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Human Trafficking for Ransom in Black Holes in the Digital Landscape: An Introduction

Mirjam Van Reisen, Munyaradzi Mawere, Klara Smits, Morgane Wirtz

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Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya

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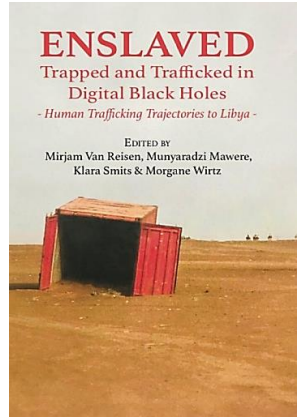

Cite as: Van Reisen, M., Mawere M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (2023). Human Trafficking for Ransom in Black Holes in the Digital Landscape: An Introduction. In: Van Reisen, M., Mawere M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (eds), *Enslaved Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, pp. 1-29. Chapter URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367240406_Human_Trafficking_for_Ransom_in_Black_Holes_in_the_Digital_Landscape_An_Introduction Book URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367254851_Enslaved_Trapped_and_Trafficked_in_Digital_Black_Holes_Human_Trafficking_Trajectories_to_Libya

Contents

Chapter 1

Human Trafficking for Ransom in Black Holes in the Digital Landscape: An Introduction[1]

Mirjam Van Reisen, Munyaradzi Mawere, Klara Smits, Morgane Wirtz

Trapped in a human trafficking cycle for ransom

In 2017, video footage emerged of people being auctioned as slaves in Libya (Elbagir, Razek, Pratt & Jones, 2017). Amid the shock about this situation is the awareness that we can never accept slavery *of Africans* (or anyone), *in Africa* (or anywhere), ever again. Yet, today, enslavement is still taking place, in the form of 'human trafficking for ransom', in Libya and elsewhere.

However, this enslavement does not begin in Libya. It starts in Eritrea, with Eritrea's indefinite national service, from which Eritrean refugees[2] are fleeing in large numbers (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van

Eritreans are caught in 'black holes' in the digital landscape – both in Eritrea, where ICTs and Internet connectivity are strictly controlled by the government, and when they flee, forced to depend on smugglers and traffickers. This control continues on their journeys and once in Libya – where they are detained, tortured, exploited and even killed. Their 'illegal' status prevents them from accessing protection and makes them targets for exploitation. They do not have the 'right to have rights'. Many fall victim to human trafficking for ransom. The policies of the EU are exacerbating this situation and trapping them in a human trafficking cycle.

[1] Parts of this chapter were written as part of the third and fourth authors' PhD theses and will be reused fully or in part for this purpose.

[2] While the authors argue that all of the people fleeing Eritrea are 'refugees', in this book the terms 'migrant' and 'refugee' are used interchangeably in a non-legal way

Reisen and Estefanos, 2017). It is virtually impossible for Eritreans to leave Eritrea legally; due to this, and the government's strict control of information, Eritreans are forced to turn to smugglers and traffickers to escape. Those who do manage to leave often find themselves caught in the human trafficking cycle, as they try to find refuge in the Horn of Africa, and beyond, against a backdrop of policies that make movement 'illegal' (Van Reisen. & Mawere, 2017).

In 2009, the first Eritrean victims of human trafficking for ransom were identified by doctors in Israel (Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, 2010). It quickly became apparent that the victims were mostly from Eritrea. On their arrival in Israel, they showed signs of severe torture. The researchers found that their families had paid high ransoms for their release, a practice described as Sinai trafficking and human trafficking for ransom by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014). The modus operandi took place in locations where victims did not have access to communication other than to make phone calls to family members, while being tortured, to beg for ransom (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Smart phones, mobile payments and Internet connectivity have supported the practice, through the extortion and collection of payment (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans & Gebre-Egziabher, 2017; Van Reisen, M., Gerrima, Z., Ghilazghy, E., Kidane, S., Rijken, C. & van Stam, G., 2018).

One of the stories investigated by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) is that of Berhan, whose relatives paid USD 40,000 for his release from the torture houses in the Sinai. Subsequently, he ended up in one of the official detention centres in Egypt, from where he was deported to Ethiopia. He was then moved to a refugee camp in Tigray, in northern Ethiopia. With no prospects in the camp, Berhan decided to travel to Sudan and onwards to Libya. He was on the boat that sank near Lampedusa, Italy, in 2013. The few survivors of the tragedy found themselves embroiled in a situation in which the Eritrean embassy in Italy tried to control the refugees. As you can see,

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to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

the victims of human trafficking find it difficult, if not impossible, to escape, even after paying large ransoms. Hence, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) described the situation as a 'human trafficking cycle'.

The modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom has continued to spread, becoming a global phenomenon. It has been described in Mexico (Meyer & Brewer, 2010), South America (Cooper, 2021), Thailand and Malaysia (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018), Yemen (Michael, 2021), North Macedonia (MacGregor, 2020), Greece (Ekathimerini, 2019), and other places. In 2017, Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) describe the expansion of trafficking for ransom to Libya. Van Reisen and Estefanos (2017) noted the emergence of a criminal culture, involving armed groups and terrorist militias, which exploit and extort migrants and refugees. They found that Eritreans (government authorities, military and others) were involved as perpetrators of the human trafficking of Eritreans for ransom. They uncovered evidence that the trafficking operations were supported from within Eritrea, at the highest level (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017).

