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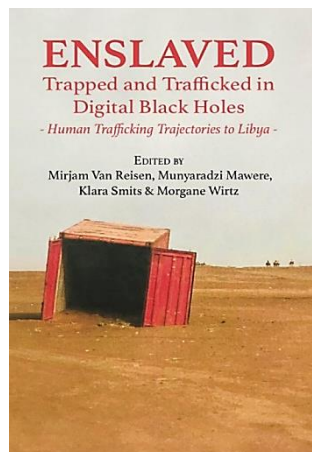
Morgane Wirtz

Chapter in: Enslaved

Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes:
Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya

From the book Series:

Connected and Mobile: Migration and Human Trafficking in Africa



Cite as: Wirtz, M. (2023). “We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya. In: Van Reisen, M., Mawere M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (eds), *Enslaved Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, pp. 669-714. Chapter URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367236889_We_had_no_Choice_it's_Part_of_the_Journey_A_Culture_of_Sexual_Violence_in_Libya

Book	URL:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367254851_Enslaved_Trapped_and_Trafficked_in_Digital_Black_Holes_Human_Trafficking_Trajectories_to_Libya	

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Chapter 15

“We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya¹

Morgane Wirtz

Introduction: Many did that...rape

“The Libyan smugglers, many did that...rape. Sometimes even on the road, they bring you down. They take the women and do whatever they want”, shared a young woman from Guinea living in Zarzis in south Tunisia. Sitting at a round plastic table, she is calm, keeps her eyes lowered to the floor, her hands resting on her knees. “You too have been through this?” I ask her. “Yes,” she replies. “Several times?” (Interviewees 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

She looks down. She is silent and cries softly. Sitting beside her, upright in his chair, her husband explains:

Sexual violence against migrants and refugees in Libya is commonplace – and in the Sahara desert, it is virtually unavoidable. It is used to subjugate and control refugees and migrants, to profit from them and induce payment of ransom, as well as opportunistically – just because they are there. The people interviewed for this chapter reported extremely severe forms of sexual violence, even resulting in death. Since the times of Gaddafi and his harem, there has been a culture of sexual violence in Libya, which has led to the normalisation of this violence, as well as the impunity of the perpetrators.

She had no choice. When you are there, you are between life and death. These smugglers have no conscience. They are drugged and lose control. You can greet them,

¹ The research for this chapter was undertaken as part of the author’s PhD thesis and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

they respond with insults or blows. (Interviewees 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

This situation has become commonplace in Libya. In July 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) released an alarming report to the Danish Refugee Council. It indicated that out of 16,000 survivors of the journey through Libya interviewed by the MMC, 1,634 reported witnessing or experiencing almost 2,008 incidences of sexual and gender-based violence, affecting more than 6,100 people (MMC & UNHCR, 2020, p. 20). However, the exact number of victims, even among the interviewees, could be much higher, as this type of violence remains a taboo and is often underreported.

Sexual violence in Libya is perpetrated against both women and men. During the field research, we came across two male interviewees who reported experiencing sexual violence during their journey. According to a report published by the Women's Refugee Commission, the phenomenon is common:

[The informants] reported that sexual violence against men and boys is “so high, so widespread, so systematic,” “very common,” “a massive issue,” “up there with the levels of sexual violence against women and girls”, while noting that “almost no one escaped this”. [...] A protection officer commented that “it is so widespread. Everyone knows when a man says, ‘I’ve gone through Libya,’ it is a euphemism for rape.” (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019)

“It’s part of the journey,” explained a woman to journalist Maurine Mercier (Mercier, 2018a). Rape on the road to Libya has become so common that some women take precautions – they carry protection or use contraceptives in order to avoid getting pregnant or contracting HIV (Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017, p. 233). Despite the awareness of this risk, outside the migrant/refugee² community, little is known about the sexual violence that people on the move face on

² In this chapter, the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ are used interchangeably in a non-legal way to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

the way to Libya. Perhaps this is because being raped is perceived as dishonourable. Rape survivors are not supposed to talk about it. What happens, how, where, why, and who the perpetrators are remains largely unknown.

This chapter attempts to provide some of the answers. It presents an explorative overview of the sexual violence faced by migrants and refugees during their journey to, and while in, Libya. To understand this phenomenon, it is important to look at the overall situation of sexual violence in Libya. Although this book focuses on Eritreans, this chapter throws the net wider to look at sexual violence against all nationalities to understand the context and culture in which such violence is normalised and capacitated in Libya. Hence, the research question investigated in this chapter is: *What are the experiences of sexual violence by migrants and refugees in Libya and what is the culture of sexual violence that contributes to this?*

To answer this question, this chapter describes and compares three broad categories of sexual violence against migrants and refugees which emerge from literature: (1) sexual violence as a tool of subjugation; (2) sexual exploitation; and (3) sexual violence as an opportunistic crime (these categories are defined in the section after the literature review, as they emerge from this review).

Again, this chapter looks at the issue broadly to include categories of people other than those who have been trafficked – it looks at sexual violence against ‘people on the move’, but also other instances of sexual violence. The focus here is on the culture of sexual violence in Libya that enables these practices to take place. Other categories of sexual violence might exist in Libya, but were not raised in the testimonies collected. In the following section, the methodology used for this empirical research is presented. This is followed by an exploration of the topic in the literature. Next, the theoretical framework used for the analysis of the findings is presented. This is subsequently followed by the findings, which are presented according to the three categories distinguished in the theoretical framework. The last section of the findings is dedicated to the impacts of sexual

violence on survivors and their relatives. This is followed by a brief discussion of the findings and the conclusion.

Methodology

The methodology detailed here describes the collaborative efforts of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western communities (SDDI). This team worked under the leadership of Van Reisen, who acted as principal investigator. The full methodology of the research underpinning this book can be found in Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*.

This chapter presents the results of a descriptive ethnographic research on sexual violence perpetrated in Libya against people on the move. The main material obtained for the ethnographic research was collected through participatory fieldwork. Observations and other material collected in various locations, both in-person and through digital communication, informed the background to this chapter. This material included reports, videos, social media posts, photographs and other information, collected and sent to us by resource persons in social media spaces and in personal communications, and is part of participatory ethnographic research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016) and netnography (Kozinets, 2017).

The large majority of the interviews analysed in this chapter were carried out between March 2019 and December 2021 by Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits and Adoum Moussa. Interviews by Mirjam Van Reisen were conducted in small focus groups, and several interviews from her previous research have been re-used. The SDDI research includes 312 participants in interviews. A total of 213 interviews were held, and 12 reports based on interviews were analysed. Some of the interviews were held with more than one person at a time. This included 11 focus group interviews. Two-thirds of the interviewees were male. Of the respondents interviewed, 33 were experts/resource persons; 3 were smugglers; and 283 were refugees/migrants (89%). Of the refugees/migrants, 128 had been trafficked in Libya. Two-thirds of the refugees and migrants interviewed were aged between

20 and 40 years. The majority of the interviewees (n=203) were of Eritrean nationality. Others were from: Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia. The interviews were held in Belgium, Italy, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, the Netherlands, Niger, Sudan, Tunisia, and online. The majority of interviewees were in Tunisia (n=83), Sudan (n=73), Niger (n=54) and the Netherlands (n=48).

