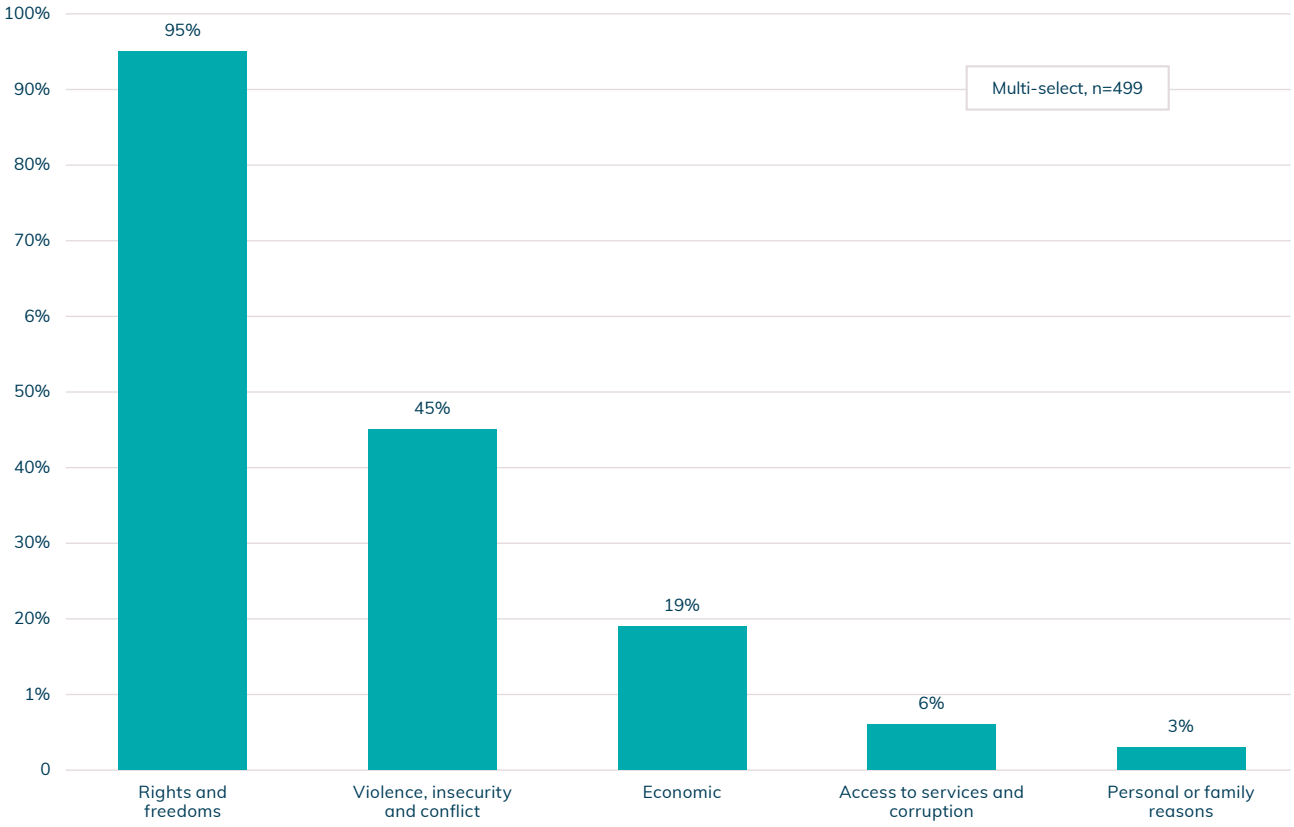
No qualitative participant agreed to have their responses recorded, likely out of fear that a recording might be used to stop their (onward) movement, thus the qualitative data collection relied entirely on notetaking. These same fears meant that respondents were at times reluctant to share information about topics they deemed sensitive and may have led to self-censorship at times.

4. Movements of Pakistani asylum seekers to Madagascar

4.1 Drivers of mixed movement

Almost all respondents (95%) indicated that they left Pakistan for reasons related to rights and freedoms. For the majority of this subsample (89%, n=474), this was due to religious discrimination, most likely because of respondents' affiliation with the Ahmadiyya movement of Islam (see Background). Additionally, 46% of respondents who cited rights and freedoms as a reason for their departure specified that they lacked freedom of expression, also likely related to religious persecution.[31]

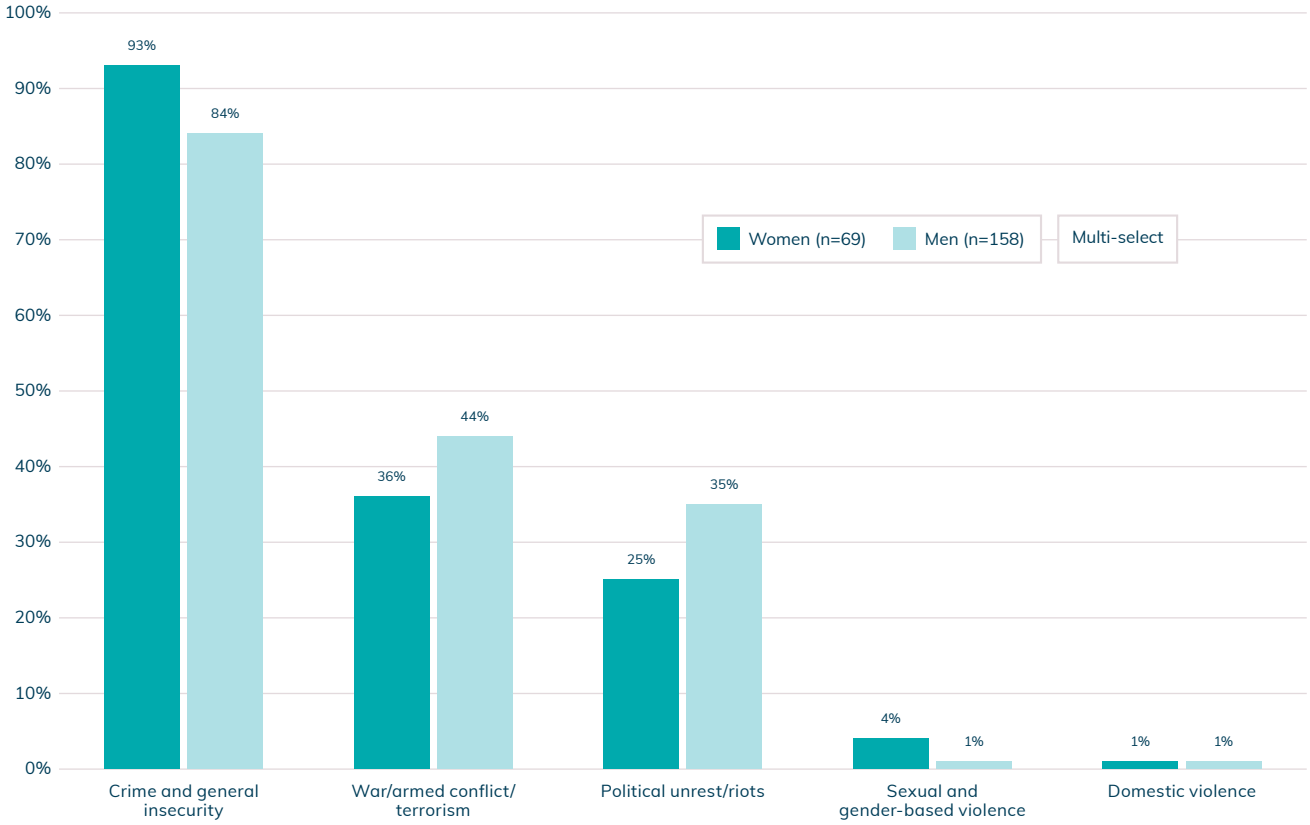
Figure 2. For what reasons did you leave?[32]



Men and women did not show major differences in the overall drivers they reported. Zooming in further on respondents who cited 'violence, insecurity, and conflict', some gender-related variations come to light, though they remain small and deserve further interrogation (Figure 3). For instance, crime and general insecurity was slightly more often reported by women than by men. On the other hand, political unrest and riots and war/armed conflict/terrorism appeared to affect men more often than women, perhaps reflecting gender roles that would be more likely to place men at the centre of active conflict. **Almost none of the respondents cited environmental factors as a driver in their decision to leave Pakistan.**[33]

31 Other reasons for leaving Pakistan were much less frequently cited: two respondents indicated "forced conscription", one respondent indicated "sexual discrimination", and one respondent chose "other" and specified restrictions around "doing business".
32 Other reasons including "culture of migration", "natural disaster or environmental factors", "don't know", and "other" all had one response.
33 When asked whether environmental factors played a role in their decision to leave, 432 respondents said no, 63 said they didn't know, and four respondents indicated that the environment was a factor (for three this was due to links between conflict and environment, and for one it was because environmental factors directly affected their living conditions).