Since then, tens of thousands of migrants and refugees have been trapped in lawless situations in human trafficking warehouses[3] throughout Libya (Hayden, 2022). The notion of the human trafficking cycle is reflected in Hayden's description of the situation as a 'revolving door' in which refugees are sold and resold, and in which pushbacks occur that keep the refugees and migrants in an indefinite situation of detention and dislocation. Her book *The Fourth Time We Drowned: Seeking Refuge on the Most Deadliest Migration Route* (2022) describes human trafficking for ransom in Libya and its neighbouring countries as a toxic situation that is exacerbated by the policies of the European Union (EU). Non-government organisations (NGOs) find and protest the returning of migrants and refugees to Libya by the Libyan Coast Guard, alleging that these

[3] 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).

operations are sponsored by the EU and its member states (Amnesty International, 2020).

Given the severity of the situation, and the lack of academic engagement with it, a systematic description of human trafficking for ransom in Libya is urgently needed. There also is a need to explain why this egregious situation has persisted. This book aims to contribute to a description of the phenomenon and explain why it persists. It is based on empirical research that studies the situation on the ground, as it is perceived by refugees, migrants, and other stakeholders with knowledge of, and engagement in, the situation. The research takes an emic perspective, in order to view the situation from within. Previous studies have followed the trajectory of Eritreans caught up in human trafficking for ransom and, hence, this study draws on the knowledge that is available.

Methodology and aim of research

This book is largely based on the work of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western Communities (SDDI) of Tilburg University. The fieldwork was undertaken between 2019 and 2021. It includes observations, interviews, and online/offline interactions with people on the move, as well as other actors and resource persons, on the Central Mediterranean route in Libya, the Horn of Africa, Northern Africa and Europe. The researchers also analysed documentaries and photographs of situations (see Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*). The fieldwork focused on Eritrean refugees and migrants and, to allow for a comparative perspective, people from other nationalities were included. The study was conducted as an explorative ethnographic case study. It followed a qualitative methodology, except for the research by Selam Kidane (Chapter 8: *Trust Works: Delivering Trauma Recovery Understanding Self Help Therapy (TRUST) to Refugees from Eritrea*), which used a mixed-method methodology.

A detailed analysis of the methodology is provided in Chapter 3, as well as in each of the individual chapters. Each chapter is presented

as a stand-alone presentation of the empirical material. However, together, these chapters contribute to the aim of this research, which is to: *describe the phenomenon of human trafficking for ransom of Eritreans on the Central Mediterranean Route to, and within, Libya, and explain why human trafficking for ransom has persisted.*

Organisation of this book

This book is divided into three parts. The theoretical and methodological considerations are provided in the first part. The second part presents the empirical findings on human trafficking for ransom of Eritreans from Eritrea to, and in, Libya. The third and last part focuses on the human trafficking cycle in Libya and discusses the revolving door situation for refugees and migrants in Libya. This includes a larger set of interviews, including with people from a non-Eritrean background.

Part 1: Theoretical and methodological considerations

Part one of this book sets out the theoretical and methodological considerations. Chapter 2, *Living in an Information Black Hole: Theoretical Framework Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*, provides a reflection on the adequacy of theoretical frameworks available to study human trafficking for ransom and proposes alternative frameworks based on theoretical plurality. In Chapter 3, *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*, the methodology is presented and the researchability of human trafficking for ransom is investigated. This chapter looks at whether or not, and how, research can be conducted on a topic that may (re-)traumatise both participants and researchers. Chapter 4, *Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature-Review*, presents a review of the extant academic literature on human trafficking for ransom. The final chapter in this part, Chapter 5, *The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya,* presents a spatio-temporal context that situates the research in time and place.

Part 2: Human trafficking for ransom of Eritreans

The second part of the book presents the empirical data on human trafficking for ransom of Eritreans to, and in, Libya. Chapter 6,

Enslaved by their Own Government: Indefinite National Service in Eritrea, examines the indefinite national service in Eritrea, which is often identified as the principal reason why people flee Eritrea, arguing that it is in fact slavery. Chapter 7, *Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking*, identifies the reasons why people are trying to escape from Eritrea and their vulnerability to human trafficking. Chapter 8, *TRUST Works: Delivering Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy (TRUST) to Refugees from Eritrea*, investigates the effectiveness of an intervention designed to help reduce the trauma experienced by refugees who have escaped from Eritrea. Chapter 9, *Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking*, looks at the trajectories of Eritrean refugees to Libya and the practices that take place along these trajectories, classifying the practice as falling within the legal definition of 'human trafficking'. Chapter 10, *Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya*, maps the human trafficking routes and hubs used to move Eritreans to and through Libya. Chapter 11, *"You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*, presents an inventory of the human traffickers in Libya, with a specific focus on those trafficking Eritrean refugees. Finally, Chapter 12, *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*, looks at the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom used in Libya and compares it to Sinai trafficking.