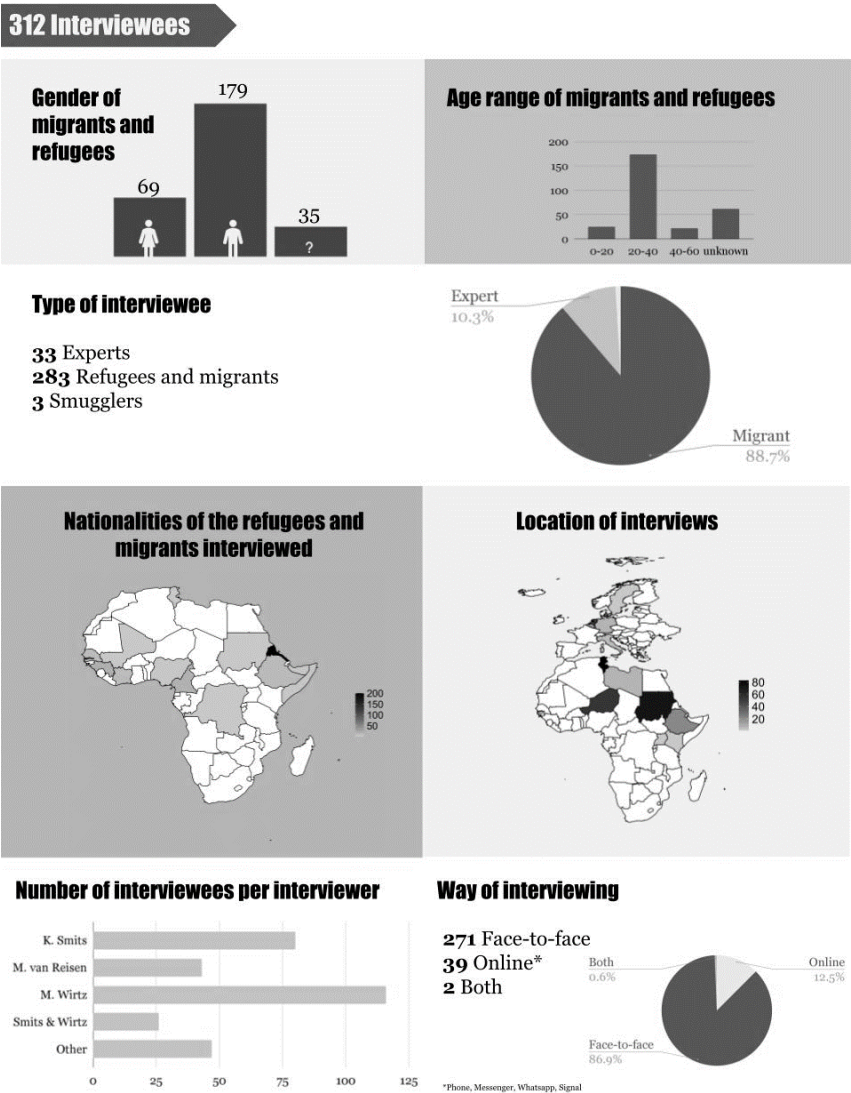
Out of the 128 interviewees who had been trafficked in Libya, 30 people (20 men and 10 women) reported having experienced or witnessed sexual violence during their stay in Libya.³ Two smugglers and one resource person gave further details on sexual violence in Libya.⁴

These were selected for the analysis presented in this chapter. In terms of nationalities, the respondents were made up of Eritreans (16), Guineans (7), Senegalese (2), Somalis (2), Cameroonians (2), Sudanese (1), Nigerien (1), Nigerian (1) and Congolese (1). In addition, three interviewees were smugglers, two of which were currently operating between Agadez in northern Niger and Sabha, one was a local journalist and researcher, and one a former translator.

³ The majority of the interviewees were explicitly asked if they had experience or witnessed sexual violence. However, in some cases, when it did not seem appropriated, the question was not asked. Others brought the topic up before the question was asked.

⁴ These interviewees did not explicitly state that they had witnessed sexual violence, but they give details of the same.

Figure 15.1. Overview of interview statistics⁵



The labels that were used in analysing the interviews came from the interviews and referred to the relationship of the interviewee with the event (survivor, witness); this included specific labels regarding the

⁵ Some interviewees are noted as both expert and refugee/migrant, but only counted once towards the interviewee total.

gender of the victim, the position of the abuser, the location where the sexual violence occurred, whether or not the sexual violence was systematic, the presence of witnesses during the crime, whether or not someone paid to abuse the victim, whether or not the act was accompanied by other forms of humiliation, and the lasting consequences of the act. Using these labels, the testimonies were categorised using axial coding according to the three forms of sexual violence distinguished in this research.

The quotes selected to appear in this chapter are those that were the most illustrative of the various abuses that the survivors reported having experienced. Quotes from other research reports and articles by journalists are included in the discussion, as they provide complementary descriptions that help to give a more profound understanding of the practice. The findings from the interviews were supplemented by a literature review on the topic, which is presented in the following section

Literature review: The culture of sexual violence in Libya

This section provides a brief review of the research and literature on present-day sexual violence in Libya. Even though the literature is scarce, some important research based on extensive interviews is available. In particular, the Women's Refugee Commission carried out a study on sexual violence against men and boys on the Central Mediterranean route, which is the first extensive study on this topic and provides important insights into how sexual violence is perpetrated in Libya (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019). However, before delving into the literature, it is necessary to provide a general definition of sexual violence and rape.

Definition of sexual violence and rape

In this chapter, '*sexual violence*' refers to any sex-related act inflicted on a person without his or her conscience consent. This includes threats and attempts, as well as deeds (International Criminal Court, 2011). '*Rape*' refers to unlawful sexual intercourse or any other sexual penetration of the vagina, anus, or mouth of another person, with or without force, by a sex organ, other body part, or foreign object,

without the consent of the victim and causes mental and physical injuries (International Criminal Court, 2011).

In human trafficking for ransom

Interviews conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission show that as soon as migrants and refugees fall into the hands of human traffickers, they are at risk of sexual violence. An Eritrean refugee who was kidnapped in a group of hundred people in the Sahara desert explained how his new traffickers imposed their authority:

When the trafficker kidnapped us, they took two men. One was obliged to take off his trousers – they made him rape the other man. This man refused and did not want to do it, he said, 'It's best to die and just kill me.' So they heated a spoon with a fire and burned his tongue and his nipples because he would not do that. Nothing happened to the other man, they let him go, but they said to everyone that this is what happens to you if you don't respect what we want you to do. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 27)

It is often in the Sahara that migrants and refugees realise that sexual violence will be hard to avoid. A health provider interviewed by the Women's Refugee Commission stated the following:

I spoke to a young girl who had been travelling in a group through the desert and they were stopped by an armed group. They were taking her away with other women to rape and a man said, 'No she's my wife.' He thought maybe they wouldn't rape her if the husband was there, but they didn't believe him and they forced this man to rape her instead. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, pp. 34–35)

Such abuses are reported on the whole migration road; from the countries of origin of the migrants and refugees till their destination.

Rape is perpetrated in the trafficking camps.⁶ In this case, the perpetrators are usually those working for the human traffickers or the human traffickers themselves. Journalist Sally Hayden covered the trial of top Eritrean human traffickers Kidane Zekarias Habtemariam

⁶ 'The terms 'prison', 'warehouse', 'house', 'hangar', 'store', 'farm', 'holding camp' and 'credit house' are all used by migrants and refugees to refer to the places where they are sequestered and tortured for ransom (see Glossary of Terms).

(known as ‘Kidane’) and Tewelde Goitom Welid (known as ‘Welid’) (see Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). She wrote the following about the trafficker Welid:

Goitom [Welid] was particularly infamous for sexual abuse. Multiple victims in different countries told 100Reporters they personally know women who had babies as a result of rape by him. People held in his warehouse said he would pick out any girls or women he wanted, some married, others very young. He allegedly videotaped the assaults, threatening to post them online if the woman spoke out. Relatedly, no female victim has come forward to give evidence, prosecutors say. (Hayden, 2021)

A key informant reported to the Women’s Refugee Commission the case of a man who was captured in Bani Walid.

He was [...] forced into a container with many other people. He was forced to strip off his clothes. Everyone who stayed in the container was in their underwear. [...] At night, guards would take some of the men outside to rape them. He said the raping happened so regularly that it became normal and no man could refuse because the guards had guns and they would shoot and kill you. When the men came back crying, they would talk about what the guards did to them and how violent it was. He said that because it happened to everyone, the men were able to talk about it together. (Women’s Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 58)

This quote demonstrates the extent of the perpetration of rape against men in trafficking camps. Perpetration in the context of the admission of torture for ransom collection was also reported by the Women’s Refugee Commission:

Bored guards also engage in sexual violence for entertainment purposes. A 34-year-old Nigerian man told a key informant, “The torture is to beat, to electrify the genitals. The sexual violence is to satisfy themselves. It is just for fun, they are laughing when they do it. (Women’s Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 32)

A similar experience was recorded by journalist Maurine Mercier: “In front of everyone, they ask you to stroke yourself. It stimulates your erection. [...] They laugh, they are happy. It’s unheard of” (Mercier (2018b).

