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**IT TOOLS AND METHODS
FOR MANAGING
MIGRATION FLOWS**

D3.5
The 'making of' of real-life mixed migration journeys arriving in the EU

Formation and materialisation of migration decisions

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Executive Summary

This deliverable is produced within Work Package-3 of the **ITFLOWS Project (IT Tools and Methods for Managing Migration Flows)** and presents the qualitative study of a set of 92 semi-structured interviews with migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees who moved along the **Eastern Mediterranean Route** (to Greece), the **Central Mediterranean Route** (to Italy), the **Western Mediterranean** and **Western African Routes** (to Spain), and the **Atlantic Air Route** (to Spain). It aims at having a better understanding of how individuals constantly negotiate and interact with policy-shaped macro/meso constraints and opportunities in different contexts (**origin, transit, host**) and at all stages of the journey (**departure, *en route*, arrival**), including in their gendered dimensions. Thus, it aims at getting a better grasp of the entire migratory process and how it is (re)shaped through consecutive and dynamically changing decisions taken across multiple contexts making up one's experience of (fragmented) journeys as a whole. The analysis particularly inquires into how decisions are formed and materialised in relation to three interrelated questions: (i) **whether to stay or move** (next); (ii) **where to move** (next), i.e., destination preferences; and (iii) **how to get there**, i.e., itinerary, means and modality of mobility.

Taking into account these three dimensions of one's decision-making, our analysis shows that approaches to and experiences of the journey (with the eventual arrival in the EU, in our case), significantly differ, and can be categorised in **three groups**.

In the first group are **those who had clearly intended to move to and stay in a non-EU destination**, but after their experience in the (first) host contexts, re-formed their mobility intentions as a result of a decision-making process separate from the one informing departure from the origin country. Their experience of 'transit' is in fact one of **longer-term settlement** in a host country, and only once they decide to move on (typically after having lived there for relatively long periods of time), the journey resumes, or rather, **a new journey starts**.

In the second group are **those who intended to reach 'Europe'** (even when vaguely defined) from the onset and had no intention of staying in another region or country, while having a more or less clear idea about the itinerary that they aimed to (or they should) follow. For those in this group, decision-making throughout the journey (and particularly when *en route*) does not revolve much around the choice to depart

or not, or where to go (next), but rather on **how to reach the next step in the journey**.

The third group is composed of those interviewees who, from the onset, and throughout a large part of the journey, had **no clearly defined intentions to reach/stay in/ move on from a concrete destination**, but had a rough direction in mind, and adopted **a flexible and step-by-step approach**. Their intentions and plans with regards to all three dimensions of decision-making eventually got incrementally clarified as their experience of the journey progressed. In these cases, consecutive migration decisions shape, and in turn are (largely) shaped by, non-linear migration journeys.

Overall, the approach to and the experience of departure, transit and arrival as well as the nature of decision-making processes unfolding in these different stages and contexts, and hence the 'making of' of the journey, show **variation**, even if different paths might eventually lead to similar migration outcomes (i.e., arrival in Greece, Italy or Spain in our case).

Whilst such variation sets the stage for the 'making of' of the journey, *diverse macro/meso factors in different contexts which inform decision-making* (re)appear at various stages of mobility. The **(geo)political context** appears as somewhat dominant at all stages of the various routes, may that be in the form of conflict, persecution or generalised 'rightlessness' in the face of rule of law deficiencies in origin and transit, or the migration- and asylum-specific policy regime in transit and arrival which can be either exclusionary or inclusive, so influencing the wish to move on or not. All of these can be experienced in the form of intense insecurity, which is augmented by **socio-economic and socio-cultural structures** informing intersectional disadvantages. At the meso level, the **family** plays a significant role in origin and transit, but its relevance (notably that of family back home) upon arrival seems to decline, or be reshaped in terms of **gendered power dynamics**, particularly on the CMR/WMR/WAR (i.e., in Italy and Spain).

The relevance of **smugglers** as actors feeding into the different facets of decision-making, instead, varies along routes, and depending on the particular approach to the journey. Further, how individuals conceive and experience their relationship with smugglers seem to differ: interviewees from African contexts mostly depict them as actors facilitating their movements and refer to ambivalent arrangements

with such actors, which, in some cases, indicate a blurring of lines between smuggling and trafficking, whilst all interviewees who moved along the EMR refer to the transaction between themselves and smugglers as a rather clearly defined one between two parties soliciting and providing a service (albeit often embedded in skewed power dynamics).

Besides economic resources, **social resources** such as friends or civil society organisations also play a crucial role at all stages. Finally, decision-making in origin, transit and arrival appears to take place under rather **limited or seemingly vague knowledge about concrete migration and asylum policies in future destination countries**, while factors pertaining to the overall context in these countries (e.g., safety, economy, jobs, public services) seem to play a notably deeper role than the workings of migration and asylum policies in shaping destination preferences.

This deliverable is organised as follows: The introduction gives an overview on the conceptual framework and methodology of this study. The following four sections present the findings of the analysis of the interviews, focusing on the decision-making processes shaping the journeys along the four observed routes, namely the Eastern Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean, Western Mediterranean and Western African, as well as the Atlantic Air Route. Each of these sections is structured along the various contexts/stages of the journey; namely, origin/departure, transit/en route, and host/arrival. The conclusions comparatively discuss findings across these routes.

Key words

Migrants' decision-making, migrants' agency, fragmented and dynamically evolving migration journeys, mixed-migration, Eastern Mediterranean Route, Central Mediterranean Route, Western Mediterranean Route, Western African Route, Atlantic Air Route, EU migration and asylum policy, sexuality and gender in migration

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Abbreviations

AAR	Atlantic Air Route
CMR	Central Mediterranean Route
CRI	Associazione della Croce Rossa Italiana
DPA	Data Protection Advisor
EMR	Eastern Mediterranean Route
FIZ	FIZ Karlsruhe – Leibniz-Institut für Informationsinfrastruktur
IAI	Istituto Affari Internazionali
ICG	Independent Gender Committee
IDT-UAB	Institute of Law and Technology - Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
IEB	Independent Ethics Board
ITFLOWS	IT Tools and Methods for Managing Migration Flows
LGBTQI+	Lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer/intersex
OCC	Associacio Open Cultural Center
OIT	Oxfam Italia Onlus
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SOGI	Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
UAB	Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
WAR	Western African Route
WMR	Western Mediterranean Route

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1. Introduction[1]

This deliverable is produced within Work Package-3 of the ITFLOWS Project (IT Tools and Methods for Managing Migration Flows), and together with Deliverable 3.2 (Okyay et al. 2021a) forms part of the qualitative strand of research conducted within this Work Package. Within the broader framework of the project, Work Package-3 focuses on the study of drivers and trajectories of mixed migration, aiming to further our understanding of the factors and processes across contexts of origin, transit and destination that shape mixed migration flows arriving in the EU. Through quantitative as well as qualitative research, Work Package-3 aims to contribute to both the technical and the policy objectives of the ITFLOWS project. The quantitative strand, through feeding into improved foresight, speaks more directly to the technical, i.e., prediction-related objectives of the project's EUMigraTool. The qualitative strand – to which this deliverable refers – through shedding further light on the operation of drivers across various contexts and at the individual level, speaks more closely to the policy-related objectives, as it aims to contribute to an improved governance of migration and asylum in the EU (and beyond) by providing in-depth insights into real-life migration decisions, experiences, and outcomes, as well as on who migrates, why and how, beyond a sheer focus on overall volumes of mixed migration flows.

The aim of the qualitative analysis presented in this deliverable is to develop a better understanding of how structural conditions across origin, transit, and host contexts, and factors operating at the individual level interact in informing migration decisions and journeys, and thereby shape the patterns and dynamics of mixed migration arriving in the EU and unfolding at an (inter)regional level. Thus, it is premised on an understanding of migration as a function of the mutually constitutive interaction between structure and agency. While (particularly) the macro and meso levels have been analysed in Deliverable 3.2, this deliverable focuses on the micro perspective: through the analysis of a set of 92 semi-structured

interviews (see lists of interviews in Annex I), *it aims at having a better understanding of how individuals, who have themselves undertaken migration journeys, constantly negotiate and interact with **policy-shaped macro/meso constraints and opportunities** in different contexts (origin, transit, host) and at all stages of the journey (departure, en route, arrival), including in their gendered dimensions*. Thus, it aims at getting a better grasp of the entire migratory process and trajectories and how they are (re)shaped through consecutive and dynamically changing decisions taken across multiple contexts making up one's experience of (fragmented) journeys as a whole.

In line with the objectives of the ITFLOWS project, the main focus is on examining the factors and processes that inform mixed migration flows that reach the EU, and hence, on the most relevant regions of origin and major routes identified from the perspective of the EU as a destination. The regions of origin and the migratory routes the qualitative analysis will focus on are: (i) from the Middle East and South-Central Asia along the so-called Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR); (ii) from West, East and North Africa along the so-called Central and Western Mediterranean Routes (CMR and WMR) and the Western African Route (WAR); and (iii) from Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) along the so-called Atlantic Air Route (AAR).[2]

The overall conceptual framework which has driven this study (Okyay et al. 2021b), has been published online as a Milestone of the ITFLOWS project, and is only briefly summarised here with a focus on aspects relating to decision-making, followed by a section which gives an overview on the methodology of this study. This introduction is then followed by four sections on the EMR, CMR, WMR and WAR, and AAR, while the conclusions comparatively discuss the findings.

1.1 Summary of conceptual framework

This study contributes to the literature which seeks to understand why, where and how people move, by providing a dynamic model which accounts for how

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[2] While these reflect the principal regions of origin of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees moving along these conventionally identified routes, it should be noted that migratory journeys and particular itineraries are often much less straightforward, as, for example, illustrated by journeys (also in our sample) originating from countries like Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that have crossed via the EMR and stopped (for the time being) in Greece.

individuals interact with policy-shaped macro- and meso-structures and thus shape their own migration processes through **continuous decision-making** across various contexts and stages of mobility, and by paying particular attention to the 'fragmented' (Collyer 2010) and 'non-linear' (Crawley et al. 2016) nature of journeys.

This understanding is situated in a turn of the literature, which – problematising a static view of migration determined by structural forces and a limited role attributed to agency – has advocated for conceptualising migration as a social process driven and shaped also (or rather, primarily) by the **mutually co-constitutive interplay between structural forces and individuals' aspirations, perceptions, experiences, and capabilities** (*inter alia*, Carling and Collins 2018; de Haas 2010). While agency, i.e., individual decisions and actions, plays a role in shaping migration processes, it is understood as being informed (and limited) by structural constraints as well as by perceived or real opportunities and available information. In this vein, de Haas (2010, 16) has suggested a 'conceptualisation of individual migration as a function of capabilities and aspirations within a given set of structural constraints'. Individual capabilities encompass 'the social, human and material capital individuals are able to mobilise in order to migrate' (de Haas 2010, 16). As posited by Van Hear (2006), the extent to which migrants can mobilise social and economic resources or convert different kinds of resources according to concrete needs arising during the migratory process significantly shapes not only whether one can entertain the idea of moving or how to do so (i.e., means, modalities, itineraries), but also destination choices within one's reach. Accounting for capabilities provides a better grasp of the different tools individuals have at their disposal for manoeuvring when faced with structural constraints. A focus on aspirations on the other hand, incorporates individual preferences and perceptions of constraints as well as opportunities into the analytical framework (de Haas 2010, 17), allowing a better understanding of (differences in) the ways in which people respond to and interact with structural factors.

This study builds on such an understanding of migration as a social process driven and shaped by the **interplay between structural elements and individual (and group) agency**. The key element identified by the analysis is the constant, two-way

interaction between structure and individual aspirations, perceptions, experiences and capabilities that informs migration decisions as well as the materialisation of such decisions through actions, and thereby shapes the outcomes of this social process. Thus, macro/meso structures,[3] to which the concept of migration drivers closely speak to, does not automatically or exclusively "cause" migration or shape its volume, direction or form. It also implies that the same set of structural factors does not inform migration decisions (e.g., to move or to stay, the choice of destination, the means, modality and itinerary of movement) in a uniform manner. It is the individual (or group) differences – which might themselves be structured as in differences pertaining to e.g., gender, ethnicity, class – in preferences, aspirations, (social and economic) resources and experiences that shape the ways in which individuals respond to and interact with structural shifts, opportunities and constraints.

While acknowledging that the individual dimension and the structural dimension mutually shape one another, also when looking into migration processes, for analytical purposes, we follow the definition of **drivers** proposed by Van Hear et al. (2018, 930) as: those *structural factors* that 'shape the broader context within which aspirations and desires to migrate are formed and in which people make their migration decisions'. Migration journeys may entail multiple decision-making processes in different contexts, which is particularly the case for mixed migration flows. Therefore, our analysis inquires into the formation of decisions that shape and are shaped by the journey unfolding across different contexts – where individuals not only interact with different sets of structural elements operating in diverse ways, but also different sets of actors.

Our focus on continuous decision-making and the interplay between structural elements and individual (and group) agency is also situated in an understanding of '**fragmented journeys'** that are 'broken into a number of separate stages, involving

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[3] For a more detailed discussion on the conception of macro/meso structures this study relies on, please see Okyay et al. (2021b). We understand macro structures as to include broad (geo)political, socio-economic, security, developmental and environmental conditions in which individual decisions are embedded, and pay particular attention to changes in such conditions in spaces of mobility connecting origin, transit, destination and host contexts. At the social level, structures of patriarchy might play a significant role in decisions of who migrates to where and how, particularly relevant for an understanding of gendered migration experiences. Meso-structures include social (e.g., friends, other migrants), family, kinship and smuggling networks spanning the entire space of mobility.

varied motivations, legal statuses and living and employment conditions across multiple contexts (Collyer 2010, 275). A focus on the fluid, flexible and fragmented nature of the journey derives from the observation that real-life migration, contrary to dominant conceptions of human mobility, is often far from being a 'direct movement from A to B' (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016, 3; also see, Schapendonk 2013).

This implies that most of these journeys are characterised by **multiple decision-making processes** (as to move or to stay put, where to move, and how to move) across several contexts and in the face of changing conditions, dynamics, policies, constraints and opportunities. Besides shifting structural conditions, people's encounters and experiences formed during the journey might have a determining effect on, *inter alia*, people's intentions and destinations, which then shape the journey (and migratory outcomes) in return (see, *inter alia*, Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016, BenEzer and Zetter 2015). In some cases, periods spent in different locations might be considerably lengthy and intentions regarding settlement or onward movement change compared to one's initial plans, which requires thinking of 'serial migration of consecutive movements' rather than a single journey (Crawley et al. 2016, 28). This also implies that the motivations for one's first departure (typically from the country of origin) might be completely different than those culminating in the decision to move onward, while preferences as to one's intended destination change during long and multi-legged journeys (see, *inter alia*, Collyer 2010; Crawley et al. 2016; Gebrewold and Bloom 2016). All of this implies a stronger emphasis on understanding how motivations, intentions, plans, directions and destinations are (re)formed during the journey is needed.

Also, **policies** influence the broader structural context in which decisions are made. While the scope of and importance attached to migration policy – particularly in the EU – has been growing, whether and which policies play a role in shaping migration is still debated in the literature. **Migration policies** are largely defined as those instruments that are 'established in order to affect behaviour of a target population (i.e. potential migrants) in an intended direction' (Czaika and de Haas 2013, 489). Despite their growing scope, evidence suggests that migration policies' capacity to generate their intended effects remains rather limited, particularly when it comes

to 'the overall volume and long-term trends of migration' (de Haas 2011, 27; see also, Czaika and de Haas 2011, 2013; de Haas and Vezzoli 2011).

This does not mean, however, that policies, in general terms, do not generate effects on migration processes and trends. In comparing the role played by the **wider spectrum of policies** as opposed to those that target migration, De Haas (2011, 24) has distinguished between 'the preponderant role of states in migration processes' and 'the comparatively more marginal role of specific immigration and emigration policies'. Echoing this, the literature points out a greater influence of policies, such as those in the labour, macroeconomic, welfare, foreign, trade, or aid realms as well as that of colonial legacies on migration (Czaika and de Haas 2013, 489). When it comes to countries in conflict, a greater role can be attributed also to geopolitical dynamics and multilateral or peacebuilding efforts. While restrictive migration and asylum policies intend to influence the direction of movement by attempting to deter people from moving towards a particular country, the analysis by Thielemann (2004, 3) suggests that 'key determinants of an asylum seeker's choice of host country are historical, economic and reputational factors that largely lie beyond the reach of asylum policy makers'. Similarly, in a qualitative study relying on in-depth interviews and focus groups with migrants and refugees (who arrived to Europe in the early-mid 2010s), Hagen-Zanker and Malett (2016) found that in the EU context, expectations and perceptions about access to education, other essential services, and employment play a much greater role in determining one's destination than migration policies.

Control and deterrence policies often generate effects that 'reshape' or redirect particular migration dynamics rather than preventing or stopping migration in absolute terms (Hagen-Zanker and Malett 2016). According to de Haas (2011, 25-27), **restrictive policies** generate 'substitution effects', which include diversion of flows to contexts with less restrictive policies; shifts in migration channels and means, e.g., from regular to irregular; adjustments in the timing of onward movement (i.e., expediting or postponing); or discouraging return. Within the EU context, Hagen-Zanker and Malett (2016) found that such policies seem to have played a role in redirecting some migrants' destination to a country that is perceived more welcoming relative to more restrictive alternatives, which was particularly the

case for those who did not have a clearly defined destination.

This is in line with our approach of looking into migration dynamics against a broader background of conditions and policies (beyond a binary pair of origin and destination), in which the interlocking of the political, economic, security and migration policy landscapes in different contexts – where the journeys unfold and are formed – plays a combined role in influencing migration decisions and dynamics. In short, policies *per se* cannot shape overall volumes or long-term trends of migration, as migration decisions are informed by a complex combination of factors that are beyond the range of influence of a single policy area. However, policies – in particular those beyond the realm of migration – play a role in influencing the broader structural context in which migration decisions are made, even if it proves challenging to establish clear causal mechanisms between one factor, i.e., the policy framework in a particular domain, and the complex process of migration that is shaped by the interaction between several elements at the macro, meso and micro level.

Finally, as noted in the ITFLOWS Gender Action Plan (Boland and Tschalaer 2021), **dimensions of gender and sexuality** are central to any discussion on migration opportunities (including access to migration networks or resources) or destination choices, as societal and political gender norms and expectations structure immigration and integration politics, policies and practices. These norms are often signalled as "drivers" in origin countries, but in fact are in play throughout the migration journey, including upon arrival to the destination, where migrants are often shouldered with the responsibility of "adapting" to the sociocultural context in so-called integration processes. Moreover, gendered and sexualised experiences and processes of migration to the EU are **influenced by colonial histories** (Nair 2013). In other words, in a postcolonial context, external intervention and transnational globalisation processes driven by neoliberal capitalist regimes are interlinked with migration, recreating or entrenching asymmetrical relationships between the Global South and North that can be underpinned by racialised dynamics at all stages of the journey/in all contexts. Finally, it is crucial to consider how gender identity and sexual orientation intersect with dimensions of **age, class, ethnicity, religion, race and ableism**. Consequently, macro and meso factors, as

well as policies which influence these factors, do not only impact differently on women, men and individuals of diverse Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI), but the dynamics between these factors are also experienced in diverse ways by individuals.

From an **individual perspective of women, men and diverse SOGI individuals**, factors on the macro and meso level intersect in diverse ways to influence the why, when, how, and where of migration, which is captured well by the concept of **intersectionality**, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989). As soon as a person becomes a migrant, an additional layer is added to intersectionality. This raises important questions: How do women, men and diverse SOGI individuals experience their intersection in country of origin and throughout the journey? Furthermore, as Marchetti has asked, 'how does the migration–gender nexus affect the negotiation of duties, expectations, possibilities and opportunities that apply differently to men and women along their migratory experience?' (Marchetti 2018, 445).

Much of the literature on gender and migration has focused on the experiences of **female migrants** in receiving countries (migrant **domestic and care work, sex work**, as well as how migration has shaped gender relations and identities), while less attention has been paid to *pre-departure and transit contexts*, not only as relates to women but also men and LGBTQI+ individuals (Gazzotti 2021). Work to date also requires further examination of gender in relation to irregular migration at all journey stages or contexts (Schrover et al. 2009, 9). Through integrating a gender perspective to our analyses, we also aim to contribute to the literature on gender and migration by shedding some new light on these considerations to which relatively less attention has been paid so far.

1.2 Methodology

Through the interviews with migrants, asylum seekers and refugees that are undertaking the journeys, we aim to have a **better understanding of the individual stories, perceptions, and experiences**, and how the individual dimension interacts in informing the process of migration with policy-shaped macro- and meso- structures as well as the gender relations within which they are situated.

Interviews

Thus, the interviews are conceived of as **semi-structured** as their aim has been close to what McIntosh and Morse (2015, 4) have labelled 'descriptive/corrective', that is to:

> evaluate the dominant discursive representation of an experience by comparing it with participants' actual experiences. This type of interview uniquely juxtaposes what is known about an experience (i.e., established knowledge in the literature), or known only from the privileged perspectives of others (e.g., those persons who represent others, such as researchers reporting on the vulnerable, invisible groups), with the perspectives of those whose views are typically absent or under-represented and who have actual material knowledge of this experience. [...] The outcome of this interview research is to confirm, refute, or elaborate upon the assumptions of the frame. The intention is that the participants' actual experiences of the phenomenon will act as a corrective to the assumptions in the dominant discourse.

The interview **sample** has been chosen in line with this aim (see further details below). Whilst quantitative methods typically aim at representative/random samples, the opposite is the case when using a qualitative method such as semi-structured interviews. As Valentine has pointed out, 'the aim of an interview is not to be representative (a common but mistaken criticism of this technique) but to understand how individual people experience and make sense of their own lives' (Valentine 1997, 111). In our case, the aim has been to improve our understanding of how people 'experience and make sense of their lives' particularly along the diverse trajectories this larger research project looks at. Thus, complementing the quantitative strand of research within Work Package-3 that focuses more sharply on identifying patterned relationships between macro-level drivers and overall migration volumes and on providing insights into future mixed migration trends by drawing on these patterns, this approach **gives space to the individual and her/his voice, agency, and decision-making**, and allows us to shed light on how (typically policy-shaped, gendered, and context-specific) drivers operate and are processed at the individual level in shaping real-life migration projects.

The questionnaire has been structured in six broad sections:

1. Introductory questions on demographic/social profile and basic chronology

of the journey

2. Initial decision-making: deciding for departure and destination

3. Preparing for departure

4. Experience and decision-making during the journey

5. Experience and decision-making in the EU/plans for further movement in the EU

6. Feedback

Compliance with ethical, legal, and data protection requirements

As conducting the interviews with migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees has been one of the principal research activities involving **participation of humans** (and vulnerable groups in particular) within the ITFLOWS project, utmost attention has been paid to ensure that the research activity fully complies with the **ethical, legal and data protection requirements** (as also required by the European Commission). In particular, Work Package-3 partners involved in designing, conducting, and analysing the interviews (IAI, UAB, CRI, OCC, OIT) and Work Package-2 partners responsible for ensuring ethical compliance of ITFLOWS research (IDT-UAB and FIZ), together with the ITFLOWS Independent Ethics Board (IEB), Independent Gender Committee (IGC), as well as the Data Protection Advisor (DPA) have strongly collaborated in carrying out extensive preparatory work to ensure ethical and legal compliance of the research activity before the fieldwork commenced. This collaborative work conducted by the abovementioned partners has covered all the different dimensions and stages of the research activity, including *inter alia*, composition of the sample, design of the interview grid, formation of interviewing teams, assessment of ethical, legal, human rights and data protection risks and issues that may arise during the interviews as well as in the post-interview transcription and data analysis stage, and measures and guidelines designed to mitigate such potential risks.

More concretely, an **internal guide** (Teodoro and Guillén 2021b) detailing techniques and measures to be taken in order to meet the requirements to ensure

the **protection of personal data**, including the 'Anonymisation techniques document', has been prepared (see below further details on the two-stage anonymisation process entailed in this document). In addition to the anonymisation techniques, this internal document also provides guidance on the data protection policies to be taken into account while carrying out and analysing the interviews and following the completion of these tasks, technical and organisational measures to safeguard rights and freedoms of research participants, as well as security measures to protect personal data, e.g., related to storage and transfer of data (Teodoro and Guillén 2021b).

As part of this preparatory work, another internal guide (Teodoro and Guillén 2021a) including procedures, guidelines, and templates to ensure ethical and legal compliance of the research activity covering all other aspects than the above-mentioned guide on data protection has been prepared under the supervision and lead of Work Package-2 ethical lead partners, and in collaboration with the IEB, ICG and the DPA. This **internal guide** includes: **a)** Informed Consent procedures for the participation of humans; **b)** Template of the Informed Consent Form and Information Sheets; **c)** Recruitment Plan; **d)** Measures to protect vulnerable individuals/groups and minimise the risk of their stigmatisation; **e)** Incidental Findings Policy; and **f)** Gender Policy (Teodoro and Guilléen 2021a). To make sure that the interviewing teams as well as the analysts were fully informed and prepared in terms of meeting the ethical, legal and data protection requirements, an **Ethics Handbook** bringing together all the necessary guidance and procedures was produced before the interviews kicked off, which was later updated with the inclusion of the 'Two-step incidental findings transcription procedure' (Guillén and Teodoro 2021). Further, a half-day **internal training session** covering all these issues was pursued with all partners involved in carrying out and analysing the interviews and the ethical lead partners, while the civil society partners (i.e., the interviewing teams) signed the Gender Policy (in Teodoro and Guillén 2021a) before fieldwork commenced.

In addition to these guidelines and templates tailored to particular ethical requirements to be met in the research activity on which this deliverable draws (i.e., interviews with migrants, asylum seekers and refugees), our work also draws on the

relevant ethical guidance entailed in the **ITFLOWS report on international and European legal frameworks on migrants and refugees** (Xanthaki et al. 2021), as well as the **ITFLOWS Gender Action Plan** (Boland and Tschalaer 2021).