Part 3: The Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya

The third part of this book investigates the human trafficking cycle. Chapter 13, *Hell on Earth: Conditions in Official Detention Centres in Libya*, looks at the conditions of Eritreans in official detention centres in Libya. Chapter 14, *"Dead-dead": Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya*, investigates the situation of the Eritreans outside official and unofficial detention centres, and their options in terms of leaving Libya. Chapter 15, *"We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey": A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*, looks at sexual violence perpetrated in Libya within the context of human trafficking for ransom and more generally. Chapter 16, *"Gate Closed": The Situation in Libya during COVID-19*, discusses the situation of refugees and migrants in the

context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of borders that accompanied it. Finally, Chapter 17, *Active Agency, Access and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya*, reflects on the agency of Eritrean refugees in Libya, especially in terms of using social media to attract attention to their situation.

Summary of findings

Theoretical findings and literature review

In **Chapter 2**, Van Reisen, Smits, Wirtz and Smeets discuss the theoretical frameworks available for studying migration, in particular, the push and pull theory of migration. This theory is a rational choice theory that assumes that people have all the information available with which to make decisions. It is currently the dominant model of migration used, and is heavily embedded in EU policy.

In this chapter, the authors question the adequacy of the assumptions underpinning the theory to explain migration, particularly its failure to explain the decisions made by some people on the move to continue their journey, despite the high risk. They point to unequal access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), which enables 'gatekeepers' (including those facilitating human trafficking for ransom) to control access to (and dissemination of) information. The concept of a 'black hole' in the digital landscape is explored to explain how this unequal access makes Eritreans vulnerable to human trafficking for ransom and benefits the perpetrators. The ability of refugees to make rational decisions is also impacted by trauma, which can lead them to continue on dangerous migratory trajectories. The authors argue that the decisions that people on the move make, particularly Eritrean refugees, who are often in marginalised and vulnerable situations, require other theories, such as remoteness and cultural entropy.

This chapter also discusses the framing of migration as a problem of 'illegal' or 'irregular' migrants, which determines the solution adopted. Because of this framing, the policies of the EU aim to stop migrants from reaching Europe, which, it is argued, has exacerbated the problem. The authors show how these policies have not only failed

to prevent migrants from crossing the Mediterranean Sea, but have also fuelled human trafficking for ransom.

Finally, the authors point out that it is important to understand human trafficking for ransom as a cycle that traps victims, rather than a single event. The lack of protection of the rights of the survivors creates further vulnerability at each stage. Chapter 2 concludes that a pluralistic approach is needed to explain human trafficking for ransom and encourages researchers to use and develop alternative explanatory frameworks. It also advocates for policies that put the rights of migrants and refugees first, rather that aiming to criminalise the movement of people and externalise borders.

In **Chapter 3**, Van Reisen, Smits, Wirtz and Mikami describe the methodology used for this research, which was conducted primarily as a case study of Eritrean survivors of human trafficking for ransom. The data was collected using fieldwork, observation and netnography in the Horn of Africa and Europe. The research was conducted from an emic perspective, to give a voice to the migrants and refugees, whose narratives have been reported and retold by others, but seldom from their own perspective.

This chapter also discusses the ethical issues involved in researching human trafficking for ransom, including the risk of (re-)traumatising the participants and the researchers, and, hence, the researchability of such a sensitive topic. The authors describe both participants and researchers as having 'skin in the game'. In relation to the researchers, it is explained why this is important, as it enables them to empathically collect, interpret and analyse the data. However, a research team involved in researching such a topic is vulnerable to secondary trauma. Moreover, the risk of re-traumatising the participants also requires ethical consideration. Accordingly, a trained psycho-social professional was added to the research team to advise the researchers on how to handle the potential for (re-)traumatisation. The authors recommend that studies with high exposure to trauma for participants and researchers integrate specialists in the team to advise, support and monitor those involved. It is concluded that human trafficking for ransom is a researchable topic, but requires awareness of the dangers

of (re-)traumatisation, and this requires specific support to be integrated in the design of such studies.

Chapter 4, by Lorger and Gotlieb, presents the results of a systematic literature review of human trafficking for ransom. In the academic literature, human trafficking for ransom is described as a fairly new phenomenon, driven by digital technology. The literature thus far has focused mostly on the situation in the Sinai desert (from 2009 to approximately 2014). Only a small number of publications were uncovered on the situation of human trafficking for ransom beyond the Sinai. In relation to including human trafficking for ransom in Libya, despite a thorough search, including snowballing and purposive searches, the authors were only able to identify a few academic works.

However, the extant literature does provide a relatively coherent description of human trafficking for ransom. The modus operandi used in trafficking for ransom in Libya is similar to that used in the Sinai, pointing to the fact that it is an extension of this practice. The review finds that human trafficking for ransom has evolved through international criminal networks that include, among others, top Eritrean military officials, Eritrean smugglers, and smugglers and traffickers from other countries like Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia. The chapter concludes that there is an urgency to document the situation in Libya in more detail, to eradicate the practice, prevent it from spreading to new locations, and bring those responsible to justice.

In **Chapter 5**, Wirtz, De Vries and Van Reisen consider the spatio-temporal context (current and historic) of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The chapter considers the 13 centuries of uninterrupted human trafficking and slavery in the region. Understanding this history is vital to understand the current situation of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. As well as the legacy of this trade in people, this practice is taking place in the context of the conflict following the fall of President Gaddafi and the civil war between General Haftar and the United Nations (UN)-backed government.

