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“Forced emigration: the origins and prospects of refugees in France (OPReF)”

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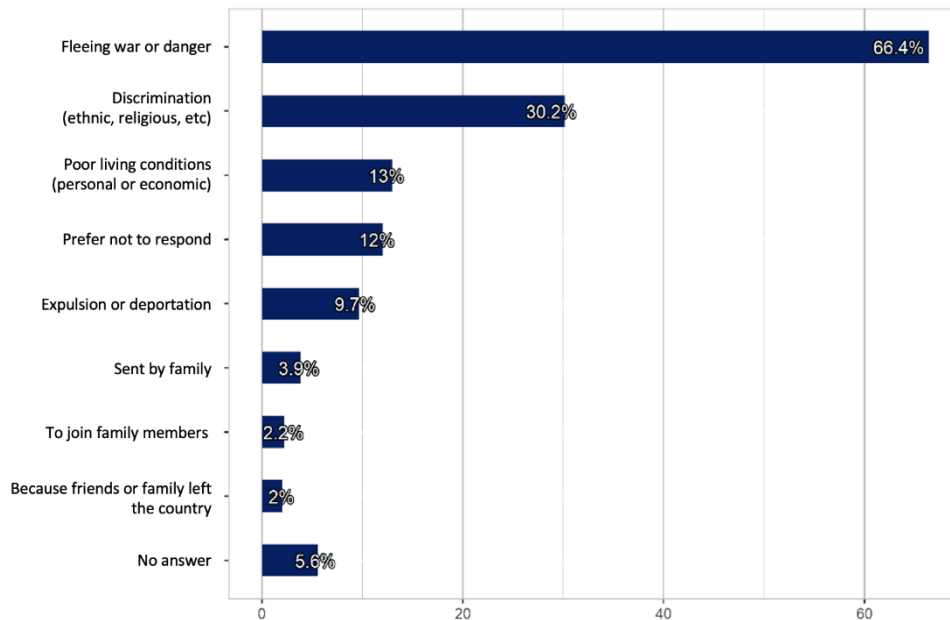
Forced emigration involves complex decision making, and upon arrival people who have effectively been expelled have more problems with socio-economic integration than other migrants (Dustmann et al., 2017; Brell et al. 2020; Fasani et al., 2021). The study Origins and Prospects of Refugees in France (OPReF), co-funded by the Direction Générale des Étrangers en France and the Institut Convergence Migration of the Collège de France was conducted by the Paris School of Economics to establish national statistics on the diversity of the asylum seekers in France (excluding Corsica and the French overseas territories) who were granted refugee status and who are thus Beneficiaries of International Protection (BIP). Carried out between November 2020 and April 2021, in nine languages, the OPRéF study helps us to understand better people’s socioeconomic origins and their reasons for leaving, the journeys they made before receiving asylum in France, their health, and their aspirations. It was conducted in 378 migrant centres, chosen randomly from the files of the DN@NG¹ of the French immigration and integration office, which house a representative sample of the refugee population.

The OPRéF study strengthens existing statistical projects such as the PPM studies (by DRESS), the TeO (by Ined/INSEE), and the ELIPA (by DSED), but distinguishes itself by its specific focus on the BIPs accommodated under the asylum system, which makes it the biggest national study ever undertaken in France, with its 2,632 participants.

The number of refugees in the world changes in parallel with indicators of conflict, which increased strongly, reached a peak in 1992 then declined, before reducing from 2011 onwards ([Center for Systemic Peace](#), 2018; Hatton, 2016). Matching this observation, the great majority of respondents in the OPRéF study stated that their main reason for leaving was to flee war or danger, the second reason was to flee discrimination and poor personal or economic living conditions. Few gave family as a reason for leaving.

¹ Dispositif National d’Accueil Nouvelle Génération.