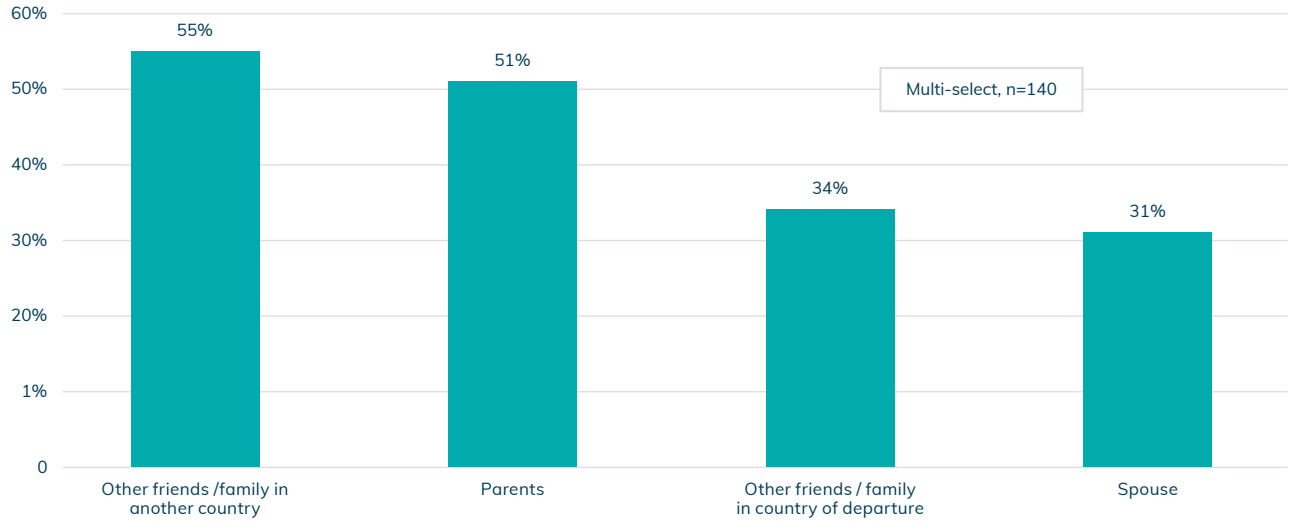
Figure 3. What kind of reason relating to violence, insecurity or conflict? By gender



*The subsample of women is limited and should thus be treated with caution.

Most respondents made the decision to move independently and less than one-third (28%) said that they were externally influenced. This finding did not vary by gender (27% women vs. 29% men). That said, most respondents had received information from external sources to plan their journeys (also see 4.2 Information). Of those who indicated that their decision had been influenced (n=140), **the biggest influences were friends and family in another country (55%) and parents (51%)**. Gender differences were more pronounced when it came to influence by friends and family in another country (cited by 57% of 105 men vs. about half or 17/35) of women) and by their spouse (cited by just under half or 15 women vs. 28% of men). This may be due to women more often being tied to the influence of their husband. That said, the subsample of women is limited and so this result should be treated with caution.

Figure 4. Can you choose the biggest influences on your decision to migrate?[34]

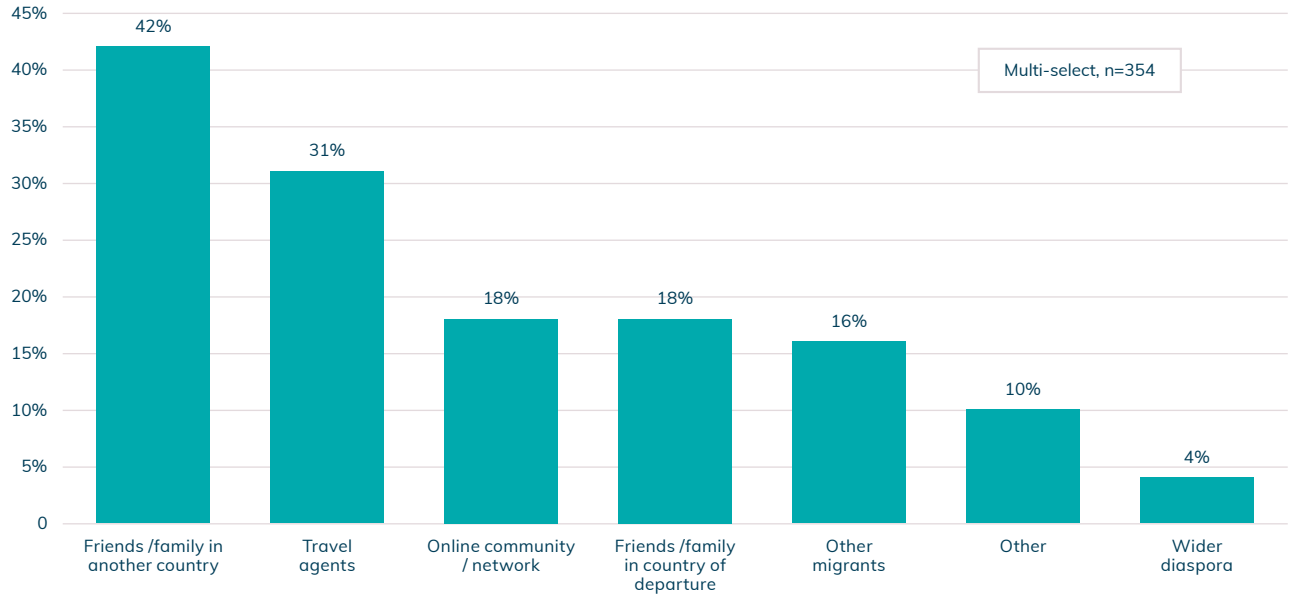


34 "My children" was selected by four respondents and "returnees" was selected by one respondent. "Social media," "smugglers," "mainstream media, film and books," "other," and "don't know" all had zero responses.

4.2 Access to information about the journey

The majority (71%) of all respondents had obtained information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before departing, and relied on this information to plan their journeys. This came from a variety of sources, with friends and family in another country the most frequently cited source of information (42%, n=354), followed by a less personal source: travel agents (31%). It is possible that some of the 'travel agents' indicated here are not entirely formal. A key informant providing additional insights spoke of a 'network' in Pakistan that was providing advice in exchange for money, and it is possible that in some cases respondents were capturing more of a broker/facilitation dynamic with their answers of 'travel agent'. Online communities/networks (18%), friends/family in the country of departure (18%), and other migrants (16%) were the next most prominent sources, followed by 'other' (10%), which in all instances referred to the internet.[35]

Figure 5. What were your sources of information about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc. before the journey?[36]



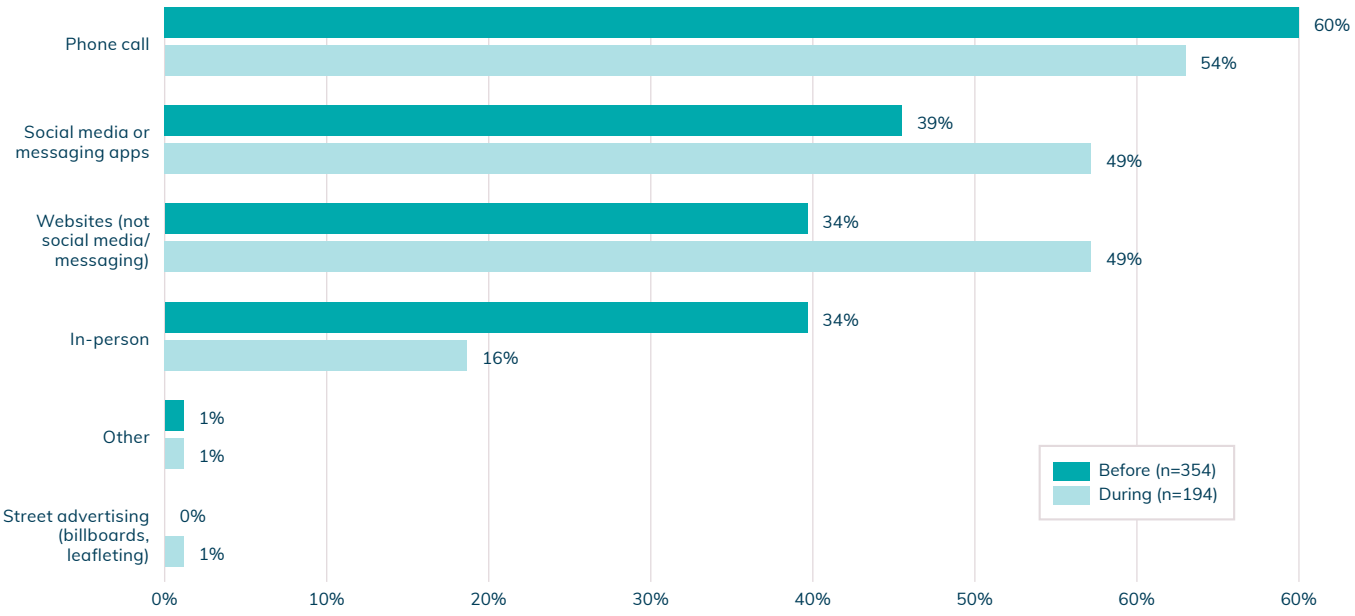
Most responses did not show pronounced differences by gender, with some variation seen in relation to those who reported using travel agents, cited by 33% of 264 men compared to 26% of 90 women. Additionally, while **the relative importance of sources of information during the journey did not differ greatly from that seen pre-departure**,[37] at times their relative prominence by gender showed more substantial variations. For instance, travel agents were cited as a source by 34% of 140 men who received information during the journey compared to about one-fifth (10/54) of women. This may to some extent be a reflection of different gender roles while travelling, as when reporting on phone use during the journey, 47% of 216 men said they used their phone to get information about the journey vs. 35% of 102 women, whereas 84% of women used their phones to stay in touch with family vs. 77% of men.[38] It also highlights the fact that **travel agents, often thought of as a pre-departure resource, continued to play a role even after departure from Pakistan**.