Sally Hayden also reports that some human traffickers use sexual violence as a way of entertainment. She wrote the following about human traffickers Kidane and Welid:

Some survivors said both smugglers forced teams of weak captives to play football against each other. They would shoot at those who missed shots, and the winning man would choose a woman to rape from the other's detainees. (Hayden, 2021)

Sexual violence can also result in the death of the victims. In the testimony below, the death seems to be the actual objective behind the orchestration of sexual violence by the human traffickers:

A health worker described the ordeal of one of her patients, a 24-year-old man from Sierra Leone: 'He was in Bani Walid in one of the unofficial places of captivity. [...] Guards had so many people in the holding place, and they had a lot of people who weren't worth anything anymore. They couldn't extort them anymore, so they would initiate a 'cleaning out', saying, 'it's time to clean the prison and have a bath.' They would line up all the men and the women naked – everyone had to strip – and the men and women were in different lines. The women had to masturbate the men. They were forced to do everything to make the man erect. If the men became erect, the guards would cut their penis off. If there was no erection, they would rape the woman with a stick. He said that no woman survived that – they'd rape her until she bled to death. They would do this on a semi-regular basis to reduce numbers. [...] I remember him talking about seeing the mutilated penises jumping on the floor afterwards – they were still activated. He said the guards were laughing while this happened, that it was like watching movie for them – they would sit back and enjoy this. This practice was ongoing; it wasn't a once off. They did it regularly for entertainment. Three of his own friends who he was travelling with died in front of him in that process. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 20)

This testimony indicates that victims of human trafficking, from whom no more ransom can be collected, are vulnerable to extreme cruelty, including sexual violence, which can result in death. Similar findings were reported by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) on human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai. They found that cruelties, including sexual violence, could result in death, particularly if there was an impression that the victim could (or would) not be able to collect the ransom. In their analysis, this added to the pressure

on other victims to collect ransom, as they witnessed the consequences of not paying the amounts being demanded from them.

For ransom collection

The findings of the Women's Refugee Commission show that sexual violence is part of the torture applied by human traffickers to migrants and refugees to extort ransom. A key informant explained:

I had a case recently – a brother and sister from Somalia were travelling together with the brother's best friend. The best friend was going out with the sister, he was her boyfriend. They were held captive in Al Kufrah for a few months. The captors gang-raped the sister for six days in a row in front of the two boys. They did that to exert pressure on the boys to have their families send money. She was in a serious condition – she had internal injuries from the rape and died after 15 days. She died one week before we rescued them. These boys were 16 and 17 years old. This sexual violence was used as a method of torture for extortion – to force her brother and her boyfriend to witness this, unable to defend or protect her. They were then forced to ring their families and they begged for help. By the time the money came, she was dead. (Women's Refugee Commission 2019, p. 34)

Even if not often reported, the communication of sexual violence through information and communication technology (ICTs) to add pressure for the purpose of ransom collection was also reported. A health provider explained to the Women's Refugee Commission: "Violence to the [male] genitals is common in Libya. They film genital torture and they Skype with the family to extort money" (2019, p. 24).

ICTs and the filming of sexual violence can also be a tool to exacerbate the humiliation of the victims, as well as to threaten them. Journalist Sally Hayden wrote: "I've heard reports of smugglers in Libya raping women on camera, then threatening to post videos online if the women ever speak out" (Hayden, 2020).

In official detention centres

There are also many reports of sexual violence in official detention centres administered by the Directorate of Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM), under the Ministry of Interior (OHCHR & UNSMIL, 2016; 2018a; 2018b; ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL, 2021). In

some of them, sexual violence starts immediately after the arrival of the detainee at the prison as part of the intake procedure. A health provider interviewed by the Women's Refugee Commission shared the experience of a 22-year-old Eritrean man:

This man was twice forced to undress and bend over for the guards to search in his anus for money. He described how violent and painful it was and that although he wasn't raped with a penis, he feels that he was and now lived in a constant state of fear of being raped. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 22)

Sexual violence is systematic in certain official detention centres. A child protection officer reported the following: "Torture and sexual abuse are part of the daily experience in detention centres in Libya. It's Russian roulette whether you are chosen as a victim one day or the next" (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 32). In this case, the aim is to terrorise and enslave the detainees. It can also be a tool for humiliation as a punishment. A key informant told the Women's Refugee Commission the following:

One guy told us that in the detention centre if someone tried to escape, then all the other men in the room are forced to have sex with this person, otherwise they will kill him. We heard that many times. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 22)

From the interviews carried out by the Women's Refugee Commission, it was revealed that sexual violence perpetrated in official detention centres can be very well organised:

He was put in an official [DCIM] detention centre, but kept in a secret cell where he was being extorted for 1,000 euros. He described how they kept people in this cell, which was away from the main prison where the majority of refugees and migrants were held. There was open rape – rape in front of everyone else, against men and women. Men and women died by rape. He could hear women screaming and crying as they were being raped. There were two gates on the cell. When one gate opened, it meant they were going to rape the women. When the other gate opened, it meant they were going to rape the men. Guards had friends who came and took pleasure in raping men. These people didn't work there – he thought they were friends of the guards or could have paid guards to rape the men. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, pp. 23–24)

Hassan, a young man from Cameroon who was interviewed in Agadez after he fled Libya, explained how hard it is to witness this kind of abuse:

In Libya, I went from prison to prison. The last one was the worst. There were three hundred of us in a small room. Some stood, some sat. Every three days at least one person died. We stayed four to five days without food and water. One day they brought two women into our compartment. They wanted to rape them in front of us. We told them that this was not going to happen, that they should do it somewhere else. Not in front of us. They didn't listen. So we got in the way. That's when they hit and shot several of us. (Wirtz, 2018)

It is important to note that the violence described in this section is committed in official detention centres. International NGOs and UN agencies have access to those prisons. A key informant from the Women's Refugee Commission described the experience of a Nigerian woman:

She was taken to Zawiyah [a DCIM centre] where she saw UN logos each time. She said that 'the men were tortured and beaten regularly, and they were raped, too. The women were raped continuously. (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019, p. 24)

The majority of migrants and refugees detained in official detention centres had been arrested by the Libyan police or the Libya Coast Guard, which is partially financed by the European Union. When migrants and refugees are arrested for attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea, they are usually brought back to prisons where this kind of sexual violence and human rights violations are perpetrated.

Sexual exploitation

Libya is crossed by prostitution networks. Some of them are well known. An example is one that goes from Edo State in southern Nigeria and the sub-region to Italy. Women have been trafficked on this route since the 1990s (Kuschminder, 2020). They are approached in their country of origin and promised to be taken to Europe. Once they arrive, they are forced to pay off a debt ranging from USD 20,000 to USD 60,000 through prostitution (Baker, 2019). As the research stands, survivors of this kind of exploitation are always

women. The perpetrators managing this network are also often women, called ‘Madams’, but can also be men. Men also work in this network as guards, drivers and facilitators. In some cases, women are already forced into prostitution on the road, in Niger or Libya. Women are often sold by their captors to pimps at the head of a ‘connection house’, a term used for ‘brothel’ in the region (Baker, 2019).

A culture of sexual violence

To understand the context of sexual violence perpetrated against migrants and refugees in Libya, it is important to remember that Muammar Gaddafi himself faced many allegations of rape. In a book entitled *Gaddafi's Harem*, the investigative reporter Annick Cojean reports that hundreds of women were imprisoned and raped by the former Libyan head of State (Cojean, 2014).

Following the revolution in Libya, the use of sexual violence spread among the forces in opposition. In March 2011, a woman attested on international TV channels that she was arrested and raped by Gaddafi's forces for having demonstrated against the Libyan leader (Allegra, 2018). In April 2011, the US envoy to the United Nations claimed that Muammar Gaddafi was encouraging mass rape during the revolution by supplying his troops with Viagra (MacAskill, 2011).

Since Gaddafi's regime fell in 2011, rape has been used as a weapon against his former supporters. In *Libye, Anatomie d'un Crime*, a documentary directed by Cécile Allegra, a survivor shared that, while being abused, the rapists explained: “We are doing the same as you; Gaddafi's supporters” (Allegra, 2018). In the Libyan civil war and in detention centres, rape is used to destroy enemies, to defile them and to make them the outcasts.

In the same documentary, another survivor related that a member of the Tawerghas ethnic group (a Libyan group rejected for their dark skin, accused of having supported Gaddafi and of having raped more than 1,500 women in Misrata) and migrants were imprisoned naked together all night long. Cécile Allegra also collected testimonies that migrants were forced to rape Libyan men (Allegra, 2018).

Rape is also used as a weapon against migrants and refugees by human traffickers in Libya. In this context, refugees become no more than ‘merchandise’ that can be transported, sold, exchanged or stolen. Sexual violence is used to keep them under control, deprived of their dignity, self-esteem and will. To achieve this aim, both men and women are targeted for rape. The perpetrators are people connected, close or far, to human trafficking for ransom.