Figure 1. Fleeing war the main reason for leaving



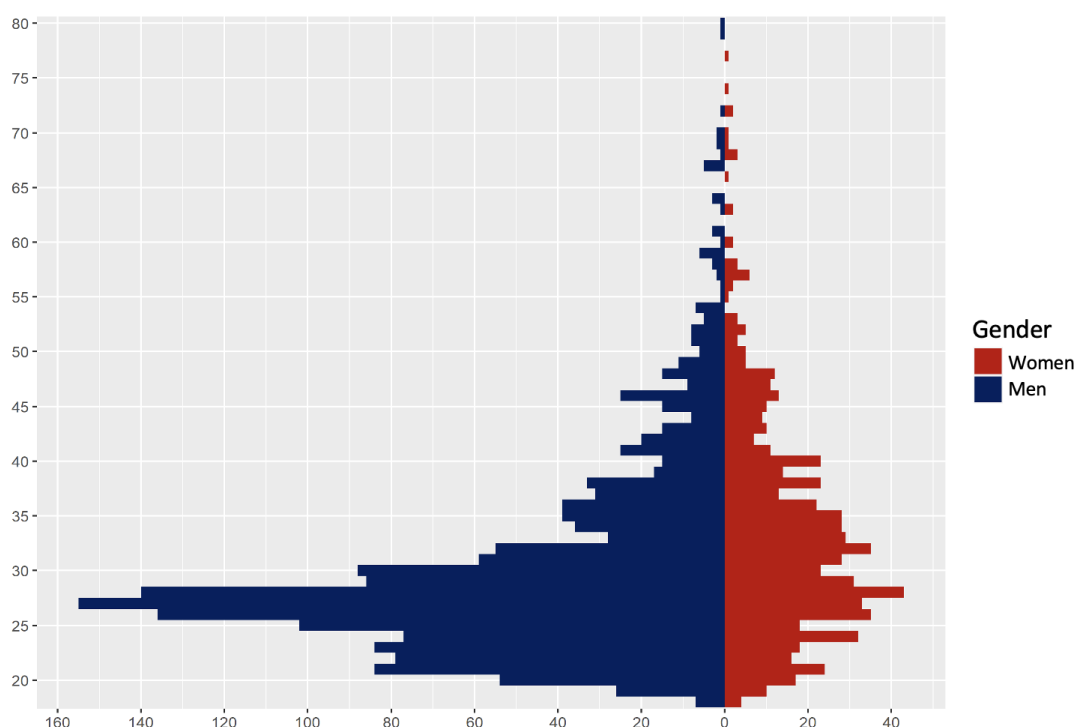
More than half of the BIPs in our sample came from Afghanistan or Sudan,² two countries marked by long periods of conflict in the second decade of this century, followed by Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Syria, Eritrea, and Somalia, virtually all affected by armed conflict or political instability in the past ten years or so.

Despite being crucial, the difficulties that people endure on their voyages remain a little-known dimension, even though the travel experience and how long it lasts have effects on the physical and mental health and the human capital of those who undergo it. For example, except for the Syrians, the vast majority of respondents stated that they had no network to contact upon arrival, which may reflect the absence of a specific destination in mind at the moment of departure. In addition, the module surveying the risks incurred during the voyage shows that many respondents in our sample were the victims of physical attack, financial swindling or extortion, imprisonment, theft, blackmail, sexual harassment, or drowning: fewer than one quarter of them indicated that they had been through no such trials. The enquiry also revealed some heterogeneity with regards to gender and nationality, which might be explained, in part, by the timing of the migration and the routes taken: most participants from the Ivory Coast or Eritrea said that they had been imprisoned, which was reported by 30% of participants of other nationalities, while 20% of female respondents reported having been sexually harassed or suffered sexual violence, compared with 8% of the men.

² Afghanistan: 32%; Sudan: 11%; Guinea: 7%; Ivory Coast: 4%; Syria: 4%; Eritrea: 4%; Somalia: 4%; and 78 other nationalities of less than 4%.

The complexity and the dangers linked to exile are reflected in the characteristics of the sample. It was essentially a young population, aged less than 35 years, and male.³ Still, there was also significant diversity. The Afghan, Eritrean and Sudanese participants were mostly men (up to 90% for the latter); among Guineans and Syrians, the gap was less marked, with around 40% women. Only the Ivory Coast was an exception, with a majority of women (60%).