In addition, the emphasis by European policymakers on the need to curb migration is fuelling the trade. The authors critically consider the effects of EU policy. Approaching migration through a process in which movement is made illegal, has meant that refugees and migrants experience great difficulties in accessing legal routes and support. This strengthens the grip of human traffickers on people on the move. The result is that the number of people driven into the hands of the human trafficking organisations has increased. Obstacles to legal movement have simply driven up demand, increasing prices and the risks of the routes. All of these factors have created a fertile ground for human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

Empirical findings

Chapter 6, by Palacios-Arapiles, looks at how the government of Eritrea is enslaving its own people through indefinite national service. National service in Eritrea has a large development aim and involves work of a non-military character. It is performed under the full control of the government, with conscripts being required to serve from the age of 18 (sometimes earlier) until the age of 50 (but in reality this extends longer), for negligible pay. Palacios-Arapiles investigates whether this constitutes slavery. In doing so, she rejects the concept of 'legal ownership' as the definitive benchmark for slavery, arguing that the 1926 Slavery Convention recognises *de facto* slavery, in line with the wording of the definition of slavery, which speaks of 'powers attaching to the right of ownership', and relevant jurisprudence.

Based on this reading, Eritrean national service fulfils all requirements to be identified as slavery under international law. The Eritrean government exercises control over the Eritrean population and has built its economy on the forced labour of the Eritrean population. In fact, the author argues that Eritreans are controlled to such an extent that they have developed a 'false consciousness' and repress key aspects of their identity, which continues to affect them long after they leave Eritrea.

In **Chapter 7**, Smits and Wirtz explore why so many Eritreans are leaving their country and why they are particularly vulnerable to

human trafficking for ransom. Previous research in relation to Sinai trafficking has shown that Eritreans were disproportionally targeted. The authors find that the reasons for this include systematic political repression, lack of civil freedom, human rights abuses, arbitrary imprisonment, and deliberate impoverishment inside Eritrea, as well as the compulsory indefinite national service. In addition, the authors highlight how the long-arm of the Eritrean regime, which operates in neighbouring countries through surveillance and intelligence, creates deep insecurity among Eritrean refugees, contributing to the secondary movement of Eritreans. At the same time, the Eritrean government is profiting off those who flee, through the ransoms paid by the families of the victims of human trafficking for ransom, as well as the illegal collection of financial contributions and 'taxes' extorted from the diaspora. The lack of alternative (legal) ways of leaving and the control of information by the Eritrean government, effectively creating a 'black hole' in the digital landscape, drives Eritreans into the hands of human traffickers. In particular, the government's strict control of information leaves Eritreans dependent on smugglers and traffickers for information. This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Tigray.

In **Chapter 8**, Kidane presents the research undertaken to assess the effectiveness of an intervention to deliver Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy (TRUST) to Eritrean refugees suffering from post-traumatic stress in a refugee camp in Tigray, Ethiopia. Kidane found that TRUST reduced the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and increased socio-economic resilience among highly-mobile and highly-traumatised communities, such as Eritrean refugees. The intervention was delivered via mobile phones using an app that was developed for use by people on the move. The study showed that treating trauma has a positive impact on mental health, perceptions of social and economic status, and community-wide relationships. There is an urgent need for mental health support to be provided to refugees, for them to be able to recover from trauma and function socially and economically, as well as to prevent dangerous onward migration. This chapter shows that

such an intervention is possible, despite the challenges presented by a highly mobile community and limited resources.

In **Chapter 9**, Smits and Van Reisen describes the trajectories of Eritreans towards, and in, Libya. It sets out the practices involved in the movement of people along these routes and investigates whether or not these practices constitute human trafficking. According to international law, the elements of human trafficking are: (1) recruitment, (2) transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, (3) with the aim of exploiting them for profit.[4] The testimonies collected show that Eritreans are in fact recruited by intermediaries, smugglers and traffickers, who infiltrate communities and encourage them to embark on the journey to Libya, using deception and fraud. Cases of kidnapping were also reported (recruitment by force). In addition, the agreements made by refugees in relation to the price for the journey often change once they arrive in Libya, with higher prices being demanded. In Libya, the refugees are held against their will, in poor conditions, and tortured until they pay the 'ransom' for their release. They are also exploited for labour, sexual services and often resold to other traffickers. The purpose of these practices is clearly to exploit these vulnerable people for financial gain. Hence, this chapter argues that the practice satisfies the elements of the crime of human trafficking.

Along the routes to, and in, Libya, information is tightly controlled by those involved in trafficking for ransom (facilitators, smugglers, drivers and guards of detention centres). The phones of migrants and refugees are taken from them and they are dependent on the traffickers and those who work for them for information. They cannot receive or disseminate information. Hence, it can be concluded that migrants and refugees are living in a 'black hole' in the digital landscape. This is an important aspect of the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom.

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[4] See: https://www.unodc.org/res/human-trafficking/2021the-protocol-tip_html/TIP.pdf and Glossary of Terms.