Overall, respondents much more frequently reported obtaining information before the journey (71%) than they did during the journey (39%), which is further explained by the fact that all took flights and had relatively short journeys before arriving in Madagascar. Before the journey, respondents tended to receive their information via phone calls, followed by social media or messaging apps, websites, and in-person communication. During the journey, phone calls remained the most used means of receiving information, but they were closely followed by "social media or messaging apps" and "websites", with in-person communication also substantially less important during the journey (Figure 6).

35 All respondents who indicated "other" specified "Google," with the exception of one respondent who said "internet," and one respondent who said "Google and ChatGPT."
36 "Smugglers" and "returned migrants" were each selected by three respondents, and one respondent selected "private employment agency."
37 Sources of information during the journey were cited as: friends/family in another country (43%), travel agents (29%), online community/network (21%), other migrants (19%), friends/family in country of departure (18%), other (Google) (14%), wider diaspora (6%), local people met on the journey (2%), smugglers (1%), private employment agency (1%), and returned migrants (1%).
38 Additionally, 33% of respondents used their phones to transfer money.

Both before and during the journey, women more frequently reported using social media and messaging apps to gain information than did men.[39]

Figure 6. What means did you use to obtain information before and during your journey?

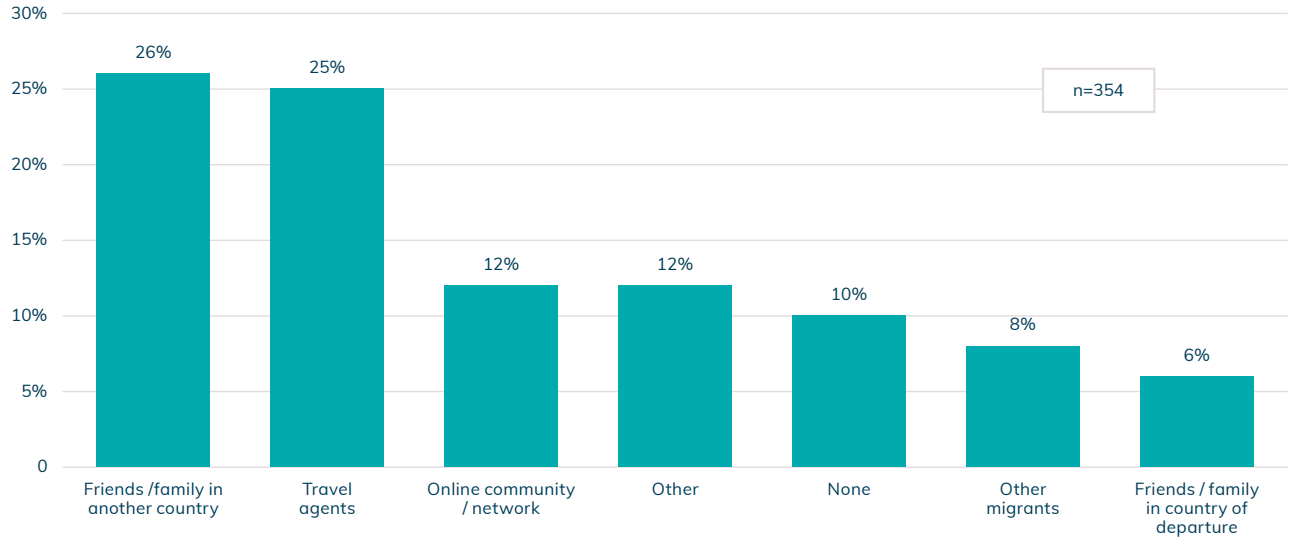


Of the respondents who consulted information sources at some point when planning and executing their journeys to Madagascar (n=365), the sources they considered most reliable generally coincided with the most-used sources of information. The main exception to this was that friends/family in another country were used by 42%, though just 26% perceived them as the most reliable source. Additionally, friends and family in the country of departure were least often cited as a reliable source (6%), which may be due to the unlikelihood that many people in Pakistan have firsthand experience with travel to Madagascar. **This suggests that the most personal sources of information were not necessarily the most relied upon.** Such an interpretation is also supported by the fact that less personal, more formal sources were considered quite reliable proportionally speaking: Google was considered the most reliable source by 38 of 42 people who used it before and/or during the journey, and travel agents were cited as most reliable by 16 of 57 respondents who used them.

Overall, the data demonstrates that to the extent that respondents were being influenced in their movement decisions, personal connections were a considerable source of influence (also see Figure 3). This is also supported by the inputs of a key informant, who in seeking to explain the linkage between Pakistan and Madagascar, spoke of family-to-family, word-of-mouth connections. It may be that given the regular nature of the travel respondents engaged in, respondents did not choose/need to depend on the informal information provided by personal connections or smugglers as much as would be the case in situations of irregular movement.

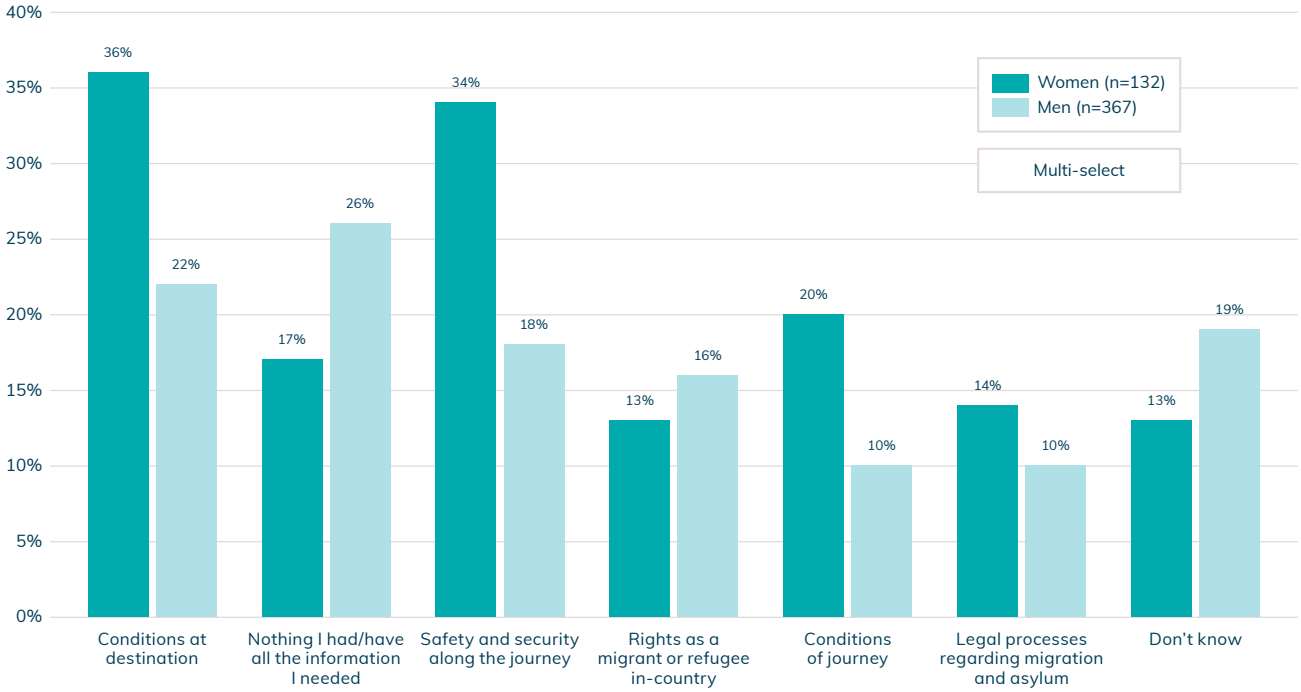
39 Before the journey 46% (41/90) of women who obtained information did so via social media or messaging apps compared to 36% of men. During the journey 61% (33/54) of women who obtained information did so via social media or messaging apps compared to 45% of men.