Figure 2. A young and mostly male population

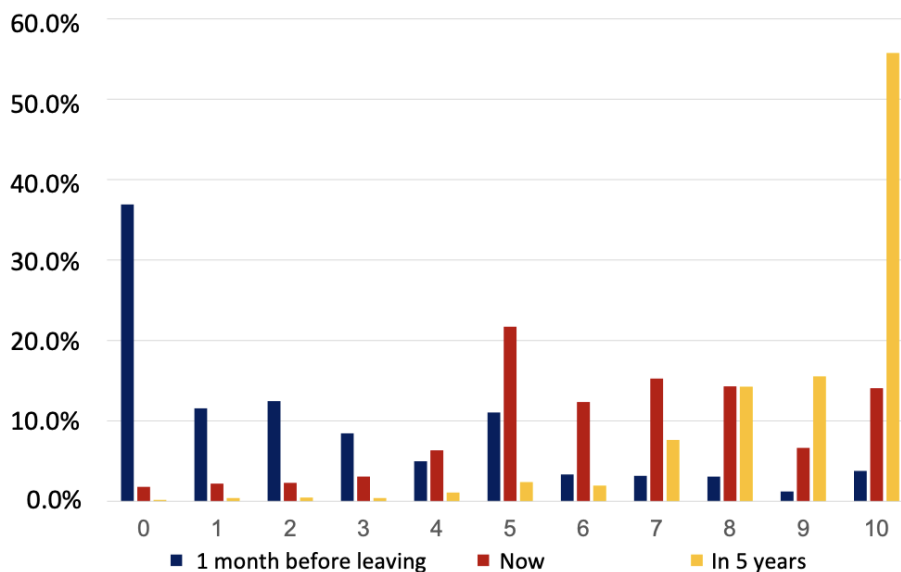


Diversity returns when we look at education levels. The women were more educated, 22% of them having tertiary education compared with 13% of the men. Differences among the nationalities were also marked: this reflects both the development gap among the countries and the specifics of the national education systems. Brücker et al. (2019) stress that as a general rule, the proportion of individuals who have finished their studies diminishes with the duration of armed conflicts, and that countries like Afghanistan are particularly affected. Among our respondents, Afghans were especially over-represented in the group of those without tertiary education: while they constituted 32% of the sample, they represented 46% of those who had no tertiary qualification. On the other hand, as a language, French was “quite well” understood by a majority of respondents, reflecting the proportion of refugees originating from francophone countries.

³ While 48% of the French population are male, men made up 68% of our respondents; 78% of the men and 68% of the women were aged 35 or under (compared with 40% and 41% for France) and only 8% of respondents were more than 45 years old (compared with 47% in France). Source: Insee, Pyramide des âges en 2022, accessed 4 March 2022. <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2381472>

Among other things, the study showed that the participants accord great importance to finding work that they like and at which they excel, and which offers good pay. Generally, employment appears as a priority after family and access to housing. Yet access to jobs remains a real issue: while an average of 3.2% said they had been unemployed in their country of origin, this rate rises to 38.4% at the time of the study, while the “employed” category plummeted, a rather stable observation across countries of origin. However, on the whole, the respondents reported a certain optimism about their future five years hence (Figure 3) and a majority declared that they “rarely” feel that they are worthless, desperate, nervous or depressed;⁴ regarding their self-declared general state of health, we saw an improvement between the situation six months before their flight and the time of our study. Finally, a vast majority of the participants said that they want to stay indefinitely in France.

Figure 3. Reported optimism during the study



⁴ The OPReF study uses the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6).

Conclusion

The OPRéF study surveyed 2,632 BIPs in France between November 2020 and April 2021, housed in 378 centres, chosen randomly to make up a representative sample. Mostly, they were young men under 35 years of age, who had fled conflict-ridden countries outside Europe, mainly Afghanistan, Syria, and some African countries. During their journeys, many of them had experienced serious violence.

While their trajectories were relatively dissimilar by country of origin, the employment situation on arrival was especially homogenous, signalling a general degradation compared with the situation in the country of origin. Nevertheless, participants reported a certain optimism about their futures. As well, their health was considerably better compared with six months before their departure. However, housing remains their priority, along with family and work.

The data will be made available for researchers during the second semester of 2022. 2022 on the PSE - École d'Économie de Paris web site on the « [Open data](#) » page.