The chapter also looks at the human trafficking networks and the complicity of authorities. The trafficking trajectories taken by Eritreans to, and in, Libya are highly organised by a network of actors across the Horn of Africa. The research found that most Eritreans are trafficked by Eritreans and that Eritreans military and government authorities are involved as perpetrators, alongside other authorities, notably Sudanese, who are complicit in the rights abuses of the refugees. The involvement of authorities, law enforcement personnel and armed groups is also set out in previous descriptions of human trafficking for ransom.

In **Chapter 10**, Wirtz describes the key trafficking routes through Libya, including places of transit, imprisonment and departure points for the Mediterranean Sea. The routes used for human trafficking for ransom change often and adapt to circumstances. She investigates five routes: the southern route (from Niger and Chad); south-eastern route (from Sudan); western route (from Algeria); north-western route (from Tunisia); and north-eastern route (from Egypt). All of these routes converge in the north-west of Libya for departure across the Mediterranean Sea.

Wirtz systematically identifies and describes key hubs where refugees and migrants are held in captive, such as: Bani Walid, Garabulli, Gharyan, Khoms, Misrata, Sabratha, Sirte, Tripoli, Zawiyah, Zintan and Zuwarah. This includes holding camps, warehouses, transit points, official detention centres, and departure points, in which grave human right violations are taking place. Migrants and refugees are beaten, tortured, raped and killed in these places. Those who make it to the coast and attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe are often caught by the Libyan Coast Guard and sent back to official detention centres, where the cycle starts again.

In **Chapter 11**, Smits presents an inventory of the alleged perpetrators of human trafficking for ransom on the Central Mediterranean Route. The focus of this inventory is on those identified in the interviews as organising the trafficking from the top. Refugees refer to these actors as the 'chief' or 'connection man'. This chapter provides a systematic description of those heading the trafficking organisations, as described by the interviewees. This information is triangulated with

publicly available documents on the trafficking actors and organisations.

This inventory does not constitute a legal analysis, but a description of the actors identified by the interviewees. The names of the traffickers are not anonymised, as this information is already in the public domain. Some of the traffickers have been arrested or sanctioned, others are being sought by international crime investigators. However, many operate with impunity. They carry out their activities through the safety of a network that they control from a distance, through digital means. Despite the efforts to shut down these highly profitable trafficking routes, every time a path closes, another opens.

In **Chapter 12**, Wirtz and Van Reisen investigate the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The researchers find striking similarities between Sinai trafficking and trafficking for ransom in Libya, including the torture methods used to extract ransoms. In both places, victims are (were) beaten, raped, subjected to electric shocks, hung using chains, and burnt with molten plastic. In both places, mobile phones are (were) used to broadcast the torture (audio and video) to relatives of the victims to extort ransoms. In both places, the victims are (were) held captive in inhumane conditions, without adequate food or water and without access to medical care. Death frequently occurs in the trafficking warehouses. Hence, it appears from the evidence presented in this chapter that human trafficking for ransom in Libya is carried out using the same modus operandi as used by Sinai traffickers. If human trafficking for ransom has spread from the Sinai to Libya, with the profitability of the practice, there is a real risk that it could spread even wider.

This chapter also looked at the role of ICTs in the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom. It found that although ICTs are an essential tool in the extortion of ransoms, they are also tightly control. The human traffickers and those who work for them control what information is shared, playing a strict 'gatekeeping' role in relation to the flow of information. The refugees are kept in 'black holes' in the digital landscape, unable to receive or disseminate information.

The authors conclude that refugees are trapped in a human trafficking cycle, from which it is hard to escape. They are sold and resold from one place of detention to another, from one trafficker to another, and even by the Libyan Coast Guard. They are treated like commodities, to be exploited for financial gain. The policies of the EU are perceived by the migrants and refugees as exacerbating the situation. They have the impression that the EU will do anything to prevent them from crossing the Mediterranean Sea. This places the refugees in a situation in which they see no way out (as returning to Eritrea is not an option). Many who have escaped Libya, and know the dangers, return to try and cross the Mediterranean Sea, as they see no future in Libya's neighbouring countries. This traps them in a human trafficking cycle.

In **Chapter 13**, Wirtz and Van Reisen describe the conditions of the refugees held in detention under the control of the Department for Combating Illegal Immigration (DCIM). While these detention centres fall under the control of Libyan authorities, in practice, many are run by armed groups or militia. Although official detention centres can be accessed by humanitarian organisations and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this access is difficult and highly negotiated. This is partly because Libya is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention and, hence, refugees have no legal status in Libya. As a result, they are indefinitely detained, with no clear pathway out. Without legal protection for refugees and migrants in Libya, the UNHCR and other organisations struggle to maintain access to the centres, leaving the refugees feeling abandoned by the organisations created to protect them.

Those held in detention endure severe inhumane conditions, arbitrary punishment, including torture, and severe deprivation of food, water and sleep. These conditions contribute to the spread of disease; many die or are killed. The guards and officials benefit from the migrants and refugees by extorting them. The interviewees reported being offered to Libyan civilians for labour and sexual services. They are also sold to traffickers – or sometimes released by the guards for the 'right price'. The guards are also involved in stealing the possessions of the detainees, including their phones and any provisions provided

by humanitarian organisations. Hence, the official detention centres are part of the human trafficking cycle.