All interviews have been based on **free and informed consent** and have been audio-recorded. Once the civil society partner (i.e., the interviewing teams) completed the transcription, the audio files have been deleted. These transcripts have been then safely stored on the NGOs' premises through encryption, and **have not been shared with any third party**, and will be destroyed at the end of the project. To protect the interviewees by ensuring their anonymity, a **two-stage anonymisation process** has been strictly applied: **firstly**, the civil society partner has produced the transcript from which it has deleted personal data. The transcripts after the first stage of anonymisation have been shared in an encrypted format only with the members of the IAI and UAB teams responsible for the qualitative analysis of the interviews, on which this deliverable is based. **Secondly**, IAI and UAB teams have further assessed these transcripts so as to make sure that the transcripts do not identify research participants nor make them identifiable. To this end, following the minimisation and generalisation principles, the two teams deleted further personal data (if any) and any other information that might lead to the identification of the persons. Only the transcripts after the second stage of anonymisation have been kept on file (in an encrypted format), and have been used for the analysis which followed.

Before starting the analysis using the atlas.ti software confirmation was obtained from the IDT-UAB and FIZ that it was an ethically and legally-compliant collaboration platform for the analysis of the transcripts. Access to the anonymised transcripts used for the analysis has been limited only to the IAI (interviews conducted in Greece and Italy) and UAB (interviews conducted in Spain), and were not shared with any third party, including other members of the ITFLOWS Consortium.

Experience of the interviews by the civil society partners

As indicated above, the interviews were pursued by ITFLOWS civil society partners involved in this task, whilst the analysis of the interviews has been carried out by

the research partners IAI and UAB. **Civil society partners** were asked to provide **de-briefs** on their experience of and reflections on the interviews. In doing so, the aim was to help the research team to take the issues raised by the civil society partners and eventual limitations into account when analysing the interviews, drawing conclusions, and providing insights derived from the experience of the interviews conducted within the framework of ITFLOWS that might be useful for future research activities. This section therefore briefly highlights relevant issues that emerged in the de-briefs of the three civil society partners (OCC, OIT, CRI).

First of all, all three organisations reported that the (personal) link which field workers had with migrants was crucial in involving them in the interviews, reducing the stress on the side of the interviewees, and in **building trust** between interviewer and interviewee. This relationship can also be established through the cultural mediator and/or interpreter present in the interviews. In addition to this, conducting the interviews in a known location also improved their quality. OCC (2022, 9-10) in particular has pointed out that

> relevant 'motivation factors' to participating in the interview have been: the familiarity with OCC or the external organisation making the referral; an established previous relationship with the interviewer, the interpreter or the field worker who made the referral; the food vouchers as an incentive; and a personal motivation and desire to share stories and opinions of the European Union's reception policies. On the other side, 'opposition factors' to participate in the interview have been: the date of arrival in the country: new arrivals were less prone to participate in the interview; the legal status: recognised refugees were more comfortable in participating than [...] [irregular] migrants; a low level of education [...] prevented a comprehensive understanding of the ITFLOWS project and its aim; country of origin and gender: women from Sub-Saharan countries were found impossible to convince to participate.

Some of the interviewees also reported that they were participating in order to contribute to the improvement of services for migrants and refugees, whilst others displayed fear that the interview might negatively impact their own asylum procedure. OCC also reported that the conduct of interviews by women facilitated a smooth and sincere conversation including on sensitive questions with both female and male interviewees. OCC reported two **incidental findings**, following which, it followed the ITFLOWS Incidental Findings Policy and the ITFLOWS Incidental

Findings Procedure (Teodoro and Guillén 2021a, 16, 50-52), while the OCC and IAI, in consultation with the ethical lead partners, activated the *Two-Step Incidental Findings Transcription Procedure* (Guillén and Teodoro 2021).

Trust was also built during the interview, and interviewees became more confident towards section 3 of the questionnaire (preparing for (initial) departure): "This is probably because, up to that point, the hard questions from the past are gone and the interviewee has understood the good nature of the questionnaire and the project" (OCC 2022, 20). OIT and CRI reported that almost all interviewees who had spent time in Libya requested not to answer questions on Libya. Indeed, they (OIT/CRI 2022, 2) highlighted that most

> of the respondents were beneficiaries of humanitarian corridors because they were evacuated from Libya. They were reluctant to share their experience and this part of the interview was not included in order to avoid revictimization. In fact, most have been victims of abuse and harassment in prison camps and some have been separated from their families.

The **Informed Consent Form**[4] has been identified by all civil society partners as constituting a challenge, as interviewing teams were met with reluctance/ resistance on the side of potential interviewees to sign the consent form. This was especially the case when the interviewee did not personally know the NGO, the person who referred the interviewee to the NGO, the interpreter/cultural mediator or the interviewer (OCC 2020, 21). In all three countries, one of the main difficulties reported related to the length and the degree of the specificity entailed in the form, which was particularly the case when the interviewees had lower educational levels or were relatively unfamiliar with written forms and/or the concept of scientific

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[4] It should be noted that the informed consent procedures have been designed in line with the legal framework of the European General Data Protection Regulation. In addition, based on the insights drawn from previous research (involving interviews with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in particular) highlighted in the literature, the challenges that interviewing teams might encounter and indications as to how to best overcome such challenges were taken into careful consideration in tailoring the informed consent procedures and templates to the needs and exigencies of the particular research activity (see Teodoro and Guillén 2021a, 6-12). In particular, these procedures considered different cultural backgrounds and education levels, fear that signed documents might be linked to asylum claims or lead to persecution back home, general suspicion vis-a-vis authorities, etc. Therefore, while prioritising the use of simple, clear and easily understandable language in the written forms and underlining the free and voluntary nature of consent (as well as the individuals' right to withdraw consent at any time without facing any kind of repercussion), the procedures also included the possibility of oral consent (Ibid.).

research. Another major difficulty rose due to the request of a signature, which led some interviewees to perceive a 'contradiction between the declared and explained anonymous nature of the interview and the actual request of a signature, along with name and surname, on a hard copy' (OCC 2022, 21). An exception was constituted by the participants from Latin America who viewed the Informed Consent Form as a "written agreement between the parties" and hence, as demonstrating professionality and assurance for respect of participants' privacy.

In cases where the request of a signature constituted a major obstacle, the interviewees were presented with the option of oral consent, yet, even stronger resistance was shown for the oral version (as reported by the OCC). OCC reports two cases in Spain where the potential interviewee refused to sign the document and withdrew from the interview, while OIT/CRI report similar difficulties also with regard to audio-recording (OIT/CRI 2022, 1):

> Many people have in fact declined ITFLOWS invitation and, among those interviewed, many have shown distrust due to the length of the Informed Consent Form and there are those who have not given consent to the registration or those who have given it after a long reflection.

Some participants with lack of schooling also felt embarrassed going through a long text in front of the interviewers. The interviewers took their time to walk the candidates through the consent form, clarifying one by one concepts that were not clear, explaining how the form aims to protect them and safeguard their rights, describing the measures and procedures in place to ensure anonymity and confidentiality despite the signing of a hard copy document. This is why, as reported by OCC (2022, 22), at times, the process of signing the interview forms 'took over 30 minutes of negotiations and discussion'. This effort, together with the help from and important role played by the interpreter/cultural mediator in clarifying doubts, giving assurances, and building trust helped overcome the challenges related to the consent form.

Another obstacle was the initial question *'as to which **gender** do you identify?'*. For many interviewees (particularly men), it 'has been challenging to explain why gender plays a role in the questionnaire and why it has to be specifically addressed' (OCC 2022, 23). Based on the experience of conducting over 60 interviews, OCC

reported that '[o]verall, the prevalent impression is that participants understood the question as totally irrelevant' (OCC 2022, 23) and had difficulties in answering follow-up questions such as *'Do you think being *male/female/other* has made a difference in terms of your decision to leave?'*, also because they were not familiar with the concept of 'gender' itself.

It should also be noted that some of the interpreters/cultural mediators had a feeling of powerlessness after the interviews, as they could not help interviewees who asked for more information, support and help after the interviews. OCC (2022, 26-27) reports that 'the cultural mediators advised, for future projects, the compilation of an extensive list of organisations that provide basic needs services – i.e. food, accommodation, legal or psychological support – for each location' would be useful.[5]

In all cases, the composition of the **sample** had been re-adjusted in coordination with IAI and UAB to ensure a **gender balance** (as foreseen in the Recruitment Plan in Teodoro and Guillén 2021a) while adapting to challenges that emerged during the fieldwork in terms of the feasibility of access to certain groups in specific interviewing locations (e.g., access to female interviewees from Sub-Saharan Africa in Spain, see further details below). Re-adjustments were also made to react to **changing trends and challenges**, particularly those also posed by the **COVID-19** pandemic. For example, arrivals in Greece (particularly the islands) declined over the course of the interviewing period, and on the basis of observations made and conversations held in the field, OCC reports that 'it emerged that the main reason behind the lack of arrivals are pushbacks' (OCC 2022, 12). Other reasons were connected to the closure of borders (for example migrants could not fly - in an authorised way - to Turkey due to COVID-related travel restrictions, the same applies to travel on the Atlantic Air Route), as well as to the information provided

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[5] It should be noted that in cases of incidental findings, as foreseen in the pre-established Incidental Findings Policy and the ITFLOWS Incidental Findings Procedure (Teodoro and Guillén, 2021a, 16, 50-52), the civil society partners informed the participants 'about the specialised services available at […] [their] disposal, the applicable national referral system, and the role of law enforcement agencies' as well as the contact information to access such services. However, outside such cases, the interviewees potentially also expected to receive more generalised information about basic needs services. Thus, a generalised list of basic services as a standardised practice might improve further research activities involving migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

by asylum seekers and migrants in Greece on the harsh living conditions, who reported that they 'try to prevent family members and friends from coming or strongly suggest they take another route' (OCC 2022, 13).

Sample

As pointed out before, **the design of the interview sample neither followed a random sampling method, nor aimed at being representative** of all migration flows. Rather, as will be elaborated in this section, it has been chosen with clear criteria responding to research needs. **Within the limits** posed by this approach, generalised **comparative findings regarding *patterns* across routes can be drawn** as the sample of 92 semi-structured interviews is large for qualitative interviews (this also applies to each arrival/current EU host country where the interview sample contains at least 30 interviewees, but not for example for transit or origin countries where we do not reach this number). At the same time, it should also be pointed out that such **findings need to be qualified in so far as they rely on how interviewees recollect, remember and narrate their respective experiences** in departure, *en route*, and upon arrival. Indeed, particularly the interviews on the CMR show that many interviewees do not want to remember and narrate their experience in Libya, for example.

Following the pre-established sampling criteria and in line with dynamically introduced readjustments so as to reflect changing arrival trends or difficulties in accessing certain groups and/or nationalities on the field, **a total of 92 semi-structured interviews** have been conducted by three civil society partners in the ITFLOWS project in **Greece, Italy** and **Spain**. Specifically, 30 interviews have been conducted between April and November 2021 by the OCC in three different locations in Greece (including mainland and island). In Spain, the OCC has conducted 30 interviews between August 2021 and January 2022 in four different locations (including mainland and island). In Italy, a total of 32 interviews in nine different locations has been conducted by CRI and OIT between May and December 2021. All interview lists can be found in Annex I.

In **defining the profile of research participants in each country**, a number of factors related to research purposes as well as ethical and legal compliance of the

participant Recruitment Plan (Teodoro and Guillén 2021a) has been taken into account. The following paragraphs elaborate on these factors in relation to the concrete research objectives of this deliverable (for more information on how they link to the larger project rationales, please consult Okyay et al. 2021b).

While no strict **age** group distribution criteria were applied in composing the sample, following the Recruitment Plan (Teodoro and Guillén 2021a), interviews have been conducted only with **adult** migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Minors of age or persons whose legal age cannot be established, as well as people who are already identified as belonging to especially vulnerable groups (e.g., identified victims of trafficking) have been excluded. In terms of the age distribution, as can be seen in Figure 1, while interviewees in the AAR are spread throughout all age groups, interviewees from the EMR were mainly in their twenties and thirties, and less in their forties; interviewees from the CMR were mainly in their twenties and thirties; and interviewees on the WMR/WAR were mainly in their twenties.

Figure 1. Age group of interviewees
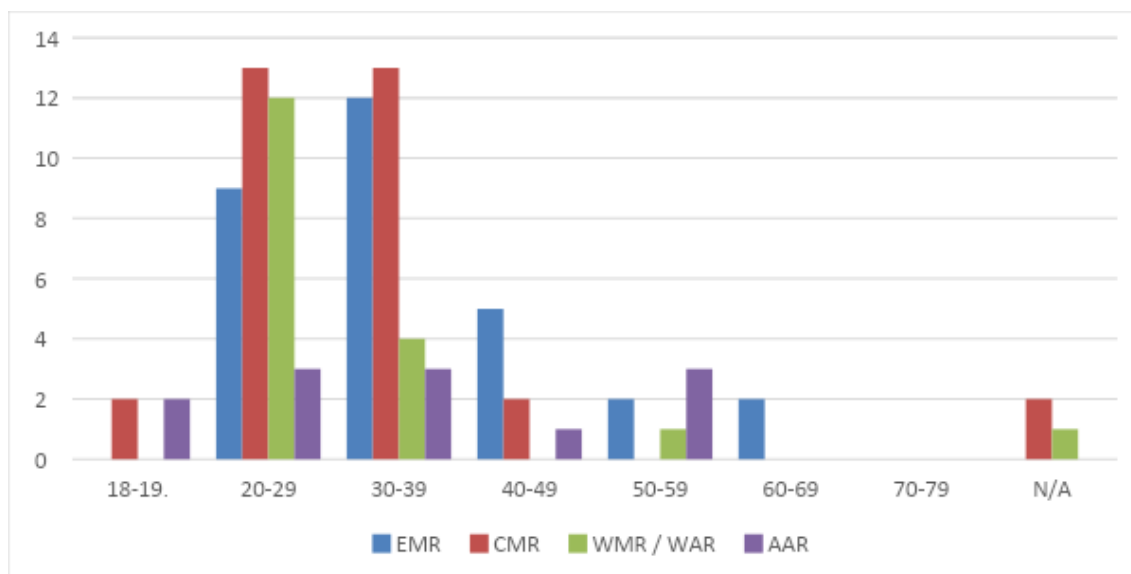
Source: own compilation

Except for Venezuelan, Colombian and Honduran nationals **entering Spain in an authorised way** (while displaying patterns of overstaying temporary visas and significant increase in asylum applications in the EU/Spain in recent years, see Okyay et al. 2021a for further details on these patterns), the participants have been selected from among those migrants, asylum seekers and refugees **who arrived in**

the EU member state under consideration without authorisation (see footnote 7 below for further details on the reasons behind principally targeting persons who have irregularly arrived and/or applied for international protection in the EU – from particular nationalities).

While the exact **female/male ratio** varies according to the EU country of arrival, in overall terms, available statistics show a considerably **larger share of male migrants**, refugees and asylum seekers arriving in the EU over the past decade. While keeping this demographic in mind, in order to obtain **gender parity** (as foreseen in the Recruitment Plan in Teodoro and Guillén 2021a) and to make sure that the voice of female migrants, asylum seekers and refugees is heard, we sought one female-identifying interviewee per every three male-identifying interviewee in the sample design and participant selection, ultimately ensuring that 36% of our overall sample consists of female-identifying interviewees.[6] As Figure 2 highlights, there were more women interviewees than men on the AAR (58%), whilst the gender balance declines from 40 % of women in the EMR to 31 % of women in the CMR, and 22 % of women in the WMR/WAR . Two interviewees, one man in the CMR and one man on the AAR respectively identified as LGTBQI+

Figure 2. Gender of interviewees
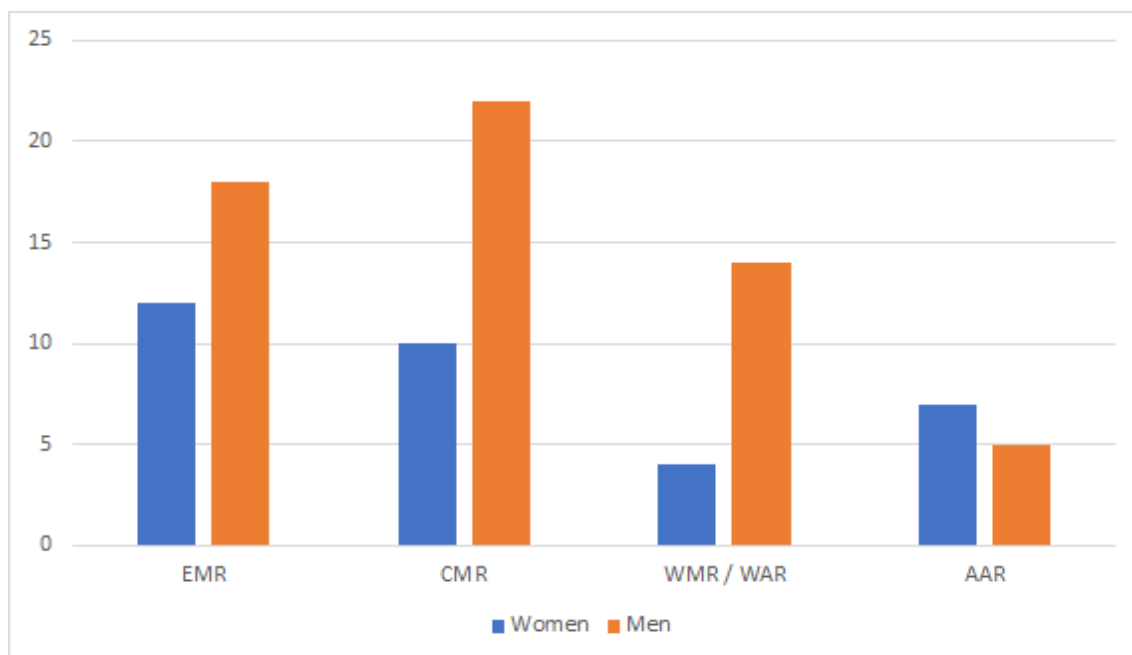
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[6] Going forward described as man or woman according to the migrants' indication.

Given the **challenges in recruiting or accessing Sub-Saharan women interviewees who moved along the WMR-WAR routes** and arrived in Spain, the selected participant origin countries of Mali, Guinea and Senegal were expanded to include Ghana in order to interview at least one Sub-Saharan woman (over 25 organisations were contacted in seeking this demographic). Researchers asked OCC to conduct additional inquiries among NGOs and fieldworkers in different (mainland and island) locations in Spain as to the nature of this underrepresentation or inaccessibility of Sub-Saharan women, whose responses as to the family and gender dimensions of Sub-Saharan migration on the WMR-WAR correspond to the later analysis of interviews with the migrants themselves.

While the sample does not aim to be representative, participants from **particular nationalities have been purposefully targeted** in order to: (i) reflect the main countries of origin accounting for a larger share of irregular arrivals and/or asylum applications recorded over the past decade in Greece (EMR), Italy (CMR) and Spain (WMR-WAR and the AAR, the latter being represented in protection claims lodged in the EU, and not in irregular arrivals); (ii) ensure overlap with the case countries selected for the analyses on which the Deliverable 3.2 (Okyay et al. 2021a) were based so as to be able to put in closer dialogue the two tasks as foreseen by the conceptual framework (Okyay et al. 2021b); and (iii) ensure a certain degree of coverage of origin countries that are increasingly reflected in arrival figures in the last few years so as to shed some light on more recent and/or emerging flows (e.g., from Egypt and Iran to Italy), and on those journeys that tend to receive less attention (e.g., from DRC to Greece) than mixed migratory movement from predominant and somewhat established countries of origin along particular routes (e.g., from Syria to Greece).[7] The origin countries of all 92 interviewees can be seen

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[7] The focus on individuals who completed migration journeys from those countries of origin that account for a larger share of irregular arrivals and/or international protection claims lodged in the EU, and who, upon arrival, have experienced the asylum process, reception conditions and the path to socioeconomic inclusion in the main EU member states of first entry (with possible differences in their experience depending on, *inter alia*, their legal status, e.g., recognised refugees, asylum applicants waiting for the –final– outcome of the asylum process, those who have not – yet – applied for asylum and are in an irregular situation) is in line with the ITFLOWS project's overall objectives of contributing to a better understanding of (past and future) patterns, dynamics, drivers and composition of mixed flows arriving in the EU, particularly with a view to enhancing the preparedness of first-line assistance and reception, while contributing to improved governance of second level reception, asylum processing, and longer term integration. Furthermore, given our focus on the different contexts and stages of the journey (i.e., on origin, alternative destination, and transit countries) the choice of a particular set of origin countries was also motivated by shedding further

in Figure 3.

Figure 4 instead provides information on the **length of the respective journeys** (the entire time spent from the moment of first departure from the origin country to the moment of last arrival in the current EU host country). Figure 4 highlights that for the majority of interviewees who moved along the AAR (83%) and for half of those who moved along the EMR (50%) the journey lasted between 0-3 months, while the majority of interviewees travelling on the CMR (66%) or WMR/WAR (61%) took more than 6 months to complete the journey from the origin country to the arrival country in the EU.

Figure 3. Country of origin of interviewees
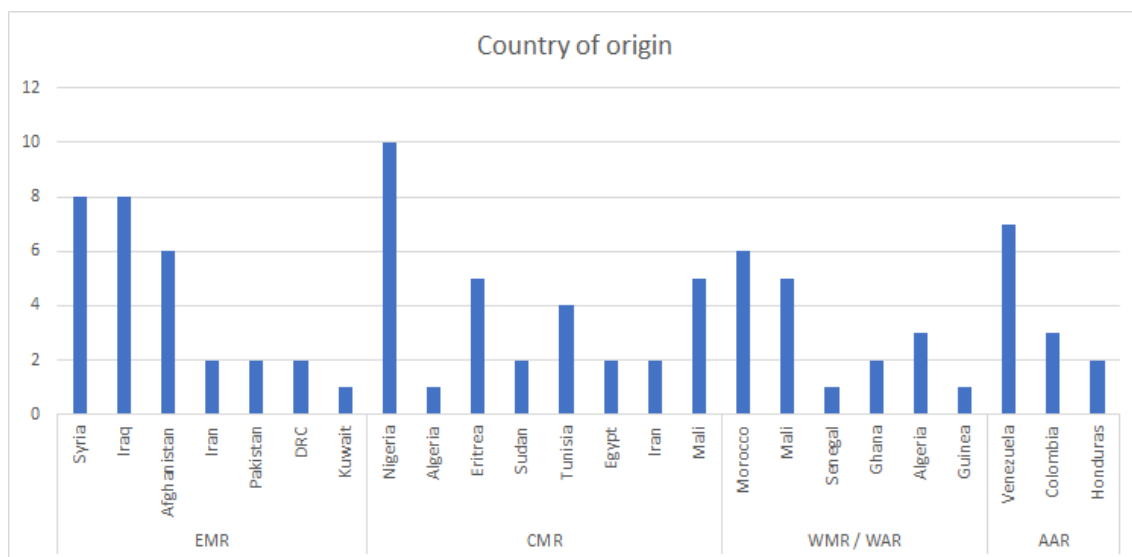
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light on the conditions faced, experiences lived, and decisions made in these diverse contexts and by eventually providing insights on how EU engagement and cooperation with these countries can be planned better, and rendered more effective, human rights-compliant, and sustainable. Work on drawing key policy implications and proposals from Work Package-3 research, including its qualitative strand and this particular deliverable, is currently ongoing under ITFLOWS Work Package-8, and will lead to a dedicated policy brief on drivers later in the project's lifecycle, which is expected to also feed into the other upcoming thematic policy briefs.

Figure 4. Length of journey
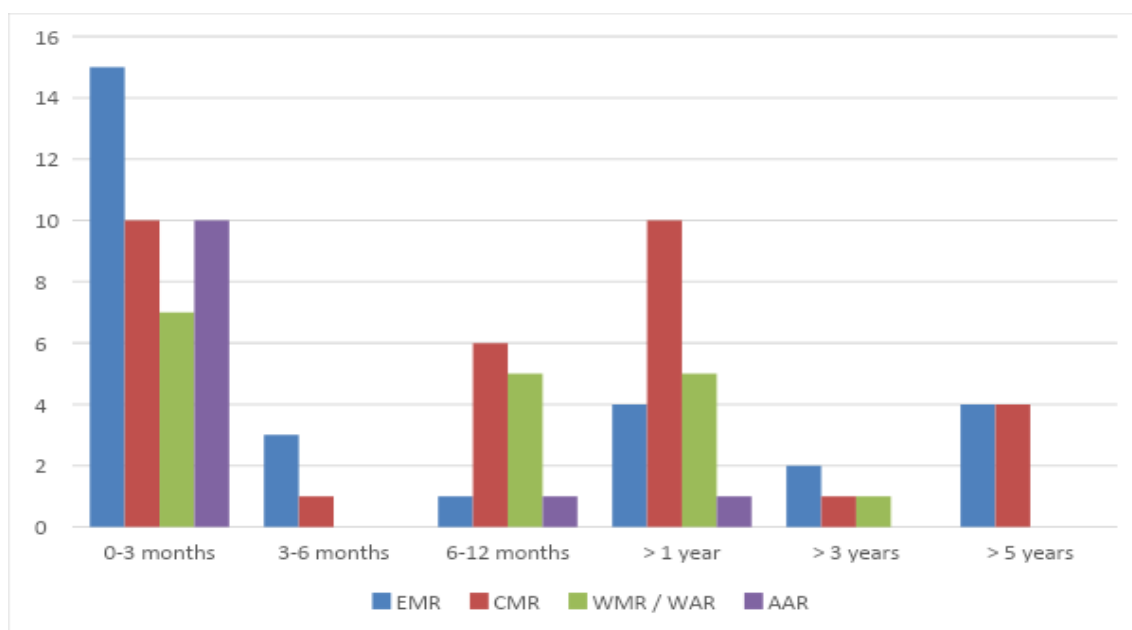
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Depending on the feasibility of access on the field, the interviewing teams have included among the research participants people who have **arrived in a less recent past** as well as those who have "completed" the journeys **more recently**. One of the reasons behind including more recently arrived migrants and asylum seekers to the sample was to have the opportunity of exploring the implications generated by newly emerging or shifting developments on mixed migration journeys arriving in the EU (particularly compared to the period in which the so-called "migration crisis" unfolded) such as: the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing mobility restrictions, as well as the effects of e.g., potential shifts in the (geo)political context, migration and asylum-specific policy regimes (in some cases also related to/justified by the pandemic), smuggling dynamics, routes and methods of cross-border movement on the decisions and (changing) opportunity-constraint structures faced and perceived by people on the move. In addition, the inclusion in the sample of interviewees with lengthier/shorter periods of stay in the (current) EU country of arrival was also motivated by the objective to account for variance in the legal status (typically linked to which phase of the asylum process one is at), and to gain insights into respective experiences of the asylum process, reception and integration - and implications deriving from such variance for decision-making as to long-term stay in country of arrival versus future onward movement. Figure 5

highlights that most of the interviewees arrived in the 2017-2021 period; Figure 6 highlights that a majority of interviewees on the EMR and WMR/WAR are still waiting for their first asylum decision, while a majority of interviewees on the CMR have refugee status/residence permit.

