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Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration

Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits, Morgane Wirtz & Anouk Smeets

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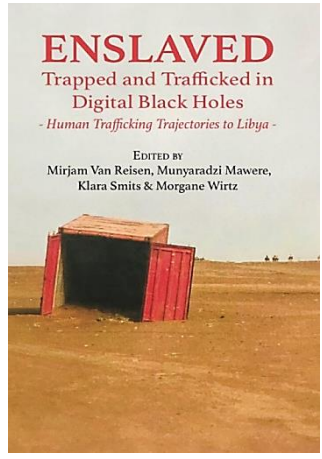

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Chapter 2

Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration[1]

Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits, Morgane Wirtz & Anouk Smeets

Introduction

The framing of migration as an issue of 'illegal' migrants is based on flawed theories, such as the push and pull theory of migration. This generates a situation in which people on the move are regarded as less worthy of the enjoyment of human rights, leading to policies that focus on preventing migrants and refugees from entering Europe. These policies are not only ineffective, but may even exacerbate the problem. This chapter seeks to develop an alternative conceptual framework for migration based on 'black holes in the digital landscape', remoteness and trauma. This plurality of theories allows for a more realistic understanding of how migrants and refugees see their world, which helps to explain the persistence of human trafficking for ransom.

Although human trafficking is not new, the crime of human trafficking for ransom has emerged with the now ubiquitous global digital infrastructure. Traditional theories, such as the push and pull theory of migration, do not adequately explain this phenomenon. This chapter seeks to develop a conceptual framework for understanding human trafficking for ransom in the digital age and how people can become trapped in a human trafficking cycle.

Information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as mobile phones and the Internet, have facilitated a new modus operandi for human trafficking (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). This new form

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

of human trafficking was first identified in about 2009 in the Sinai desert in Egypt, around the same time as the connectivity of mobile phones became global (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018; Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). In this new form of trafficking, migrants and refugees[2] (men, women and children) were kept by human traffickers in torture warehouses in the Sinai desert where they were tortured, raped, sold, and even killed (see Chapter 4: *Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature Review*).

In order to leave a Sinai 'torture house', victims had to pay a ransom, often amounting to tens of thousands of US dollars. This is where mobile phones, and increasingly other forms of technology, played a crucial role. To make sure that the ransom was paid, the human traffickers would force the victims to phone relatives while they were being tortured. Their cries for help would compel family members to send money for their release (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Van Reisen and Rijken (2015) referred to this type of trafficking as 'Sinai trafficking', also known as human trafficking for ransom.[3]

While human trafficking usually happens in secret, this new form of human trafficking depends on others knowing about the situation of the victims (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). ICTs enable the traffickers to communicate with those who will pay the

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[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).

[3] Human trafficking for ransom in Libya involves grave human rights abuses; as will be seen in this book, it is widespread, perpetrated by organised networks, and long-term in scope. It potentially constitutes an atrocity crime. There are four atrocity crimes – genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing – of which first three are legally defined in various international instruments (the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their 1977 Additional Protocols, and the 1998 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court). They have been deemed to be international crimes because they affect the core dignity of human beings, both in times of peace and war (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2018).

ransom and to arrange the payment. ICTs also enable them to control the flow of information, plan routes and logistics, and stay anonymous (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). This modus operandi has evolved with the introduction of new technologies. Human traffickers have adapted their strategies with the development of ICTs, increasing the impact of their ransom demands with videos of the torture, as well as audio recordings (Van Esseveld, 2019).

After the construction of a high-tech fence between the Sinai desert and Israel and anti-terrorism activities, the human trafficking routes through the Sinai were cut off (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). However, this high-tech fence has not stopped human trafficking for ransom. It has simply moved the problem from the Sinai to elsewhere. From 2012 onwards, this form of trafficking has appeared in Libya and the surrounding countries, including Sudan and Chad (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). Human trafficking for ransom has also been reported in Mexico (Meyer & Brewer, 2010), South America (Cooper, 2021), Thailand and Malaysia (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018), Yemen (Michael, 2019), North Macedonia (MacGregor, 2020), Greece (Callaghan, 2019) and other places. With the phenomenon constantly changing and geographically spreading, it is important to assess the relevance of the concepts and theories available to explain human trafficking for ransom.