Figure 7. What has been the most reliable source of information overall?[40]



A minority of respondents (23%) indicated that they had all the information they needed about routes, destinations, costs, risks, etc., with men (26% of 367) expressing this slightly more often than women (17% of 132). **In particular, women expressed a desire for information more often than men across all different types of information**, particularly when it came to conditions at destination (36% vs. 22%) and safety and security along the journey (34% vs. 18%) (Figure 8). Overall, the specifics of the journey beyond security *en route* were not as consequential for respondents, presumably because they travelled by air, making things relatively easy and predictable.

Figure 8. What information would have been most useful that you did not receive?[41]



40 Respondents who said "other" specified Google.

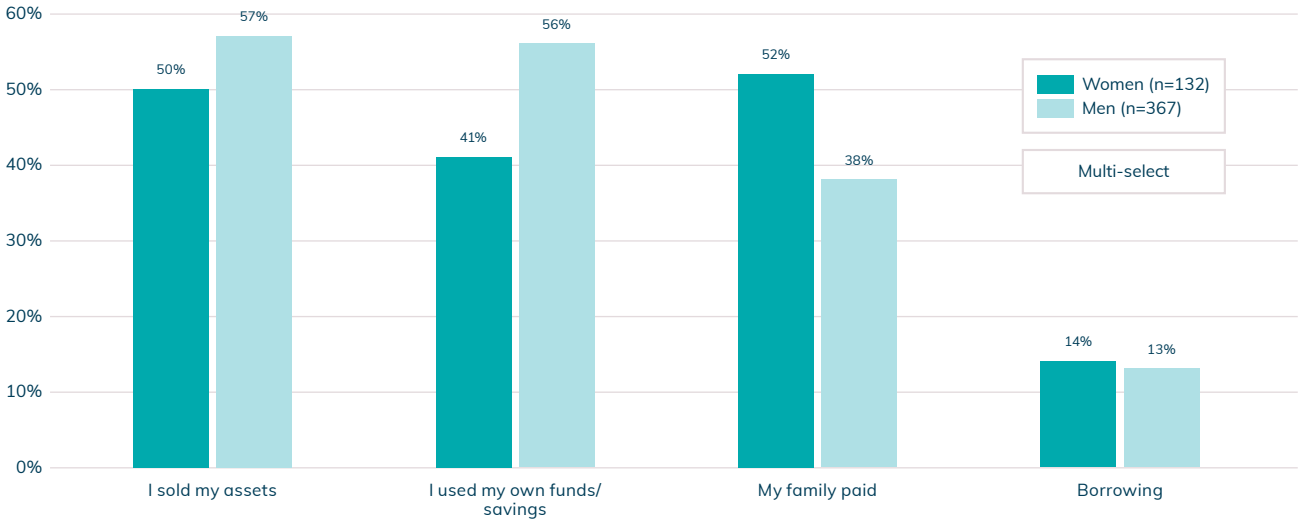
41 Additional useful information was indicated as follows: duration of journey (11% women, 5% men); routes (8% women, 3% men); where and how to access services (5% women, 3% men); cost of journey (5% women, 3% men); other (1% women, 1% men); refused (1% women, 0% men); how to find a smuggler (0% women, 0% men).

4.3 Planning and financing the journey

Respondents largely reported sticking to their original plans for their journeys, with 81% indicating that their plans had not changed from the time they first departed on their journeys to the time of interview. Of the 19% of respondents whose plans did change during their journey, 12% said that they no longer planned to return home and 5% said they had changed their route. Safety and security concerns were the most cited (77/93) reason for the change in plans. Notably, this was indicated by 21 out of 26 respondents who changed their route and 53 out of 60 respondents who had decided not to return home, suggesting that **safety and security concerns back in Pakistan were just as consequential, or even more so, than those en route**. Lack of funds was also a factor for some, cited by 22 of 93 of respondents whose plans had changed.[42]

Overall, 90% of respondents had enough money to pay for their journeys so far. The median cost was USD 5,000, which likely reflects the price of plane tickets for multiple family members, as over half of respondents (55%) were travelling with children. Respondents obtained this funding in a variety of, and often multiple, ways as seen in Figure 7. Of the 10% of respondents who did not have sufficient funds to pay for their journey so far, they mainly obtained additional support by having their family and friends send them money (28/51) and by borrowing money from other migrants (16/51).[43]

Figure 9. How did you initially finance your journey?



All respondents travelled to Madagascar by air, not surprising given the relative locations of Pakistan and Madagascar. The majority of respondents (67%) travelled via the United Arab Emirates (UAE), followed by an African country (primarily Kenya) before arriving in Madagascar. Thirty-two per cent of respondents travelled to Madagascar with only one stopover, in Ethiopia.

At the same time, **the vast majority of respondents (97%) stated that they had not used a smuggler during their journey**. Only 16 respondents reported having used a smuggler, and in the majority of these cases (12), the smuggler provided documents.[44] For these respondents, this may align with the fact that in Pakistan the Ahmadiyya are reported to face barriers to obtaining civil documentation, such as birth certificates and passports (see Background).[45] Taken together, the data overall suggests that **respondents were able to engage in relatively organised and regular travel**.

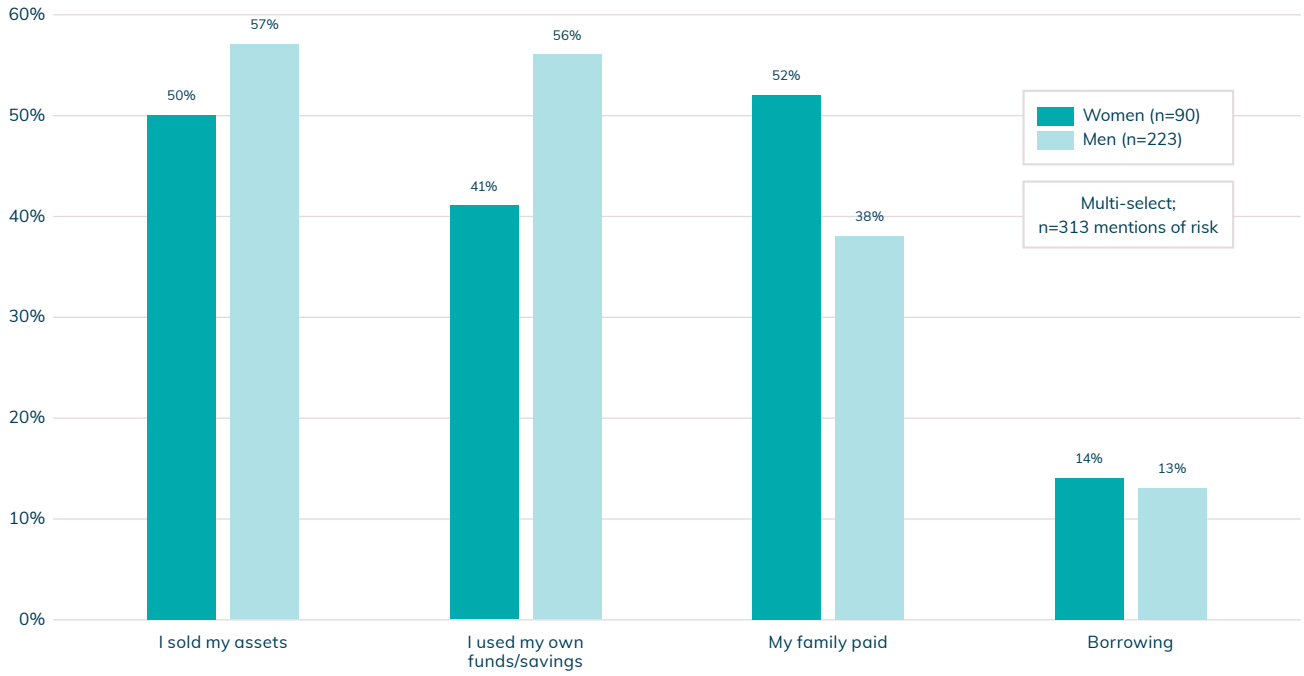
42 Among respondents who changed their plans on route, several other reasons were mentioned: family pressures were cited by five respondents, sickness by one respondent, other by one respondent, and three respondents said they didn't know why they had changed their plans.
43 Additionally, five respondents sold belongings, two worked, one begged, one provided in-kind labour, one hadn't been able to get more money, and one borrowed money from an unnamed source.
44 Additionally, smugglers provided: transit across borders for three respondents, access to communications for three respondents, help dealing with authorities for two respondents, in-country transportation for one respondent, and food or water for one respondent.
45 United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (2021). Op. cit.