Figure 5. Year of arrival of interviewees in EU
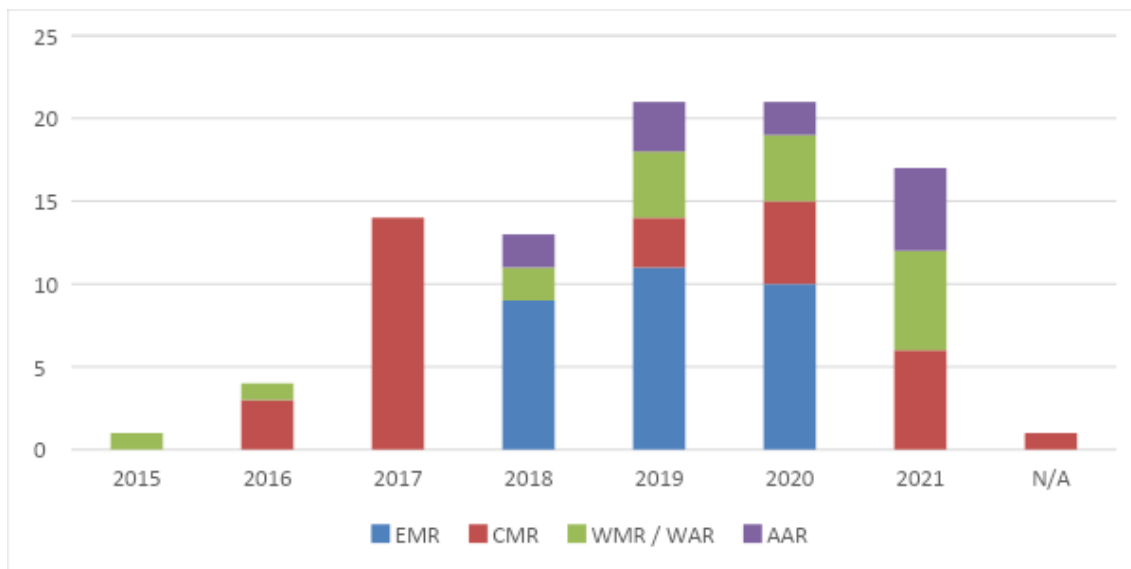
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Figure 6. Legal status of interviewees
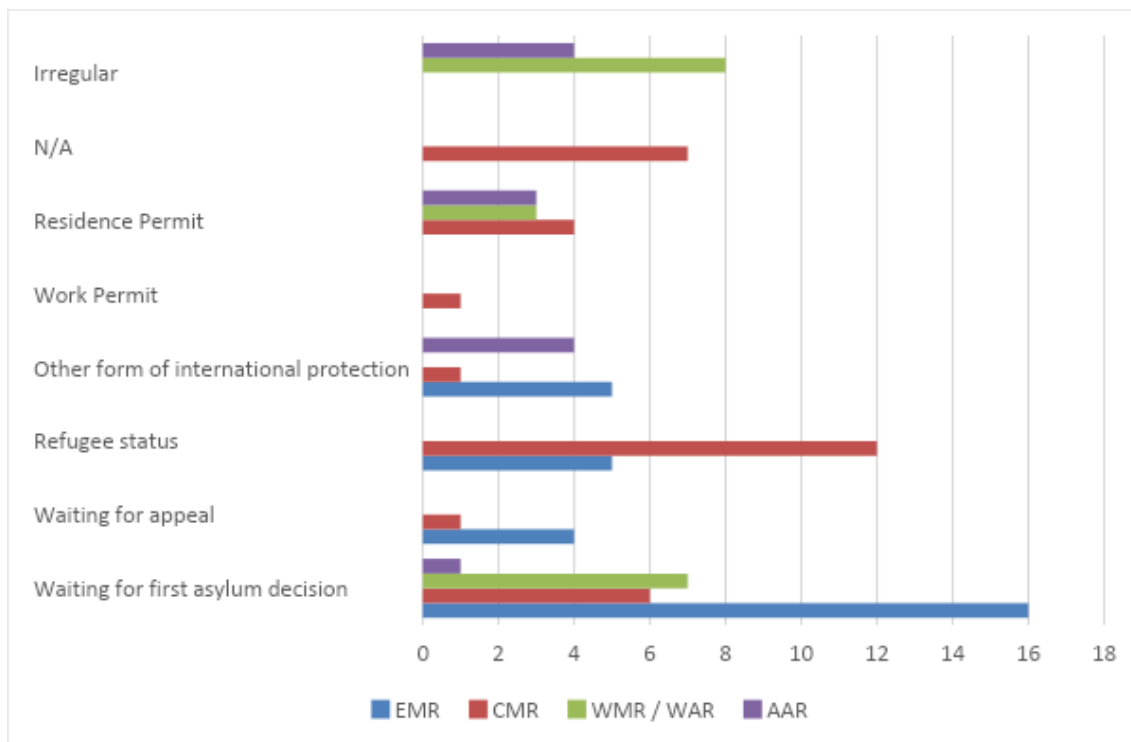
Source: own compilation

Finally, while interviewees were not chosen in terms of their **family status**, **educational and work background**, the sample shows sufficient variance also in this respect. Figure 7 highlights that the majority of interviewees on the EMR are married, while the majority of interviewees on the other three routes are single. Figure 8 shows that a majority of interviewees on the EMR have kids, while the majority of interviewees on the other routes do not have kids. In terms of educational status, Figure 9 shows that the majority of interviewees on the AAR, WMR/WAR and CMR have high school, secondary school or university degrees, whilst the educational background of the interviewees on the EMR is more mixed. Finally, Figure 10 displays how on the EMR most male interviewees were in paid employment and most female interviewees in unpaid care work for their families when in country of origin. On the CMR and WMR/WAR, the share of male interviewees who were unemployed before (first) departure is higher, while more female interviewees were in paid employment in the country of origin. On the AAR, relatively high unemployment/unpaid employment is noted for both male and female interviewees.

Figure 7. Marital status of interviewees
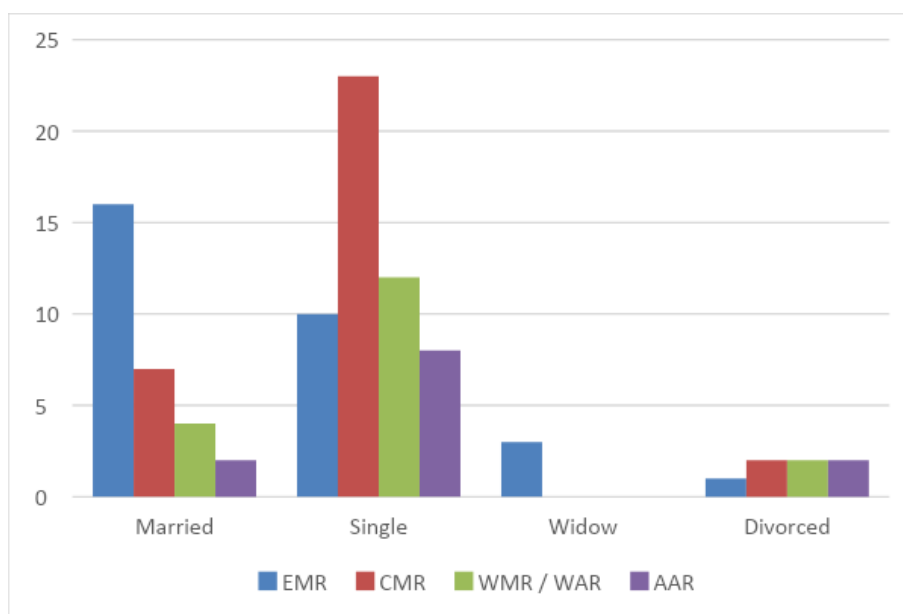
Source: own compilation

Figure 8. Family status of interviewees
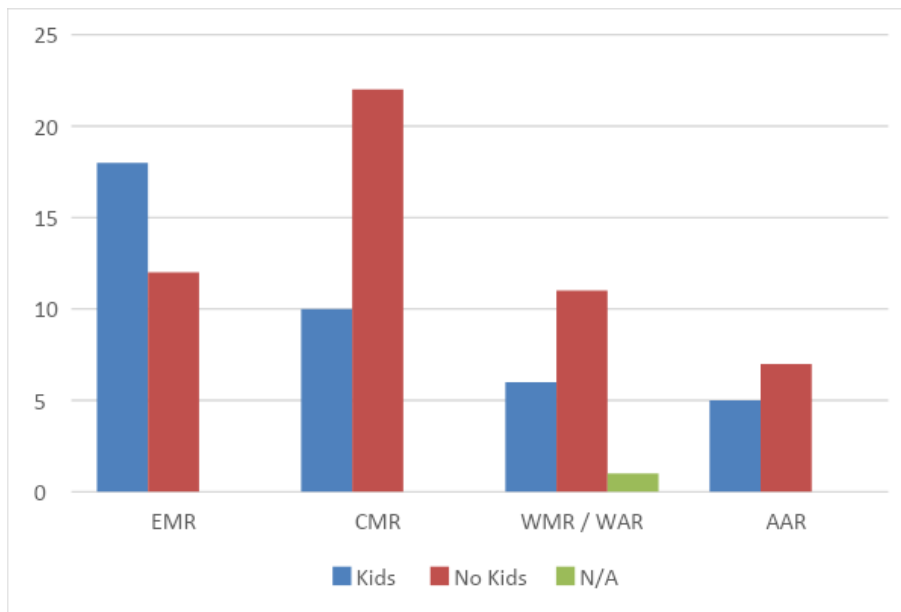
Source: own compilation

Figure 9. Educational background of interviewees
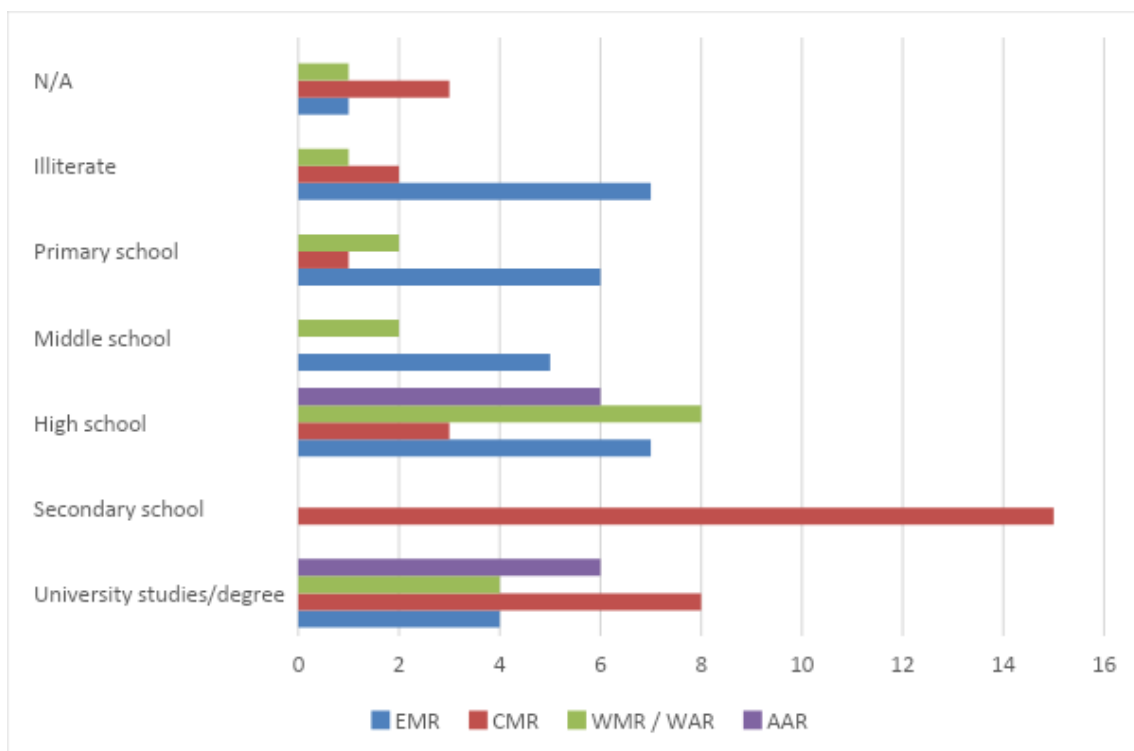
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Figure 10. Employment status of interviewees in country of origin
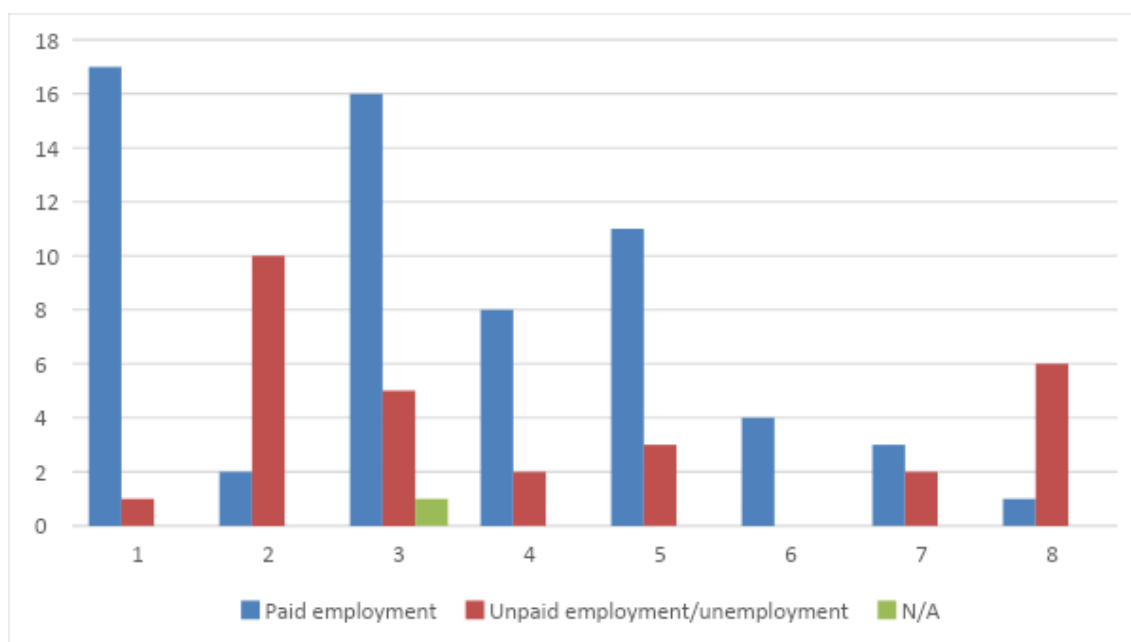
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Analytical procedure

The transcripts of the interviews have been analysed by two research teams, IAI (EMR and CMR) and UAB (WMR&WAR and AAR), with the support of the ***atlas.ti*** software. In a first stage, IAI developed guidelines for the interview analysis which were discussed in a meeting with UAB. The analysis inquired into **how individuals constantly interact with and negotiate macro- and meso-structures (typically acting as constraints or enablers) when taking migration decisions and translating such decisions into action** so as to shed further light on how such interplay informs migration outcomes, i.e., in terms of destinations, itineraries, timing, modality, means of mobility*.* In doing so, we paid particular attention to individuals' interaction with the policy regime(s) governing cross-border human mobility as well as gender relations*.*

We focus on the journey in its entirety starting from the (first) departure from the country of origin to the (last) arrival in the EU host context, while we do not consider the journeys to be "completed" upon arrival to the (current) EU host countries (Italy, Spain and Greece), and inquire into on-going decision-making regarding the options of staying put/moving on (within or outside Europe). We analysed the decision-

making processes in three dimensions, i.e., in terms of various **contexts** across which migration decisions are (re)made, and representing different **stages of mobility**: (i) **origin/departure**; (ii) **transit/en route**; (iii) **host/arrival**. While acknowledging the difficulty involved in neatly dividing real-life migration journeys and (varying) experiences of mobility into distinct compartments, a focus on different contexts and stages of mobility analytically allows us to account for **(changing) macro- and meso-structures in relation to which decisions are made and translated into action**.

At each stage/context, we focused on how decisions are formed and materialised in relation to:

1. whether to stay/move (next);

2. where to (i.e., destination preferences);

3. how to get there (i.e., itinerary, means and modality of mobility).

To the extent possible and where relevant, we also attempt to capture the evolution of one's thinking, plans and actions in relation to these questions. Analytically approaching the journey in its changing stages and contexts also helps us have a sharper focus on this aspect of evolution, or the gradual 'making of' the journey.

Once we had set these guidelines, we began to code 10 per cent of all interviews bearing these questions in mind. On the basis of these 10 per cent, IAI and UAB teams developed respective code books that were shared, followed by an exchange on these code books. On the basis of this, one **shared code book** was developed (see Annex II). The respective research teams then began to code all interviews on the basis of this code book. Once this process was finished, another meeting was held between IAI and UAB research teams to exchange preliminary analytical insights and to discuss the structure of the reports. The research teams then produced first draft reports, which were again shared and discussed to focus and align them more closely. The results of the final revision following this can be found in this deliverable.

2. Migration journeys along the Eastern Mediterranean Route

2.1 Decision-making before departure in the origin country

When describing the broader context which had a bearing on the decision to leave, an overwhelming majority of the interviewees (25 out of 30) explicitly point at the **(geo)political context**. The most common way in which the (geo)political context plays out on one's daily life, and eventually translates in the decision to leave, is by leading to a sense of **insecurity**.

In Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq, such insecurity is directly linked to **war and conflict**, which directly weighs in on one's life through the **death or disappearance of close family members**. This leads to fear for life of self and family, which, rather rapidly, translates into the decision to leave. As one female interviewee from Afghanistan puts it (O-001-028):

> In Afghanistan, the situation was super difficult because of the war, and they killed five of my siblings. […] I was thinking about one-two months and I thought, if I stay in Afghanistan, the future of my children will be worse and maybe they will die like my siblings.

The materialisation of threat to life, physical integrity and freedom is principally owed to the presence of the army, police, militias and terrorist groups. The **army** – particularly evident in interviews with Syrian men – is feared for being "wanted by the army" (O-001-026), having defected the army, or because of the threat of conscription (O-001-02). **Militias** – particularly evident in interviews with Afghans and Iraqis – are typically feared for their persecution and abuse through kidnapping, physical violence, ransom, and life threats (directly targeting oneself or the husband/children/employer). For example, a male Iraqi journalist reports that a group of terrorists: "told my wife that if we don't leave, they would kill me [...] In my city, there was a war. They told me that they would have killed me, so I directly decided to leave" (O-001-06).

In some cases, the **government** and **the police** seem to share, exercise, and abuse power together with non-state groups, as accounted by an Iraqi woman, whose husband was kidnapped by a man from a "group [that] works for the government", and later received a death threat, which was sent by "this group and the police" (O-

001-017).

In the case of stateless interviewees, lack of a **legal status** is mentioned as a reason to leave, as one interviewee (whose father was an Afghan national and who grew up in Syria) pointed out: "why we left from Syria, it's because we didn't have any document" (O-001-013). This interviewee also identified experience of racism as a factor feeding into his decision, whilst the stateless female interviewee from Kuwait reports having been supported by the local community.

The **socio-cultural context** appears in only six cases as informing the decision to leave. In most of these, experience of violence and fear for life is closely linked with **patriarchal family and societal structures**: three male interviewees (from Iraqi Kurdistan, from Iran, and a stateless interviewee from Syria) were exposed to threats to life by the family of the women they intended to have a relationship with/marry. One female interviewee was threatened by a powerful man in the Iranian army who wanted her to divorce from her husband. Two female interviewees were subjected to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) by family (see below).

In the decision of a Pakistani man, the **intertwinement between (geo)political and the socio-cultural contexts** played a major role, as he received threats to life from "some clerics", who, as he puts it, "in Pakistan, especially particularly, [...] are very powerful" (O-001-024). Similarly, the position of one Iranian man as a non-religious person was the cause of discrimination directly affecting his life and educational-professional prospects, as he "couldn't continue school" (O-001-05).

Only three interviewees refer to the **socio-economic context** as *also* having played a role in their decision, that is, two Syrian men who mention loss of livelihoods (no work) or essential services (no electricity) due to the war. One female interviewee mentions the difficult socio-economic context particularly playing on the stateless.

Beyond the macro-context, the **family** typically plays a significant role (albeit in different ways) during the decision-making process. Both female and male interviewees mention that their decision to has been motivated by the urge to protect the family in situations where powerful actors (i.e., the army, militias) threaten the security of the family. **Parenthood** (regardless of gender) appears to have a strong effect: most interviewees who had children at the time of departure

specifically refer to the fear/worry they felt for the safety and future of their children as motivating the final decision. This also applies to a single Syrian aunt, who departs with the two children of her brother to assure necessary medical treatment for one of them.

In four instances, however, **the family** becomes the **source of insecurity** underpinning the decision to leave, as in the two SGBV cases: through continuous rape (by an uncle) leading to unwanted pregnancy and threats to life (by an aunt) in the case of a Congolese woman, and in the case of a Pakistani woman, through harassment (including sexual harassment and arsoning of her house) by a brother-in-law following her husband's death.

Most accounts show that the **family** (parents, siblings, aunts, uncles) is **consulted** during the decision-making process. Albeit relatively less dominant than the family, **other social networks/contacts**, such as friends, employers, colleagues or local institutional figures (e.g., pastor) are also consulted, typically in the case of unmarried interviewees.

Beyond consultation, families often **support departure** (in the emotional, logistical, economic sense). Two married female interviewees (from Kuwait and Iran) point out how particularly their fathers were worried for them, urged them to leave and supported them financially, appearing as more dominant in their decisions than the respective husbands or mothers (the latter – as opposed to fathers – were not explicitly mentioned in that particular part of decision-making). Some are **actively motivated** by family members, as one Syrian man (that had defected from the army and who – and whose family members – felt an imminent threat to his life after learning that the army was advancing towards their town) posits: "My mum told me that I should go to Greece because my brother lives in Athens 'because if Assad catches you, they will never leave you alone'" (O-001-020).

The **family rarely appears as discouraging departure** and augmenting the emotive cost of leaving, except for the case of an Iraqi woman, who was forced by her parental family to choose between leaving with her husband and staying with them, the outcome of which she summarises as: "So, I chose my husband. And I left my family. And I left everything" (O-001-017).

Thinking on departure typically goes hand in hand with thinking on the **destination**.

Slightly over half of the interviewees (16/30) had in mind **Europe** as their intended destination when in country of origin. Most mention concrete countries: **Germany** (five Iraqi and three Syrian interviewees), **the UK** (three interviewees from Iraq, Syria and Pakistan), **Greece** three interviewees (one Syrian and one Iranian interviewee, and one stateless interviewee from Kuwait), and **Austria** (one Afghan interviewee). Others refer to Europe as a generic destination.

While there is a (first) destination in mind at the time of departure, two accounts illustrate the **flexibility of plans** regarding settlement/onward movement and destination(s): even if they intended to reach concrete countries – Greece and Germany respectively – both had thought that, if they did not like it there, they could "go to another European country", with Belgium, France, Holland, and Italy being mentioned as alternatives (O-001-020; O-001-030).

Those who **did not think of Europe as a destination** but had a concrete destination, mentioned **Lebanon** (three Syrian interviewees); **Turkey** (one Afghan and one Congolese interviewee); **Iran** (two Afghan interviewees), and **South Africa** (one Congolese interviewee). All account having lived in these countries for some time, before going through another decision-making process about onward movement and destination (see Section-II).

Others specify that they **did not have a specific country in mind** and that they just thought of the first step, that is, departing, as in the case of a Syrian man who "just wanted to leave Syria" (O-001-014). Some were however assessing their options before departure, as one interviewee, who mentions having acquired information about Turkey from his friends when in Afghanistan and deliberating between Turkey and Iran.

Expectations from a move to a potential destination build on the **information** one had about it. Information about Europe is typically generic, and refers to the conditions wider (geo)political and socioeconomic context can provide. Interviewees mention that they knew **Europe** has "a peaceful environment" (O-001-024), "laws and a good system" (O-001-027), that "people changed their lives" in Europe (O-001-003) and that it is possible to find work and support the family in terms of education or economically.

Besides similar assessments about overall conditions in **Germany**, most accounts

particularly underline that they had information indicating – in a rather idealised (and somewhat misleading) fashion – that it was a refugee-friendly country with a more liberal admission and reception regime: "they have a good relationship with the refugees. They help them" (O-001-021); "They welcome refugees" (O-001-018); "that Germany is a good country, that we can go there easily and we can stay there [...] that the children can go to school" (O-001-008).

Greece was variously perceived as either a country that could "give you a house and money enough to live" (O-001-01) and was "open to refugees" (O-001-09), or negatively as a country where "you cannot find a job easily and that you cannot continue your life very easily" (O-001-03). While it did not change his mind, a male interviewee from Afghanistan (O-001-015) recalls being somewhat shocked after seeing on TV under which conditions refugees lived in Greece:

> the people, which were refugees, were very angry. They were going to the garbage and they were collecting the food and they were eating and some of the people, single people, they were going to sell themselves, their bodies, and they would get paid, I don't know exactly the charges. I thought that's too much.