In this chapter, we consider the availability of new technologies in the digital era, such as mobile phones and computers, as a critical factor in human trafficking for ransom and, more generally, as a critical aspect of the movement of migrants and refugees. The mobile phone, as a contested space of access, is not only vital to human trafficking for ransom, but also to migration more widely. The Mixed Migration Centre has collected data on the phone access of migrants and refugees moving from the Horn of Africa towards Northern Africa and Europe (Frouws & Brenner, 2019). This data shows that, at least somewhere on the route, around 85% of migrants and refugees have access to a phone (either a smartphone or a non-smartphone). In addition, of all the routes analysed (seven different migration routes

originating from West Africa, the Horn of Africa, and Afghanistan), the route from the Horn of Africa to North Africa/Europe had the most cases of lost or stolen phones, with about 15% of the migrants and refugees interviewed who had used this route reporting that their phone was lost or stolen along the way (Frouws & Brenner, 2019).

The data reported by the Mixed Migration Centre (Frouws & Brenner, 2019) also suggests that human traffickers and human smugglers are (one of) the main source(s) of information. In their report, Frouws and Brenner (2019) analysed the sources of information for migrants from the Horn travelling towards North Africa and Europe. Migrants indicated that, at the start of their migration route, family and friends in the country of destination were their first source of information (56%), followed by smugglers (37%), and family and friends in the country of origin (20%) (in this study migrants were able to choose multiple first information sources). On route, the importance of smugglers as a source of information increased, with smugglers becoming their main source of information (53%), followed by friends and family in the country of destination (50%), and others ahead on the route (33%) (Frouws & Brenner, 2019).

Furthermore, the Mixed Migration Centre found that migrants who had access to a phone on the route had access to a wider range of information channels than migrants who did not (Frouws & Brenner, 2019). Migrants without phone access reported their main source of information to be smugglers, whereas migrants with phone access were also able to use friends, family, and social media to receive information (Frouws & Brenner, 2019). Another report by the Mixed Migration Centre (2020) found that, specifically for Eritreans, smugglers are the main source of information on the migration route. In this report, 79% of Eritreans interviewed said that while on route they received information from people who they identified as smugglers.

So, how can we explain the critical role of ICTs in migration generally and human trafficking for ransom in particular? The push and pull theory, which says that pull and push factors determine the decisions of migrants and refugees to stay or move, has continued to dominate

the migration discourse, including how migration drivers are understood and framed. However, it does not offer a perspective that can help us understand how ICTs have changed migration or why it has escalated in places such as Libya in relation to human trafficking for ransom.

Does it matter how a situation is explained? We believe that it does. The conceptual framework underpinning our understanding of a situation drives the direction of policies – and if this framework does not adequately explain the situation, the policies may fail to address the problem, or even exacerbate it. As a result of the incorrect framing of the problem and, subsequently, ineffective policies, human trafficking for ransom has greatly increased in the context of migrants and refugees in Libya – as this book sets out to illustrate. It is, therefore, important to explore whether or not there are better ways to explain the causes of this phenomenon and any factors that exacerbate it.

Accordingly, this chapter looks at the link between the introduction of ICTs, such as mobile phones and increases in Internet connectivity, and the emergence human trafficking for ransom, towards developing a conceptual framework to explain the phenomenon. After the methodology, the subsequent section looks at the flaw in the push and pull theory of migration, including why it fails to explain why migrants take great risks to reach Europe. This is followed by a discussion of problem framing, including the influence of problem framing on policy making and the framing of the migration 'problem'.

After problem framing, the next section explores how the digital infrastructure is a social structure of 'winners' and 'losers', which – in extreme situations – can lead to 'black holes' in the digital landscape. The concept of a black hole is further explored using the empirical observations of the authors to identify key incidents that point to a more nuanced understanding of the problem (Erickson, 1977). This is followed by a discussion of the concept of remoteness and cultural entropy to help explain how areas that are disconnected from the 'centre' can be both vulnerable and resistant to policy, as well as affected by ineffective policies.

Finally, this chapter looks at how living in a 'remote' black hole in the digital landscape, in a situation in which human trafficking for ransom of migrants and refugees dominates the scene, policies to fight the criminal networks are ineffective at best, and support to victims is largely unavailable, creates a 'human trafficking cycle' (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). This concept has emerged from previous studies on human trafficking for ransom and has been identified as a key characteristic of this type of trafficking (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). The existence of this human trafficking cycle helps explain why the policies of deterrence and interception have not worked to decrease human trafficking in Libya – and may have even exacerbated this situation. This is followed by a brief conclusion.