As explained in Chapter 5: *The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*, ‘black’ skinned people continue to be perceived as slaves in some Arab communities. In many cultures, including Western ones, raping a slave or its descendent is not perceived as a crime. Social justice advocate Dorothy Roberts writes, “For most of American history the crime of rape of a black woman did not exist” (Roberts, 1997, p. 31). The fact that migrants and refugees are seen as slaves by Libyans means that they are not perceived as entitled to human rights, which means that sexual violence is not considered to be something that is reprehensible.

Theoretical considerations: Three categories of sexual violence

This chapter looks into the existence of a culture of sexual violence in Libya and the relationship of this culture with the perpetration of sexual violence in human trafficking for ransom. The research takes account of Rorty (1998), who argues that human rights are accessible only if there is a recognition of rights as rights, if there is an empathy towards the people involved in the situation, and if there is enough safety to have the space to consider the people involved in the situation. Failing these conditions, the culture of human rights might not be conducive to the enjoyment of these rights by everyone.

From the literature review, three categories emerge as specifically relevant to the modus operandi of sexual violence perpetrated against refugees and migrants in Libya. The first category is ‘sexual violence as a tool of subjugation’. This category is based on the strategic rape theory developed by the psychiatrist Ruth Seifert. In *War and Rape: Analytical Approaches 1*”, Seifert asks what the reason for rape is, in

general (Seifert, 1993). She then develops five explanations of the function of rape during war. For her, the roots of rape are not in sexual desire; instead, she defines rape as “an extreme act of violence perpetrated by sexual means”.

Rape is not an aggressive expression of sexuality, but a sexual expression of aggression. In the perpetrator's psyche, it does not fulfil sexual functions, but is a manifestation of anger, violence and domination of a woman. The purpose is to degrade, humiliate and subjugate her. (Seifert, 1993, p. 1)

The second category of sexual violence committed against people on the move in Libya is ‘sexual exploitation’. Sexual exploitation is defined as: “Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another” (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.).

In many cases, the vulnerability of migrants and refugees is exploited for sexual purposes and monetary profit by others. The testimonies labelled as ‘sexual exploitation’ in this chapter are the ones that related to a financial transaction for sexual services. In most cases, this was done without the consent of the migrant/refugee and they were often not the ones who received the money at the end.

The third category of sexual violence committed against people on the move in Libya is ‘sexual violence as an opportunistic crime’.⁷ This crime is able to be committed because the migrant/refugee is considered to be the ‘property’ of the traffickers or people holding them, who have often bought them, or simply because they are under

⁷ This type of crime is usually referred to as a ‘crime of opportunity’, which is generally understood as a crime that is committed without premeditation or planning, when the perpetrator sees that they have the chance to commit the act (Warr, 1988). In this chapter we have avoided the use of the word ‘opportunity’, as it has positive connotations. In addition, we wanted to distinguish it from crime of opportunity as we do not know the mind of the perpetrator to determine whether or not there was planning and premeditation before seizing the moment.

the control of, or easy to target by, the drivers, smugglers, guards, employers or Libyan citizens.

In this research, sexual violence was categorised as an ‘opportunistic crime’ when it seemed to occur when the perpetrator saw a chance to commit the act and seized it, because the victim ‘was there’ and easy to abuse. This category of abuse was not systematic and was often committed in private.

These three categories are not comprehensive and overlap in some cases. While this chapter attempts to explain why sexual violence occurs on migratory paths to Libya, it is important to keep in mind that the authors were neither present during the crime, nor in the head of the abuser to understand clearly what happened and what was the real motivation while they were committing the crime. The following sections present the findings of the interviews.

Sexual violence as a tool of subjugation

In this chapter, we have defined sexual violence as a tool of subjugation when it is systematic (when all detainees are subject to the violence) or when it is accompanied by humiliation. The spectrum of sexual humiliation practised against migrants and refugees in Libya is large and leaves survivors with deep physical and psychological scars. This section presents the testimonies of migrants and refugees who experienced sexual violence as a tool of subjugation in the Sahara (on the way to Libya), in the official and unofficial detention centres.

On the routes through the Sahara

The first ordeal before arriving in Libya is the crossing of the Sahara desert. People on the move cross stretches of sand in Toyota Hilux 4×4s packed with about 28 people. Their survival depends only on the driver and their ability to hang on to the back of the car. The journey between Agadez in northern Niger and Sabha in southern Libya usually takes around five days. Between Sudan and Kufra, in south-eastern Libya, the journey can take several weeks or even more than a month (see Chapter 9: *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*). The routes are littered with dead bodies; stories of violence and the rape of migrants and refugees abound.

From the interviews, it appears that sometimes drivers, smugglers or human traffickers use sexual violence to implement discipline among the passengers and show them who is in control now. Victims are of all nationalities and can be men or women. A young Eritrean woman recalled the following about her experience in the Sahara.

Between some towns, the car goes very fast. If someone falls, they don't stop to pick him up. The driver and his assistant were raping the women passengers. The men who were with us could not do anything. They were beaten and some were raped. If they tried anything, they were shot dead. (Interviewee 1049, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)⁸

A young Eritrean man testified as follows:

When I was in Gerba [in Sudan], they put me in a hut. I was alone. [...] Even they tried to abuse me. [...] This is the hardest time for me. I don't want to remember that. This is the worst event of my life. I tried to fight with them. I tried to shout. But it was [sigh]. It was very far. It is not... There was nothing around that place. It is far away from the village. They tried many times. Then they even shot the gun in front of me. And they did it. [Cries] (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Sexual violence in the Sahara is so common, that it is no longer unexpected by migrants and refugees. This does not diminish the trauma that such violence causes, as the above quote shows.

In human trafficking camps

In the camps of the human traffickers, migrants and refugees lose their status as 'human beings' and become 'goods' or 'merchandise' that is worth money; often a ransom is asked of the victim's relatives, and they are sold, exchanged or stolen (see Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*). Sexual violence in this case is a strong tool of subjugation used by the 'owners' of the migrants and refugees. It is also used to accelerate the

⁸ This interview was also published previously (in 2020); the specifics of this publication are withheld for security reasons.

payment of ransom. In some camps, sexual violence is systematic. An Eritrean woman explained:

We were 50 people, men and women. Forty women. They gave us one bread and a piece of butter. Then, they tried to divide us from the men. This place was full of arms. They divided us and then they raped all of us. (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

According to interviewees, rape is systematic in the warehouses of Ahmad Oumar al-Dabbashi⁹ (Chapter 11: “*You are the Ball – They are the Players*”: *The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*). A young refugee explained:

Of course the women are raped over there. In all the places controlled by Al-Amu, women are raped. But women are raped all over Libya. Al-Amu controls a lot of smugglers and pushes many migrants to the sea. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Some guards in the trafficking camps force migrants and refugees to work with them (Chapter 11). Raping the detainees can be one of their tasks; a Senegalese man explained:

They put a little Somali [refugee] to guard us. When he finds us sleeping, they hit us. But if you touch even a single hair of this little one, they kill you. It's a little one, he is 13 years old, or something like that. He is a Somali. He beat us with a Gambian; he's called Alassane [name changed]. They [the refugees forced to work as guards] are the ones who come to hit us. [...] They rape women all the time, Alassane, the Gambian, every day he comes. He is the naughtiest there. (Interviewee 1069, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

Sexual violence, particularly towards men, is taboo. Survivors are reluctant to share their full migration experiences, due to sexual violence being a ‘shameful’ topic and it is ‘against their culture’ to talk about it, as young Eritrean explained:

⁹ Known as ‘Al-Amu’, this Libyan trafficker is on the sanction list of the UN Security Council Committee (2018).

There are men raped. [...] There are too many problems in Libya. Because it is shameful if a man is raped, how can he say it to you like that? [...] It is shameful. And it is not our culture to tell like this. (Interviewee 1059, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Even if the topic is taboo, systematic sexual violence has the effect of normalising the practice.

As part of ransom collection

In the trafficking camps, migrants and refugees are sequestered and tortured, with the aim of collecting ransom from their relatives. Sexual violence can be part of the torture applied to a refugee. A young Eritrean woman shared the following:

[In the warehouse in Bani Walid], we were requested to pay. They were taking women out to rape them. Sometimes, we were beaten and at other times we were splashed with hot water. [...] We were beaten as much as the men. For example, they tie you by the feet and they hang you upside down and they beat you. (Interviewee 1050, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

In some cases, sexual violence in the camps of human traffickers in Libya is combined with the use of mobile phones. Migrants and refugees are forced by the traffickers to contact their families by phone, while being tortured, to beg them to pay their ransom (see Chapter 11). This torture can also include sexual violence. A smuggler interviewed for this research in Agadez explained:

It is true that when one rapes a women, we put the phone. It's true, huh! About Libya, all that is said, know that it is true. Yes, they do that, that's what they do, to show their parents how they live there, for money to come [to make them pay ransom]. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)¹⁰

Audio, videos and pictures of sexual violence are sent to the families of the detainees in order to accelerate the payment of ransom.