4.4. Exposure to abuse and harm

In spite of the relatively orderly nature of their travel between Pakistan and Madagascar, **65% of the 499 respondents pointed to dangerous locations along the journey, with 61% of respondents indicating locations in Pakistan and 8% of respondents indicating locations in Madagascar.**[46] This is likely due to an acute awareness on the part of respondents of the risks posed by being part of the Ahmadiyya movement in Pakistan, particularly in certain locations, as a much smaller proportion of respondents (35%) indicated that they had actually personally experienced protection incidents during their journey.

In Pakistan, the most cited risks were physical violence (77%), death (52%), and non-physical violence (e.g. harassment) (37%) out of 313 separate mentions of risk in Pakistan.[47] These showed some variation by gender with men more frequently mentioning death (58% of 223) as compared to women (39% of 90), and women more often specifying non-physical violence (48%) as compared to men (32%). Shedding further light on the persecution faced by the Ahmadiyya, **the most frequently perceived perpetrator by a substantial margin was 'people from the local community' (79%)**. The other most prominent responses were military/police (26%), criminal gangs (16%), and armed groups/militias (16%).[48]

Figure 10. What were the main risks in Pakistan?



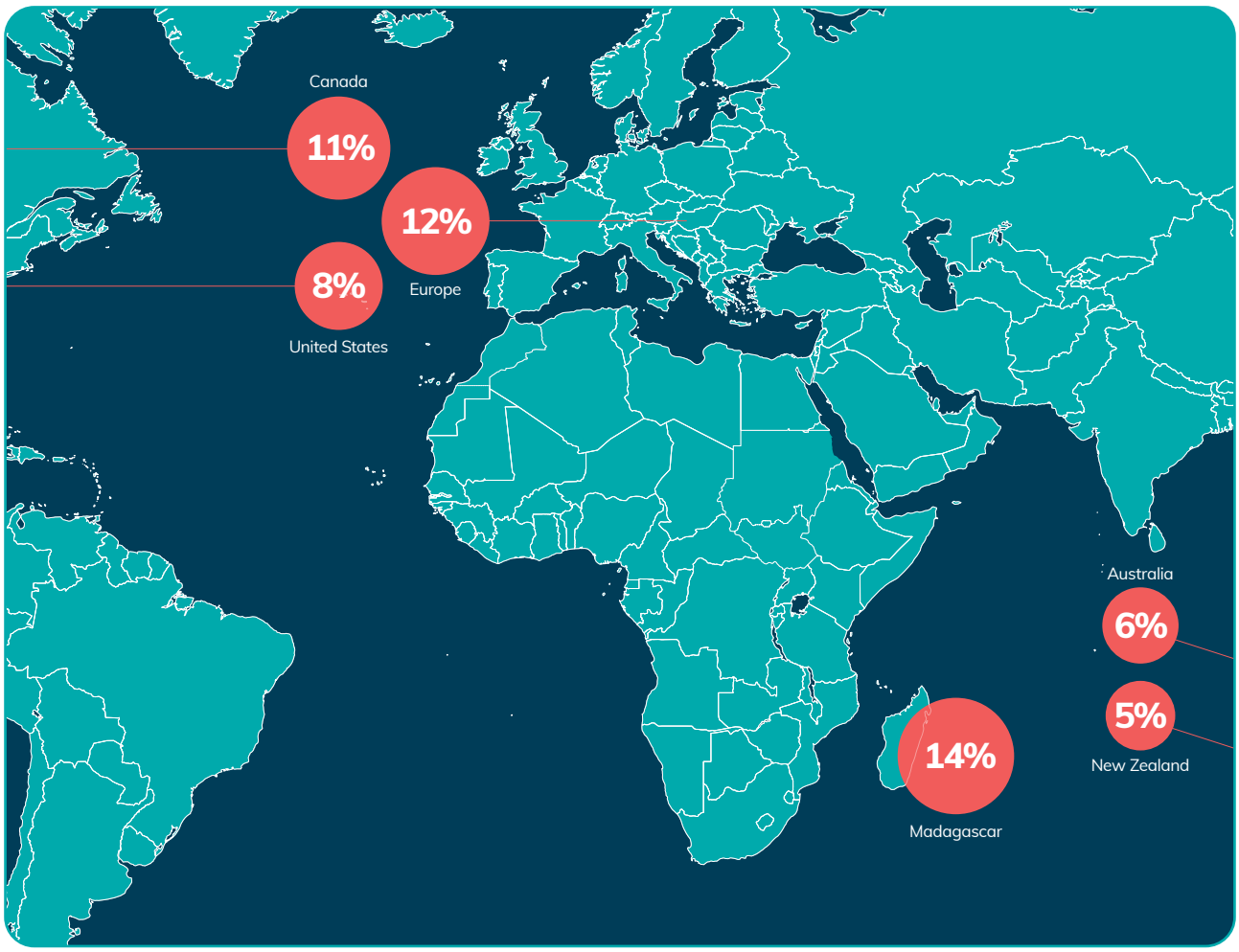
By contrast, in Madagascar, the risks appeared to be more opportunistic and linked to respondents' outsider status rather than due to identity-based persecution. **The most often-cited risk in Madagascar was robbery (31/42), followed by physical violence (12/42) and bribery/extortion (12/42).**[49] Perceived persecutors were once again 'people from the local community' (35/42), military/police (8/42), and border guards/immigration officials (8/42).[50]

46 Seven respondents also mentioned locations in Kenya and four respondents mentioned locations in the UAE.
47 Other risks were: injury/ill health from harsh conditions (16%), detention (12%), kidnapping (11%), bribery/extortion (3%), sexual violence (3%), robbery (2%), other (2%).
48 Other perpetrators were: border guards/immigration officials, cited by 24 respondents; none, cited by seven respondents; family members, cited by two respondents; other, cited by 1 respondent; and don't know, cited by one respondent. No respondents cited other migrants.
49 Other risks were: non-physical violence (e.g. harassment) (5/42), death (3/42), injury/ill health from harsh conditions (2/42), and detention (2/42).
50 One respondent also mentioned criminal gangs.

4.5 Preferred destination

The majority of respondents (73%) did not feel that they had reached the end of their journey, with an additional 13% saying they were unsure whether or not their journey was over. **Respondents who expressed a desire to move onward from Madagascar (n=364) often did not know where they wanted to end up (43%), and the majority of those who did specify a preferred destination indicated English-speaking countries outside of Europe**, with linguistic compatibility likely a factor in this regard. Moreover, the countries they cited were those to which people typically reach via resettlement pathways (Figure 11). **No respondent selected Madagascar as a preferred destination**, including the additional 14% of respondents who said they had reached the end of their journey and did not express an onward movement aspiration. That being said, Pakistanis appeared to view Madagascar as a safe asylum country on the pathway to resettlement, and Mayotte, following the Western Indian Ocean Route from Madagascar, was not cited as a preferred destination by any respondent. Taken together, **these findings suggest both a strong desire for resettlement and an uncertainty over what might be possible in that regard**.

Map 2. What country is your preferred destination? (n=499)[51]



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.

51 43% (217) didn't know their preferred destination, and one respondent each selected Benin, Morocco, and the UAE. The countries represented in "**Europe"** are Austria (7 respondents), Belgium (6 respondents), Denmark (11 respondents), Finland (4 respondents), Germany (8 respondents), Ireland (4 respondents), Italy (2 respondents), Norway (9 respondents), Spain (2 respondents), and the United Kingdom (2 respondents). This also includes six respondents who answered "Europe" in general rather than selecting a particular country.

The respondents who chose "other" did not indicate a specific country; rather their responses provided insight into their decision-making, as eight of these respondents expressed that **the decision regarding their ultimate destination was not up to them**, for instance saying:

> "*We lean on UNHCR to send us wherever our lives will be safe and our children can have access to a better education system.*"
> **Pakistani man**

> "*Anywhere UNHCR will send us.*"
> **Pakistani man**

> "*We don't have [the] choice.*"
> **Pakistani man**

This perception was underscored by a key informant representing CDA, who added that the Pakistanis believe that their departure for the final destination country depends only on UNHCR, with resettlement being their sole aim. The remaining twenty-one respondents who stated "other" expressed that **they simply wanted to go to a country where they could live their lives in security, with their rights respected, while meeting their basic needs**, for instance saying:

> "*Anywhere we feel safe and can get access to work and medical facilities.*"
> **Pakistani woman**