Most, however, did not have much information about **Greece**, or about the asylum system and reception conditions there. Some accounts indicate misleading information (or information in need of being updated as probably it came from refugees who had moved in a very different policy context) about the ease of onward movement after arrival to Greece. An Iraqi interviewee states: "we thought we would have [...] stayed inside a container for 3 or 4 months and that then we could have continued our journey" (O-001-018). Similarly, a Syrian man mentions he "knew that in Greece [...] you had to stay only 6 months, take your documents, and leave" (O-001-016).

Similar expectations and information shaped preferences for **non-EU destinations**, as for instance, Lebanon being chosen for relative safety and access to livelihoods that were absent in Syria. Some compared several **destination alternatives**. An Iraqi woman mentions deciding that they "can have a good future" in Europe, but not in Turkey (O-001-017). Similarly, one Afghan man (O-001-023) accounts having assessed destinations in terms of overall conditions and asylum policies (i.e., risk of deportation as Afghan nationals):

> The situation in Turkey is better than Iran because it's safe, and there is job, we can do. [...] if you go to Turkey, Turkey doesn't deport the people, their families. But if you go to Iran and you stay there, that the government of Iran, they deport you in Afghanistan.

Additionally, **affordability** appears as having informed the choice of destination, mentioned in several accounts: "my money, it was enough just until Greece" (O-001-027); "my money was enough just for Turkey" (O-001-023); "I didn't have to pay so much money to get there [Lebanon]" (O-001-026). **Accessibility**, as a function of geographic proximity, hurdles to (authorised) movement, and access to actors that facilitate overcoming such hurdles also plays a role. Finally, having access to **social support mechanisms**, such as family members (even distant) or friends is mentioned by some as a factor feeding into thinking on destination.

At the time of the first departure, the predominant **source of information** on destination was **friends or family members** in destination or the origin country, and rarely the internet and media (mentioned only by two young men who lacked personal networks/contacts).

In terms of **organising the trip**, the **social network**, i.e., pastor, colleague, employer, friends, family, smuggler, and **economic resources**, i.e., existing savings (income or wedding money), money acquired by selling one's belongings (car, house, shop, jewellery) or sponsorship by family appear crucial in terms of making the act of departure and the immediate stages of the journey possible. The only case in which the interviewee lacked own/family economic resources, he sponsored an individual journey (having had to leave his family behind) by borrowing money from an acquaintance in his village.

The **itinerary, means and modality of travel** to reach the destination largely depends on whether legally crossing the borders is an option, and seems to be largely designed by the **smugglers** when it is not. The crossing from Syria/Iran to Turkey always happens unauthorised and is enabled by smugglers, whereas some report having travelled with a passport and a visa (rarely with fraudulent documents as in the case of the stateless interviewee or one Congolese man), e.g., between Afghanistan/Pakistan and Iran, Syria and Lebanon, South Africa and Turkey, and (in most cases) between Iraq and Turkey.

2.2 Decision-making in transit

The experiences following departure from origin country and before arrival to the last destination (i.e., Greece), mainly in terms of intentions to stay/move on (as well as 'where to' and 'how') and length of stay significantly differ, and can be roughly categorised into three groups:

The **first group** is composed of those interviewees who had **initially intended to stay in a non-EU country**, and after having lived in these countries for varying periods of time (from 10 months to eight years), **decided to move on** to Greece/Europe. In the **second group** are those who **intended to reach "Europe"** (even when vaguely defined) from the onset and had no intention of staying in another country. Within this group, experiences differ in terms of length of stay and the extent to which the transit to Greece was straightforward (see below). **Third**, accounts of some interviewees indicate that they had no clear destination (but a rough direction) in mind and adopted a **flexible and step-by-step approach**.

For those in the *first group*, **Lebanon** was the destination and host country for three male Syrians, **Iran** for two female Afghans, and **South Africa** for one male Congolese, where they stayed from five to eight years, one male Afghan interviewee had intended to live in **Turkey**, but after around ten months, left for Greece. In all these cases, the journey was not planned, nor experienced as a single, uninterrupted move from the origin country to the EU (via Greece). Onward movement was the outcome of a separate process of reassessing one's life and future prospects in the host contexts (vis-à-vis changing – or perpetuating – conditions) against those one might find in potential destinations. None of the interviewees considered return to their country of origin.

The factors culminating in the decision to move on (typically acting in tandem) can be categorised into four groups: (i) **precarity driven by lack of legal status** and having no access to socioeconomic rights as well as having poor/no prospects for having legal security and certainty (at the intersection of the (geo)political context and the migration/asylum policy regime); (ii) **problems deriving from relations with local community** (at the intersection of (geo)political, socio-economic and socio-cultural context); (iii) **exploitation by employers/at the workplace** (at the intersection of socio-economic and political context and the migration-asylum

policy regime); (iv) effects of the **deterioration of overall political-security and economic conditions**.

Impeded access to (and thereby lack of) legal status and the resulting **"rightlessness" and precarity** were the main reasons for two Afghan female interviewees, both single parents of four children, who lived for five and eight years respectively without documentation in Iran. While both describe being in an "acceptable" situation in terms of housing and work, they mention not having documents and the lack of access to education, medical care, and even transportation as the main reason for deciding to leave. Constant fear of deportation for self and children transpires from both accounts, while they underline that Afghan nationals face particularly high risk of deportation in Iran. Thus, the decision to move on was motivated by being deprived of documentation and thereby of basic socioeconomic rights, as well as by the risk of involuntary return. Furthermore, it was also the perceived impossibility of ever obtaining a legal status (largely based on first-hand experience of attempting and failing to do so) that made both interviewees take the decision to move on, as one of them points out (O-001-012):

> The police arrested my children. And those people that didn't have any document and entered Iran illegally, as us, they were deported back Afghanistan. We tried to receive the document, but we couldn't, and we decided to leave Iran.

Similar issues deriving from being somewhat pushed to irregularity by the policy regime are reported by two Afghan interviewees in Turkey. One of them ended up in an irregular situation, as for lack of livelihoods he had to leave the town he was assigned to by the asylum office and to the confines of which his legal residence and socioeconomic rights were limited to. The perceived **lack of prospects for legal certainty** in the longer run was also crucial in his decision: "if you are in Turkey, you cannot take a Turkish passport. It doesn't matter if you stay there one year or 20 years" (O-001-023).

With regard to the **relations with local community**, Syrians (in Lebanon) and one Congolese (in South Africa) mention perception and experience of a hostile societal context (at times described as "xenophobic" or "racist") as the main reason for onward movement. In some cases, this leads to a situation in which sustaining livelihoods becomes impossible, as for one male Syrian, who had to close down his

business after growing hostility by his competitors. On the reasons why (such hostility), he explains: "because I was just Syrian and people didn't like the idea of a Syrian guy came from the war and opened a business there", and specifies: "because a Sunni guy having a great business in a Shia area" (O-001-026). In others, feeling/being targeted as a group (i.e., Congolese in South Africa) in a context where "every year there were xenophobic attacks" (O-001-019) underpins the sense of insecurity informing the decision.

Even when not mentioned among the principal factors informing onward movement, negative assessment of experience with local community (e.g., racist, not friendly, they do not like foreigners) is common to most accounts (longer or shorter stays with or without intention to settle). There are some exceptions, however, such as the case of a female Afghan who accounts having "good relations with" the population of Iran that she describes as being "super good" (O-001-028), or the Congolese single mother who reports having received local donations in Turkey, particularly during Ramadan.

Cases of **exploitation and abuse by employers** always happen in the informal sector, hence, are closely linked to being undocumented, as interviewees have no access to formal employment and cannot report abuse to the police. They include unpaid labour, arbitrary cuts to salary, long working hours/no rest/no holidays – the latter particularly in Turkey, and also reported by some interviewees who stayed for shorter periods/did not intend to settle. Some also refer to the reproduction of socioeconomic castes and differentiated labour markets in a context of structural xenophobia (e.g., Congolese in South Africa). Female interviewees report either having worked only briefly, stayed at home or begged on the street (in the case of a single mother). The account of a male Syrian (O-001-013) points to the complex intersection of gender, refugeehood, (working) class, family separation owing to displacement, age, and family roles (as son, daughter, mother), exposing (young) men to abuse, forcing (young) women first to the household and then to return to a conflict zone, and putting (older) women in a situation of deepened dependency as a single head of household left behind:

> At that point, we were all together and we all decided to work, even my sisters. But the work was very hard there. So we decided to tell our sisters to stay home. And my

brother and I, we went to work. Then, my sisters left (back to Syria). And my brother and I continued working. We worked a lot. And we got a lot of money that we sent to my mum from Turkey. She had many problems. She needed money, because her health was really bad and she needed help.

Perception of **deteriorating conditions due to shifts in the overall context** in the host country are among the main factors informing onward movement in two cases: a sense of insecurity due to growing hostility/attacks targeting the Congolese in South Africa, and loss of hope in a (safe and decent) future in the host country due to deepening political and economic crises in Lebanon, which the interviewee describes as "what happened in Syria started in Lebanon in 2019, there was no jobs, those fires everywhere, like bombing" (O-001-025). The case of another male Syrian, who feared being returned to Syria by Hezbollah and conscribed by the army is illustrative of how the (geo)political context in the region continued to play out on one's life outside the home country – and in particularly **gendered** ways.

Parenthood plays an important role in two cases: in the case of two female Afghan interviewees in Iran where the risk of deportation (for one's children) lack of access (of one's children) to schooling and health services, or that of one male Syrian in Lebanon, where the impossibility of accessing adequate medical care for his son with disability are mentioned as having acted as the principal motivation for moving on.

As for the decision regarding the **(next) destination**, interviewees mention Germany, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Austria, Italy, Switzerland and Turkey. Again, expectations as to relative improvement of life based on the information acquired about the potential destination were decisive in destination choices. **Better prospects for obtaining a legal status** ("papers", "document", "positive asylum decision") to have a sound basis to start building one's life (mainly through access to socioeconomic rights) cuts across almost all accounts as the main factor shaping destination preferences. In relation to **employment**, interviewees mention the availability of/access to jobs (in France, Italy, Germany, Netherlands) and less exploitative work environment (in Turkey compared to Iran). **Other factors** informing choice of destination included relatively lower degree of racism and linguistic affinity (for Congolese in France), easier asylum procedures and positive

asylum decisions (for Syrians in Germany).

Most interviewees either state that they knew nothing about the asylum process and reception conditions in **Greece**, or thought they would briefly stay in Greece and then move on. However, others knew about the workings of the asylum system and the reception conditions in Greece but decided to move on from Turkey nonetheless. One male Afghan interviewee pointed out for example that his brother advised him to stay in Turkey and not come to Europe, as most European countries "are not good" (O-001-015).

Information on potential destinations comes mainly through **friends** (also those made during the journey) and **family members** who either live in the transit or (planned) destination contexts, or were presently *en route* within Europe. In two cases it was the **smuggler** in Turkey who provided information on potential destination (Italy) to interviewees and on how they can take them there, which then largely shaped their trajectories. The internet and people met on the internet were the main sources of information only in two cases, and in other two, a general reference to "asked around" (O-001-08) or "they" (O-001-010) were made.

As for the **organisation of the journey**, friends, relatives, and other migrants (typically from the same nationality/linguistic group) act as a source of information on how to find and contact smugglers, who then are in charge of designing the itinerary and means of mobility within transit countries and when crossing international borders. This holds for both those who reached Greece faster, and those who stayed longer in transit countries.

Those in the **second group** (i.e., having Europe as a clear destination in mind already at the time of first departure) account different experiences in terms of how long and complicated the transit phase was. Some have **crossed rather directly and in short timeframes** (less than a week or a few weeks in the cases of some Iraqi interviewees). In these cases, the itinerary and means of mobility were designed and arranged almost entirely by smugglers connected to one another across countries. Others **stayed or had to wait for longer periods** mainly owing to hurdles to continuing the journey (interviewees report having waited in Turkey/attempted to cross to Greece up to 18 months), or as in one case of a male Syrian, because he decided to wait for other family members back home to join him in the transit

country (for five years) before moving on.

The **hurdles** mainly relate to the inability to circumvent **the wider set of policies aiming to restrict mobility**, such as border surveillance, inland controls, push-backs and pull-backs (notably in the Turkey-Greece leg, and particularly heightened in the post-2020 political context); **insufficient economic resources** to overcome such hurdles, that is, not being able to pay for 'effective' smuggling services (which needs to be seen in the context of what interviewees describe as a very expensive life in Turkey); or **reduced supply of smuggling services** due to lockdowns and border closures during the pandemic.

Most of the interviewees needed to pursue **multiple attempts** in completing the journey until Greece (some mention attempting 10 or 15 times). Some report having paid the smugglers only once until they make it, others mention having to pay several times even when an attempt was unsuccessful. More than half of the interviewees (17/30) mention having been **apprehended by the police** at some point: when crossing the borders irregularly on the way up to, entering, exiting or within Turkey. While in five cases, interviewees were apprehended at entry into Turkey (from Iran and Syria), the accounts suggest that hurdles are particularly high when trying to exit Turkey, especially in an attempt to cross to Greece: overall, more than half of the interviewees report having been prevented from exiting Turkey (most of the time multiple times), being pushed back by Greek law enforcement (in two cases, while one interviewee describes his brother-in-law being pushed back), pulled back during the crossing or apprehended before embarkation by the Turkish authorities (in fifteen cases). Besides the cases of push-backs from Greece, four interviewees (all Syrian) report having been deported from Turkey to Syria, demonstrating the overall application of illegal practices by law enforcement authorities and the effects of the (geo)political and policy context governing mobility at the (last leg of the) EMR.

Finally, experience across the various contexts one "transits" is decisive for those who have a **flexible and step-by-step approach** to the journey, be it in terms of the decision to stay or move on, destination choice, or the question of how to reach the next destination. Their accounts show that the journey (with its beginning, trajectory, or "end") is being built up incrementally while *en route*, as they reassess

their options and preferences and readjust their plans as a function of **experiences lived, information obtained, and contacts acquired** (providing information and/or mediating for overcoming the hurdles or accessing opportunities).

The account by one Pakistani man, who at the time of departure (vaguely) intended to reach a "peaceful country in Europe" (and ended up in Greece after crossing Iran, Turkey and assessing his options during his six-month stay as an asylum-seeker in Bulgaria), illustrates the importance of information acquired at transit mobility hubs (O-001-024):

> Actually, when you come to Turkey, especially Istanbul, this is like a market, you know everything about this journey. You might have heard about Europe, but when you come to Turkey, then you realise which country is where, how far is it, how the journey is. Because this is all the discussion going on while you stay there.

How the thinking about staying/moving on as well as the (next) destination evolves along the journey, is well summed-up by one female interviewee from Afghanistan (O-001-004):

> We were looking for a safe place. If we could have stayed in Iran, it would have been good for us. But since the enemy of my husband, we couldn't stay there. After, we wanted to stay in Turkey, but it was super expensive and we couldn't stay. So we changed our mind and our opinion step by step. When we arrived in Greece, we changed our mind again and we decided to go to Switzerland.

Even when one initially has a clear idea on one's destination, it does not necessarily mean that the journey would come to a definitive end in that destination, illustrating that **flexibility and fluidity is typically inherent to the journey**, as pointed out by one Syrian interviewee, who clearly had Greece in mind as his (next) destination at the time of departure: "I thought, I will get the stay, settle for some time and get […] some papers that I can use to travel to go somewhere else. Then I will decide where to live next. So I had just like a plan for Greece" (O-001-026).

Indeed, as the next section will demonstrate, arrival in Greece did not mean the end of the journey for most of the interviewees, and in most cases, the experience in Greece has motivated many to think of onward movement.

2.3 Decision-making after arrival in the host country

After arrival in the (current) host country, thinking with regards to both whether to end or continue the journey, and where to potentially move next, continues. The decision-making process is predominantly conditioned by the **policy context**; that is, the asylum and reception system in Greece with its inextricable links to the wider scope of EU asylum governance. The **socio-economic context** (e.g., relatively poor state of the Greek economy, unemployment among the local population) is also mentioned, typically in relation to bleak employment prospects interviewees think they would have even as recognised refugees.

The workings of the **asylum and reception system** shape all **key elements of life**: legal status, living conditions, and access to social and economic rights. The policy context also informs interviewees' **social interactions**, which, aside from those with other asylum-seekers and refugees, are typically limited to encounters with authorities/public service providers (e.g., police, asylum office, camp manager, hospital staff) and humanitarians ((I)NGOs, IOs). Experience of the asylum process and reception conditions also has a **strong bearing at the psychological level**.

Experiences after arrival start to be shaped by the **first contact with, and access to the asylum system**. Accounts indicate notable differences between the islands and mainland Greece. In the **islands**, the process is rather standardised and somewhat more straightforward: registration with the police, fingerprinting, issuing of the "police paper", and transfer to the camp. In the **mainland**, most participants mention difficulties in acquiring information on how to access the asylum procedure, as in the case of a female Syrian interviewee who reports not receiving "any information" from the police, being "like blind", and having waited in the bus station for three days asking everyone around what to do (O-001-008). Difficulties typically persist also in registration, and consequently, obtaining documentation and getting the appointment for the interview.

Accounts of two Syrian men (arrived in mainland Greece), confirm additional effects of **Greece's temporary suspension of its asylum system** as a response to both the February 2020 crisis with Turkey following the latter's opening of its borders in an attempt to obtain diplomatic gains from the EU, and the pandemic. They report having spent over one year without documentation, and therefore with no access to

the reception system, as they were unable to lodge their asylum claims, despite multiple attempts. Highly illustrative of the post-2020 policy context in Greece increasingly marked by push-backs and summary returns, one of them accounts how the impediments he faced in accessing asylum had effects well beyond his exclusion from the reception system, as he feared deportation without being given the chance to apply for asylum (i.e., refoulement): "I wanted just to be legal here. Or any paper, any kind of paper that would protect me. Because at the time that I arrived here [summer 2020], there was so much, so many pushbacks to Turkey, from Thessaloniki even" (O-001-026).

Overall, the **asylum process** is dominated by long periods of **waithood** (participants report waiting up to three years to do the interview), which were further extended by the effects of the pandemic (and possibly the post-2020 policy/(geo)political context). Having to endure long periods of legal uncertainty – *and* precarious material conditions particularly in the islands – weigh in sharply on the mental constitution of asylum seekers. As one Afghan man (who had grown up in Syria and the Gulf) reports: "The asylum process. I know about two people who tried to kill themselves. They tried to kill themselves during the lockdown" (O-001-013).

Some think that the long waiting periods are part of a **deliberate policy choice**, as pointed out by one Iraqi man: "They know that according to the European law, they cannot say 'we don't like you, go out from our country'. No, they will fight with you, but not with weapons, with your mind, psychologically" (O-001-007). Others question the legal grounds of status determination, as in the case of one Syrian man: "I was in the army and I left the army, and I should have asylum, political asylum and they give me 2 rejections and my country it's on war" (O-001-019).

Experience of the **reception system** typically starts with the arrival to the **camp** and reception standards largely define interviewees' **living conditions**. There are considerable differences between the islands and the mainland in this respect. All interviewees in the **islands** describe standards far from meeting basic needs (i.e., shelter, food, hygiene). Particularly single men report (at the time of the interview) staying or having stayed in places like the "jungle" (forest outside the camp), whilst parents with children are prioritised in the camp. Most live under these conditions

for long periods. A sense of being trapped is dominant, alongside a desire to be transferred to mainland Greece (an option typically limited to families and single mothers). Witnessing **traumatic events** like fires, fights or death of other asylum seekers (e.g., for lack of medical care, as one participant describes) further pushes the limits of psychological endurance. Others experience trauma in first person or in close family, as one female Afghan interviewee, whose daughter, after being raped in the camp attempted to commit suicide several times, with no further police investigation following afterwards. Solidarity between asylum seekers (e.g., sharing food, guidance on life in the camp, volunteer work) is typically described as one of the few support mechanisms.

Interviewees in **mainland Greece** describe relatively better living conditions. However, it is clear that the **reception system** (especially in terms of **access to housing**) positively discriminates towards families and single mothers. Difficulties in accessing asylum and hence institutional assistance (especially from 2020 on, as described above) led single men and families alike to rely on their own resources (spending savings, borrowing money from other refugees/family back home, being hosted by refugee friends), or to live in the street when no such resources were available. Most report having **difficulties to manage their lives economically**, particularly families, who need to pay for children's needs from pampers to school clothes.

Most interviewees describe a rather limited degree of **assistance received from authorities or civil society** (or no assistance for those who were unable to apply for asylum for a long time). This applies to cash aid, food assistance (especially once outside the camp), legal support during the asylum process, or facilitation of access to services (e.g., transportation/interpretation services to get medical care, support to enroll children to school). Both those participants who have been granted asylum and those who were waiting for the outcome of the appeal after a negative decision, mention economic difficulties due to the suspension of the cash assistance, which occurs in both cases.

Especially **single men** report not having received support from institutions or civil society. **Families and single parents** mention having been assisted to a relatively greater degree (e.g., food assistance by authorities after leaving the camp, legal

support or facilitation of access to public services by NGOs), although a Syrian man who has a child with disability reports not having received medical assistance (or any other kind of support), because he was unable to lodge his asylum claim for over a year.

A significant portion of the interviewees shares a sense of '**de-humanisation**'. This is closely related to the precarity of reception conditions, but also goes beyond. Particularly those who have lived in the islands underline being subjected to inhumane living conditions, as one Syrian man posits: "I didn't know that people were racists. They leave people living in a forest. No water. No electricity. We are human. We are not animals" (O-001-020). Participants also point to their interactions with the authorities and in some cases the local population (embedded in skewed power dynamics and a context marked by xenophobia), underlining concretely how the 'hosts' treat, look at, talk to asylum-seekers: "There is no washing machine in the camp to wash our clothes. Our clothes are dirty. Everyone looks at us in a bad way. In a disgusting way" (O-001-016); "I'm not happy to live in Greece because the behaviour of people, of the government is so bad with the refugees. […] people treat you so bad because you are a refugee" (O-001-022).

Others specifically refer to de-humanisation, as one Syrian man who accounts how the camp manager responded to his neighbour following the latter's complaint about having cockroaches under his baby's pillow (O-001-014):

> it's not our problem, the cockroaches are Greek, you came to their place, they didn't come to yours.' He said it was not his problem. That him and the son went to the cockroaches place, not the reverse. That it's their place before to be your place.

In short, experience of the policy regime governing asylum and reception, and relations with authorities and the host population (at times the two being conflated) strongly influence participants' **assessment of life and future prospects in Greece**. Such assessment, typically in comparison with prospects one believes would have somewhere else, significantly feeds into **thinking on future settlement/onward movement**.

Only four out of 30 interviewees describe their experience in Greece in **positive terms**, and **consider (the possibility of) staying** in Greece. For instance, one male interviewee from Iran, who converted to Christianity, feels integrated and has no

plan to move on. A single mother from Congo states that: "Greek took care of me. Since I was in Greece, I'm very good" (O-001-010). A man from Pakistan who reports being satisfied with Greek society and the government, nonetheless has not yet decided, and points to the role played by **legal (in)security** and the legal-policy context in shaping one's plans as asylum seeker: "I'm not a citizen of Greece so that I cannot make plans. My plans changes according to the laws changes" (O-001-024).

In line with the above description representing the dominant experience of asylum and reception, an overwhelming majority has a **(very) negative assessment of life in Greece**, see bleak prospects in the country, and **deliberate (unauthorised) onward movement**. Most express a clear desire to move on within Europe, and plan to do so regardless of being granted protection and/or finding work in Greece. They consider obtaining protection and the documentation (or not) merely as a crucial step before deciding whether to exit Greece in an authorised/unauthorised way. For others, who seem to have varying timeframes in mind, the decision of staying or moving on is conditional upon the outcome of the asylum process, receiving some basic assistance (e.g., housing, cash support) while waiting, or having prospects for socioeconomic inclusion (e.g., being able to learn Greek, to access formal employment and find a job, to send children to school) in case of being granted protection. Nearly all plan to apply for asylum in the intended destinations.

Germany emerges as the **intended destination** that is mentioned by a larger share of the interviewees, alongside England, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France and Italy. There is an idealised perception especially of Germany, where most think that there are employment opportunities, dignified reception standards and better integration support. The dominant impression is that (as opposed to Greece) Germany respects and cares for refugees, and is a country where "[t]hey have humanity" (O-001-020).

The choice of intended destination is closely linked to the interviewees' perception of having greater possibility of: finding work, having legal security and certainty (asylum, passport, citizenship), and accessing (a wider range of) socioeconomic rights and (better quality) public services for oneself and one's children, i.e., (higher) education and healthcare. Besides these expectations that relate to the overall political and socioeconomic context (including better-functioning social

institutions) in these countries and have not much to do with the asylum regimes, interviewees also cite more effective asylum systems, higher (and humane) reception standards and better integration support in shaping their thinking on (next) destinations. In some cases, linguistic commonality or relative ease of learning the language plays an additional role.

The presence of family members and friends – or "people that I trust and [who] told me to come there" as one Syrian man specifies (O-001-025) – are other **factors operating at the meso-level and displaying the importance of personal networks** in shaping destination preferences. Where such personal networks are absent, destinations with diasporic communities are preferred, as in the case of a Congolese man who thinks of France, as the sizeable Congolese community might help him, or a Syrian man who inclines towards Germany because he thinks "most of the Syrians go there and it would feel way better with this community" (O-001-26). Information typically comes from families, friends and acquaintances (generally refugees and migrants) in the cited countries, while internet/people met on the internet are exceptionally cited as the source of information.

3. Migration journeys along the Central Mediterranean Route

This section analyses a significantly heterogeneous sample, including migrants - now residents in Italy - coming from Nigeria, Mali, Algeria, Tunisia, Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt, and Iran. Twenty-two out of 32 are males. Eleven are recent arrivals (2020-2021); the remainder covers a time frame from 2016 to 2019.

The **multiplicity of origin and transit contexts** inevitably complicates the identification of common patterns. Moreover, the way in which migrants experience this process and the drivers shaping their migratory choices appears to be extremely *personal* as individual agency (or in many cases, a lack of it) is constantly re-framed in light of the broader context and the actors they meet along the way. Migratory decisions are hardly conceivable as *deterministic processes*, but rather as an immediate reaction to modifications in the economic, social and political conditions, or even as a response to specific changes to the personal life of individuals. Subsequently, **each individual trajectory appears fragmented and constantly re-negotiated** through various stages of the journey.