Methodology

The investigation set out in this chapter concerns the exploration of an epistemological point of departure for a discourse on migration that is centred on the experiences of migrants and refugees. The current migration discourse tends to take an external viewpoint that focuses on economically-linked drivers of migration based on the push and pull theory. In contrast, the research on human trafficking for ransom presented in this book takes the perspective of the victims, and those close to them, as an important source of information.

In this investigation we follow an ethnographic approach, in which the central task is to describe the people living in the situation. In doing so this research seeks to describe an emic (insiders') perspective on human trafficking for ransom, to explore the way in which the victims, and others who are close to them, perceive their situation and act upon their understanding. This is in contrast to the epistemological lens of the push and pull theory, which dominates the current migration discourse and makes assumptions about how persons on the move (migrants and refugees) see and calculate their options. Although such assumptions may be confirmed by the research, the data collected is also framed within this paradigm, without any deeper questioning of the underlying processes at stake.

In an ethnography, all of the data available from a research can potentially be a relevant source to discover patterns of social reality. Accordingly, this chapter investigates alternative concepts to explain human trafficking for ransom in migration. Although there are no predefined hypotheses, sensitising concepts are used to direct the tools, data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings. In particular, the research in this chapter builds on empirical observations collected during the time of this research (2019–2021). The observations are selected as key incidents that lead the researchers to the workings of abstract principles of social organisation (Frederickson & Wise, 1977). Such research is inductive and data driven, generalising from the specific information in the data to a more general reasoning. These key incidents help to reveal a more general rule.

The key incidents were selected from fieldwork carried out in location by the researchers in Uganda and Zimbabwe.[4] It also draws on the daily reports generated through ethnographic monitoring of the war unfolding in Tigray, on the border of Eritrea, where four major refugee camps were located when the war started. Given that Tigray, Eritrea and, to some extent, Ethiopia were closed to the Internet during the research period (at least from November 2020 to July 2021), the reports received were difficult to access and validate. These reports were published on a daily basis by Europe External Programme with Africa (EEPA) in its Situation Reports (from November 2022 to July 2021).

The events reported were received from sources on the ground. These events were reported by refugees themselves or through intermediaries. The incidents reported were selected in this research because of their relevance to the understanding of the concept of an 'a black hole in the digital landscape'. This approach is inspired by the ethnographic monitoring approach developed by Hymes (1980), although in a different context. In this methodology, the researcher

[4] The fieldwork in Zimbabwe was carried out by Van Reisen in January 2020, May 2019, and October 2018, and by Smeets in 2020. The fieldwork in Uganda was carried out in January 2020.

takes an incident to signify a social situation through observations that give reference to a conceptual understanding of that situation, analyse this in a broader theoretical framework, and return it to the social situation with the intention to help improve the situation (Hymes, 1980). The participants in the study do not emerge as objects or bystanders, but are active collaborators in the research, the findings and their use (Hymes, 1980).

Before presenting the findings on the ethnographic monitoring of black holes, the following sections discuss the flaw in the push and pull theory and the importance of framing the problem correctly.

The flaw in the push and pull theory of migration

Introduced by Ravenstein in his 1885 and 1889 works, *The Laws of Migration*, the push and pull theory is described as one of the oldest theoretical models of migration (Kidane, 2021). Ravenstein described his laws of migration mainly in relation to migration from county to county within the United Kingdom. He talked about "currents of migration" flowing to "the great centres of commerce and industry" (Ravenstein, 1889, p. 198).

This theory provided the foundation for many migration theorists. One of them was Everett Lee (1966), who stated that migration is the result of the evaluation of the positive factors in destination countries and negative factors in the countries of origin. This model also assumes that obstacles to migration weigh heavily in this decision (Lee, 1966).