If the detainees are released or escape, they risk being arrested and sent back. If they are intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea, they are either sent back to the detention centres or 'sold' to human traffickers. The EU funds the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept refugees and migrants at sea. Some of the refugees interviewed accused the EU of directly contributing to the human trafficking cycle in Libya. It is argued in this chapter that, the EU, through its policy of funding the Libyan Coast Guard, is exacerbating the predicament of migrants and refugees and fuelling human trafficking for ransom.

In **Chapter 14**, Smits describes how there is no way out of Libya or the human trafficking cycle. With no legal status or viable options, and limited access to information, migrants and refugees are pushed into dangerous situations. Smits describes the cycle as consisting of one or more of the following aspects: (1) arrest leading to trafficking for ransom; (2) slavery, other than trafficking for ransom; (3) arrest and captivity in detention centres; (4) urban living, with high risk of robbery and abuse; and (5) few options to exit the situation. Escape from this cycle is only possible via the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, which has a high rate of interception and return to Libya. After return, the same cycle starts again. Although there is the possibility of crossing the border to a third country or, in very few cases, to participate in a voluntary return or evacuation scheme, the countries in the region also offer limited prospects for migrants and refugees. Without any viable option, many people who have escaped Libya return, despite knowing the risks, to attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea, rather than living in a situation in which they feel there is no hope.

In **Chapter 15**, Wirtz considers sexual violence as an element of human trafficking for ransom. In this chapter, she throws the net wide to look at sexual violence in Libya as a whole, not only against Eritreans and not only in the context of human trafficking, in an attempt to understand the practice. Wirtz finds that the phenomenon

is widespread and systematic and the victims are both men and women.

Wirtz finds that sexual violence in Libya can be roughly grouped into three categories: (1) sexual violence as a tool of subjugation, to degrade and humiliate (and control) the victims; (2) sexual exploitation for profit, such as forced prostitution and for sexual services; and (3) sexual violence as an opportunistic crime. Sexual violence in Libya is largely perpetrated with impunity. It happens against a history and culture of sexual violence that stretches back to the times of Gaddafi. It has also been used as a weapon of war and has been normalised to some extent. The lack of legal status and protection of refugees and migrants in Libya exposes them to sexual violence, within and outside human trafficking situations. Wirtz concludes, that sexual violence is part of a culture of violence that is embed and that contributes to the human trafficking cycle.

In **Chapter 16**, Wirtz, Smits and Van Reisen consider the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and refugees in Libya and its neighbouring countries. COVID-19 changed the dynamics of movement, not only in Libya and the Horn of Africa, but worldwide. The pandemic led to restrictions on movement and the closure of borders. In response, the smugglers adapted their routes and modus operandi. The situation became advantageous to human trafficking groups, as the demand increased and the opportunities diminished, driving up prices. The routes became more dangerous, as greater risks were taken.

The border closures, lockdowns and quarantines prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic were indisputable obstacles. The theory of push and pull would predict that when more obstacles are in place, the pull decreases. Hence, migration flows should have greatly diminished during the pandemic. However, from April to October 2020, over 24,000 people arrived in Malta and Italy from Libya and Tunisia. This is three times the number for the whole of 2019. Hence, it appears that such theories do not explain the reality of migration as it happens on the ground. The findings of this chapter suggest that other mechanisms are at play. This chapter builds on the previous findings of Kidane (2021), who found that traumatic mindsets

provide a better explanation for the risky decisions taken by migrants and refugees.

In **Chapter 17**, Creta considers how Eritrean refugees in Libya make sense of their world and act upon their understanding. Refugees struggle to create digital spaces, as in the holding camps their access to smartphones is restricted. Despite the challenging circumstances, Creta observes that refugees find ways to participate online, especially through social media, and to make their voices heard. Creta finds that it is important for refugees that their own voices are heard and that they control their narrative. She considers that online platforms offer opportunities for refugees to do so. Eritreans in Libya have created new digital spaces in which they make their voices heard. In these spaces, they raise awareness about their situation, distribute pictures and videos, organise protests and denounce their situation. When they engage on these platforms, Eritrean refugees are able to communicate without the intervention of gatekeepers.

Human trafficking trajectories: A string of black holes

Human trafficking for ransom thrives best in darkness and left unexposed. This book discusses how the criminal organisations perpetrating human trafficking for ransom in Libya prosper from Internet blackouts and by creating conditions in which they control all communication. 'Black holes' in the digital landscape are places or situations where connectivity is unavailable or deliberately denied. Creating black holes where people cannot participate in the digital world is an important element of maintaining the control needed for human trafficking for ransom to take place. In these black holes in the digital landscape there is limited, or no, Internet or digital access, making those within them dependent on others for information. Those who provide such information, or dictate what information is exchanged, are called 'gatekeepers'. The deeper and more comprehensive the black hole is, the more power the gatekeepers hold over those within it.

The trajectory of human trafficking for ransom in Libya starts for many in Eritrea. Eritreans are a 'gated' community, with little, if any,

access to information from outside the country, and very little ability to send information out of the country. Hence, Eritrea can be qualified as a black hole in the digital landscape. After escaping from Eritrea, refugees still have no easy access to the Internet and very limited access to information. The information that they can access is often heavily controlled. This is the starting point of the trajectory of human trafficking for ransom.