3.1 Decision-making before departure in the origin country

The decision-making process in context of origin is rarely connected to a trigger event; it rather originates in a **concatenation of circumstances** – be they directly or indirectly intervening in interviewees' lives – that eventually culminate into the decision to leave. Overall, **reasons to leave are quite personal and disparate**; hence, it is arduous to identify some common patterns.

When talking about the contextual factors inducing the process, respondents often refer to the **(geo)political context**. This includes a wide range of different situations: from the outbreak of **conflict** (as in the case of two Sudanese interviewees) **and the subsequent presence of guerrilla groups** to mandatory military service**, from **legal persecution of sexual orientation** (a Nigerian man) to **lack of political freedom** and an overall political situation that sometimes directly interferes in respondents' daily life (for instance, the case of an Iranian woman whose father became unwanted by the regime and thus persecuted).

Nonetheless, despite Mali's and Nigeria's experience with forms of instability and

conflict over the same period, the geo-political context seems to be a less poignant factor at play when it comes to respondents from those two countries. The effects of war, participation in anti-police protests - and the ensuing persecution by police and army, or even affiliation with a political party, are mentioned in single cases. However, these drivers are usually linked to **a wider perception of unsafety** that informs the decision to leave, and generally do not constitute a trigger event *per se*. The **context** can play a role in shaping the attitude to migrate, but is usually **mediated through** other **personal circumstances**, like the risk of losing a job due to new political configurations or an uncomfortable position within the family.

Meanwhile, interviewees from East and North Africa often mention the **socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts**. While the former is generally connected to the **lack of job opportunities and future prospects** (there is also one case of a man from Eritrea mentioning the lack of medical assistance), the latter reveals substantial **impact of gender**: from social marginalisation due to sexual orientation (with troublesome relationships with the local community) to an unfair judicial and social system where women are not adequately protected and respected (as in the case of two Tunisian women; one was a victim of rape and the family "kicked [her] out of the house because they said [she] brought shame to [her] family" (R-001-033)).

Among Malian and Nigerian respondents, the socio-economic context is rarely indicated as informing the precise reasons to depart, whereas **socio-cultural factors** appear as significant drivers, usually linked to a perception of **danger** and even to **life-threatening situations**: in a particularly telling case of a woman from Nigeria, the imposition by her family of a forced marriage with an older man, and the intrinsic patriarchal culture of violence that she suffers after her refusal, constitute the trigger event for her to flee. **Patriarchal family structures and cultural norms** are also at play for a man from Mali, stating that "according to our culture, I had to live at my father's house but I was not happy there" (X-002-004), indicating that leaving behind that difficult situation was his main reason to depart. Other elements mentioned in this sphere are the disputes arising from traditional patterns of land ownership and the membership of a certain ethnic group, especially underlined by Nigerian interviewees.

Overall, feelings related to one's life in the origin country are usually negative and often connected to a sense of **fear**. Indeed, the perception of being in constant danger is rather widespread with 13 out of 32 respondents describing a situation of **feeling unsafe**. As a result, it is not surprising that a common aspiration is to live in a safe and peaceful place ("I wanted to escape the conflict and live with no fear" (R-001-031), "To be far from danger" (R-001-035)). Nonetheless, all the interviewees share a general **desire for a better life** and hope for a change in their existence ("I see no future there" (R-001-040)). Still, in some cases, **gender** strongly surfaces as shaping expectations of a change for a better life and future through the act of migration. Mothers travelling with children always refer to their desire to give their children a better future. Two Tunisian women also cite their wish to live "in a place free from judgements and where I can be valuable as a woman" (R-001-033), "where women rights are respected" (R-001-034).

Within this framework, **family** plays a determining role in shaping migration-related decisions, both as **a reason to leave *per se*** and a **key element in the logistical arrangement of the journey**. As for the first aspect, difficult personal situations within the family appear as a possible trigger event for the decision to migrate. For instance, reports of **abuse** – usually connected to actors like police and the army – concern also the family domain, embedded in a patriarchal socio-cultural context, and manifested as a difficult cohabitation with relatives or violence descending from intra-family disputes. Examples include some respondents from North Africa – both men and women – having suffered from family repudiation following previous personal experiences of abuse and violence (e.g., a Tunisian woman states "I was always afraid of my parents" after being raped (R-001-033)).

Likewise, the role of family in the decision is multifaceted: the decision to leave is either taken together and/or shared with relatives; the family group is informed; or the decision is simply communicated to and accepted by the family. Sometimes, the family is not informed at all (also for security reasons, as in the case of an Iranian woman). Nonetheless, while in the majority of cases interviews report that the **decision is predominantly individual and autonomous**, there are at least four cases where the decision is imposed by a family member against the will of the interviewees. The case of an Eritrean woman is rather impressive as it discloses a

complete loss of agency: "My husband told me to leave", "it was my husband's decision" (R-001-042).

Apart from these cases, although respondents often felt overwhelmed by a contextual framework that is no longer sustainable, they retain a **distinct degree of actorness** in the decision; expressions like "I decided", "it was my decision", "I took the decision" are recurrent. Nonetheless, some describe their decision as forced ("I had to"), notably with reference to their **physical unsafety**: "I can't take it as a decision. If I hadn't gone, I would have died" (R-001-025), "I had no choice but to flee the country" (R-001-030). In the case of a man from Mali, the decision is 'forced' upon him by another person: "The person I left with paid all expenses. He forced me to leave but I don't want to say more because it is a painful subject" (X-002-002).

Even though seven interviewees report they were meditating about the possibility of leaving for a while, **the decision to leave is mostly taken quickly**, with no time for preparation. Subsequently, respondents do not have documents and leave only with the money held at the moment. The crossing of the border is therefore usually unauthorised, with the exception of those who took a flight with the necessary documentation, notably from Iran and Egypt.

Many **depart alone**, while **travelling in a group**. The **crossing of the first border** usually occurs by bus or by walking, especially in Eastern Africa. Crossing on foot is physically exhausting and highly demanding ("I walked for a whole week without eating" (R-001-041)). No major hurdles are reported, however; there is only the case of an Eritrean woman who was arrested while crossing the border with Sudan and forced to undergo military service. Then, she bribed the military personnel and managed to escape.

As for the **logistical arrangement of the journey**, interviewees rely on two crucial sources: **economic resources** (personal savings, economic support from family and friends – the latter representing a case of social resources being converted in economic ones) and **social resources** (family, friends, other actors mediating and/or facilitating mobility). An interviewee from Nigeria describes having paid a third actor – presumably a smuggler – already at the moment of departure, and then having the travel expenses covered throughout the journey. However, other accounts also suggest that migrants, especially those from Western African

countries, depart without knowing anyone in countries of transit and destination. Whenever they are present, social resources are usually identifiable in **acquaintances** in countries of transit (Libya) or in Europe. Respondents mostly refer to **relatives** (as an "older sister" (X-001-012)) or **friends** ("a lady who lived in Libya" (X-002-013)).

Overall, **people do not have long-term plans**; thus, the majority of them have **no clear destination in mind**: "I wasn't sure that I would go to France, but I wanted to leave anyway" says a man from Mali (X-001-012). And when a clear destination is declared, for Malian and Nigerian respondents this is predominantly **another African country** as Libya or Algeria, while **Europe is clearly not the default destination**. However, the perception of the country of destination (Italy, Europe in general, or Libya) can be rather blurred, as testified by the experience of a woman leaving Nigeria: "After a week these people told me that they were going to a place called Libya. I had hardly heard that name before" (X-002-014). Moreover, migrants from West Africa, unlike those from the rest of the sample, generally do not know anyone outside the country that could inform them about the journey and the destination. Among those with some contacts abroad, **Italy** is explicitly mentioned twice as the desired destination due to some peculiar traits, specifically Italian football and the fashion industry. In another case, **France** is indicated as the planned destination as a second step after Libya.

On the other hand, interviewees from East and North Africa mention Italy as their intended destination in six cases; yet the **information provided is quite generic**, usually based on other people's stories: "Italy as a country with no problems" (R-001-033), "that welcomes all refugees" (R-001-039), "a good choice to emigrate in Italy" (R-001-036). The case of the Tunisian woman is once again of interest from a **gender perspective**: she refers to Italy as "a beautiful country where the law applies to all people independently of their origin. But most importantly women have more rights than in my country" (R-001-034).

However, respondents generally **know nothing about either destination or migration policies thereof**, with the unique exception of an Iranian woman whose father knew about asylum procedures in Germany, despite being unaware of the Dublin system.

3.2 Decision-making in transit

Experiences in transit countries are rather diverse, thus further complicating the identification of common patterns. In this phase, the decision-making process is noticeably dynamic, made of constant renegotiations and re-adjustments. It might be argued – quoting an Eritrean woman – that "it is a **step-by-step process**" shaped by the actual opportunities and hurdles faced at each stage: *"*Only step by step first you think how to cross the first border to Sudan, then the second and last to take the boat to Italy. I never had long term plans as you don't know which stage you will reach." (R-001-027).

In line with the **fragmented nature of migratory trajectories** transpiring from the interviews, experiences of migrants in transit are also hardly definable as short or long stays, as remembering details about the duration and concrete itinerary of the journey can be challenging. Excluding some cases of long residence – be they motivated by the need to work in order to cope with the absence of economic and social resources as for Western African respondents, or neither planned nor calculated as in the majority of other cases – the length of stay in transit contexts can span a range between over a few weeks to months.

Generally, it is arduous to identify a predefined **itinerary**, as – especially for migrants from East Africa – it is mostly casual and contingent on the situation. Nigerian interviewees, however, depict a relatively more precise set of trails from their home country to Niger and Libya. The only exception is constituted by a man from Nigeria reaching first The Gambia, "despite never having been there before and not knowing the country" (X-002-008). Also, for Malians, migratory corridors through Algeria and Libya appear among the more clearly defined itineraries.

Libya thus still emerges as a key country of transit or even destination, despite the conflict engulfing it. West African migrants travelling towards Libya usually rely on old acquaintances, family members or people connected to those actors organising their journey, in order to gather information. However, migrants more commonly report they had no direct contacts in Libya before, but rather a vague knowledge of the dangerous situation there. Nonetheless, the idea that Libya presents job opportunities and better pay – granted "the protection of a Libyan" (X-002-004) – lingers on, as declared by a Malian man first crossing to Algeria and then moving in

the neighbouring country.

For these groups, a visible pattern concerns the seeming **absence of hurdles to cross the borders** in countries like Nigeria, Mali, Niger, or even Libya. Crossing the border happens by bus or taxi. Movement in the region seems to be experienced by migrants as something ordinary/normal, as recounted by a man from Mali: "I left Mali by bus and arrived in Niamey without any particular problems" (X-002-003).

This aspect puts into perspective the **role of smugglers** and/or mobility facilitators encountered by migrants while transiting the desert. In these specific contexts, a majority of interviews reveals that almost every migrant has paid someone else to organise or provide the means for their journey. These actors are depicted as those who helped the interviewees get to Libya or "the men who organized the trip" (X-001-009). Most of the respondents crossing this region describe how they had to pay their passage through the desert between Niger and Libya, or from Algeria to Libya. Payment patterns vary, as they can be concluded in just one instalment, or by paying multiple times, at every stop or at each change of vehicle. The smuggling business seems to follow diverse practices also in terms of other aspects: some migrants recall being assisted by the same person until their embarkation, others recount meeting more than one facilitator, of different nationalities.

Regardless of the length of stay, how to live in a country of transit, and how and when to make the last step towards Europe are questions upon which migrants seem to exercise agency only to a point. When talking about the circumstances contributing to the **decision to move on**, many respondents mention the **(geo)political context**, notably in relation to their experience in **Libya**. Indeed, interviewees describe a situation of widespread violence and insecurity, where "you could have been shot at any moment" (R-001-028), "they would enter your home, rob you, kidnap you" (R-001-031). One respondent also reports that nobody cared about COVID there. Overall, Libya is often labelled as "hell" and linked to **traumatic experiences** – be they personally lived or 'only' witnessed. As a result, many express their unwillingness to share their experience that might have been particularly painful and disturbing ("I don't like to recall all the illness, hunger, dirtiness and so on I suffered in Libya" (R-001-027)). Migrants share stories of: torture; violence; kidnapping; ransom attempts by the police or criminal groups; theft; bribes to the

police in order to continue the journey; forced labour to pay for the passage between countries (Niger/Sudan-Libya); unpaid labour; being detained in prisons, ghettos or overcrowded houses guarded either by "black men" or Libyans; and threats to their life. An Eritrean woman says (R-001-042):

> The only thing I would like to add is the great violence I have experienced in Libya, the fact that they burn and whip you with the straps is a violence that I still carry within myself. […] I was in Libya for seven months, I was kidnapped and tortured for two months; I still carry the signs with different scars of the many burns on the legs and arms that I had to suffer.

Socio-cultural context is mentioned only once when an Eritrean mother complains that Sudan is a "difficult country for a woman alone with children" (R-001-042). **International events** also intervene: one Sudanese respondent applied to be included in a (non-specified) resettlement programme to the US in Egypt, yet, because of **Trump Administration's travel ban** against Sudanese people, he was forced to stay. Moreover, some directly experience the effects of the **Dublin system** – as an example of policy elements affecting individuals' migratory decisions and trajectories (in this case, acting as a constraint). Notably, in accordance with the Dublin Regulation, two respondents from Iran (first landed in Italy, yet headed to Germany as intended destination) were transferred back by the German police to the country of first entry in the EU, i.e., Italy. Both describe it as a traumatic experience, also from a gender perspective (R-001-037):

> We were maltreated by German Police […] we were surrounded as we were criminal. […] I was very afraid when Police came suddenly in the middle of the night to deport us. We were all shocked. There were 10 policemen (no women) for 3 people. When my mother asked to go to the toilet and get dressed, the policeman followed her inside the bathroom.

Experiences in transit are rather subjective and diverse; yet, dominant feelings are typically negative. While living conditions in **Libya** are dreadful and usually connected to detention, in **Sudan** and **Egypt** life was 'normal' for migrants from East and North Africa. Here, respondents lived in shared apartments, usually with co-nationals; they worked, sometimes studied, and built connections with the local community ("[Sudanese] people is very nice and kind" (R-001-027)). A sketched integration notwithstanding, interviewees were not satisfied with their life as "it

was not much different from the one in" (R-001-041) their country of origin. As for migrants from West Africa, the number of **abuses, violence and intimidations** both in Libya and Niger is staggering as well, yet **relations with local communities** in Libya can be ambivalent: there are examples of migrants receiving help and protection by locals and other foreign nationals, or getting support for leaving the country because it has become too dangerous. **Racism** suffered by Sub-Saharan Africans in Libya is not cited, barring the case of a Nigerian man declaring that "people are very racist in Libya" (X-001-011).

Moreover, life in transit is mostly irregular and **undocumented**; exceptions are the two Iranian respondents who received asylum visas in Germany. There is also a case of denial in Sweden, with a subsequent expulsion order. Nonetheless, notably among Western African respondents, the **lack of legal status** does not seem to be a relevant factor shaping the experience of migrants in Libya: only once the absence of documents is described as an issue.

Once in transit, **the role of family is scaled down** when compared to previous steps. Nonetheless, the case of the Eritrean woman persists to be rather impressive as she is still a victim of her husband's decision: "he decided I had to leave Sudan. I opposed it […] he didn't listen to me", "he forced me to go […] I did not want to board and never wanted to leave my son but he did not give me a choice" (R-001-042).

All these elements inform the actual decision to move on, despite in some cases migrants' agency being severely limited, especially in Libya. Notably, the decision concerning how and when to leave the country by sea is usually in someone else's hands. In certain cases, even the choice regarding whether to depart is not taken in autonomy: a couple of interviewees state that they were first asked for money by whoever organised their journey, but were then brought along without having to pay. A Malian man recalls: "One day they told me that there was a boat ready for me if I paid. I didn't want to go but they would leave me there alone, so they took me with them even if I had no money" (X-001-012).

Migrants' **restricted agency** is also reflected by the fact that a planned destination is not a recurrent theme at this stage. They have generally **limited or skewed information** at their disposal: an extreme case is conveyed by the story of a man from Nigeria residing in Libya, who was unaware he was not in Europe and has been

working to earn his own passage to Italy. From the interviews transpires a **general lack of information**, including about migration policies regulating the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, and, in some cases, a certain **unwillingness to move on to Europe or Italy**, especially for Western African migrants residing in transit for a longer period of time. However, there is also one clear example of a straightforward plan to move on, recalled by a Nigerian woman, who, as soon as she reached Tripoli with three companions, went looking for someone who could take them to Europe.

Among respondents from East and North Africa, **Europe** is most often referred to as their final stop, yet there is **no planning** nor a designed itinerary. Germany was the intended destination of the two Iranian interviewees, yet it became an intermediate step because of the 'Dublin effect', as mentioned above. The journey is typically financed through **personal savings** (many worked while in transit, saving money for the trip) or **friends'/family's economic support**. Hence, notably for this group of migrants, **social resources** remain vital, especially in the form of friend networks. **Friends** act as mediators to establish contact with smugglers, provide economic support, share information on destination, help to find accommodation. However, the logistical arrangement of the journey is generally conditioned by the payment of smugglers.

A shared feature of almost all interviews is an **overall assessment of the journey** mostly tinted with negative tones. In most cases, and independently from the country of origin, the journey is described as tough, dangerous, tiring, exhausting, hard, frightening, difficult, chaotic. Many report **traumatic experiences**: witnessing others' death (notably, among Western Africans, more than half of the interviewees have witnessed someone else's death), experiencing violence, being kidnapped and enslaved, travelling through the desert without eating/drinking for days. Two respondents were saved in Libya thanks to humanitarian corridors (whose functioning is not detailed by the interviewees). The **perception of danger** becomes even deeper at the point of embarkment on the Mediterranean for individuals like a man from Mali, who had never seen the sea before, or a woman from Eritrea who says "I am very scared of the sea. I asked my companions in prison that if we embark together to bring me blindfolded" (R-001-041). Shipwrecks and rescues at sea are also reported, even if remembering those moments is hard.

Both female and male respondents agree that there is no difference in terms of hardships throughout the journey since men and women equally suffer ("gender is not relevant, it's difficult for everyone" (X-002-005)). Among West Africans, only two men assess the **role of gender**, stressing that "men are often beaten and punished, but women are subject to many forms of violence. It is not better or worse, it's hard for everyone in a different way" (X-001-011). Among other respondents, only female interviewees emphasise that women are usually more vulnerable to abuse and violence. In this regard, an Eritrean woman offers a different and unusual perspective (R-001-041):

> To a woman happens everything, get violented, get pregnant, get sexual diseases. Being a man helps but the hardness of the journey, physical fatigue, hunger, thirst, is tolerated mostly by women with more strength. Being a woman gives you superior strength I walked for a whole week without eating, I did not stop and I did not complain, I simply kept walking with my daughter on shoulders.

3.3 Decision-making after arrival in the host country

Even in the arrival context, experiences are varied and personal. The **legal statuses** held by migrants interviewed in Italy seems rather secure, with some differences related to the time of arrival in the country. Interestingly, some of the respondents from Nigeria and Mali – who have been in the country for a longer period of time – refer to their legal status as possessing a "residence permit",[8] underlining the importance of their right to settle or at least legally reside in Italy, while only a few refer to themselves as refugees. Among the remaining interviews, most notably from countries in East and North Africa, and Iran, 12 out of 18 respondents held legal statuses as beneficiaries of international protection, while 6 (arrived in 2020-2021) were waiting for first asylum decision or appeal. **Asylum procedures** – albeit successful in the majority of cases – are diversely assessed: "smooth" (R-001-025), "very good" (R-001-26;32) for some; "stressful" (R-001-034), "difficult" (R-001-

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[8] A significant number of respondents do not specify their concrete legal status at the moment of the interview, rather referring to their residence rights, while not detailing through which particular path they have acquired their current form of documentation/residence permit. It might be implied that such a "residence permit" explicitly mentioned by several interviewees is connected to a successful asylum procedure, but there are not sufficient elements in the interviews to detail the concrete path that has led to the currently held legal residence rights with more certainty.

027;36) for others, who criticise the length of the process and some language barriers.

The first days spent in Italy after the shocking experience of crossing the Mediterranean Sea are characterised by the importance of **transfers** operated by public authorities or civil society organisations **within the reception system**. Almost all respondents underline how they were moved one or multiple times towards their future reception locations, sometimes after a first transit through a hotspot.

Respondents mostly live in **reception facilities** (emergency centres, hotels or houses shared with other asylum-seekers), with the exception of two Eritrean men who report being without housing. Life within centres is sometimes marked by problems with other migrants (for instance, theft, aggression). The **experience of reception** is, thus, rather heterogeneous and so is the overall assessment of life. If some describe their life in Italy as "dignified" (R-001-026) or "happy" (R-001-025), emphasising the fact of feeling safe, others feel unsatisfied and describe their experience as "hard" (R-001-028), "tough" (R-001-027), or "exhausting" (R-001-030). The effects of **COVID-19** upon arrival are underlined by the most recent arrivals, as all respondents reaching Italy since the beginning of the pandemic spent a quarantine period either in a hotel or on a quarantine ship.

Narrowing the focus on those interviewees from West Africa (with lengthier periods of stay in Italy), an overwhelming majority positively assess their experiences in Italy, describing the people they met as kind, nice and ready to support. This assessment applies to the help received on rescue boats, within the reception system and even from the general population ("Italians are very kind and warm-hearted" and "more tolerant" (X-001-010) than in other European countries, states a man from Nigeria).

Some difficulties may emerge in the **initial stages of integration**, due to different alimentary practices or the troublesome cohabitation with other refugees with diverse cultures. However, this is not a consolidated pattern, as moving in with other asylum-seekers can also be considered as a positive development. A positive assessment of life is also related to a **successful integration in the local social fabric**: playing in the local football team, as happened to a Malian man, is a pivotal

example. **Perceptions about Italy can also change** over time: a Nigerian woman felt like she "was back in an African village" (X-002-001) at first, but then got to know the conditions in Italy and her opinion shifted. Italy is also valued positively when compared to other European countries, even if the sources of information on other countries are not clearly identified ("the stories I have heard" (X-001-010)).

Nonetheless, in various interviews, several **shortcomings of the reception system** are singled out. Although stories differ from case to case, the majority of the interviewees, especially from East and North Africa, and Iran, complain of **inadequate assistance** from authorities once their international protection claim has been recognised. Notably, if on arrival authorities generally supported migrants – either via legal or social assistance – to go through the asylum application, then they were left alone. Psychological, medical, and economic assistance is rather absent. Some denounce **scarcity of staff** in some phases of the reception process (e.g., X-002-006) as well as some experiences of **racism** (e.g., R-001-032). Moreover, many grumble about the **lack of support in finding employment/accommodation**, that is in the path towards longer-term integration. Nonetheless, the absence of authorities was partly compensated by the **support received from the local population**: "On the other hand the population that I have known in these years has supported me, I found a lot of humanity and understanding for my condition" (R-001-040). As a consequence, **social resources** remain critical; indeed, a significant share of respondents receive support – also in economic terms – from their **friends living abroad**.

In some cases, the **lack of assistance** is considerably debilitating and frustrating. For instance, an Eritrean mother says she got little support as a mother with kids in Italy; likewise, the two Eritrean men without housing describe themselves as hopeless. "Until today I have no work, no assistance of any kind whatsoever. I try not to give up but it is very hard because nothing has changed. I have no expectations for the future" (R-001-028); "I am lost at the moment, I try to find a solution to survive" (R-001-029).

As for future plans, a conspicuous difference exists between West African respondents and the rest of the sample. Indeed, respondents from Mali and Nigeria predominantly **wish to remain in Italy** and do not declare clear plans to move

towards other European destinations. The wish to leave the country is stated in isolated cases, and it does not necessarily point towards other European countries: for instance, a Nigerian man would like to return home, should he decide to leave Italy. Once in Italy, there seems to be a widespread, **modest, but consistent satisfaction** with the conditions in the country, which does not translate into future expectations on other European destinations, let alone logistical plans and arrangements to leave. The only concrete alternative in Europe appears to be **Germany** due to the presence of more job opportunities. Anyhow, information on possible future destinations is partial and skewed, at best.

On the other hand, within the group from East and North Africa, and Iran, the assessment of their experience in Italy is more varied. Among those who refer positively to their experience in Italy, feeling safe and supported, being happy, "full of joy" (R-001-042), and grateful are dominant feelings. Half of the respondents in this group (9 out of 18) want to stay in Italy and express their **desire to settle**. However, some plan to leave the centre and move to another city in Italy. In some cases, the decision to stay is conditional on the **possibility to find a job or a house**. "If things don't change, I will try to reach Monaco", says a Sudanese respondent (R-001-031); "If I find a job, I'll stay here" (R-001-040). Two interviewees previously attempted to leave Italy, yet were returned by the police. Five persons in this group explicitly reveal their **intention to move on**. Their feelings are chiefly negative. Generally unsatisfied, they complain of being left alone. "I want to go to another country because here in Italy I'm wasting my time" (R-001-028); "I think that any country is better than Italy" (R-001-029).

Among those who want to leave Italy, it might be said that **they do not have a clear destination in mind**, nor have they reached the stage of putting the decision into action. Overall, they refer to the possibility of joining friends living abroad, namely in the **UK** and **France**. An Eritrean mother mentions the **North** as a place where more opportunities are available. Hence, information on the intended destination is scarce and quite general.

Overall, plans to move on and/or settle are related to **migrants' personal aspirations**, which are overwhelmingly connected to the **search for a job** or to **reunite with other family members in Europe**. Indeed, among those who intend

to stay, the first aspiration is always to **find a job**. Furthermore, respondents usually connect this goal with the **plan to learn Italian** as they see it as a way to improve their chances to be employed. **Professional training** and **language courses** are a constant feature of migrants' experience of the Italian reception system, and are met with mixed feelings, especially when evaluating their usefulness in order to find a job. Moreover, from respondents' stories, some hurdles in attending Italian courses surface, both related to personal reasons (e.g., some health problems) and to logistical problems (e.g., the need to move to another city without having enough money to pay for the bus ticket). Many also cite the **need for a house** and support to find it. The ultimate goal is always to **gain independence** and **have a better life** "away from problems" (R-001-032). In the case of a Nigerian woman, the perspective of marrying in Italy constitutes an additional factor shaping her choices.