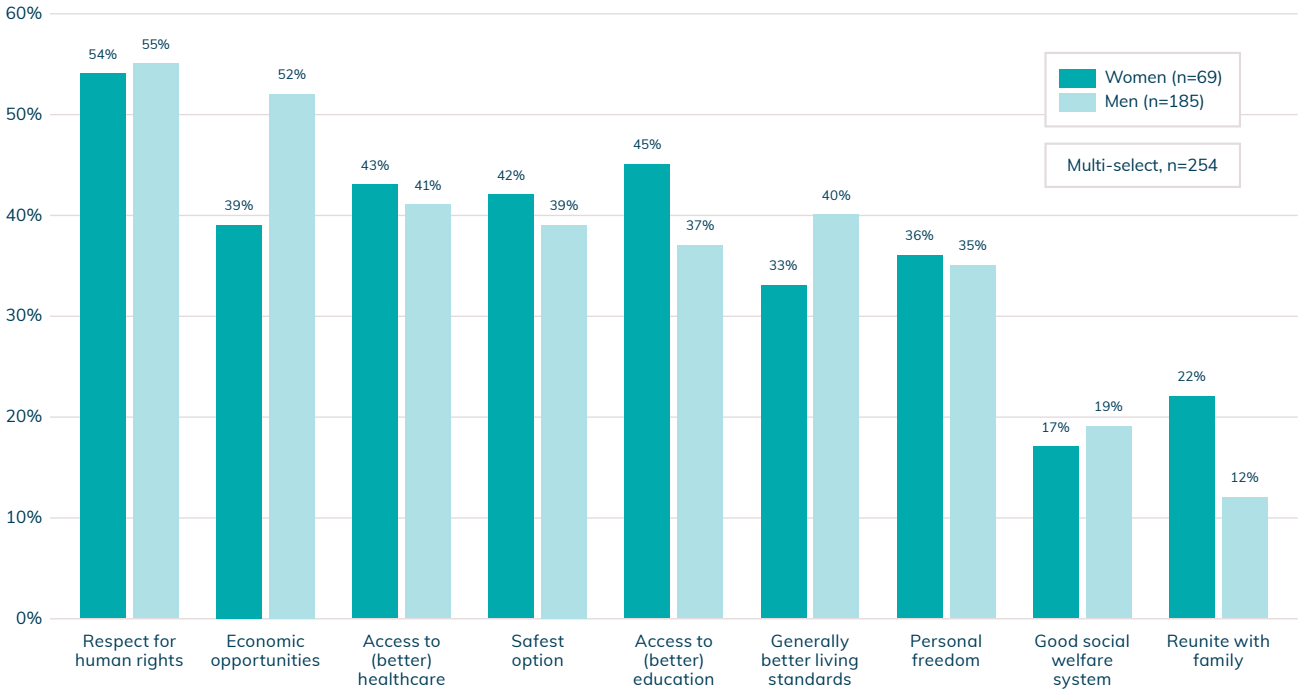
> "*Just a country that can give us a basic right.*"
> **Pakistani woman**

> "*Anywhere where we can live peacefully and can have access to a better living.*"
> **Pakistani man**

Themes of security, rights, and access to basic services were echoed among respondents who expressed any sort of preference regarding a preferred destination (including those who specified "other").[52] In keeping with the most frequently selected driver of movement, rights and freedoms, the most often cited reason for choosing their destination was respect for human rights (54%). Personal freedom (35%) was also an important factor, and when it came to emphasizing the importance of rights and freedom, men and women did so at almost identical rates.

52 This included 11 people who had indicated that they were at the end of their migration journey, but specified some preference regarding destination in response to the question, "what was your preferred destination." It does not include people who said, "don't know," "none," or "refused" when asked if they had a preferred destination.

Figure 11. Why did you choose this destination?[53]



Other reasons showed some slight variation between genders (Figure 12). For instance, 52% of 185 men cited economic opportunities as important in choosing their destination (vs. just over one-quarter or 27/69 of women), perhaps reflecting a role as primary breadwinner. On the other hand, women more often pointed to 'access to education' (just under one-half or 31/69 vs. 37%) and 'reuniting with family' (nearly one-quarter or 15/69 vs. 12%), seeming to indicate child-rearing and familial considerations to a greater extent.

Despite the fact that the US was the second-most cited preferred destination after Canada, recent policies of the American government did give people pause. **Thirty-four per cent of respondents indicated that they were 'very impacted' or 'somewhat impacted'[54] by US changes to migration policies, foreign assistance and refugee resettlement.**[55] Of the six respondents who chose other countries as their preferred destination but also said they were "very impacted" by these policies, five indicated they had wanted or hoped to go to the US. One woman stated, "We waited years for resettlement, but after Trump's policy, our case was cancelled." Several others alluded to the fact that they had relatives in the US, with one saying "It divided our family across borders."

Many other concerns were raised, with people feeling like they were less likely to receive assistance, or had lost access to services, as well as expressing worry over being able to access resettlement. Multiple respondents felt vulnerable, and others described a sense of powerlessness. Some stated that they had no future in Madagascar, and a few emphasised that they could not go back to Pakistan. Many agreed that these decisions impacted all refugees.

> *"My hope for travelling is broken."*
> **Pakistani man**

53 Other responses included: "reunite with friends" cited by 15 respondents, "easier or faster access to asylum" cited by 13 respondents, "presence of a community from my culture" cited by five respondents, "I did not choose the destination" cited by one respondent, "other" cited by one respondent. Three answer options garnered zero responses: "close to country of departure," "don't know" and "refused."

54 32% of respondents were "not impacted at all" and 34% of respondents were "not aware of these changes."

55 Over the course of 2025, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, has taken many decisions leading to changes in US foreign policy, changes in migration policies, suspending the United States' humanitarian and development funding, pausing refugee resettlement. See: Martín Gil, A., Elbadawy, K. et *al* (2025). The Dismantling of US Refugee Resettlement and Its Impacts. *The Baker Institute for Public Policy – Edward P. Djerejian Center for the Middle East.*

"All of our future depends on this decision"
Pakistani man

"Maybe he takes this decision for his country but if all of the countries will take this same decision, how about the future life of the refugee and asylum seeker?"
Pakistani man

"If the USA has applied these changes, where can I get hope?"
Pakistani man

"We feel like we are the problem for everyone."
Pakistani woman

5. Mixed movements through and from Madagascar towards Mayotte along the Western Indian Ocean Route

5.1 Profiles

Key informants perceived that the majority of Malagasy attempting the journey to Mayotte were women. In particular, two key informants spoke of the prevalence of pregnant woman among the Malagasy making the journey, with one stating "in Mayotte, the authorities strongly protect children's rights, so once pregnant, they are allowed to stay there." The reverse was true for Comorians, according to another key informant, who stated that it was most often young men from Comoros making the trip. Other key informants emphasised the prevalence of youth among those departing and the diversity of nationalities. In addition to Malagasy and Comorians, key informants noted nationals of other African countries (e.g. Somalia, Ethiopia, and DR Congo), and people from as far afield as Yemen, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Thailand seeking to reach Mayotte.

5.2 Drivers of mixed movement

Refugee and migrant respondents and key informants alike maintained that **poverty and the search for more secure livelihoods was the primary reason that people sought to go to Mayotte from or via Madagascar**. In eight out of the 11 interviews with people on the move, this went hand in hand with the need to provide for one's family. More broadly, all eight Malagasy and one Comorian respondent expressed some variation of the statement that life in Madagascar is tough, often referencing challenges in earning (sufficient) money and rising prices for basic necessities.

> *The main reason that drives me is money for my family. The income I earn from fishing is no longer enough, and my boat and nets have already been destroyed two or three times by cyclones. I want my children to be able to eat properly and to go to school.*
> **Malagasy man**

> *Life here is really difficult and unstable. Poverty is everywhere, and the cost of living is very high.*
> **Malagasy woman**

> *When I was in Anjouan, Comoros, I sold fruit and spices at the market after I left school. Sometimes I earned enough to eat, and other days I didn't. It's not a life. You can't build anything or save money.*
> **Comorian woman**

Similarly, five respondents from Madagascar, along with one from Comoros, were motivated by the prospect of better wages in Mayotte. They heard that low wages in Mayotte translated to a "fortune" elsewhere in the region, and they compared a month's wage in Mayotte to a year's earnings in Madagascar. Several respondents and key informants specifically referred to the allure of earning Euros in Mayotte.

For the two respondents from the Horn of Africa, economic factors were intertwined with conflict and violence. The respondent from Somalia spoke of how the need to pay a "tax" to Al Shabab each week made it impossible to build his small business, saying: "in reality, we were only working for them." The respondent from Ethiopia explained how instability and the need to bribe militias to access construction sites meant he could no longer make his living as a bricklayer.

5.3 Influences and decision-making

Five respondents noted they were influenced in their decision to move by others, who were in all cases family members. In three cases, these family members influencing their decision-making were already abroad, with two in Mayotte and two in mainland France. Furthermore, all respondents spoke of external influences on their choice of intended destination, even the six who specified that the decision to make the journey in the first place had been their own. For the two Ethiopian and Somali respondents, it appeared that **their choice of Mayotte was influenced both by relatives in France and travel agents who had links to smugglers in Madagascar in their countries of origin**. The Somali respondent described how the agent had advised him not to try and travel along the Northern Route (or Central Mediterranean Route) via Libya, saying instead that travelling to Mayotte via Madagascar was safer and more discreet, albeit longer. The agent also indicated that it was easier to get asylum by arriving in Mayotte rather than via the Mediterranean.