¹⁰ This interview was also published previously (in 2020); the specifics of this publication are withheld for security reasons.

Sexual violence is often combined with humiliation. This can take various forms and can be even more destructive than the beatings. In the interviews, two people explained, for instance, that they had been forced to drink urine. A young Nigerian man explained:

When I talk about Libya, I see this again; someone giving you their urine and asking you to drink it. You have to drink, otherwise they will whip you. (Interviewee 5010, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

Genital mutilation was also reported by various interviewees. A young man testified that it is a strong tool of fear used to get refugees to work for the human traffickers:

One day, one person came to me after I refused to work: "What heroes are you to talk to me like this?" He brought something like scissors on my ... on my ... yeah. He is doing like this. [Mimics bringing scissors close to private parts]. He wanted to cut a small part. [...] Blood is coming there. But another Libyan said: "No, no it is haram [forbidden by Islamic law], just leave it". (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Sexual violence is a powerful way of destroying someone's humanity and self-esteem. The same man quoted above describes the refugees queuing up outside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Tripoli. For him, they hardly seem like human beings anymore:

Some of them don't have hands. Some have lost eyes. Some, before they came to Libya they were men, real men. But now, they are not men. Their organs are not working as they [the human traffickers] are beating it! Or standing on it like this [mimics someone crushing a penis, someone pulling a penis] or hurting you like this [mimics someone with a knife on a penis]. How many people suffer in Libya? (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Subjugation through sexual violence is a highly effective tool for the human traffickers. The effects of this crime stay with the survivors for a long time. From the interviews it is clear that survivors carry the trauma for months, years, or even a lifetime.

In official detention centres

As they are illegally on Libyan territory (Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention on its 1967 Protocol and refugees have no legal status), migrants and refugees are always at risk of being arrested and locked up in an official detention centre. These prisons are controlled by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM). Even though humanitarian organisations have conditional access to these centres, interviewees reported many abuses, including sexual violence, taking place. The perpetrators of sexual violence were all identified as guards working in the detention centres. The victims are men and women of various nationalities.

As in the trafficking camps, sexual violence in official detention centres can be accompanied by humiliation. After having been arrested at sea in the summer of 2020, a young refugee was brought to Abu Issa detention centre in Zawiyah. He contacted the authors of this chapter right after his release. He was angry. He wanted to talk about what had happened:

They beat us there! [...] And they are gay! There are also raping men there! Not only women, men also. They rape the men and they beat you. [...] Every morning, they will remove our pants. Then, we are naked like babies. They beat you, then they ask you to walk like a frog. All together. They ask women to remove their bikini, and then to walk like frogs and they start laughing at them. (Interviewee 1089, interview with Wirtz, Messenger call, August 2020)

To exacerbate the humiliation, sexual violence is sometimes committed in front of witnesses, such as other guards, as stated in the quote above, or other detainees.

Sexual violence committed in official detention centres can serve as a punishment. This includes the cutting of the genitals, as a former translator working for a NGO in Libya explained:

Once, [the refugees] told me about a rebellion they had done. Some denounced the leaders to the guards. They underwent torture festivities. They even told me that some people were castrated. They do surgery without morphine, just to make them suffer. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

In official detention centres, sometimes hundreds of detainees share one cell. Subjugation through tortures and violence, as described in Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*, could be a tool for the guards to keep control of the situation.

Sexual exploitation

Ninety per cent of Libyan territory is desert. For hundreds of years, the area has been used by trafficking networks; merchandise, slaves, drugs, weapons, prostitutes, they are all moved through Libya to Europe. This section looks at the sexual exploitations of migrants and refugees through these networks.

The cases of sexual exploitation against migrants and refugees in Libya reported in the interviews were all committed for monetary gain. Migrants and refugees are a commodity in the hands of human traffickers. With sexual exploitation, the product is a sexual service that is delivered most of the time under force or threat of force. One of the most famous women trafficking networks is the one that goes from Nigeria to Europe. Many women from Nigeria and the sub-region are trapped in situations of sexual exploitation. After being promised a trip to Europe and a job, they find themselves in Niger, Libya or Europe, having to pay off huge debts through prostitution. In Agadez, the amount of these debts can reach EUR 2,000. The price for sex with a prostitute in Agadez is around EUR 5 per time (Wirtz, 2021). In Italy, the service of a prostitute is worth around USD 25 per time. Among the interviews collected for this chapter, one person explained having found themselves in this forced prostitution network. Dozens of women in this situation were met by the authors in Agadez for a photographic report on prostitution (Wirtz, 2021).

The perpetrators of sexual exploitation are both men and women. They can be drivers, facilitators, guards, traffickers, Madams,¹¹

¹¹ 'Madam' is the name given to women involved in human trafficking for prostitution from West Africa to Europe. Madams are often former victims of these networks who have paid off their debt, but have nowhere to go or nothing to do after years in forced prostitution.

members of Islamic State (ISIS) or clients. The victims are mostly women, but also men, especially young men.

In this section we look at the prostitution network of Nigerian women, other prostitution networks, sexual exploitation perpetrated by ISIS, the role of official detention centres in sexual exploitation and prostitution as a way to survive in Libya. As discussed earlier, although this book focuses on Eritreans, this chapter looks more broadly at sexual violence against all nationalities to understand why sexual violence in Libya is so widespread.

A young Nigerian woman explained how she was trapped into prostitution when a family friend invited her to Libya. She explained:

If you are from Biafra, Eastern part of Nigeria and that you are staying in Lagos you will suffer a lot you know. So, you don't get opportunities, going to school was not easy. I could not finish. So, I got an opportunity, somebody told me: "I will bring you to Libya and you are going to get to work". And I said: "OK". He told me: "Don't worry when you will get to Libya, you will work and be paid". I thought that I could work and help my family. So, this is why I decided to come to Libya: to work and to support my family. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

This woman travelled across Niger by bus and in other vehicles. When she finally arrived in Libya, she understood that she was expected to work as a prostitute. However, she was able to escape by indicating to her mother the residence in Nigeria of the Madam who had taken her on this journey. Her mother was able to put the Madam under pressure and she did not have to prostitute herself to pay off her debt. But she saw what she had escaped from:

[In Tripoli], I entered a house where there are a lot of girls doing prostitution. So this is where they dropped me. My mind was beating. Because I did not know what was next. There are a lot of girls. Pinky dresses, pants. They were high. They were drunk. Smoke everywhere. In this house I saw the other girl who came with me to Libya. And this was how I got to know she was sold for prostitution. So I stayed there for a few hours. And then, they took me from there to another house. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

To pay off her debt, this interviewee was still forced to work as a maid for Libyans for eight months without getting paid. She describes herself as an intelligent woman – and she is obviously resourceful, as her first contact in Libya repeatedly tried to abuse her, but she managed to escape:

He rapes women. He tried to rape me. But he couldn't. Because I told him that I was having my menstruation. He said: "When are you going to finish?" I kept telling him: "I am over-bleeding". I was using palm oil and I put it in my pants and I said: "You see: I am still bleeding". He said: "Why?" I said: "Maybe it is the desert. I ate a lot of bad food". Then he was tired and he told me to go to Tripoli. (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

However, many others are unable to avoid being raped on a regular basis before Libya, inside Libya and after Libya.

Other prostitution networks also exist in Libya, but are less well known. During the research, we came across one testimony of a survivor of such a network. The young woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo was less fortunate than the Nigerian woman mentioned in the previous excerpt. She travelled with a group of migrants directly from Congo Brazzaville to Libya, where she was locked up in various places and sexually exploited:

We arrived in Libya. [...] The houses there are closed, there are not even any windows! [...] And on top of that, there were... Ah God, Libya, I don't know... Men who came to rape you. Men who came for the women every day. Every day. Every day they raped us. [...] One day, I asked a person next to me: "But why do they change us from house to house like that? Why do people come and make love to us like this?" She said that it is the one who kept us there who took the money and then let [the Libyans] come in, they did what they wanted and then they left. That's how he does his business. And if he gets tired of you, he gives you to another person who will keep you in a house again. (Interviewee 1041, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)



Figure 15.2. Nigerian prostitutes who escaped prostitution networks working in Agadez, Niger

(Photograph: Morgane Wirtz/Hans Lucas, 2021)

It is clear from this interview that the objective of the people at the head of these networks is monetary gain. Migrants and refugees are raped because the person who holds them is paid to let people have sex with them. The abusers are people from outside – locals who come to have sex with (forced) prostitutes.