The **role of the family back home** emerges as highly disputed. Diverging ideas surface when it comes to the opportunity of reuniting with the family back home: some refugees look for a possible **reunification** to provide a better future to the family group, especially their children, while others are more reluctant or state clearly their **unwillingness for any kind of reunification**. Others believe that their families are faring better in their home countries, as in the words of a Nigerian man stating that "I often call my grandmother but I do not intend to bring her here, [...] she is fine where she is" (X-002-007).

4. Migration journeys along the Western Mediterranean and Western African Routes

This section describes decision-making on migration projects at three stages of departure, transit and in deciding whether to continue physical trajectories along Western Mediterranean Route and Western African Routes, or to remain in a European member state. This analysis is conducted in relation to 17 interviews (see methodology for further description) with asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants who had arrived to Spain via a version of these "routes" from the African continent, through Spanish sea or land borders. The individuals included 13 men and four women migrants from the origin countries of Morocco, Mali, Algeria, Guinea Conakry, Senegal and Ghana. It should be noted here that in interviewee recruitment, as described in the gender considerations section of the introduction, it was difficult to obtain **gender parity in interviewees from West Africa.** As a result, the sample design was slightly modified, and supplementary research conducted, in light of this limitation.

While each individual presented a highly personal and distinctive account and migration experience, patterns that emerged in the analysis are described here, alongside the relevant insights they offer, with attention to how macro- and meso-level obstacles versus opportunities were negotiated at the individual level. Throughout, dynamics and understandings of gender, alongside other intersectional dimensions of difference, played a role, with **family and personal networks** notably serving of recurring importance.

4.1 Decision-making before departure in the origin country

To begin, in attempting to unpack the decision-making processes leading up to departure, many of the narratives reflected how individuals navigated multiple **expectations**, balancing this with **personal attempts of "becoming."** Several participants sometimes gave what could be described as conflicting answers as to who was ultimately responsible for the decision to leave. They often remained **ambiguous about individual versus family decisions**, and usually wanted to take ownership even if they described a situation where the family played a part. For

example, when questioned as to whether the decision to leave was made alone, a Moroccan woman stated, "My father encouraged me to go," but when asked to follow up, explained, "I thought about it myself and I decided by myself" (O-004-008). Several more interviewees from North and West Africa often **took individual responsibility** for their decision to leave, but at the same time spoke with family members and parents before making the decision.

Apart from the question of attributing responsibility for who was behind the decision-making, interviewees communicated factors leading up to the decision to leave that reflected overall patterns, which included aspirations for a "better life," family motivations, local community relations (including any corresponding discrimination), and finally, armed conflict or violence. Of course, all these factors could be interrelated.

For example, seeking to support family could form part of a larger search for opportunities, and hopes and **aspirations for a "better life."** A Moroccan man explained, "Basically, I wanted a better life for my family, I wanted to take care of my family and the house. That's the main reason" (O-002-007). He found his remuneration for his plumbing job insufficient, and his neighbour had told him there was an opportunity for a "better life" in **Sweden**. His friends had also said **migrants were not returned** if entering Europe through the Canary Islands, but rather transferred to an NGO or reception facility. A single Moroccan woman who had been supporting her mother, father and siblings in Morocco for years, had decided to move to Spain in order to **provide them with "a better life"** as well (O-004-008).

Indeed, it was notable that the "better life" phrase was explicitly used in several interviews. However, what it was perceived to be varied, depending on the origin country of the person, as well as their individual contexts and characteristics. Sometimes personal networks informed **perceptions of a better life**, and the perceived opportunity cost of leaving. After a Malian man had finished high school and began work as a bricklayer in Mali. He found that, "there is nothing in the city, 5€ is too little for a very difficult job like that. Less than 5€, 2500 CFA francs. It's too little, it's to exploit the man" (O-004-007). He continued that his friends described the opportunity for improved circumstances: "I see that friends who have left are doing very well, they have a better life, they used to tell me 'come and get your life

here'" (O-004-007). These aspirations he indicated could also be conceived of as a **path to adulthood**.

In considering such aspirations as to a "better life," and individual level characteristics as micro-level determinants of who wants to leave or stay, **educational level** seems to take on a role. With the exception of an Algerian man, Guinean man, Malian man, Senegalese man, and a Moroccan woman and man, the rest of the interviewees had completed high school, with some holding university degrees. This is important as it seems to demonstrate relatively higher levels of education among the participants, given that while some of the participants' origin countries have compulsory education through high school, actual enrolment through high school remains low; meanwhile, other origin countries only provide and oblige education through middle school.

In proceeding to explore family as a motivation in the decision to leave, while "better life" was not explicitly cited, **leaving as a family project** presented itself in cases of interviewees with children. While the **majority of interviewees were single and childless** (a trend in migrant profiles characteristic of these "routes") two of the four that did have children explained that this factored into their decision to leave, with an Algerian divorcée worrying she was unable to protect her daughter in the face of **gender discrimination** and potentially even violence. An Algerian father of two explained his **children's education, stability and social mobility**, among other factors, informed his decision to leave. Another family project included a Ghanian woman who studied to be a nurse while her husband travelled to Spain to settle and process her visa documents, so that she could **join him and eventually also bring their daughter**.

In the case of a Ghanian man, enjoying a stable life and attending a renowned international high school, he and his mother decided to **join his father** who had been working for some time in Spain. It should be highlighted that there was sometimes a **gendered notion of responsibility** on the part of West African men, either in an **adulthood project** (encouraged by the family) or in terms of **responsibility to support the family**.

However, the **family dimension** could also be related to **abusive or complicated dynamics**. This was the case with several West African men, who felt they had no

option but to leave due to this type of factor. A Guinean man had left the country as a minor, encouraged by other members of his community, due to ongoing physical abuse from his step-mother that left him hospitalised, combined with appropriation of any wages he earned or resources he had. In the case of a Malian interviewee, his father's passing led to his role as head of the family, as well as struggles amongst his uncles for family resources with **land and property disputes**, and his uncles threatening to kill him.

In a similar manner, although not as often as directly life threatening, difficult relations with families or local community related to **religious and gender discrimination or social rejection**, reflected how participants chose to move in light of goals that included either attaining respect, social mobility or stability. In the case of men from North Africa, a few that were not practicing religious (in varying forms of religious belief and practice of Islam) felt that they were stigmatised and even threatened by other members of their local communities, as a Moroccan man explained his decision to leave was a combination of a health condition he felt was not receiving adequate treatment and an attempt to avoid a life of delinquency; largely, however, he cited the trouble he faced for his **defiance of socio-cultural or religious norms** (O-002-001):

> When I was 16, 16 and a half, I decided to quit Islam, to leave Islam and to become an agnostic atheist, and my family didn't like that. My community in general didn't like that […] I don't do Ramadan because I'm not a Muslim, so I had a lot of problems […] I sleep outside just to avoid having these fights with my father […] one time I was eating on the streets or something, and then some group of people saw me and they were like, "Oh, you are eating […] And then I had to fight with them. And even if they beat you, like, or they do something bad to you, you cannot go to the police […] They will take you to jail.

Similarly, a woman from Morocco **felt discriminated against societally as a woman**, with little options for autonomy and social mobility, including a poor public system with **no social coverage** for women, **precarious labour and lack of employment possibilities** as a woman, little respect for human rights, and with no assistance from public authorities when harassed. The woman explained "I was thinking about going to a European country to live as I wanted not as they wanted," with 'they' referring to her **perception of a patriarchal system**. She added that, "In

our tradition […] everyone is involved in the female business and their lives, even with the smallest things […] If I do not get married […] if I do not have kids, they are involved" (O-002-006). Regarding her job, she maintained that it was not sustainable for her to "work all day long from eight in the morning until seven in the afternoon just for five euros" (O-002-006). When talking about the **sexual harassment** that she repeatedly suffered, she shared that "if I say that I got harassed to the police, they will not get involved to solve it […] If I get harassed by men and go to complain to the police, they will not do anything, even my family will not do anything" (O-002-006).

Other mobilisation efforts seemed to parallel the **search for respect and social mobility**, albeit perhaps with less threat to security. A Moroccan man explained "I don't identify with the culture in Morocco at all. I never fit in. I had a lot of problems. I did a lot of drugs. I was addicted" (O-002-022). He proceeded to explain that despite having a good job, he thought that the nature of the job allowed his employer to easily send him to jail, and that he generally did not get along well with his family.

Finally, **armed conflict**, perpetrated by **multiple actors at the local level,** marked **West African narratives** on initial decision-making, and was sometimes reflective of a survival strategy. A Malian man described how the first departure in his journey included leaving his village where his family had farmed and he had been studying for his university degree, to **seek more stability in the capital** (O-004-007):

> There were conflicts, and, I don't know, it's a fight that's currently spreading in Mali, slavery fights, like this, and every time they would enter the town brutally, like this [...] they would attack. So we saw that there was no peace there, every time there were conflicts, every time there were bad people who came into the village. They would come and attack and kidnap people, or they would break up shops to collect everything.

Another Malian man explained how bandits came and attacked their village, that he reported who they were to the police, and the **bandits returned and killed the police as well as threatened the interviewee**'s life. "I spoke with my mother and I told her that I wanted to leave, otherwise, I was going to have problems. Now I have my life, I can't lose it, because I have a child, see?" (O-004-003). At the same time, citing reasons to leave as due to conflict should not be reflective of a lack of migrant

agency, particularly when considering access to resources shaping ability to move, as well as aspirations.

Indeed, depending on the reasons to leave, participants faced certain **obstacles** or facilitating factors, and actively chose to and proceeded to depart. In beginning with **enabling factors**, these often included a **combination of economic and social resources**. In several cases, as described earlier in the decision-making behind reasons to leave, families encouraged or enabled the participants to embark on their journeys. For example, in the previous case of the Malian man escaping death threats, he was able to ask for **resources (20,000 CFA) from his brother and rely on friends and family** in assisting his departure. Another Malian asked for **money from his aunts and uncles**. An Algerian man **sold all of his possessions** in order to pool together the collective resources for him and his friends to buy a boat, illustrating how migration decisions can represent individualised evaluations of opportunity costs. He estimated that this preparation took a month, as they bought the boat, gathered food, obtained gas, and waited for a good day to leave from Algiers. In the case of the previously referenced Guinean man, a **community member** sympathising with his abusive home life **transported him to the border with Senegal**.

In looking at all obstacles, **constraints** in leaving included a **lack of economic and social resources**, more so than lack of resources like knowledge, skills or health conditions. In particular, while some participants had been supported by family or community members, others were **discouraged from leaving**. This was the case of a Senegalese man and single father of two, who was discouraged by his family from leaving, as well as in the case of a Moroccan woman whose family also objected. The Senegalese man explained that "my family did not agree, they told me to stay there, like 'you are a grown up, you will succeed', but no, I had to change my surroundings" (O-004-006). According to him (O-004-006):

> they did not want [me to leave] because they knew I was going to be an irregular, because I told them I was going to go to Morocco, and they understand how I would live there. But when I answered that I was going to Morocco to look for something better they still told me to stay there, but I said no, it was my own decision.

In considering favourable circumstances versus hurdles, one category that could fall into both when making observations on the stage of departure includes **information sources**. When asked as to the sources of information, interviewees did not always have a particularly clear response, and **the information itself was often vague or general,** in terms of **intended destination** or **planned trajectory.** However, as cited above, these sources usually came from the community, sometimes complemented by additional research online, as was the case of a Moroccan man. He described his previous knowledge about Spain as basic, other than knowing there were other migrants there with similar origins, and thus he could possibly communicate; he had also learned about Spanish asylum policies on YouTube. A Malian man explained he learned about **France** from his friends and Google, considering the language and potential ease of obtaining legal status attractive. Another Algerian man explained he knew that he would have access to rights, and had learned some information about this from friends and the internet. A Malian man said he had always liked **Spain** as a destination, particularly given its visibility in international football. In the case of the previously referenced Moroccan woman attempting to escape discrimination, she more ambiguously understood that Spain offered democracy, policed corruption and respected human rights.

4.2 Decision-making in transit

In moving to address the experience during the journey and the macro- and meso-factors shaping the means and modalities of the participants' journeys once having left the origin country and before arriving to the EU host country, a few generalised patterns emerged with respect to the WMR and WAR routes.

Firstly, **journeys of West African migrants** were often longer (**months to years**), involving **dangerous travels** with frequent **traumatic experiences** through **several countries**, and decisions to not remain in those countries. Journeys were perilous in that they were marked with **violence**, dangerous conditions, physical harm, lengthy trajectories, and **deaths of companions**. Out of the interviewed participants, **West African men** (no women) were the only ones who made the **perilous boat journey** from the coast of Africa **to the Canary Islands**. In the case of sea arrivals to Spain, these usually were accomplished thanks to authorities or

search and rescue missions finding their vessel. Given how participants had suffered physical harm and danger and witnessed companions die, their recent trauma seemed to go **unaddressed in reception services**.

In terms of **inter-continental travel by road transport or on foot**, the **differentiated trauma** experienced on the road by both genders from West Africa was described by a Guinean man (O-004-002):

> There are gangs, they will attack you, they have guns. They will say, "what you have, give me." If you don't give, they will hit you […] The women, they will rape them […] If they ask you something you don't have, it's not good […] I only have a small phone. That's what they took away from me.

Both the accounts and **low number of West African wome**n interviewees coincides with literature indicating the **difference in mobility of women** in this type of journey, particularly those that note how these women can remain immobilised in transit countries or remain in countries of origin due to **disproportionate family care responsibilities**.

Secondly, for both West African and North African migrants, the **role of "smugglers"** was persistent, although what is understood as a smuggler is qualified here. It could be depicted as a facilitating factor, alongside personal networks that **included fellow migrants** or individuals from the same country of origin or community. Here, it is understood that the notion of "smuggling" still allows for migrant agency, as migrants negotiate their journeys and make decisions as to how to move. Indeed, while the majority of the West African accounts reflected engaging with a smuggler, interviewees did not refer to the agent or network by such a term, and did **not necessarily consider transactions exploitative**, but simply as a means of transportation.

In other words, it could sometimes be unclear as to whether the interviewee considered the actor a smuggler, fellow migrant or simply a helpful individual. For example, in the case of the aforementioned Guinean man, he had paid a Moroccan for a three-day long boat trip with around 43-44 people to the Canary Islands, but considered the captain (who was later taken away by law enforcement upon arrival and clearly considered a smuggler by authorities) as a "guide" (O-004-002). On the other hand, a Malian man explained that he left his money for the smugglers with

his friends so as not to be robbed. He believed these **smugglers were operating in tandem with law enforcement** as they facilitated the boat journey from Mauritania to the Canary Islands. On this journey he had paid for, on a boat containing 40 people, the passengers ran out of food and water, and the interviewee faced a hand infection that resulted in having to amputate his finger upon arrival in Spain, after a total of eight days on the water.

On a related note, constraints and hurdles were often linked to **lack of resources to continue an onward journey**, difficult and sometimes **violent encounters with authorities** (who often solicited **bribes**), returns due to **lack of administrative or legal paperwork**, and **border closures due to COVID-19** (which resulted in the necessity of further smuggling costs or bribes). The earlier referenced Guinean man, who travelled from Guinea, to Senegal, to Mali, to Algeria, to Morocco (before finally taking a boat to the Canary Islands) said he found difficulty in finding work as a minor in **Senegal**, as well as in **Algeria**. He also noted that he had paid authorities or security forces at the borders.

Multiple attempts to access European territory were not limited to West African migrants. In the case of a Moroccan man, he had attempted to leave Laayoune for the Canary Islands three times. He did view smuggling as exploitative, explaining that smugglers had stolen money from his companions on a small boat holding 34 migrants, and that he had **paid around 2000 EUR** in total for the 16-hour trip.

As somewhat illustrated above, reasons to **continue the onward journey** included: that the "transit" country was not the original, intended destination; **precarious socioeconomic conditions or legal status** in the transit country; or, **personal networks of information**-sharing that shaped decisions as to trajectories. In the case of the first, some of the West African migrants had to carry out a longer, indirect journey to Europe or Spain, but **continued to seek Europe and Spain** as the final destination. Others might not particularly have intended to continue on to Europe, but found **unsustainable livelihoods in the "transit"** country.

For example, a Malian man and his family found difficult conditions in a **Mauritanian refugee camp**, after which he **travelled ahead solo** to Morocco, where he also was unable to gain a regular legal status or communicate, and could not sustain himself, resulting in travelling on to Europe. The man described his life

at the Mauritanian refugee camp: "at the beginning you settle for the things that you have, but then, for someone that has studies so many years it was too boring. There are a **few jobs to do**, but temporary". It was precisely because of this that he "did not see a future there in the camp" and "[…] decided to go to Morocco" (O-004-005). After spending a few months in the latter country, he decided to leave because he did not see "any working opportunity there" either (O-004-005). As for personal networks, in the case of the Malian man fleeing death threats in his origin country, he explained that when he called home from Mauritania his **brother encouraged him to continue onward** and leave Africa entirely.

4.3 Decision-making after arrival in the host country

Finally, experience upon arrival in terms of decisions to remain were marked by considerations as to opportunity structures and constraints regarding **legal status, language abilities**, recognition of **degrees and qualifications**, **work** prospects, **assistance from NGOs**, and – again – family or **personal networks**. While the **majority of interviewees intended to stay in Spain**, in particular those who had pinpointed it as their original destination at point of departure, a few were still considering or had contemplated moving on to another country in Europe for reasons related to the aforementioned factors. For the most part, those in contact with their families in the origin country frequently explained they **had been advised not to come back**, or that the family remained supportive of their decision to remain in Spain and Europe.

Here it is important to note that **legal status** could have an interrelated impact on experiences with integration, particularly socioeconomic, and aspirations about life if remaining in Spain, or considerations about continuing to move on. Eight interviewees held irregular status, six were in the process of asylum, and three held residency status (primarily via family reunification). Those with residency or in the asylum process were often grateful for NGO assistance received, and generally pleased with conditions in Spain, albeit sometimes reflected upon **Spain's struggling economy** or the socioeconomic and particularly the **employment impacts of COVID-19** (some had lost jobs and sought social assistance).

For example, a Malian man in the asylum process felt that his improved Spanish

language skills and professional training he received from NGOs facilitated him remaining in Spain, and planned to keep working there rather than return to Mali. As he put it (O-004-001):

> The first important thing for me was to learn Spanish, because I knew that in order to be successful in my asylum application, I would have to understand the language. Some of the organisations working with asylum seekers paid for my Spanish language studies and, when I finished, they also paid for some training courses on mechanics, since I was still not able to work.

Moreover, the organisation in question also provided him with a room in a shared apartment with fellow beneficiaries and helped him look for employment, albeit, ultimately, he found his current job himself. He explained that "it is going to be almost four years since I came, and it does not cross my mind going back to Mali" (O-004-001). Another Malian man believed that with his university degree and skills he would have **high chances of employment after completing the asylum process** (O-002-003).

On the other hand, those in an **irregular situation** faced greater **socioeconomic exclusion**, and had difficulty finding support, including in light of the **impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic**. A Moroccan woman thought irregular migrants had better chances of integration in **Germany**, as she experienced difficulty in finding stable housing conditions, obtaining a job, and regularising her status in Spain. The Moroccan that had been supporting her family back in Morocco had **difficulty finding work during COVID-19**, but continued to make efforts to find stable housing, employment and achieve regularisation, with **aspirations to one day open her own business**.

A few participants were under the impression (again, via vague sources of information) that **conditions might be better in other EU countries**. A 21-year-old man from Ghana was initially entertaining the possibility of moving on to a **Scandinavian country,** given **English-speaking skills** and **publicly funded education** there, but ultimately decided upon remaining in Spain as he continued working on his language skills and studies. A Malian man in the asylum process was first looking towards internal mobility in Spain – waiting to see what **conditions on mainland Spain** were like, **versus Canary Islands** – before deciding on whether or

not to move on to **France**.

Finally, a previously referenced Moroccan interviewee's account also illustrates how **individual negotiations of gendered roles and constructions** can continue to impact experiences and decision-making even in the "arrival stage." As she explains, she also had problems with different family relatives residing in Spain that offered her a room, for instance an aunt in Madrid or cousins in Aragon. The way she expressed it, "I always have problems with my family, like constantly […] They are my family, I respect them, but they get involved in others' personal lives […] They were always trying to control me […] and I got tired of how they treat me and how they humiliate me" (O-002-006). Essentially, she felt surveilled and pressured by her **family relatives** to meet certain sociocultural or gendered expectations, and **chose to leave them and live precariously**, sleeping nights at a former place of employment.

5. Migration journeys along the Atlantic Air Route

The Atlantic Air Route (AAR) has been gaining importance in recent years, not only as a result of the ongoing economic and socio-political crisis in Venezuela, but also due to a growing perception of violence, insecurity and political instability in the region. The historical and current ties between Latin America and Europe, and particularly with Spain, has translated into constant migration flows between the two territories. Europe and the Schengen Zone can be attractive due to perceptions that it is a region of stability, security and the benefits, and well-functioning public services that take into account a wider range of socioeconomic rights. Nonetheless, few migrants from Latin America are able to undertake the journey, mainly because of the great economic costs of journeys, with air travel as the only option.

In understanding migration along the elements informing the decision of leaving, transiting or arriving to a country like Spain, all are interlinked. Within the region of origin, situations of constant political turmoil, in addition to increased criminal violence and prolonged economic crisis influences individual migration decisions. All these factors and their intersection entail multiple elements shaping the migrants' decision to leave their country of origin.

5.1 Decision-making before departure in the origin country

In describing decision-making leading up to departure, participants cited **violence and insecurity** experienced in their countries of origin. Within this level of analysis, a notable percentage of interviewed migrants referred to experiences of danger and violence in their surrounding environment, e.g., shootings or violent deaths, or related to personal experiences of different types. Similarly, the open confrontation between Latin American governments and **criminal gangs or guerrillas**, e.g., the Mara Salvatrucha in Honduras, is mentioned by some interviewees as one of the main problems affecting their everyday lives. This reality generates high levels of violence, criminality and widespread instability. For instance, the emergence of guerrilla groups like the FARC in Venezuela and along the Venezuelan border – which originally represented a Colombian non-state violent actor – is repeatedly mentioned in interviews as an increasing threat. Even groups smaller than the FARC

are cited as having a more notable presence. One of the interviewees explained how his mother had to move to Spain for issues related to "guerrilla conflicts […] took them (the mother and some other family relatives) out of the house (where they lived) on about three occasions" (O-003-012). Furthermore, **extortion** by criminal groups is presented as a common scourge by migrants in several countries of origin. A great deal of people residing in certain areas within those territories live under constant threat of extortion by violent groups or street gangs. Some of the interviewees accounted for this violence by explaining: "there is a lot of crime and that makes us always afraid, you know? We cannot go out alone because we have the permanent fear that they are going to do something to us" (O-003-009).

It is significant how the situation has worsened over the recent years, affecting the **economic reality** and thus accentuating the **food crisis** permeating several countries across Latin America. Many of the migrants interviewed confirmed that they could manage to live with high levels of insecurity and violence, but that the lack of expectations for the future given socioeconomic conditions was unsustainable. As one of the participants shared, "you live just to be able to eat […] I was working for free […] You have no aspirations […] If you think about having a child, how are you going to do it if you barely have enough to eat yourself" (O-003-001). Likewise, **inflation** has been mentioned as one of the main concerns resulting from the worsening of the economic situation. Food insecurity is such that even if a person manages to obtain a decent salary, he or she might still not be able to pay for basic products. As an interviewee explained, "at work they pay very little, you know? And despite having the degree that you may have, the salary is very, very low and well, people do not have enough because everything is very expensive" (O-003-009). In this context, many participants confirmed that if their financial situation had not been as bad as it was, they would not have left their country.

Concurrently, the state crisis has led to a degradation in public services and in the quality of **education** and **health**, which were already almost non-existent in several of the countries of origin. Although a person may have faced challenges in the public health system before, the private sector is now not much better, due to a lack of medicine and supplies, especially in the case of Venezuela.

In terms of the functioning of public institutions, many interviewed migrants spoke

of the widespread levels of **corruption** occurring at all levels of the states' public administrations. They argued that one of the main concerns was having to confront administrative corruption at low levels of government in order to obtain any legal document or fulfil a procedure.

In this regard, there were several migrants who stated that the **inefficiency of the judicial system** in their countries of origin had a share of responsibility in their decision to leave. Some representative cases included: (i) a woman who complained due to suffering from gender-based violence and feeling absolutely unprotected by the state security forces (O-003-010):

> I tried to file a complaint in Colombia, but in Colombia … they do a kind of conciliation in which they call you […] and the attacker. And they tell you something in the line of 'well, what's going on' […] as if to clarify what is happening.

(ii) a person presented another complaint of death threats and extortion (O-003-012):

> they do not really understand the magnitude of the threat (referring to the judicial system), regardless of whether you go and place a document (referring to the complaint) and say, 'they threatened me'; that document remains archived there and 20,000 years can pass.

and (iii) another individual explained how police tried to incriminate him in a public offence (O-003-008):

> they put me in the patrol car and took me to a police station […] They prosecuted me and the worst thing was that they involved me in a crime about which I did not even know what had happened [he had been a victim of kidnapping]. The Prosecutor's Office wanted me to take responsibilities for the crime and they wanted me to sign a record […] I was not going to sign anything; I would only do so if I had a lawyer present and I was not going to say anything until I did.

These are some of the multiple macro-level drivers in countries of origin informing a person's decision to leave his or her country of origin. As one Venezuelan interviewee summarised it, "the main problematic element with migration from Venezuela to Spain is Venezuela" (O-003-001).

Throughout the narratives, several **macro-level factors** emerged that could have an impact on migrant **preferences as to desired region of destination**:

Among the most repeated elements that can act either to attract or discourage migrants from the American continent are **language and culture**. A significant proportion of such individuals mentioned that speaking the same language significantly facilitated their integration process within the host society and that, since they were not familiar with any other language, Spain ended up being the sole possibility and thus most desired country of destination for many of them.