For the nine Malagasy and Comorian respondents, the influences tended to be confined to their social networks, with respondents having received direct advice from family or friends in Mayotte or having observed friends and neighbours sending money from Mayotte or returning with notable material gains. Such respondents did not appear to have the same reliance on smugglers as those from the Horn of Africa, likely because movements among Madagascar, Comoros, and Mayotte are a part of a well-established movement corridor, with a firmly embedded culture of movement among these islands. A few respondents also referred to the images they saw on Facebook from their broader social networks that depicted a better life in Mayotte. Once again, influences were largely limited to the choice of destination country, rather than the decision to move.

> *They [my friends] didn't encourage me, but I saw that they sent money to their families in Ambanja and even built houses there. So, I thought they must be earning a good salary in Mayotte.*
> **Malagasy man**

> *What I saw in Facebook convinced me that this country is better than here and that I could have a chance to change my life.*
> **Malagasy woman**

The majority of respondents emphasised that their choice of Mayotte as their intended destination had not been spur of the moment, but considered and prepared for over a long period. The two respondents from the Horn of Africa spoke of comparing multiple destinations and routes and weighing their respective risks and benefits. Respondents from Madagascar spoke of observing others taking the route to Mayotte, seeking information from their networks, and/or discussing the decision with their spouse. One Malagasy respondent also specified that he had tried to make changes in his life in Madagascar before taking the decision to attempt the journey to Mayotte. He described changing employers, working on different fishing boats, helping on tourist boats, and moving internally. In spite of this, he felt that "wherever I went, it was the same: the money I earned was always small, no matter how hard the work was." His decision was ultimately made after his boss told him he would bring him to a bigger fishing boat where he would earn much more money, only to be caught by the gendarmes and lose their fishing equipment. Another indicator of the long-term nature of respondents' planning for and commitment to the journey was its financing. **Six Malagasy respondents spoke about selling family land and/or taking out loans to pay for the trip.**

> *My mother took out a loan from the bank so that I could make the trip, and she had to put up all our household belongings as collateral because the people who were supposed to take me to Mayotte asked for 6,000,000 Malagasy Ariary (MGA). I had gone [to Mayotte] to help my mother and father, but the debt from the bank is still unpaid, even after they sold our cows and rice field.*
> **Malagasy woman**

5.4 Routes to and through Madagascar

Key informants spoke of foreign nationals using legal means to travel to Madagascar, with Comorians often arriving by boat, as it is cheaper, and other foreign nationals arriving by plane at the airports of Antananarivo or Nosy Be. Once in country, people hire a *taxi-brousse* or car to reach coastal departure locations on the outskirts of Mahajanga, Ambanja, and the island of Nosy Be (see Background).[56] Malagasy make their way to coastal departure points using public transportation. From these coastal locations, both key informants and respondents described people boarding either motorboats or cheaper, small fishing boats called *pirogues* to reach Mayotte.[57] Depending on the specific route and smuggler, respondents must sometimes transfer between boats while at sea.

Ambanja was described as an increasingly important staging point for departure, given its proximity to Mayotte and the porous nature of its coast, with many bays not under surveillance by authorities. Key informants spoke of multiple departure points along Madagascar's coast, with one stating that "from what I know so far, the departure site changes constantly." Difficulty in determining specific departure points was also mentioned in relation to Mahajanga. Other departure points include more remote areas between Ambanja and the area around the island of Nosy Be, including the islet of Nosy Faly.

Map 3. Departure areas along Madagascar's northwest coast

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.

56 Taxi-brousse (literally "bush taxi") refers to mini-buses that provide public transportation in Madagascar.
57 Pirogue is the French term used in Madagascar for small (fishing) boats, while in Comoros and Mayotte the local term kwassa kwassa is used.

5.5 Smuggling dynamics and fees

Smugglers and their intermediaries were described as Malagasy or Comorian men. The experiences and observations of key informants and respondents alike painted a picture of organised operations carried out by networks of individuals. These networks appear to be characterised by both a *specialisation* – different smugglers taking on different, well-defined tasks – and *compartmentalisation* – smugglers within the same network having distance from each other and from their clients – of roles. Respondents spoke of various practices on the part of smugglers that kept them at arms' length, such as communicating through intermediaries, changing phone numbers, and limiting contact. Respondents also generally seemed to be kept in the dark as they awaited the phone call that would trigger their departure. These networks clearly have transnational reach, both to countries of origin such as Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as onward to Mayotte.

> *The smuggler was a very mysterious and cautious man. He always contacted me using different phone numbers.*
> **Malagasy man**

> *Helping a migrant to leave is not the work of one person, it is a network of several people.*
> **Key informant, Mahajanga**

Key informants provided further insight. An intermediary from Comoros described his role putting prospective clients in touch with smugglers. He spoke of smugglers, boat owners, and captains as having their own roles, and he did not seem to have in-depth information about the process beyond his own part. A *pirogue* operator spoke of how "each smuggler has his own area and organisation." Another key informant from Mahajanga spoke of "recruiters" working in Antananarivo, Nosy Be, and Ambanja, at times in collaboration with hotels, and at times offering fake work contracts for positions in Mayotte. He also indicated that this is usually not an activity carried out by smugglers themselves.

> *Many people are implicated in this matter because those foreigners do not know what is happening here. There are people who host them, people who provide food, and those who transport them by taxi-brousse when they arrive in Antananarivo, there are others who arrange boat transfers.*
> **Key informant, Ambanja**

The cost for smuggler services varied by nationality.[58] A key informant working as an intermediary to connect people with smuggling services stated that the price for Malagasy to reach Mayotte is 6,000,000 MGA (approximately 1,300 USD).[59] This generally aligned with what Malagasy respondents themselves reported, with most stating they were charged 5-6,000,000 MGA (approximately 1,090 – 1,300 USD), and a few reporting slightly lower rates.[60] In contrast, the price for Comorians to make the trip from Madagascar to Mayotte is slightly higher at 1,500 Euros (approximately 1,750 USD). The qualitative data from respondents and key informants revealed the widely held perception that the **journey from Madagascar to Mayotte was cheaper than from Comoros to Mayotte**. One key informant noted that the route between the Comorian islands and Mayotte was very heavily monitored and controlled by coast guards, which may explain how increased risks of interdiction for smugglers translated into higher fees for this segment of the route, and therefore prompted **a shift in route (and smuggling activity) between Madagascar and Mayotte**.

Respondents spoke of several different payment modalities. Six Malagasy respondents spoke of paying their smuggler the full cost up front, after which their smuggler would call them when the conditions were right to depart several weeks or a month later. Two Malagasy, including the one with also a Comorian nationality, who were still planning their journey spoke of arrangements that would allow them to pay part of the cost up front and the rest upon

58 In addition to nationality, other factors that impacted the cost of the journey were the number of services provided by smugglers aside from the boat crossing, the size or type of the boat used, and the number of passengers aboard. That said, respondents and key informants could not provide specific details on how this impact the price.
59 Approximately USD 1,336.
60 One respondent who made the journey in 2019 reported paying 2,000,000 MGA (approximately USD 445). Another who was currently contemplating making the journey said he had been quoted a price of 4,000,000 MGA (approximately USD 891), but it seemed as though this might only be a down-payment, with additional money to be worked off after arriving in Mayotte.

arrival in Mayotte. The three non-Malagasy respondents described some variation of a multi-stage payment scheme. The Somali and Ethiopian men had both made initial payments to agents in their respective countries to cover airfare, as well as a down-payment to the smuggler in Madagascar, and upon arrival in Mayotte their families would transfer the final instalment, with the smugglers holding their passports as a guarantee of payment. They put their total costs, including airfare, at 3,700 USD and 3,200 USD respectively. The Comorian woman had paid a deposit of 1,000 Euros but upon arrival in Madagascar was told that the total cost to travel to Mayotte would be 2,500 Euros rather than the initially agreed 1,500 Euros. These accounts demonstrate the risks that may come with using smugglers, including extortion and scamming (also see 5.6 Risks *en route*).

> *It's not really a debt, but since I'm short 1,500 Euros, I'm dependent on him. He knows where I live. He didn't force me to work for him, but he "suggested" that I find work quickly. He knows I'm stuck here until I pay him back. He confiscated my passport as collateral. I'm afraid that if I take too long, he'll ask me for something else... services that I don't want to provide.*
> **Comorian woman**

> *No one helps us. We are invisible. If we have a problem, we cannot go to the police or the hospital. We are entirely dependent on the smugglers. They are the ones who decide whether we live or die.*
> **Somali man**

5.6 Risks en route

Key informants frequently spoke of deaths at sea and unsafe and overcrowded boats, with the key informant who worked as a *pirogue* operator acknowledging that they overload the boats they use, for instance putting 24 to 29 people in a boat meant to carry 18 passengers. He also said that the boat engines are not made for long trips and frequently overheat and estimated that 80% of trips end in failure.