The push and pull theory fits within the paradigm of the rational choice theory, which is one of the leading theories that attempt to explain the factors behind migration (Haug, 2008), especially between countries. Applied most famously in the fields of criminology and economics, the rational choice theory looks at the decisions of individuals as the result of weighing up the costs versus the benefits. These theories and narratives of calculation are integrated into European Union (EU) policy. In response to the EU's new anti-

human trafficking strategy, the European Parliament Research Service wrote a report stating that:

> *Factors contributing to human trafficking can be categorised as 'push' and 'pull' factors. [...] The victims were recruited at a moment in life when they were experiencing either persistent or deteriorating economic hardship and were thus ready to take a high level of risk.* (Bakowski & Voronova, 2021, p. 6)

In relation to the EU's flagship fund for addressing irregular migration, the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, the European Commission notes:

> *[It] helps [in] addressing the root causes of destabilization, forced displacement and irregular migration by promoting economic and employment opportunities, as well as combating smuggling of migrants and trafficking in human beings.* (European Commission, n.d.)

Here, the fund refers to the promotion of economic and employment opportunities in countries of origin. In this qualification the push factors, or root causes, of migration are classified as largely economic. This approach to the issue implies that the smuggling and trafficking of migrants and refugees are an additional consequence of 'irregular' migration. These are just two examples of how embedded the push and pull theory is in the framing of the problem in EU policy.

It is not only the EU that assesses migration in terms of push and pull factors; this has become a globally dominant narrative. For example, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) stated the following:

> *Migration and forced displacement in the IGAD region are driven by many factors – ranging from conflicts, degradation of the environment, disasters, and poverty – that force people to move away in search of safety and economic opportunities, among others.* (IGAD, 2021, p. 6)

Also here, the push (driven by) and pull (move towards in search of) are clearly visible.

However, various researchers have questioned the adequacy of the push and pull theory as a general explanation of migration behaviour and trajectories. Haug (2008), for instance, questions the often economic-centred analyses that underlie the 'rational choices' made

by migrants, commenting that "in migration decision research there is no consensus about a list of necessary and adequate push or pull factors" (Haug, 2008, p.599). Zimmerman, Hossain and Watts (2011) found that simplistic push and pull models do not explain the health implications involved in human trafficking and lead to a criminal focus in policy that ignores the context. Cheng (2017) found that the push and pull model is not only limited in scope when it comes to understanding trafficking, but also deflects attention from the responsibility of states to address it.

Kidane (2021) adds that push and pull factors do not explain onward migration in situations where the risks of migration are clearly very high. She also points out that the model does not explain why similar push factors do not cause the same patterns of migration in different parts of the world. In her research, Kidane found that the model does not take into account psychological factors, such as trauma and collective trauma. High levels of trauma cause perpetual fear, which can lead to a flight response that is beyond rational thought processes. Continuous stress and anxiety linked to traumatic experiences can heavily influence the mindset of people, causing them to flee the situation they are in (Kidane & Stokmans, 2019; Kidane, 2018). Kidane (2021), thus, argues that the push and pull model does not explain why people continue to flee (secondary migration), despite the known dangers posed by the journey.

The push and pull model also fails to explain the growing role of digitalisation in migratory movement and human trafficking (Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019). The increased availability of information should – if the push and pull theory was correct – give migrants and refugees a better information position to avoid entering situations that harm them. However, in contrast, we find that migrants and refugees, despite having information about risks associated with migratory journeys, are not avoiding such situations.

First, there is a need to better diagnose the source of the problem; how do we explain that fact that migrants and refugees are knowingly moving into situations that are harmful to them? For this, there is a need to reconsider our understanding of the processes that lead to

this situation. Such understanding is vital to help break the cycle of violence and attend to the victims in this situation, who at present remain largely out of sight.

Secondly, there is a need to reflect on the basis for policies that follow the push and pull model, which have not stopped people from moving and migrating, and becoming victims of human trafficking (Horsley & Gerken, 2022). Despite the gravity of this situation and the extreme violence of the torture perpetrated in this type of trafficking, research is scarce. It is also remarkable that the policies in place to deal with this situation focus on stopping the smugglers and traffickers to prevent refugees and migrants from entering Europe, rather than the urgent need to protect the rights of victims (Schäfer, Schlindwein, & Jakob, 2018; Shatz & Branco, 2019; Hayden, 2022). This is even more surprising given that the crimes committed are considered among the most heinous and egregious rights violations committed today.

Hence, it is argued that the link between migration, digital innovation and human trafficking for ransom cannot be explained by the push and pull theory, which has dominated the migration field. Accordingly, the policies based on push and pull theory need to be revisited. To elaborate on why this is so important, in the next section we look at how the framing of a problem is relevant to the solutions proposed. If the framing of a problem is wrong, then the policies formulated to address the problem are also likely to misfire.