Despite the economic disparity that exists between **Spain** and Latin American countries, the former is chosen by some of the migrants from the latter due to having lower **living** costs than other Western European countries. Although some interviewed migrants might have initially thought of attempting to go to France or Germany, or even to the United States, they were aware that these are countries with high and expensive living standards, incompatible with their vulnerable economic situation and limited material resources.

Concurrently, most Latin American migrants preferred **Europe** – and Spain in particular – as a region of destination over the United States. In addition to the language or the culture that seemed to them more attractive, it was perceived that Europe had **more permissive policies of entry and movement** within the Schengen area and the likelihood of being able to stay after arrival. Most Latin American migrants acknowledged that they may only be able to enter regularly as tourists to Europe, and then fall into a situation of irregularity by remaining beyond the tourist stay limit. In the case of Venezuelans, in Spain they have the possibility to apply for humanitarian status, and migrants from Central America often try to request some type of international protection, alleging persecution from violent criminal groups. In contrast with this, most migrants argued it would be impossible for them to access the United States and was not worth an attempt.

Some of the interviewees also mentioned that Europe struck them as safer than, again, the United States, arguing that it is **less violent or problematic in terms of security**. They often established comparisons between their countries of origin and those of destination in terms of crime and violence to justify their migration decision. As one of the participants put it, "in my country I cannot walk down the street alone because something could happen to me, while here I can walk alone, and nothing happens. Thanks to security" (O-003-009); or, alternatively, they

highlighted the general quality of life that "many European countries have, for example, in relation to their stable economies and the possibilities of living well there" (O-003-001).

In the same way, the **robust public services and systems,** particularly public education and the public health system, stood out as one of the main factors shaping some of the migrants' decisions to move to Spain. It is worth pointing out how most interviewed mothers talked about being able to provide an education for their children. At the same time, younger interviewees or those aspiring to conduct vocational training mentioned the possibility of accessing university education or training courses, which would facilitate labour market entry. Finally, the vast majority presented health coverage as a critical factor within their decision-making process, especially in those cases where there was a previous medical condition or history of disease in the family.

Moreover, there were a considerable number of occasions in which the existence and influence of **networks of family relatives and friends** had a strong impact on migrants' decisions to leave or stay in their countries of origin. On many occasions, **family and friends** who remained encouraged the migrant and supported him or her throughout the trip. These persons might provide economic assistance but also do so with words of encouragement. One of the interviewees (O-003-011) said,

> a sister bought it for me (the plane ticket) with a credit card. The money to enter, the same. Together (with other family members) they collected and lent me the money, that is, one of them lent me this amount, another that amount... until I arrived.

Another of the interviewees underscored the importance of receiving the moral support of the family "(her mother told her) 'it will go well for you because you are an entrepreneur, you are doing it for the well-being of both' (in reference to her and her daughter)" (O-003-007). It is also of relevance the role played by the **companion migrants,** who undertook the journey with the migrant and shared similar experiences. Undertaking the migration experience together helped in moments of pressure or uncertainty, given mutual support.

Similarly, having **relatives in the country of destination** was an important incentive to embark on the trip. Migrants who have already settled in a host country

may push and encourage prospective migrants to take on the journey, especially when the displacement of the former was successful, and they find themselves in a position to assist new migrants by sending them valuable **information** about the country that is going to host them. This included information on children's schooling, to migration processes, to tips about how to search for employment. **Diaspora groups and communities** financially support fellow nationals at their origin country for them to be able to make the trip, e.g., paying for the flight or lending them money to prove at the destination airport that they are entering the country as tourists; or to have enough financial resources to settle down after arrival at the country of destination. To guarantee a successful integration process during the first months, they lend money to the newcomers or provide them with temporary housing until they can gain economic independence. One of the interviewees explained her experience as follows: "there was someone I knew here in Madrid. He told me, 'hey, come here, suddenly there are more possibilities for you to get a job, come here'" (O-003-010).

The importance of **social networks** is such that even in situations in which migrants have the possibility of choosing between different places of destination, networks become a deciding factor in where to settle. One of the interviewees said, "no, I was never going to risk going to any country if I did not have a relative. Especially considering that I was travelling with my daughter" (O-003-007).

Finally, **individual factors** and decision-making processes leading people to leave their country of origin **cannot be separated from macro- and meso-level drivers**. In other words, the personal situation of migrants is always conditioned by the context (violence, insecurity, poverty, lack of good education or health) wherein the decision to leave is pondered and, ultimately, taken. As an interviewee (O-003-006) put it in relation to how insecurity and violence ended up conditioning all aspects of his life,

> there comes a point when you feel trapped and that there are not many options left […] you feel that there is a limit […] I could never really went for a walk […] in the street with my friends, in my life, never (due to a deep feeling of personal insecurity).

Although migration is often presented as an option that individuals have been

pondering about and planning for a long time, it is common that a **very specific episode ends up triggering** the movement. This specific occurrence thus constitutes the key element that leads individuals to make the final decision, i.e., from a **threat** (**gender abuse, organised crime**) to their safety that is perceived as very real. An interviewee who had been once kidnapped said, "I already imagined myself lying on some highway, in the news, with a gunshot in the head or something like that" (O-003-008). It could also include a violent occurrence in the person's immediate surrounding, as another interviewee explained (O-003-001),

> we experienced a very strong episode near the house. An individual with guns, with firearms, tried to attack another person, the shots were heard, he practically went to the door of the house [...] and that for me was very traumatising.

The specific episode could also be a **macro phenomenon** that affects the migrant directly and that strikes them as irreversible, leading to the perception that the situation is not going to improve in their country, or a kind of desperation with the context. This could include the murder of people in the town where they lived, or the electricity blackout that occurred in Caracas (Venezuela) in 2019 for 34 days, which led them to say that "we simply said no, enough is enough" (O-003-001). Ultimately, **fear for personal safety**, their lives or **lack of sustainable livelihoods** acted as a trigger in the final decision to leave.

Another important element resurfacing in interviews was the lack of paid **employment** and the view that there was little likelihood of obtaining it for the foreseeable future. Likewise, **poor living conditions** or **fragile health** needs unmet by the public healthcare system were factors that led some of the interviewed migrants to initiate their journey.

Due to an unstable socio-political and economic situation in the country and its impact on participants' expectations for the future, several of them reported suffering from **traumas and psychological illnesses**, such as depression. In these circumstances, leaving the country could offer a possible solution.

In some instances, interviewees manifested a **prior desire to migrate**, especially among younger interviewees. Before the recent crisis, migration in Venezuela could be perceived as a possibility to improve one's life and an opportunity, rather than an obligation or an escape. This changed with the economic and political crisis that

began and severely worsened almost a decade ago. Since then, for most, migrating has become a survival tactic, or forced.

Episodes having to do with family members, or the **family situation** of an individual, can trigger the decision to migrate. In relation to this, it is necessary to point out how young couples are more likely to undertake the journey, especially if they have a child or wish to have one. Faced with the impossibility of giving their offspring a promising future in their country of origin, they see migration as an improvement of their current situation. Some interviewees stated, "for our safety, but also thinking about the girl's future" (O-003-004); or "where I could give my daughter a better quality of life due to the current situation in my country" (O-003-007). But not only having a child can lead to migration, there were several who reported that the breakdown of their family unit led them to migrate, i.e., from parents who did not take care of their children, neglected them or violated them, to repeated episodes of gender-based violence, widespread throughout the region. One of the interviewees explained the harassment suffered at the hands of her ex-partner in the following way: "(the man told her) don't go out, don't visit your relatives, I'll pick you up from the university"; or "he had watched and controlled me constantly, and just one day I made the decision" (O-003-010).

Despite the apparent contradiction, in the same way that poverty might lead to departure, a **good economic situation** could also influence migration decisions. As an interviewee shared, "at the beginning you were sure that if you did not do anything wrong, i.e., cooperating with criminal groups, nothing bad would happen to you either; but of course, if you stand out a lot financially you become a target" (O-003-001). In certain regions, economic stability did not make it easier to stay in origin due to suffering from other problems or shortages of utilities, as another participant explained (O-003-006):

> I was very, very privileged, but I was living in a bubble [...] we often did not have water in the house. The water and electricity were constantly going out [...] we spent almost a year where there was no bread, and it did not matter how much money we had.

Moreover, the **economic situation** of the migrant can greatly influence the way in which such individual may choose to move and the country that he or she picks as

destination. The more economic resources a person has, the greater the possibilities that the trip will be made through a direct flight to Europe. On the other hand, a person with fewer economic resources will likely have to go through a transit country, borrow money and sell all his or her belongings to gather resources for departure.

5.2 Decision-making in transit

There were several migrants from Latin America who considered moving to a neighbouring country before attempting a final move to Europe. They considered a transit country for a multiplicity of reasons, but it was especially linked to an ease of the conditions of travel or to the geographical proximity between the two territories, and because this step might allow them to save some money to, later, be able to carry out the longest and costliest leg of their journey.

Venezuelans that passed through countries of transit at some stage of their journey usually did so in the countries of Peru or Colombia. where a significant number of Venezuelan diasporas are concentrated. They felt they could establish themselves there in preparing for the final move to Europe. Movements to a neighbouring country are almost always conducted by land, given the high cost of air travel.

In general terms, Latin American migrants wished to travel less to other Latin American countries given that they perceived an increasing situation of **danger, violence and political instability** within the region. In short, if they could avoid transiting to another country and make the trip directly to Europe, they would do so. They explained that there are no major differences between their context of origin and what they can find in other countries on the continent, but also that they especially noticed a generalised and regional **increase in xenophobia**. A considerable number of migrants raised the issue of systematic exclusion in access to work or in the treatment that they received when they were in other countries within the region. Indeed, xenophobia has become a major push factor in transit countries; there are several migrants who confirm that they left transit countries for Europe due to experiencing this discrimination. One of the interviewees commented, "(in Peru) we began to suffer from xenophobia to a point in which we feared for our safety" (O-003-004). Nonetheless, a notable number of migrants who

mentioned episodes of xenophobia later justified it or attempted to rationalise it, arguing that they understood such discriminatory attitudes as a reaction towards the large presence of migrants from their countries of origin, who sometimes had brought violence and insecurity to countries that had welcomed them.

However, transit countries could also have some comparative **advantages** that lengthened the migrants' stay there. Among those that some participants highlighted the most were two. The first included that **access to the labour market** could be done more simply because it took place in the informal market; employers hired migrants even if they were in an irregular situation: "employers do not register you and always pay you in cash [...] due to being in this type of legal situation, I imagine that it becomes easier to get a job" (O-003-004). Secondly, they cited **migration documentation.** When residing in a transit country, there were few occasions when migrants were afraid of being deported to their countries of origin or of encountering problems with the migration authorities. In the same way, having access to administrative or legal documents regularising their situation was not perceived as a complicated process.

As in origin and destination countries, **family networks and friends** played a critical role in transit movements. Many migrants travelled to a transit country because they had social networks that supported and assisted them. This support ranged from basic information related to entering the country or how to carry out immigration procedures, to support in the search for employment, children's education or providing accommodation for long periods of time until the migrant could gain autonomy.

The difficulties that migrants experienced in transit countries often ended up triggering **secondary migration movements**. There is a **widespread perception of failure** in this type of migration due to the feeling that the desired improvement and stability that was initially sought when travelling to the transit country had not been achieved.

Nonetheless, migrants' gathering of socioeconomic resources when residing in a transit country is significant. **Willpower and capacity for resilience**, combined with persistence in the pursuit of objectives, could result in accumulating enough savings to be able to continue with their trip to Europe. Sometimes the **employment**

situation in which the migrants find themselves in, or the support or help that such person receives from their employer is an important reason behind the decision of extending the stay in the transit country. Although they may be somewhat precarious jobs, migrants perceive them as an improvement over the previous situation they had left behind in their country of origin.

5.3 Decision-making after arrival in the host country

Within macro-level drivers at countries of destination informing a migrant's decision-making process, **asylum and refugee policies** can act as an important incentive to determine whether a given country is an appropriate place of destination or not. For instance, the case of Spain currently serves as an attractive option for Venezuelans who (beyond cultural and linguistic advantages) are eligible for international protection granted for humanitarian reasons. Similarly, there are legal and administrative procedures to **be granted nationality**. In Spain, this policy is highly favourable for people from Latin America; in two years' time, they can apply and have access to the Spanish nationality. Some migrants perceive this policy as a key element for successful establishment in Spain.

Social coverage and benefits provided by the public administration could also act as mechanisms incentivising people to move to a certain country. Certain **welfare state regime** policies are usually referenced by migrants as elements that made them chose to go to Spain, especially among: (i) young people who wanted access to quality public higher education; (ii) mothers and fathers planning for their children to receive primary and secondary education; and (iii) individuals in general underscoring the value of the universal coverage that public health provides. These social provisions facilitated societal integration and attempts to pursue life projects.

In certain situations of vulnerability or lack of abundance of resources, migrants often required the active **assistance of family relatives or friends** to be able to support themselves once they arrived at the country of destination. While this has also been underscored from the moment of departure and even of transit, receiving the support of one's social networks is equally important at the region of destination. Regardless of whether the physical displacement had ended, migrants often found themselves in dire need of assistance to put their new life in motion in

the host country. When such assistance failed, migrants considered the possibility of returning to the country of origin or of moving on to another destination. The support of these networks was essential for many migrants seeking to remain in the country of destination, both to achieve material integration, i.e., by facilitating housing or employment possibilities, and to safeguard the psychological health of individuals, i.e., by providing necessary emotional stability to the person in question.

Something similar occurred with the role that **civil society and religious organisations** played in the integration process of migrants in Spain. Individuals who received some type of support from non-governmental organisations felt they had greater agency to act both individually and collectively than a person that had not enjoyed such support. In this regard, they felt their migration experience was more positive and, therefore, remained longer. This could be partly because they were able to create an informal network of acquaintances and even friends, by being put in contact with fellow migrants or diaspora communities that often relied on each other for information or assistance in everyday life. Again, this could influence decisions to remain.

The **psychological and emotional stability** of migrants residing in their planned country of destination is of great importance when considering going to another country (re-emigrating) or returning to their country of origin. When interviewees perceived that they had a successful experience, leaving the host country was rarely considered. On the other hand, in those instances in which an individual is suffering from poor living conditions or has had a traumatic experience, such considerations and the likelihood of starting a secondary journey increased. Both macro – i.e., the situation and context of the country of destination: security, stability, lack of violence, quality of education and healthcare – and the meso-level factors –i.e., having networks of family and friends who supported them – played an important role in the migrants' process of attempting to achieve emotional stability.

Simultaneously, **age** also seemed to be an important variable to consider. It is interesting to note how a remarkable number of **young people** who found themselves in a favourable situation thought about leaving Spain anyway, but only once they had been able to achieve professional training or work experience. This was then followed by aspirations of a more promising professional career in

Germany or Scandinavian countries. Such individuals explained that they were aware of the better economic conditions for qualified persons that these countries could offer. In any case, they considered their time in Spain to be medium and long term, while they were generally sure of not wanting to return to their countries of origin. In relation to this, **older** interviewees – and especially those that had travelled alone – encountered far more difficulties integrating, both because of the hardships of accessing the labour market at an advanced age, and the inherent difficulty of adjusting to a new cultural environment. In these instances, there was a common desire to return immediately to their country of origin and with their families. As one of the participants exposed, "yes, yes, I am alone here […] I want to leave. I feel too lonely"; and "so I am going home. I believe that there is no better place in the world than one's home" (O-003-011).

Individuals forming part of more **united families, or with stronger ties to family members** back in the country of origin, are those that more often consider returning to their country of origin, even though being aware of the difficulties that are very much still present there. On many occasions, the families in the origin countries persuade migrants not to return. Given the situation of instability and violence in the country of origin, those who stayed gave strength to those that departed, encouraging them to remain in the destination country or to continue their journeys. As one of the interviewees put it: "over time my mother told me, 'it is the best thing that you have done, even though it hurts [...] I am not going to tell you to come back because what are you going to do here? Stay there'" (O-003-004).

6. Conclusions

Our analysis of the interviews with migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees, who have undertaken migration journeys and arrived in Greece, Italy and Spain along four routes (EMR, CMR, WMR/WAR, and AAR) respectively, has inquired into the ways in which people on the move report the formation and materialisation of their decisions in relation to three (often interrelated) questions: (i) whether to stay or move (next); (ii) where to move (next), i.e., formation of destination preferences; and (iii) how to get there, i.e., itinerary, means and modality of mobility. In doing so, we have particularly focused on how individuals (also as part of family journeys) constantly interact with and negotiate macro- and meso-structures when taking migration decisions and translating them into action, so as to shed further light on how such continuous interplay informs migration outcomes and future intentions.

Approaching the journey as a dynamic and continuous process starting from the (first) departure from the country of origin to the (last) arrival in the EU, we have paid particular attention to the 'making of' the journey as a result of a series of decisions and actions (in relation to the abovementioned questions) across the *various contexts* in which the journeys unfolded, i.e., origin, transit, (current) host, and at *different stages of mobility*, i.e., (first) departure, *en route,* (last) arrival. Where relevant, we have also attempted to capture the evolution of one's thinking, plans and actions as one moves – in our case, eventually towards the EU external borders. While acknowledging the difficulty involved in neatly dividing real-life migration journeys and the varying range of experiences of mobility into distinct compartments, examining the gradual "making of" the journey across its different contexts and stages helped us account for (changing) macro- and meso-structures in relation to which decisions were made and materialised, while identifying variation in approaches to and experiences of mobility.

Our analyses show that **approaches to** and **experiences of the journey**, particularly in terms of the clarity/vagueness or rigidity/flexibility of one's intentions and plans that eventually shape migration outcomes significantly differ, and can be categorised into three groups:

In a **first group** are those who had clearly **intended** to move to and stay in **a non-EU destination**, but after considerable time periods spent in these (first) host contexts, **re-adjusted their mobility intentions** and plans as a result of a decision-making process, separate from the first one informing departure from the origin country and arrival to the first host country. The approach to and experience of the journey of those interviewees falling in this group (typically along the EMR, and mainly, but not exclusively from Syria and Afghanistan) confirms the point made by Crawley et al. (2016, 28) on the need for considering 'onward movement' as 'a separate migration experience driven by its own motivations, decision-making, planning and aspirations'.

In the **second group** are those who **intended to reach 'Europe'** (even when vaguely defined) from the onset and had no intention of staying in another country, while having a more or less clear idea about the itinerary that they aimed to (or they should) follow. However, "the execution" of these plans, and hence the thinking on and materialisation of "how to get there" followed more/less straightforward paths depending mainly on: the economic and social resources that can be mobilised (Van Hear 2006) to overcome the hurdles encountered, which were mainly related to barriers to movement (particularly linked to the policy regime governing transit mobility both across and within borders along the EMR), distance (particularly relevant for journeys from Latin America), and, as a function of one or both of these, the cost of travel (applicable to most cases).

The **third group** is composed of those interviewees who, from the onset, and throughout a large part of the journey, had no clearly defined intentions to reach/stay in/ move on from a concrete destination, but had a rough direction in mind, and adopted a **flexible and step-by-step approach**, paralleling similar experiences identified earlier studies (Schapendonk 2007; Hagen-Zanker and Mallett 2016). Their intentions and plans with regards to all three dimensions of decision-making got clarified as their experience of the journey progressed. In other words, the journey itself was the principal process determining the 'making of' of the journey. The effects of social and economic resources at one's disposal (at a particular time of the journey) in limiting and shaping many dimensions of the journey, from the timing of departure(s) to the choice of next (feasibly reachable)

destination and the means and modality to get there play a particularly important role for journeys flexibly made on the way. This seems to be particularly relevant for journeys from (West and East) Africa and towards Italy and Greece, while being also applicable to some (yet significantly fewer) journeys connecting origin regions to Greece via the Mediterranean.

This implies that the approach to and the **experience of departure, transit and arrival** as well as the **importance and nature of decision-making processes unfolding in these different stages and contexts show variation**, even if they might eventually lead to similar migration outcomes (i.e., arrival in Greece, Italy or Spain in our case). Acknowledging and taking such variation into account, in the following pages we comparatively present our key findings on the formation and materialisation of migration decisions shaping journeys across their various contexts and stages unfolding along the four routes – and informing (ongoing) thinking on staying put or moving on within or outside Europe.

6.1 Decision-making at (first) departure from country of origin

For many, decision-making about the diverse dimensions of the migratory process (often simultaneously) start at the time of departure. Decisions to leave a context behind are at first usually conditioned by how one could **potentially improve his/her future prospects in relative terms** (e.g., relative safety, relatively more secure livelihoods). The expected improvement is typically assessed by comparing conditions in origin contexts against those in the intended destination(s), which tend to be relatively more clearly defined in the case of migrants leaving Latin America and those moving along the EMR, or by weighing the prospects offered by staying put against those potentially presented by the movement *per se,* when such destinations are not as clearly defined, as notably in the case of (especially Western and Eastern African) migrants moving along the WMR or WAR. Also, **the feasibility of reaching a destination**, as a function of economic and social resources one can mobilise (Van Hear 2006) in the face of the exigencies of travel to a particular destination, feeds into timing of departure, choice of (first) destination, and itinerary and modality of travel.

Macro-structures pertaining to (geo)political, socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts are often intertwined, despite variation in terms of the predominance of factors more closely related to one or the other dimension. On all routes, effects of the (geo)political context are described as the more dominant element informing decisions (in some case more overwhelmingly so than others, e.g., the EMR). Again, however, a combination of these elements culminates into the decision to leave.

Overall, most interviewees refer to the **(geo)political context** as significantly informing their decision, which is typically indicated to as having a bearing on one's sense of (in)security. The context leads to such **sense of (intense) insecurity** either through directly affecting lives due to war and armed conflict, e.g., in **Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, or Sudan**. In many cases, insecurity is not only limited to the space of the conflict they live through, but also to spaces of anarchy they must contend with, as in the example of a Malian man targeted by bandits after they had killed all law enforcement in his village. The context also translates into such sense of insecurity through various forms of **persecution and abuse** typically perpetrated by non-state violent actors in contexts where the state is either directly warring with these actors, or unable and/or unwilling to provide protection to citizens against their abuses (notably **Iraq, Mali** and **Latin American** countries). Even when there is no active conflict or when one is not directly targeted, **witnessing insecurity closely tied to the wider political and security context** in one's surrounding (**Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia and Latin American countries**) is also cited as a motivation to leave.

In the **socio-economic sphere**, factors operate by **deepening human insecurity** (especially in Latin America, related to food insecurity), which seems to act – in combination with overall insecurity – as a tipping point in translating into the decision to leave. These elements can also inform one's definition of and aspiration for a **"better life",** which is underlined especially in North and East Africa, while socio-economic factors are rarely mentioned by interviewees who moved along the EMR. The **socio-cultural context** informs decision-making, particularly through direct effects of **patriarchal family and societal structures** on lives (by definition gendered ones) or because of **marginalisation** suffered in the family, local

community or wider society, due to being considered as not complying with established norms around gender and sexuality, and religion.

Some factors embedded in **overall context** – as long as **'Europe' as a destination** is concerned – appear in all routes and origin countries among the main considerations shaping preferences about destination, starting from the perceived security there, not only understood as lack of conflict and violence, but also as a context governed by rule of law and respect to human rights (women/LGBTQI+ rights in particular on the CMR, WMR and WAR). An improved socioeconomic context, i.e., access to/availability of (decent) employment, access to a wider range of social and economic rights and (better quality) public services, particularly education and health, is also considered significant in overall terms. The relevance of socio-economic contextual factors and an understanding of security in Europe that goes beyond a mere lack of physical insecurity indicates that individuals' reasons to leave and their preferences about destination are both informed by perceptions of (in)security – understood in the broader and multidimensional sense of human (in)security.

In certain cases, a **common language** also acts as an important element informing one's preferences: in our sample, this was especially true for Latin American migrants heading to Spain or Francophone interviewees in African countries. In the same fashion, the **existence of diaspora communities** is quite significant for many Syrian refugees to consider Germany a good destination, and for Latin Americans thinking of Spain. Although the presence of a relevant diaspora may generally inform the decision to consider a certain destination, its role emerges as less apparent for our group of respondents from Africa, when pondering their options in countries of origin.

While it should be noted that knowing about the restrictive/dysfunctional dimensions of **migration and asylum policies** (e.g., reception conditions in Greece) already when in country of origin does not necessarily 'dissuade' departure, information/expectations about these policy regimes seem to feed into individuals' decisions, particularly those aspects related to the possibility of **obtaining a (secure) legal status** (i.e., international protection, prospects of nationality). Such

expectations characterise different routes, in particular the EMR, due to, for instance, perceived higher chances of positive asylum decisions for Syrians and Iraqis in Germany; and the AAR, because of information on access to humanitarian protection in Spain for Venezuelans and Colombians.

Interaction with meso-structures informing decisions to leave mainly concern the **role of family** back home and in transit/destination countries, which, in all routes shape migrants' preferences through pre-departure consultations and information flow, and by providing emotional, economic, social, and logistical support to overcome constraints. Migration can sometimes be a family project (particularly visible in the AAR and the EMR): in almost all cases, parenthood (providing safety and a better future for children) is a significant factor, while family re-unification is a notable motivation for departures on the WMR. However, family can also be a source of insecurity motivating departure, for instance in several cases in West Africa, the Middle East, and South-Central Asia.

At the same time, **family in transit and destination countries** significantly inform expectations by sharing information and potentially providing support mechanisms upon arrival (particularly important for interviewees from Latin America to prefer Spain). Other social resources mentioned by interviewees in almost all origin countries are friends, local communities and other migrants. Lastly, presence of/access to actors facilitating movement appear largely irrelevant when authorised travel and legal entry is an option (i.e., Latin America-Spain; or parts of journey, i.e., Iraq-Turkey), while their role (particularly in terms of the question of "how to get there") is enhanced when strict mobility control regimes apply in first crossings.

The role of family (wherever they were located) in decision-making, (again) as embedded in **gendered family hierarchies and roles**, highlights widespread indications of **masculine and feminine ideals** of a meaningful present or future (linked to both socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts), pervasive throughout accounts from all the routes. On the one hand, parenthood could reflect a more fluid gender dynamic, with fathers encouraging daughters to leave on the EMR, while mothers being integral in supporting decisions to leave along the WMR, WAR and AAR, and an aunt traveling with her two nephews on the EMR.