> *I know the risks very well because I work at sea... But I also know the dangers of staying in town: no food for the children, no school, no healthcare. So, I weigh both risks. Both are frightening, but at least when leaving, there is a small hope that life could change.*
> **Malagasy man**

Several respondents said they were aware of the risks of boat journeys, but felt that they had to go anyway. Of these respondents, five had made the journey before, and could describe their direct experiences at sea: three had reached the mainland of Mayotte and were later arrested and returned to Madagascar, one had their boat intercepted mid-sea by the Malagasy coastguard and was returned, and one never made it to Mayotte because his smuggler decided to turn around mid-sea and return to Madagascar. These five had not experienced personal harm during the sea journey, and in two cases mentioned having life jackets and shelter on board the vessel.

Instead, the main risks mentioned by all refugee and migrant respondents related to their journey being interrupted, rather than their physical safety. In particular, they feared being stopped from departing by authorities, running into patrols at sea, or being arrested and deported back to Madagascar after arriving in Mayotte**. Scams seemed to be a particular risk faced by those seeking to make the journey to Mayotte** and were mentioned by multiple key informants and respondents. One type of scam was for smugglers to tell passengers that they had arrived in Mayotte after sailing through the night, when in reality they were on a Malagasy island. Another was for the smugglers to tip off the authorities so that they would face arrest before departure or interception at sea.

> *I don't know who called the gendarmes because they arrived so quickly. How did the gendarmes know our departure location?*
> **Malagasy woman**

We never reached Mayotte; we had to turn back. They told us we would make another attempt, but since then, I haven't received any news.
Malagasy woman

A week after I arrived [in Mayotte], I was arrested because someone had reported me. I guess it must have been the one who hosted me. She must have received money.
Malagasy woman

The three non-Malagasy respondents described being in limbo while waiting for smugglers to arrange their sea crossings. In all cases, they had entered Madagascar on a valid visa which had since expired. **All three respondents said that their smuggler had possession of their passports as a form of collateral, a circumstance that blurs the line with trafficking.** They had been waiting for more than a month to make the onward journey to Mayotte, with the Comorian respondent having waited since the end of January 2025. She spoke of being afraid all the time and only going out in the early morning or at nightfall to avoid detection by authorities. The Ethiopian and Somali respondents also experienced stress, with the Ethiopian noting his sleep and concentration were affected. They also both mentioned that they were running out of resources to obtain food.

Here, we are ghosts. We are hiding from the authorities. No one helps us. The only people who talk to us are the smugglers, and that's to take our money. We need real information, security, maybe a way to work legally to pay for the trip without putting ourselves in danger.
Comorian woman

We can't really leave the neighbourhood. The smuggler told us to keep a low profile so as not to attract the attention of the police, especially now that my visa has expired. We feel trapped by the waiting.
Ethiopian man

5.7 Future intentions

The reality faced by most Malagasy respondents contrasted sharply with their aspirations. All five respondents who had already attempted the trip and failed, either because they were arrested and returned from Mayotte (three), their boat was intercepted by the Malagasy coast guard (one), or their smugglers turned around mid-sea (one), had intended to stay in Mayotte for the long term, with several expressing intentions to settle there permanently. **However, all had lost substantial amounts of money in their attempts, ultimately finding themselves back where they started but scrambling to repay debts.** The two Malagasy respondents who were still at the stage of planning or contemplating the journey indicated that they planned to stay in Mayotte for the short-term. However, they also acknowledged that it was difficult to plan given the uncertain nature of the journey, which could cause them to stay longer than anticipated.

My parents' money hasn't been recovered yet. I'm working in other people's fields now and just waiting, hoping for some help if any comes.
Malagasy woman

At first, I thought I would go for a few months and then return. Now, looking at it, I realise it's more complicated. But if I make it to Mayotte, I plan to stay for a little while at first, until I've settled my obligations and debts. If I'm not expelled, I might stay longer, but I don't know. It's like a game of chance: it could go well, or it could go badly.
Malagasy man

No Malagasy respondent said they (had) intended to apply for asylum in Mayotte, or that they sought to move onward to France. However, almost all of them expressed the desire to procure legal documents of some kind, facilitating residence and work in Mayotte. For the one respondent with dual Malagasy-Comorian nationality, the situation was more complicated. Taken to Mayotte irregularly by his mother at the age of two, he had been picked up by the authorities and deported to Madagascar after 26 years in Mayotte, despite not knowing many people in Madagascar or speaking good Malagasy. He wished to return to his family in Mayotte in a legal manner, perhaps through family reunification, but was unclear about the process to follow and his prospects for success.

> *"What is this "asylum" thing? I don't know at all. I'm just trying to escape poverty. My goal is simply to work and earn money to send back home."*
> **Malagasy man**

In contrast, the three non-Malagasy respondents all stated that France was their ultimate destination. Both respondents from the Horn of Africa had relatives there and had been told that arriving in Mayotte was the easiest path to asylum. The Ethiopian man spoke of reuniting with his brother in France and finding work there in civil engineering. The Somali man spoke of work and good access to services. The Comorian woman did not indicate that she had plans to apply for asylum, but nonetheless said that she hoped to go to France legally. **In spite of these hopes, and as was the case with the Malagasy respondents, these three respondents also faced great uncertainty and substantial obstacles to realising their aspirations.** The Comorian woman continued to seek the additional money she needed to make the onward journey to Mayotte, while the Somali man spoke of waiting for the smuggler to give the go-ahead, describing a prevailing context of bad seas and increased patrols.

> *My only task is to find the money I need. Every day, I look for little jobs. As soon as I have the money, I will call the intermediary and wait for his signal to leave…Madagascar was never a destination, just a stopover that turned into a trap.*
> **Comorian woman**

> *[I received information] that it was France, with a healthcare system, schools, work. The agent told me it was easier to get asylum by arriving in Mayotte than via the Mediterranean. Now I don't know what to believe anymore.*
> **Somali man**

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Madagascar has a complex and varied mixed movement landscape, coupling a liberal visa policy for foreigners with widespread and significant economic challenges. It is a point of departure and a transit location for people – both Malagasy and foreign – seeking better livelihoods and/or international protection in Mayotte. In that sense it is a part of the wider Western Indian Ocean Route (WIOR). While people transiting Madagascar on this route typically enter the country through legal means, the next stage of the journey is undertaken irregularly, under the auspices of smuggling networks, in boats that are often unsafe and overcrowded. This heightens people's vulnerability to scams, exploitation, and disasters at sea. Madagascar is also itself a (temporary) destination for those seeking international protection. This is exemplified by the case of the Pakistani Ahmadiyya who (largely) make up the caseload of UNHCR's local partner in-country, CDA, and who primarily seek to be resettled outside the region. The legal and institutional frameworks to govern these complex dynamics are still in an early stage of development, and appear under-resourced. Further evidence and support are therefore needed in a variety of areas, leading to the following recommendations for government, policy, development and programming actors:

- **Increase resources and coordination among authorities on Madagascar's northwest coast** to allow them to more effectively support vulnerable people on the move.

- **Accompany regular information sessions with counseling and psychosocial support for refugees and asylum seekers who are seeking resettlement.** In the ever-shifting and increasingly limited global resettlement landscape, refugees and asylum seekers need timely information from institutional sources, and at the same time should have access to specialised support and guidance to help them understand their options and process emotions such as hope and disappointment that are inherent to this process.

- **Expand regular pathways to Mayotte** through labour mobility initiatives in sectors with employment needs to decrease undocumented entry for those seeking work opportunities in Mayotte.

- **Advocate for expanded complementary protection and resettlement pathways.** As resettlement opportunities grow ever scarcer, the findings of this study are a reminder that vulnerable people in the most unexpected places are relying on them.

- **Establish a regional dialogue focusing on the WIOR.** This could take place through regional bodies such as the Indian Ocean Commission and/or the Southern African Development Community, and should also include departmental authorities from Mayotte. An important point for dialogue would be how to equitably expand the asylum and protection space in the East and Horn of Africa and Indian Ocean regions.

- **Continue support for Madagascar's national refugee and asylum legislation and infrastructure.** While Madagascar has shown encouraging willingness in this regard with first steps having been taken, a national asylum framework in Madagascar could allow refugees and asylum seekers more options beyond third-country resettlement.

- **Build the capacity of nationality-specific associations (Comorian, Somali, etc.) in Madagascar** to help them recognise, support, and refer vulnerable people on the move within their communities. Religious institutions and associations can also serve as a resource in this regard.

- **Expand quantitative research with refugees and migrants in Madagascar**, including in more hard-to-access departure points along Madagascar's northwest coast, to work towards establishing a larger evidence base on mixed movements from Madagascar to Mayotte.

MMC is a knowledge centre engaged in data collection, research, analysis, and policy and programming on mixed migration. MMC has regional hubs in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America, with a global team headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and based in several countries worldwide.

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

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