Moving from Ethiopia and Sudan to Libya, this trajectory twists across a string of black holes in the digital landscape. Those trying to escape from the net have little access to information, while the human trafficking networks, through their connections with governments, intelligence and armed groups, have a granular presence and act as gatekeepers along the route. They provide the information that is needed to keep people moving forward – away from Eritrea, away from whatever triggered the desire to flee.

At the same time, human trafficking for ransom requires flexible communication, money transfers and other digital applications and, hence, Internet connectivity. Without these, it would not be possible to engage relatives and friends all over the world in providing ransoms. The human traffickers strictly control the use of these digital resources, including who can use them, when and for what purpose. Human trafficking for ransom represents the 'dark side' of technological innovation – a side that enables criminal activities that include grave human rights abuses, torture and slavery, amounting to crimes against humanity (UN Human Rights Council, 2015; UN Human Rights Council, 2016).

The roads from Eritrea to Libya are flexible; they adapt and change with the circumstances, such as, for instance, the pandemic and the war in Tigray. During the war in Tigray, Eritrean refugees were moved from Tigray to new camps[5] from where the recruitment by

[5] A large number of Eritrean refugees were also forcefully taken back to Eritrea by Eritrean troops who entered the refugee camps in Tigray, despite the fact that these camps are under international protection. Those left behind were all moved to new camps by December 2022.

human traffickers started. New routes have also been developed to circumvent hurdles, such as borders that were closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The alternative routes are often longer and more dangerous, and, hence, more expensive.

Some people interviewed for this book have been trapped in the human trafficking cycle for more than a decade – several first experienced human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai, then in Libya. However, their stories have failed to reach the mainstream public. They are not systematically studied. Part of the reason for this is because the information is not coming out of Libya. This black hole in the digital landscape creates conditions in which human trafficking for ransom thrives and can continue with impunity. The almost total control over the victims of human trafficking in this black hole is exacerbated by the versatile operations of the trafficking networks and the distance from which they are managed, which limits the risk of exposure and arrest for those overseeing the operations from afar.

A culture of impunity exists in Libya, where refugees have little, if any, access to protection and end up caught in a never-ending cycle of detention and extortion. Human trafficking for ransom is part of a toxic cocktail in a criminal culture that involves militias, terrorist organisations and other criminal entities, which operate without fear of being brought to justice. At the top of the criminal organisations are the human traffickers, many of whom are Eritrean themselves; these actors have created a layered structure in which armed groups, authorities, and communities all play a part in the subjugation of Eritrean refugees. In this system, it is hard to identify who are the authorities and who are the criminals. When refugees and migrants are detained in official detention centres, they are severely exploited, extorted and sold to human traffickers. When they attempt to cross the sea and are returned by the Libyan Coast Guard, the same thing happens again.

Number of migrants and refugees detained in Libya

The locations where migrants and refugees are held by traffickers operate in secrecy and are hidden from view. From the interviews, we

made a rough estimation of the detention capacity based on the number of locations mentioned by the interviewees (set apart by the description of the location or who was in charge), and the capacity of those locations (using estimated numbers of people detained, or the description of the size of the location). This has led to an estimation of the detention capacity in the different places that were frequently mentioned by the interviewees. This estimate is almost certainly an underestimation. There is also an increasing number of Eritreans who have died or are missing who are not included in this number.

Table 1.1. Estimation of number of people in the human trafficking camps

Places	Number of trafficking camps counted from interviews (estimate)	Detaining capacity (estimate)
Sabha	4–5	500
Brak	5	1,200
Kufra	8	4,000
Shwayrif	4	2,000
Benghazi	2	2,500
Tripoli (general)	7–8	3,500
Bani Walid	14–17	8,000
Garabulli	2–5	500
Misrata	2	200
Sabratha	8	20,500 (UN estimate)[6]
Zawiyah	7	700
Zuwarah	12	1,400
Other locations	12–14	1,500
Total	**87–97**	**46,500**

Combining this estimate with the estimated number of detainees in the official detention centres run by the government and armed groups, based on the latest estimation by the UN of 12,000, which includes so-called 'secret facilities' of official detention (Lederer,

[6] https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2017/10/59e5c7a24/libya-refugees-migrants-held-captive-smugglers-deplorable-conditions.html

2022), the total detention capacity in Libya would come to approximately 58,500.

Table 1.2. Estimation of number of people in the trafficking camps and government detention centres

Capacity human trafficking camps	46,500
Capacity official government detention centres	12,000
Total	**(Approx.) 58,500**

Interviewees indicate spending anywhere from a few days to several months and even more than a year in any one place. They are then transferred to other places, or leave Libya. If we assume that half of those detained in Libya move away, escape or die every year, then a full rotation in the cycle of detention would take place approximately every 2 years. This would lead to an estimated number of detained refugees and migrants of 205,000 over a 5-year period between 2016 and 2021.