A woman from the Democratic Republic of Congo described being raped in front of others:

Sometimes [they would rape us] in front of the others, because where are you going to go? It's dark there. It's a disaster, too disgusting. The boys are raped in the anus!
(Interviewee 1041, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

Victims of this kind of sexual violence are of various nationalities. As the previous interviewee stated, they can be men as well as women. In the case of the young Congolese woman, it was pregnancy that saved her from further sexual abuse. When her belly started to grow, her human trafficker got rid of her, as she was no longer of any use to him.

Perpetrated by ISIS

The conflict in Libya has also led to the propagation of extremism. During the research conducted for this chapter, we did not come across any testimonies of survivors of sexual slavery under ISIS. Data on this topic is very limited. “There are almost no survivors,” a key informant told us (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021). However, a former translator working for NGOs in Libya confirmed the use of sex slaves by the Islamic group:

Daesh [ISIS] was taking the women, especially the youngsters [as sex slaves]. [...] Some people allowed themselves to have four or five wives. So it was a good market for them. I didn't see anything. It is hidden. They are brought in cars with tinted windows, so that no one will notice anything and this happens far away from the city centre. But, usually, for every product there must be a market. [...] Generally, those women are directly sold on the dark web. They organise auctions ... everything. I have heard that the highest prices are given to the virgins. It seems that they are worth thousands of euros, or dinars, whatever... I even heard that they organise markets and bit solicitations. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021).

As per this research, it seems that perpetrators of this kind of sexual exploitation are men, affiliated to ISIS. The majority of victims are women, but can also be men.

In official detention centres

Sexual exploitation also happens in official detention centres. As described in Chapter 13: *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*, migrants and refugees detained in official detention centres can be sold by the guards and chiefs as slaves, for a day or for longer periods. A former translator who visited three detention centres in Libya said that detainees could also be sold into prostitution networks:

The Libyans are there for business. They dealt with the smugglers to bring sub-Saharan Africans there and direct them to the tasks they could do. [...] The ones that were proved to be homosexuals were sold into sexual labour. And the women are used to take care of the children or to be prostitutes in Europe. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

In such cases, the perpetrators are the guards working in the detention centres and the clients who come to buy sex slaves. According to several testimonies, in some prisons, there are places where the migrants and refugees are offered to clients. The victims are women and men. The former translator who worked in Libya recalled the following:

[In Sirtre] detention centre, there were a few rooms. You could feel the difference between these rooms and the others. There was an air conditioner, it was cleaned. There was security on the doors. I remember one time we had finished working late and I saw girls who looked like 15 to 20 years old, chained and guided there, right there, where there are these rooms. And then, they cleaned them with water, using a high pressure cleaner. Well, that's what I saw, after they got back there.

Once there was one of those girls who had internal bleeding. Apparently because of her bad luck, she had success. She haemorrhaged and was placed elsewhere until she left. That's what her sister told me. There. And then [she died and was buried] we dig a hole and it's finished. [...] I reported this to Amnesty, anonymously. I also reported it to Human Rights Watch, anonymously too, because I wanted to continue my work and at the same time try to help in my own way. Voila, there are a few performers who supported me and we tried to report on this. There was nothing we could do. It was a pretty huge lobby with some pretty powerful figures doing business. And with money, unfortunately, anything goes. The most beautiful left for Europe, and the others ... are exploited by the presumed leaders. (Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021).

More research is needed to understand the exact role of official detention centres in prostitution networks and sexual exploitation. However, those testimonies are clear: clients freely come to some official detention centres, to which international NGOs have only conditional access, and pay to rape the detainees.

Prostitution as a way to survive in Libya

Reports and interviews also show that people on the move sometimes sell themselves to Libyans, in exchange for something to eat or to

have money to survive in Libya. A refugee who spent about two years in the country testified as follows:

In Libya there is a lot of rape, even for men ... for kids, those who are younger. The kids, when the Libyans see them, they don't have a mind, they call them, they give them food because they are very hungry. Women, if for example you see a refugee, you have one spoon full of sugar, you give her a tea, you can do whatever you want. They follow the Libyans because of hunger. They are human beings. (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Further investigation needs to be conducted to understand how migrants and refugees may negotiate their journey by providing sexual services. One interview with a Sudanese man in Tripoli shows that such deals exist, however, we do not have sufficient information to describe how this takes place:

Before entering the sea, I stayed in a camp for two months with Eritreans, Somalis, Egyptians, Nigerians, Bengalis, people from Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast. There, they are just fucked people; they don't want anybody to talk. They use girls. They do bad things. They are fucking them. They use them. Some of the girls came without paying money. (Interviewee 1018, interview Wirtz, WhatsApp call, 2020)

In such cases, the perpetrators can be policemen working at checkpoints, drivers, smugglers, human traffickers or civilians who offer to pay for sex. Victims are of different nationalities. According to the information collected so far, the majority of them are women, but men can also sell themselves.

Sexual violence as an opportunistic crime

A large number of migrants and refugees in Libya face sexual violence because the perpetrator takes advantage of the situation. Migrants and refugees are easy prey. Adoum Moussa, a researcher based in Agadez explained:

Migrants are raped because they are vulnerable. Often, some drivers, they are not sober when they transport passengers through the Sahara. And, as those girls are

there, they just help themselves. [...] For the Toubou¹² drivers, the girls who are going to Libya have the objective to work as a prostitute over there, so they don't have respect for them. (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, Signal Call, December 2021)

Racism can also partly explain the sexual violence committed against migrants and refugees in Libya. As Adoum Moussa explain:

The drivers and Libyans continue to call and consider sub-Saharan as slaves. (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, Signal Call, December 2021)

Victims of this kind of violence are usually women, of all nationalities. They are illegally in Libya and have no access to justice and nowhere to complain if they fall victim to any crime. This leaves them in a very vulnerable situation. The perpetrators are the drivers, their assistants, smugglers, people involved in human trafficking, guards, policemen, military men and even Libyan citizens. Most of the time, they have weapons. They have relations and contacts that protect them and can easily perpetrate sexual violence.

It is hard to distinguish this kind of sexual violence from the other types, for instance, sexual violence perpetrated as a tool of subjugation. Often the different situations overlap and it is impossible to know exactly what was happening in the mind of the perpetrator when the crime was committed. In this research, sexual violence was categorised as 'an opportunistic crime' when there was a selection among the potential victim, when the violence was not systematic, and when the violence was not accompanied by other forms of humiliation. In this form of violence, intercourse often occurred in private (not in front of other migrants and refugees).

This section presents the testimonies of sexual violence as an opportunistic crime in the Sahara desert, in the trafficking camps, the official detention centres, and the urban areas.

¹² Here, Adoum Moussa is talking about drivers working for human smugglers or traffickers who are from the Toubou tribe, a nomadic tribe living in South Libya, North Libya, Chad and Sudan, for which crossing the Sahara is part of their culture.

On route in the Sahara desert

In the Sahara desert, the perpetrators of sexual violence against migrants and refugees as an opportunistic crime are all men. They are drivers, assistants, policemen and military men working at checkpoints. Victims are often women, but can also be men, and are of various nationalities. A smuggler operating between Agadez and Sabha confirmed this:

There are drivers who rape women on the road. In Libya you see them arrive, distraught, they are crying, saying that the drivers have taken them by force in the Sahara to have sex with them. Compulsory – because you can't refuse. The drivers keep all the weapons on the road. From a few kilometres after they left Agadez, they are all armed. If you refuse, they will kill you. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)¹³

However, a Nigerien who has been in the smuggling business for years said that raping a passenger is breaking one of the sacred laws to be respected when crossing the desert. He said:

A driver will never touch a woman during the journey. Because if you have sex during the journey, it's automatic, the car will have a problem. (Interviewee 1081, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, February 2021)

Adoum Moussa, a researcher from Agadez added:

This is why rape never happens in the car. They take the persons to a hidden place or under the car to abuse them. (Interviewee 2001, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2021)

An Eritrean woman described her journey between Khartoum, in Sudan, and Kufra, in Libya:

On the way so many things happened. For example, there were people dying. Compatriots were dying and when we told them, they just threw them, drop them from the car. They don't do any burial procedures for them and also... So many

¹³ This interview was also published previously (in 2020); the specifics of this publication are withheld for security reasons.

problems were happening to women, even rape. (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

Like many others, this woman was raped during her journey to Libya, despite the fact that she was travelling with her husband. When asked about her relationship with him after this happened, she answered:

There was no option that we could do at that point so... (Interviewee 1051, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2021)

“We had no choice”; this statement accompanied each of the testimonies of sexual violence collected for this research. Facing weapons and in the middle of the desert, the migrants feel powerless.