Other dynamics were less flexible, including a pattern of jockeying (or defending oneself) for a place in the patriarchal family hierarchy among interviewees from CMR, WMR and WAR – alongside other cultured masculinities – which led men interviewees depart in pursuit of gendered conceptions of the "good life." Sub-Saharan men and some North African men noted limited opportunities and pressure from family members to seek an adulthood project or manhood further abroad.

Ultimately, in **comparing and contrasting the routes more generally in terms of gender and family**, some notable patterns emerge. For example, the WMR and WAR had the greatest percentage of male participants, reflecting literature and statistics that note these routes being male-dominated; meanwhile, the AAR had the highest percentage of women participants on all routes, illustrating work to date on feminised flows from Latin America to Europe. The EMR was the only route with more participants with children than those without. This translates to observations about transnational family dynamics. Often, transnational family relationships across distances and borders can relate to more nuclear families in the case of EMR, AAR and North African interviewees on the WMR, and consideration of social protection plays a factor in decision-making across origin, transit and destination contexts, which raises questions as to how governments and policy support these families.

A lesser family role or wider definition of transnational family networks, including inter- or intra-generational relationships, seemed to be in operation on the CMR, WMR (in the case of Sub-Saharan interviewees) and WAR (although also to an extent on the EMR). On all routes, virtual or digital tools were mobilised in these transnational family dynamics, perhaps more so on the EMR and AAR, although the extent to which this took place seemed to reflect the digital divide or socioeconomic resources within a route, rather than as compared between the routes.

Furthermore, gendered macro-drivers in the geo-political and sociocultural context manifested in lack of political-judicial institutional protection from instances of **SGBV and discrimination** (by the interviewee or as a perceived threat in the future for an interviewee's child), could take the form of a single episode serving as the trigger, or an ongoing situation, and lead to the ultimate decision. Other notable

examples of gendered drivers included the case of **legal persecution of sexual orientation** in Nigeria, or **conscription** particularly targeting Syrian men.

Finally, and more obviously, further **intersectional** dimensions beyond gender, including age (if younger), class (greater socioeconomic resources and education) and ableism combined, could better facilitate departure, or could inform even entertaining the decision in the first instance. In the case of age, the vast majority of interviewees on all routes fell between the age groups of 20-29 or 30-39, with older interviewees between 40 and 69 mostly only represented on the EMR and AAR. Notably, on all routes with the exception of the EMR, the majority of participants held a high school degree or above, with the AAR marked by all migrants holding a high school degree or above. Apart from the majority of women who had travelled the EMR or AAR being unemployed, employment levels for both genders were greater than unemployed on all routes.

6.2 Decision-making *en route*/when in country of transit

When it comes to migrants' decision-making *en route* or when in countries of transit, the main findings of our research concern the different configurations that migratory trajectories could take at this stage, according to the interaction between **macro- and meso-factors** in contexts of transit and **individual agency** of asylum-seekers (Carling and Collins 2018), who usually adapt and renegotiate their experience of the journey (or residence in cases of longer stays) according to the **opportunities and constraints** they are presented with (de Haas 2010).

The three **different approaches to the journey** we have identified that shape (and are shaped by) the diverse ways in which (evolving) experiences interact with one's plans, aspirations, capabilities and expectations about the (next) destination, are particularly relevant for this stage.

For those in the first group who **initially intended to reach and stay in a non-EU country,** their experience is one of longer-term settlement in a host country, and only once they decide to move on (typically after having lived there for relatively long periods of time), the journey resumes, or rather, a new journey starts. This pattern is particularly relevant among the interviewees who have moved along the

EMR and settled for a number of years in **Iran, Turkey** and **Lebanon**. It applies also for individuals originally intending to reside in **Algeria** or **Libya**, mostly looking for job opportunities. While on the EMR the main factors informing onward movement are related to the lack of (and poor prospects for obtaining) legal status, insecure livelihoods and problems with/hostility by local communities, the deterioration of political-security (and economic) conditions affects migrants on both routes, and are particularly felt in the Libyan case. Unsustainable livelihoods were also mentioned by migrants residing in Morocco.

In the second group are those **who meant to reach 'Europe'** (albeit sometimes vaguely defined) from the onset. In this case, decision-making and its materialisation in transit contexts do not revolve much around the choice to depart or not, or where to go (next), but rather on **how to reach the next step in the journey**. Depending on the set of hurdles one encounters and enablers one can access, materialisation of transit mobility ends up being more/less straightforward. For instance, most migrants leaving **Latin America** mostly conceive Europe – and Spain in particular – as an explicit destination. Yet, while those in possession of the **social and economic resources** needed for a direct move to Europe do so, others who lack such resources, make a 'detour' in relatively more easily accessible countries in the region (despite a regional context marked by growing violence and political instability) before being able to mobilise sufficient resources for the originally intended journey to Europe/Spain. Insufficient economic resources to continue to Europe is also a factor at play, both in Turkey and in Libya, where working for paying for further movement appeared as common practice.

For migrants moving along the EMR, finding out how to successfully reach the next destination – particularly when in **Turkey** – instead takes more/less effort, time and resources, mainly informed by the restrictions to mobility at the European external frontier, and by reduced smuggling activity during the pandemic. This translates in the common practice of **multiple attempts of crossing the border**, a trait distinguishing particularly the Greek-Turkish frontier (but also the Spanish-Moroccan one) from the sea border in the Central Mediterranean, where the crossing to Italy is traumatic and potentially deadly, but usually seems to be

completed in just one shot, at least when it comes to those who successfully arrived in Europe (as in the case of our interviewees).

For those who from the onset and throughout the journey adopted a **flexible and step-by-step approach**, the decision-making process is constantly re-negotiated and concerns all dimensions of migratory choices (whether to depart, where to go next, and how to get there). This an approach to/experience of journey that addresses a gap and the need for deeper understanding in current research.

At this stage, when looking at **routes connecting Africa to the EU** – with the notable exception of migrants from North Africa, it emerges that individuals usually do not have a pre-established itinerary explicitly leading to Europe, but constantly mediate their decisions through the contextual conditions they meet (for instance, **perceived/lived unsafety in Niger or Libya**, or **fewer economic opportunities** and **difficult relations with authorities in Morocco**) and through their interactions with the actors they encounter (other migrants, smugglers).

In this sense, it should be noted that regardless of one's particular approach to the journey, how individuals conceive and experience their **relationship with smugglers** seem to be slightly different along diverse African routes and the EMR. Interviewees from African contexts mostly depict them as actors facilitating their movements, who – in a couple of cases on the CMR, WMR and WAR– also provide the service for free (which also might point to cases where the difference between smuggling and trafficking blurs). This is somewhat different from what transpires from the interviews on the EMR, where all interviewees directly refer to the transaction between themselves and smugglers as a more clearly defined one between parties soliciting and providing a service (albeit often embedded in skewed power dynamics).

For those adopting a flexible approach, **sources of information** along the way are usually vague, despite the importance of social resources as personal social networks (typically families and friends – also those made during the journey), and knowledge about destinations is rather sketchy and skewed. Plans to move on are thus incrementally built, and the final movement to the EU may also happen without specific preparations.

Moreover, **intersectional structural violence** – in particular, racialised and gendered – could trigger the decision to move on. For example, this was manifested either at militarised borders, where state authorities could be abusive, or in the form of a 'slow violence' in the everyday life of transit (Schindel 2022). Such targeted othering and racialising (or neglect) of migrants in zones of transit along the EMR, CMR, WMR and AMR came to the fore as a factor in moving on. This highlights literature emphasising how temporariness (caused by practices marginalising migrants) can even be viewed as a racialised disciplinary practice of the state in the case of certain transit countries, i.e., **Morocco** (Gross-Wyrtzen 2020). Along the WMR and CMR, interviewees reported how the abuse, violence and trauma experienced on the journey could be gender differentiated, with women particularly subject to SBGV; in **Sub-Saharan African cases the threat of gendered SBGV** communicated by other migrants in transit experiences meant deciding not to take the journey in the first place.

Finally, once again, in contrasting the routes, familial roles and gender underlie decision-making in transit. The experience of some **Syrian women in transit** reflected the **gendered nature of waiting and immobility** (Pedraza 1991), with gendered care responsibilities preventing (even informal) labour market integration, and in some accounts even causing return to origin. Trends of gendered (spatial) mobility were significantly present on the CMR, WMR and WAR routes, as the very young and elderly remained at origin due to the precarity of transit routes outlined above. While individuals perhaps relied on (virtual) family support at origin and destination, being able-bodied seemed to be important in the capacity to move on. Moreover, on the EMR, considerations related to parenthood played a role in onward movement. Finally, family reunification served as a steady factor in onward movement (through transit locations), particularly along the AAR.

6.3 Decision-making following arrival to the current EU host country: Staying put or moving on

When it comes to the formation of intentions regarding staying in or moving on from the (last) arrival country, there is a remarkable difference between Greece on the one hand, and Italy and Spain on the other. An overwhelming majority of the

participants in **Greece** express (clear) **intentions to move on**. Some interviewees intend to continue to concrete countries within Europe (particularly Germany). Typically, destination preferences are defined vaguely however, as any country in Europe (with references to Western Europe) that is not Greece. The **overall balance** in **Italy** and **Spain** tilts towards **intention for settling in these countries**. Even if some contemplate further movement, plans are much less developed, while the timeframe to materialise these plans seems to be in the mid- to long-term, unlike in Greece, where most participants intend to leave as soon as their documentation is issued (recognised beneficiaries) or as they receive the final (positive or negative) decision on their asylum claim.

Thinking on long-term stay in the country of arrival or onward movement, either return to origin country (mainly applicable to –older– migrants from Latin America) or within Europe is largely shaped by one's overall assessment of life after arrival and (in close relation to that) by perceived future prospects. In the case of protection claimants and refugees, which constitute a larger share of the overall sample (100 per cent in both Greece and Italy), such assessment is mainly conditioned by the **experience of the asylum procedure and reception**. In overall – including those whose experience as migrants has not followed the international protection path in Spain – to what extent one has been able to **access social assistance** and given **the opportunity** both by institutions and civil society **to start preparing for longer term integration** with a view to (and through) inclusion to the local social fabric seems to significantly inform intentions to stay or to move on.

An overwhelming majority in **Greece** assess **(very) negatively** their **experience of the asylum and reception system**, as well as **assistance received** for navigating the system and accessing social, economic and mobility rights. Besides difficulties with the asylum procedure (e.g., scarce information about the procedure, difficulty in lodging the application, extended periods of waiting for the outcome), which are typically combined with very low material reception conditions, the accounts suggest that the level of their **inclusion into the local social fabric has been extremely limited** (particularly in the islands). These findings highlight that even six to seven years after the 2015-2016 so-called "crisis" – and the indications that deterrence policies impeding settlement had an effect back then – persistent

shortcomings in Greece's asylum, reception and integration system can significantly discourage individuals from remaining in the country (Kuschminder 2018; Valenta et al., 2019).

The sense of separation/exclusion is closely linked to their **interactions with authorities**, and to a certain extent also the **local population** (the latter with few exceptions). Demonstrating an asylum and reception system characterised by intersectional structural violence which is racialised and gendered – and closely linked to gendered conceptions of 'vulnerability' as suggested by Kofman (2019), the accounts by single men depict particularly negative experiences characterised by limited/no access to rights and assistance families and single parents (often mothers) are entitled to, and by severe precarity with direct impact on psychological wellbeing. The suspension of integration policies or efforts until transfer to the mainland seemed to be the case of both Greek islands and the Canary Islands.

Overall, in **Italy** and **Spain**, protection claimants and beneficiaries express **satisfaction with the asylum process and reception conditions** (albeit at a moderate degree, and with exceptions, e.g., the case of some interviewees from North and East Africa in Italy who mention reduced assistance and support for socioeconomic inclusion following the recognition of their asylum claims). They also **assess the assistance they have received overall positively**, and the role of civil society in Spain in this respect particularly seems notable as the accounts by both asylum seekers from Africa and migrants from Latin America attest. In both countries, **access to measures fostering long-term integration**, such as language courses, and professional/vocational training also during the asylum process is mentioned as a positive element equipping one with the skills needed for socioeconomic inclusion, and motivating one to stay. Such measures (and asylum-seekers' access to them) seem to be **extremely limited in Greece**. Nearly all accounts in Greece (particularly in the islands) refer to being somewhat stuck in the first reception phase, where the system, despite lengthy waiting periods, merely provides services that (barely) meet asylum-seekers' and refugees' basic and urgent needs. This is experienced as a slow, daily violence, also appearing in gendered ways, as in the case of SGBV suffered by a daughter of an interviewee which was not further investigated by the Greek police. Also, with no opportunity being offered for

them to start equipping themselves with the tools facilitating socioeconomic inclusion – and hence preparing (and potentially motivating) them for long-term settlement.

Pointing out the significant implications of **legal status** for post-arrival experience and long-term settlement prospects, the difference particularly between persons in an **irregular situation** (some interviewees from North Africa and Latin America in Spain), and those with **secure legal residence rights** and who have been (and assisted) in the country for relatively longer periods (e.g., interviewees from West Africa in Italy) is striking. While decision-making regarding staying for the former group is conditional upon being able to regularise their situation, finding work and accessing some degree of assistance, the latter group, having obtained a stable legal standing (positively influencing their overall conditions) and describing a good degree of inclusion into the local social fabric, in its majority, do not consider onward movement. Similarly, access to humanitarian protection (particularly for Venezuelans) and relative ease of obtaining nationality (for Latin American migrants) in Spain are important factors feeding into the intention to stay. That most of the interviewees whose asylum claims were recognised in Greece did not consider staying there indicates, however, that legal status (albeit important) is only one of the many dimensions informing decision-making.

Besides differing experiences mainly linked to interviewees' interaction with the policy context in the three countries, prospects offered by the **overarching socioeconomic context** (employment, cost of living, public services, i.e., education, health), also feed into interviewees' thinking on staying put or moving on. Overall, this aspect is assessed moderately positively or in neutral ways in Italy and Spain, and moderately negatively in Greece. **Linguistic commonality** (exclusively applicable to interviewees from Latin America in Spain) is also an important factor to stay.

Destination preferences already formed at earlier stages of the journey (combined with experience upon arrival) also inform intentions regarding onward movement and (next) destination. The analysis shows that a relatively larger share of interviewees had **originally intended Italy and (particularly) Spain** as destinations with settlement prospects (notably for interviewees from Latin

America), and following their hitherto overall positive experience in these countries, intend to stay put. **Greece has been originally considered as a transit country** before onward movement within Europe for an overwhelming majority (and as a potential transit country for those who had a flexible approach), while their experience upon arrival has not reversed, but rather reinforced this intention.

In terms of the **factors shaping destination preferences** for those considering onward movement, those pertaining to the **wider economic and social context**, i.e., greater possibility of finding work, better educational/professional opportunities (notably for younger respondents from Latin America as they enhance their skillset while in Spain), linguistic affinities are commonly cited by interviewees across three countries. While interviewees in Greece typically mention a more humane and caring approach to the asylum process, decent (and dignified) reception conditions, and better integration support as criteria significantly shaping their destination preferences, those in Italy and Spain do not tend to factor these **policy-related elements** in their decision-making. This illustrates the notable differences between the experience of asylum, reception and integration (systems) in these countries, and the varying importance these elements have acquired as parameters informing expectations from a destination country.

Personal social networks (family, friends, trusted persons) continue significantly shaping both intentions to stay (when such networks are present in the current host country, e.g., for migrants from Latin America), and intentions to move on to specific destinations (those where such networks are available – particularly when family re-unification is the main factor motivating onward movement). In the latter case, these networks shape destination choices both by acting as a source of information pre-departure, and potential support providers upon future arrival. Those countries where one sees greater possibility of reuniting with family members back home are also preferred (especially among interviewees in Greece who moved along the EMR). Overall, the role of family back home in the decision-making process seems to be considerably reduced (particularly compared to the pre-departure phase), and when such a role is mentioned, it is often one of supporting interviewees to continue their migration project and discouraging them from returning.

In this respect, zooming out to a broader view of **gender and family in comparing arrivals on the different routes**, the EMR and AAR surfaced as routes that dealt more with family reunification and corresponding decision-making upon arrival: in the case of EMR, to move on (either to unite with family members that are already in the intended destination or to have the opportunity to join with family members back home in another country than Greece); in the case of AAR, to remain in Spain. Furthermore, the articulation by single males that they felt reception was inadequate on the EMR, alongside the ambivalence of single male arrivals (after traumatic and debilitating journeys) on the WAR about remaining in Spain, raise important considerations for governments and policy makers in terms of tailored reception services and addressing distinct vulnerabilities. In fact, intersectional vulnerabilities seemed key at this stage, as single individuals with traumatic experiences on the AAR, and presumably unaddressed mental health needs or support, contributed to contemplation of continuing beyond Spain.

These gendered family dynamics shaping intentions segues into the overall gendered or intersectional experience in decision-making once arrived in the EU. Even upon arrival, these three Member States (as referenced in the case of asylum policies in Greece) can promote an **institutionalised, gendered dependence or insecurity** (Kofman et al. 2015). However, some migrants viewed this to their favour as means to better their situation (and remain), as in the case of a Nigerian woman and Algerian man who sought or obtained regularisation through marriage. **Gendered gaps in migrant support and regular pathways** could also entrench gendered dependencies or worsen precarity, as reported by an Eritrean mother feeling she received insufficient support in Italy, or in the example of a Moroccan woman in Spain continuing to face gender-based discrimination among her personal networks upon arrival, forced to move on and live in precariousness. Finally, the **intersectional dimensions of 'existential (im)mobility,'** or a sense that one is going somewhere or moving well (Hage 2005), is striking at this point of arrival in the EU. While such mobility may be viewed as exclusive to privileged groups (i.e., citizens or skilled migrants) to varying degrees in EU Member States, despite the limitations in legal status and asylum systems outlined above, and related obstacles in the form of **compounded intersectional inequalities.**

In other words, the existential dimension of movement and migration brings to the fore how sociocultural patterns and intersectional inequalities inform representations and perceptions of im/mobility. Racialised labour and citizenship regimes upon arrival in EU destination countries can foment experiences of 'stuckedness' (Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019). This can be observed in the accounts of obstacles to finding employment or regularisation that participants faced once they arrived. Arrivals to the Greek and Canary Islands confronted this 'stuckedness', which overlapped with spatial mobility, as participants underwent what resembled a waiting or limbo period in their separation from the respective mainlands. In the case of one CMR arrival from Senegal, this sense of existential immobility was in how he articulated that remaining in the EU arrival country was a waste of time, even as general participants' perceptions of Italy were more favourable. This provokes consideration of how visible racial attributes, and any linked intersectional discrimination could have informed his particular individual experience, and whether it may have affected his sense of immobility. Even on the AAR, those without personal networks in place and with intersectional vulnerabilities (gender, age, class etc.) found themselves in dire need of assistance and contemplated returning to origin or moving on.

At the same time, those interviewed here also clearly continued to seek existential mobility on their (ongoing life) trajectories. Some expressed frustration at the arrival stage. However, while several individuals indicated that they were not yet where they wanted to be, many either articulated their intentions or made repeated efforts to find employment (again and again), secure adequate housing, and seek education to improve opportunities. In this sense, it is important to note that while pursuit of existential mobility can be impeded by exclusionary racialised and classed regimes, movement may then be found or perceived again as in these real accounts and life experiences.

7. References

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Annex I - List of Interviews

Greece

IUC	Date	Gender	Country of Origin
O-001-001	30/03/2021	Female	Iran
O-001-002	30/03/2021	Male	Syria
O-001-003	31/03/2021	Male	Afghanistan
O-001-004	23/4/2021	Female	Afghanistan
O-001-005	27/4/2021	Male	Iran
O-001-006	27/4/2021	Male	Iraq
O-001-007	28/4/2021	Male	Iraq
O-001-008	6/5/2021	Female	Syria
O-001-009	7/5/2021	Female	Kuwait-stateless
O-001-010	10/5/2021	Female	DRC
O-001-011	11/5/2021	Female	Syria
O-001-012	11/5/2021	Female	Afghanistan
O-001-013	20/5/2021	Male	Afghanistan/Syria
O-001-014	20/5/2021	Male	Syria
O-001-015	21/5/2021	Male	Afghanistan
O-001-016	21/5/2021	Male	Syria
O-001-017	25/5/2021	Female	Iraq
O-001-018	26/5/2021	Male	Iraq
O-001-019	26/5/2021	Male	DRC
O-001-020	27/5/2021	Male	Syria
O-001-021	31/5/2021	Female	Iraq
O-001-022	16/6/2021	Female	Pakistan
O-001-023	22/6/2021	Male	Afghanistan
O-001-024	22/6/2021	Male	Pakistan
O-001-025	19/10/2021	Male	Syria
O-001-026	19/10/2021	Male	Syria
O-001-027	20/10/2021	Female	Iraq
O-001-028	23/11/2021	Female	Afghanistan
O-001-029	25/11/2021	Male	Iraq
O-001-030	25/11/2021	Male	Iraq

Italy

IUC	Date	Gender	Country of Origin
R-001-025	13/05/2021	Male	Nigeria
R-001-026	6/10/2021	Male	Algeria
R-001-027	12/10/2021	Female	Eritrea
R-001-028	8/10/2021	Male	Eritrea
R-001-029	8/10/2021	Male	Eritrea
R-001-030	13/10/2021	Male	Sudan
R-001-031	13/10/2021	Male	Sudan
R-001-032	23/11/2021	Male	Tunisia
R-001-033	26/11/2021	Female	Tunisia
R-001-034	26/11/2021	Female	Tunisia
R-001-035	26/11/2021	Female	Egypt
R-001-036	03/12/2021	Male	Egypt
R-001-037	03/12/2021	Female	Iran
R-001-038	07/12/2021	Male	Iran
R-001-039	13/12/2021	Male	Tunisia
R-001-040	17/12/2021	Male	Eritrea
R-001-041	21/12/2021	Female	Eritrea
R-001-042	21/12/2021	Female	Eritrea
X-002-001	21/05/2021	Female	Nigeria
X-002-002	21/05/2021	Male	Mali
X-002-003	21/05/2021	Male	Mali
X-002-004	25/05/2021	Male	Mali
X-002-005	17/06/2021	Male	Nigeria
X-002-006	17/06/2021	Male	Mali
X-002-007	17/06/2021	Male	Nigeria
X-002-008	17/06/2021	Male	Nigeria
X-001-009	28/06/2021	Male	Nigeria
X-001-010	28/06/2021	Male	Nigeria
X-001-011	30/06/2021	Male	Nigeria
X-001-012	30/06/2021	Male	Mali
X-002-013	16/11/2021	Female	Nigeria
X-002-014	16/11/2021	Female	Nigeria

Spain

IUC	Date	Gender	Country of Origin
O-002-001	08/12/2021	Male	Morocco
O-002-002	19/08/21	Male	Morocco
O-002-003	24/08/21	Male	Algeria
O-002-004	25/08/21	Male	Morocco
O-002-005	27/08/21	Male	Algeria
O-002-006	07/09/2021	Female	Morocco
O-002-007	27/10/21	Male	Morocco
O-002-008	11/12/2021	Female	Algeria
O-003-001	04/08/2021	Male	Venezuela
O-003-002	05/08/2021	Female	Venezuela
O-003-003	30/08/2021	Male	Venezuela
O-003-004	31/08/2021	Female	Venezuela
O-003-005	01/09/2021	Male	Venezuela
O-003-006	02/09/2021	Female	Venezuela
O-003-007	11/11/2021	Female	Venezuela
O-003-008	11/11/2021	Male	Honduras
O-003-009	12/11/2021	Female	Honduras
O-003-010	15/11/2021	Female	Colombia
O-003-011	15/11/2021	Female	Colombia
O-003-012	16/11/2021	Male	Colombia
O-004-001	17/08/2021	Male	Mali
O-004-002	24/08/21	Male	Guinea
O-004-003	25/08/21	Male	Mali
O-004-004	26/08/2021	Male	Mali
O-004-005	26/08/2021	Male	Mali
O-004-006	27/10/2021	Male	Senegal
O-004-007	27/10/21	Male	Mali
O-004-008	25/11/21	Female	Morocco
O-004-009	20/12/2021	Female	Ghana
O-004-010	05/01/2022	Male	Ghana

Annex II - Code Book

(co-coded with origin, transit, arrival)

1. Abuse
2. Army
3. Aspirations
4. Authorities
5. Connection to family back home
6. COVID effect
7. Criminals
8. Dangerous travel conditions
9. Discrimination
10. Duration of transit
11. (no) Economic assistance
12. Economic reasons
13. (no) Economic resources
14. Environmental context
15. Experience of asylum procedure
16. Experience of racism
17. Family journey
18. Family life
19. Family reasons
20. Feelings
21. (Geo)political context
22. General recommendations
23. Health issues
24. Impact of gender
25. Individual decision
26. Individual journey
27. Information on migration policies
28. (no) Information on/perception of destination
29. Integration in local life
30. Integration problems

31. International Organizations
32. Lawyer
33. (no) Legal assistance
34. Legal status
35. Living conditions
36. Logistical arrangement of journey
37. Means of travel
38. (no) Medical assistance
39. Migratory past
40. Militia
41. Nature of decision
42. NGO
43. Not remembering details
44. Overall assessment of journey
45. Overall assessment of life
46. Perception/Experience of unsafety
47. Persecution
48. (no) Plan to move on
49. (no) Planned destination
50. Police
51. Preparation for settlement/onward migration
52. Presence/Absence of hurdles to crossing
53. Professional/educational life
54. Recommendation to ITFLOWS
55. Refusal/reluctance to share
56. Relations with local community
57. Relations with other migrants
58. Role of family in decision
59. Smuggler
60. Smuggler cost
61. (no) Social assistance
62. (no) Social resources
63. Socio-cultural context

64. Socioeconomic context

65. Source of information

66. Trafficking

67. Transfers

68. Traumatic experiences

69. Travel alone

70. Travel in group

64. Socioeconomic context

65. Source of information

66. Trafficking

68.