This is similar to estimations made by others. Amnesty International (2020) estimated that 'tens of thousands' of refugees and migrants are trapped in Libya's cycle of abuse. ECCHR, FIDH & LFJL (2021) put the number of migrants and refugees who have suffered torture and other inhumane acts in Libya in the past decade at hundreds of thousands. Micallef states that while it is impossible to know how many have been kept for ransom in Libya, it is possible that over several years, tens of thousands of Eritreans alone may have been held hostage (Hayden, 2019). In total, Hayden notes, the number of people in human trafficking for ransom conditions may be tens or even hundreds of thousands. In 2017, the UNHCR estimated that the number of refugees and migrants held in Sabratha alone likely numbered 20,500 (UNHCR, 2017). This is over three times as much as the estimate based on our interview data (which led to an estimated capacity of 6,200 in Sabratha). If all capacity estimations for trafficking camps are similarly underestimated, the total capacity could be as much as 140,000. This would lead to an estimated number

of detained refugees and migrants of around 450,000 between 2016 and 2021.

Number of Eritreans and payments in Libya

Between 2016 and 2021, around 114,000 Eritreans submitted a first-time asylum application in Europe (EUAA, 2022). As there are currently no other routes of great significance, these would have almost all come through Libya (including those coming from humanitarian corridors). This number constitutes over half of the conservative estimate of a total of 205,000 migrants and refugees held in captivity and detention in Libya between 2016 and 2021. Based on our research, the average that an Eritrean has to pay during their trajectory to, and in, Libya to the facilitators of the networks is USD 10,000. Again, this number is a conservative estimate.[7] Based on these estimates, the value of the payments from Eritreans alone is estimated at USD 1 billion from 2016 to 2021.[8]

This book describes in detail how this amount benefits the human trafficking networks, which are led by Eritreans at the top of these criminal organisations. The danger is that ransom these payments will increase further, as was seen in Sinai trafficking, where ransom payments for Eritreans went as high as USD 40,000 per person per time. This upward trend must be avoided and human trafficking for ransom must be abolished.

Conclusion

Human trafficking for ransom has spread from the Sinai to Libya. It is conservatively estimated that 205,000 refugees and migrants have fallen victim to human trafficking for ransom, captivity, and detention in Libya from 2017–2021, over half of which are Eritrean. The

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[7] At the time of writing, many Eritreans held in Libya are being asking for more than USD 7,000 in ransom – and this does not include the price for entering Libya or crossing the Mediterranean Sea, but only for the ransom when in Libya.

[8] Calculated using 114,000 Eritreans, each paying USD 10,000, the total is USD 1.14 billion.

cumulative value of this trade in human beings, over the same period, is conservatively estimated at over USD 1 billion, for Eritrean refugees alone. This is based on the average payment reported by the interviewees to travel from Ethiopia to Libya and across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. At the time of writing, the amount of the ransoms being extorted from Eritrean refugees in Libya is increasing.

Libya is a critical location in the human trafficking trajectory. In Libya, the lines between trafficking networks, armed groups, criminal groups and government authorities are blurred. The result is that there is a large network of routes towards, and in, Libya, with a myriad of locations, under different control and command, which hold refugees and migrants in camps. The conditions in these camps are inhumane and degrading. Many die. Those who survive carry the wounds for a lifetime.

Many of the victims of human trafficking for ransom in Libya are Eritrean. Eritreans are easy prey for traffickers. Eritrea's national service, which constitutes slavery, and its human rights abuses push thousands across the border. Information is tightly controlled in Eritrea, and citizens live in a 'black hole' in the digital landscape. With no legal way of leaving Eritrea and no access to information, they are turn to smugglers and human traffickers. In the countries in the region, they continue to be gated. On their trajectories to Libya, they move through a string of black holes, the final one being the trafficking warehouses and detention centre in Libya, where they are extorted for ransom often by their own countrymen, who are at the top of the trafficking networks.

The concept of 'black holes' in the digital landscape helps us to understand the persistence of human trafficking for ransom. Unequal access to digital technologies has contributed to the continuation of this situation. Blocking those most vulnerable from accessing the Internet and controlling their communication gives power to the trafficking networks. They are prevented from informing the outside world of their situation. As a result, little is known of the situation for migrants and refugees in Libya and the atrocity crimes that are committed with impunity.

In Libya, and on the roads to Libya, state actors collude with criminal and armed groups involved in this trade. Authorities in Eritrea and Sudan are either directly involved in this lucrative 'business', profit from it in some way, or turn a blind eye. The EU is also exacerbating the situation through its policies aimed at stemming migration, including by training and funding the Libyan Coast Guard to intercept migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. These policies, and the lack of legal status for migrants and refugees in Libya, is trapping them in a human trafficking cycle.

Once a refugee enters the human trafficking cycle, it is difficult, if not impossible, for them to escape. It is shocking that this practice exists and persists today. It is unconscionable that slave-like conditions have re-emerged on the routes from Africa to Europe. There is only one way forward: Africa and Europe must work together – with great determination and resolve, to end the slave-like condition of human trafficking for ransom, protect the rights of migrants and refugees, and bring the perpetrators of this crime to justice.

Acknowledgements

The authors would 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

Mirjam Van Reisen and Klara Smits are each the author of several sections of this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen edited the overall text. Munyaradzi Mawere provided detailed input on the content of this chapter. Morgane Wirtz provided detailed input for this chapter and provided background on the information presented in this chapter.

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