Some, however, find ways to escape the sexual advances of the drivers and their assistants. Some dress like men to avoid the abuse. A young man, explained:

Before we reached Libya, they raped! They raped women from Somalia. The Eritrean ladies, because they were wearing trousers and they had dressed like men; covering their chest, wearing jackets, jeans, they didn't know, they left them. But they raped the Somalis. [...] They were single. Some of them, they were even virgins. They raped them. There was blood that was coming on the road. (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

Sometimes the strategies put in place by the migrants to avoid sexual violence work, and sometimes they don't. The fact that such tricks are used shows that sexual violence has become so mainstream that strategies are planned in advance to try to avoid such violence.

By human traffickers

When they are in the hands of human traffickers, migrants and refugees are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. A smuggler, who stated that he is not a human trafficker and does not commit such acts, explained:

You go through a small door and you enter the room of people who have not paid. It is said that there, the detainees do not wear clothes. They stay in their underwear. They are undressed, because at every moment they are taken out to torture them so that they make their parents pay. [...] Of course they are raping. And over there,

there is no question of refusing! If you refuse, they will kill you. (Interviewee 1080, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, October 2020)¹⁴

In the traffickers' camps, the perpetrators can just 'help themselves'. A refugee explained:

Every time new migrants are coming through the Sabara desert, the smuggler is just asking a beautiful woman or a beautiful girl. He is taking one. And tomorrow, when other refugees come, he changes. [...] As humans are changing their feeding every day, he is just changing the woman. Like he is changing his clothes. Without raping. He is not raping. He just says: "Come!" And they agree, the women they agree. Because they are afraid of him. (Interviewee 1027, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2020)

A Senegalese man who was kidnapped in Sabha recalled the following:

God only knows what we went through there. To explain this, it is not easy. [...] You can go crazy. It is too hard for one man. There are women in the prison, but they are in a separate room. It is total violence. They don't know about human rights. Women, they want to violate them. They will do what they want, when they want. There are no human rights. (Interviewee 1075, interview with Moussa, face-to-face, June 2020)

The perpetrators are men – the guards, the people working for the human traffickers and the top human trafficker himself. As stated above, victims of this type of violence are mostly women, but can also be men.

In official detention centres

In official detention centres, refugees and migrants are highly vulnerable to sexual violence as an opportunistic crime. A migrant from Cameroon who was detained in Zuwarah explained:

In Zuwarah's prison and in Tripoli's prison, there are women and men. The Cameroonian women that I know and who have been imprisoned there say that the

¹⁴ This interview was also published previously (2020), specifics withheld for security reasons.

Libyans were always asking to have sex with them. It also happens that men are raped, but I have not heard about this in Zuwarah's prison. (Interviewee 1036, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

In the official detention centres, the perpetrators are male and mainly guards. The victims can be any detainee. A former translator working for an NGO in Libya stated:

2000: Everywhere. [In all detention centres] there is sexual violence.

Interviewer: Systematically?

2000: Yes, against everybody.

Interviewer: Women and men?

2000: Women, men and children.

Interviewer: Why are they raped?

2000: For them [the guards], it is for their own pleasure.

Interviewer: But if you rape everybody...

2000: For these kinds of people, pleasure doesn't come with a limit.

(Interviewee 2000, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021)

Other interviewees explained that the detention centre guards selected women to take outside the cell and sexually abuse them (Interviewee 1042, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020).

In urban areas

Most of the reports on the situation of migrants and refugees in Libya concern the conditions in official detentions centres or at the hands of human traffickers. However, the vast majority of migrants and refugees in Libya actually live and work in urban areas.¹⁵ As described in Chapter 14: *Dead-dead": Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in*

¹⁵ Among the 635,051 migrants, refugees registered in the country over the period from December 2021 to January 2022 (IOM, 2022), only 2,300 were in official detention centres (UNHCR 2022).

Libya, the lives of migrants and refugees are not easy and they can face sexual violence, even in urban areas.

Three interviewees reported having witnessed such violence or violent attempts. It was reported that sexual violence occurs mainly at work, for instance, while cleaning the houses of Libyans. The victims are women and men. The abusers are often Libyan men. But, as two male interviewees stated, Libyan women can also be abusers. The interviewees explained that they are not allowed to talk to Libyan women in the cities arguing it can lead to a confrontation with the male family members or other men. A Sudanese male refugee living for two years in Tripoli testified as follows:

Libya has beautiful girls. They like black people. But the problem is that Libyan guys are bad people. If they see you looking at any Libyan girl, they will shoot you. [...] One day, I was there and a friend of mine was looking at a pretty girl inside a car. His father stopped the car, came to my friend and said: "You should respect yourself" and he said: "I am not a bad guy. If I was a bad guy, I would shoot you." [...] If they catch a Sudanese guy with a Libyan lady doing sex, they kill him. (Interviewee 1018, interview with Wirtz, WhatsApp call, July 2020)

An Eritrean refugee reiterates this as well, by explaining that men know that they cannot speak to the Libyan women in the city as they are afraid of the consequences.

Even last week! A Libyan woman came to a Sudanese man and she told him to have sex with him. He is a man. He is interested. But he is afraid of the Libyan family of this woman. So, he said no. The girl started shouting. "That guy raped me!" They beat him. They broke his head. He is full of blood. They brought him in the car and we have never seen him again. (Interviewee 1026, interview with Wirtz, Messenger call, August 2020)

To avoid situations such as the one described in this excerpt, migrants and refugees tend to do not talk to Libyan women, nor to accept an invitation for sex, but this does not always guarantee their safety.

Impact of rape: Trauma and secondary trauma

The consequences of rape are traumatic for the survivors. Many are ashamed of what they have suffered and refuse to talk about it. In the

centre for asylum seekers in Medinine, in southern Tunisia, several women have small children with them. They are mixed race. They are the children of their abusers. They explain that the family's reaction to the news of the birth of these children outside marriage can be devastating. For a young Congolese woman, living in Zarzis, this situation remains unresolved. She is the loving carer of her young daughter. She fell pregnant while being sexually exploited in Libya. Her family is still unaware of the existence of this happy little girl. In tears, this woman explained:

No, I didn't tell [my family I had a child]. I am afraid. I'm scared. What am I going to explain to them? What am I going to explain? What will I say? I don't know yet. That it's the child of rape... I'm afraid. Ah, God! (Interviewee 1041, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

This woman had a particularly traumatic experience in Libya. However, she told her whole story without a tear. It is this last fact, the fact, that her family do not know about her child, that made her cry. Like others, the shame prevents her from asking for support from her family.

Rape is also painful for the relatives of survivors. In the testimonies collected for this research, several men testified to the pain they felt when they saw violence committed against their friends, wives, girlfriends or companions. Secondary trauma is defined as: "learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate" (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). Relatives of survivors as well as witnesses of sexual violence in Libya may be subject to secondary trauma. This was the case for a young man from Eritrea who witnessed the rape of his girlfriend in a warehouse in Brak:

Most of them are Libyan. Libyans, they take drugs. They ... [sigh]. They abuse women. They grab them by the neck: "Let's go" They take them to the place where they are living. Then, when the women come back to us, they are crying. [Sigh]. Even for my girlfriend... We met there. This is criminal. It is incredible. It is a terrible life. When I am thinking about this... I don't forget that moment. Sometimes, I see

in night dreams. I was very scared. I was scared. I was shouting. (Interviewee 1019, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

One interviewee developed a strong desire for revenge after having gone through Libya and experiencing humiliation for about two years:

They made me suffer so much that if I meet one of them, when I am in Europe, I will kill him. A woman, I will rape her! I will rape her till she cries till she throws up! I will not use a weapon, only my dick. I will take revenge. (Interviewee 1081, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2020)

It is often the impossibility of intervening that traumatises witnesses of sexual violence. In many cases, refugees in the hands of human traffickers develop empathy for each other. They seek to protect each other from abuse. As already mentioned, several men testified that they sought to come between the abusers and their fellow detainees. An Eritrean man recalled the following:

There is one person from Chad, working with Azziz [a famous human trafficker], he raped the ladies of Eritrea. [...] One day, he said to me: "I want this lady". That girl came with me from Sudan to Libya. It is a small sister. I consider myself as a big brother and I speak a little of Arabic. I said: "No. How do you dare to take that lady? She is my girlfriend. I will kill you", in the Arabic language. "She is your girlfriend?" "Yes, she is my girlfriend." He hit me! He beat me by the stick, by too much. If you say this is my girlfriend or this is my wife or this one, they will kill you also. I didn't forget this day. He hit me. And then, he took the lady. (Interviewee 1023, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

Solidarity between men and women is not only expressed in the context of rape. Refugees take care of each other in the warehouses of the human traffickers. A young man, for example, recalled helping his companions to give birth:

There is something essential that I learnt in Libya. I learnt how to deliver [babies for] women. Because there is no doctor there, in the rooms. I helped them. I remove my shirt and I cover the baby with it. (Interviewee 1028, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, November 2019)

This young man was interviewed in Tunisia. He explained that he was just waiting for an opportunity to go to Europe and that, once in a

safe place, he would like to tell his story, so that the world knows about what happens to refugees in Libya.

Discussion

The causes of sexual violence in Libya

The first form of sexual violence analysed in this chapter was ‘sexual violence as a tool of subjugation’. This classification refers here to the acts in which the sexual violence is systematic (as a collective targeting of the victims) and/or combined with other humiliation. This can take various forms, as this evidence presented in the chapter showed, and includes perpetrating the rape in front of other potential victims or recorded it using ICTs.

The purpose of this violence is to destroy dignity and self-esteem, to make people obey or to accelerate the payment of ransom. It can also be a warning or a punishment. This form of sexual violence is often systematic, no passenger or detainee can avoid it. It may occur in front of other passengers or detainees, and sometimes phones are used to record the abuse. The spectrum of humiliation combined with sexual violence committed by human traffickers against migrants and refugees is large.

In this research, we came across both direct and indirect testimonies of:

- Public rape – which is also corroborated in the literature – including in front of family members (Interviews 1019, 1023 and 1027, with Wirtz, face-to-face, November, December 2019)
- Genital mutilation (Interview 1027, with Wirtz, face-to-face, January 2019)
- Men forced to publicly perpetrate sexual violence against women or men (Interview 1027, with Wirtz, face-to-face, December 2021; see also Women’s Refugee Commission, 2019)
- Coercion into public masturbation in front of others (see also Mercier, 2018b)

In addition, the literature also discusses the following acts of sexual violence:

- Women forced to publicly perpetrate sexual violence against men (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019)
- Men coerced into sodomising opponents in the war (Allegra, 2018)
- Refugees forced to have intercourse with family members (Mercier, 2018b; Women's Refugee Commission, 2019)
- Refugees forced to have intercourse with dead bodies (Women's Refugee Commission, 2019)

According to the interviews collected for the purpose of this book, sexual violence is almost unavoidable for migrants and refugees in the Sahara desert. Other reports confirm these findings. The MMC and UNHCR state in their report, which is based on 16,000 interviews with migrants rescued from Libya, that: "The primary locations where respondents reported that incidents had occurred were in the desert (especially while crossing from Niger to Libya, and from Sudan to Egypt) (18%), Tripoli (6%), Khartoum (6%), Bamako (5%) and Sabha (5%)" (MMC & UNHCR, 2020, p. 20).

In many testimonies, the interviewees noted that their abuser was acting under the influence of alcohol or drugs. The inebriation of perpetrators seems to be one of the factors motivating sexual violence, especially particularly humiliating experiences.

The topic of sexual violence remains a taboo. For instance, it would appear that men are often victims of sexual violence, but in the interviews collected for this chapter, only two men clearly stated that they had faced such violence directly. The survivors feel dishonoured and they prefer to avoid the topic or to talk about others who have been raped, but not about their own experience. This research reported that women (are also forced to) perpetrate sexual violence.

Many interviewees avoided talking about sexual violence, because they were not in the right environment to do so. For instance, the people who were interviewed in Tunisia or Niger were still on their journey and many were not in a safe place yet. Even people interviewed in Europe would not easily open up on this topic, and it

is a very difficult topic to bring up in the interviews, causing much embarrassment.

The findings detailed in this chapter to describe sexual violence against migrants and refugees are not exhaustive. This chapter shows that it is possible to explore this topic, but it is challenging and the picture derived only scratches the surface.

Sexual violence as part of the human trafficking cycle

The research findings show the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence in Libya. The testimonies gathered so far are enough to understand the situation in which migrants and refugees find themselves in Libya. In their apartment in Zarzis, the couple from Guinea whose interview appears at the beginning of this chapter explained how they ended up in Tunisia. The husband shared the following:

We spent thirteen hours at sea looking for a rescue boat. There was no boat. Women were shouting everywhere. Some said we had to go back to Libya, others said it was better to die than to turn back, because women know the pain of Libya. (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

By his side, his wife adds:

Hell. Better to die in the sea than to go back to Libya. (Interviewee 1039, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, Zarzis, May 2020)

The findings show that sexual violence is an important element of the human trafficking cycle. This chapter describes how various forms of sexual violence are perpetrated as part of human trafficking for ransom, both as part of the *modus operandi* and in a broader societal framework, as well as for exploitation before and after migrants and refugees are detained and ransom is extorted from them.

In Libya, sexual violence occurs and contributes to the dehumanisation of migrants and refugees in Libya, who have little if any access to human rights protection. It follows from the situation of hopelessness and vulnerability in which people on the move in Libya find themselves. This chapter helped to understand some of the sexual violence committed against migrants and refugees in Libya,

as a culture in which vulnerable people on the move can be subjugated through sexual violence, without any inhibition or recourse. The findings suggest that sexual violence is an important aspect to consider when exploring the human trafficking cycle.

Conclusion

Sexual violence is perpetrated against migrants and refugees throughout their migratory journeys in Libya. The interviewees in this research shared experiences that were difficult for them to share, and hard for the researchers to listen to. It appears from these testimonies that rape and sexual violence are commonplace in Libya – they are widespread, systematic, and considered by many to be part of the journey. The victims are both women and men. Sexual violence has become so common that some take precautions, such as carrying protection or using contraceptives, in order to avoid getting pregnant or contracting HIV.

This chapter described and compared three categories of sexual violence perpetrated against migrants and refugees in Libya. The first category is sexual violence as a tool of subjugation. The objective of this type of sexual violence is to degrade, humiliate and subjugate the victim. It is used to control the refugees, as punishment and perhaps to dehumanise them so that the traffickers can continue to treat them as a ‘commodity’. The second form is sexual exploitation for profit, for example, through forced prostitution. As well as profiting from the migrants and refugees by extracting ransoms, they are used to provide sexual services, by the guards of detention centres, the traffickers and others. As in many other situations in Libya, people on the move become merchandise. Sometimes the term of the transaction is an entire life, sometimes it is just moments. The third type is sexual violence as an opportunistic crime – just because the migrants and refugees are under their control. This is perpetrated by all and sundry, from drivers, to guards, traffickers and even Libyan civilians.

The position of vulnerability in which migrants and refugees find themselves in Libya makes them easy prey for those seeking to abuse

them sexually. Their illegal status and non-existent access to justice or protection are among the reasons why these crimes are so common. Finally, sexual violence is an integral part of the human trafficking cycle – it binds the victims, through shame, by degrading them and disempowering them – making it difficult for them to break free. By treating them like a commodity, and with nowhere to turn for help or to escape, migrants and refugees are trapped in a human trafficking cycle.

Acknowledgement

Testimonies of sexual violence are rare and precious. Often, the participants are affected by the interviews. Reliving the traumas and describing the events and places affects them deeply. Some asked to take several breaks. Others experienced headaches. Many cried. The author would like to thank the people who had the courage to testify.

The author would also like to thank Europe External Programme in Africa (EEPA) for its support, through the project Europe-Africa Response to Human Trafficking and Mixed Migration Flows.

Ethical clearance

Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from Tilburg University REC2017/16; REDC # 2020n13; REDC# 2020/01 3a; REDC 2020.139.

Author contributions

Morgane Wirtz is the author of this chapter. Annelies Coessens contributed sections to an earlier version of this chapter.

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