Problem framing

When theories fail to explain a situation or phenomenon, the policies based on them are, at best, misguided and, at worst, exacerbate the situation that they are trying to solve. This section looks at the influence of problem framing through social processes on policy making and the framing of the migration 'problem'.

The influence of problem framing on policy making

The way in which problems are understood is the result of social processes. The process of making sense of a complex situation is called framing. The framing of a problem does not determine the

existence of an issue, but the ways in which that issue is understood (Goffman, 1974; Snow, Rochford, Worden & Benford 1986; Vdovychenko, 2019), and the potential solutions (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). This in turn depends on access to people relevant to an issue (Klandermans & Oegema, 1987). The narration implies an understanding of a situation, which impacts on the way the problem is addressed by policymakers (Daviter, 2007).

The framing of an issue also affects agenda setting. Kingdon (1984) discusses how policy can change significantly, in a time-bound window of opportunity, when three streams align – the problem, policy and politics streams. The problem stream is the part where an issue is identified and defined (depending on how it is framed). Only if the problem is framed in the right way can the right solution be found (policy stream). And, if it is considered relevant in the politics and power dynamics of the day, it may be put on the agenda (politics stream). When all three streams come together, a policy window opens in which a policy change is possible.

The framing of an issue is not only important in the agenda-setting phase, but remains important in policy revisions (Daviter, 2007). When a policy problem is framed, a selection process takes place, (Dewulf & Bouwen, 2012). This selection involves dissecting the problem into various elements and selecting some, while leaving others aside or giving them less weight. The framing of a problem is affected by actors, including policy entrepreneurs, both governmental and non-governmental (Kingdon, 1984). Framing is also affected by problem brokers who use knowledge, values and emotions to shape the framing of the problem (Knaggard, 2015).

Different actors (including the media, politicians and others) are involved in framing processes, which produce collective action frames; such processes can require long periods of time (Benford & Snow, 2000). Problem framing affects the media, and the media in turn has an influence on how problems are understood. The empirical research of Gregoriou & Ras (2018) shows that human trafficking narratives in the media focus on certain modus operandi that position women as victims, particularly of sexual exploitation. This framing narrows the understanding of human trafficking to the modus

operandi reported, which can differ from what is actually taking place, such as in the case of human trafficking for ransom, thereby distorting the picture (Vdovychenko, 2019).

The problem, therefore, becomes how the framing and decision-making around the issue is presented in an agenda. This ties in well with Kingdon, who describes the agenda-setting process as dynamic, time-bound, situational and dependent on the policy networks that are engaging with the issue. Tversky and Kahneman (1986) have shown that decision-making processes are often not rational. While learning can take place in decision making, the base conditions for such learning are often lacking. For example, most of the problems that we face are unique, exist in variable environments and do not provide immediate feedback in relation to the decisions made. This means that the initial framing of an issue becomes the norm and the basis for decision making, and is likely to stay until another major policy shift takes place.

The framing of the migration 'problem'

The classification of a condition in a particular category qualifies how it is understood as a problem in the public agenda. Kingdon gives an example that:

> *[…] classifying a condition into one category rather than another may define it as one kind of a problem or another. The lack of public transportation for handicapped people, for instance, can be classified as a transportation problem or as a civil rights problem, and the treatment of the subject is dramatically affected by the category.* (Kingdon, 1984, p. 198)

The classification of conditions occurring in the context of migration is contested. For several decades, the process of framing around migration, and aspects that are linked to it by politicians and the media, such as human trafficking, has been increasingly linked to security threats (Kicinger, 2004). In recent years, this has included the perceived threat of terrorism. Abdou (2020) describes how polarised sides of the political ideological spectrum see migration as something out of the ordinary and something to be prevented or that is connected to misery and tragedy, which feeds into fear and alienation.

Vdovychenko (2019) argues that, in the area of migration, a policy window, such as described by Kingdon, began to open in the EU around 2013. She says that the window was triggered by an event in which a ship with more than 600 refugees on board sank near the coast of Lampedusa. More than 300 people, mostly Eritreans, drowned that day. The event received widespread political attention and featured prominently in the media (BBC, 2013; Davies, 2013; Horsti, 2017).

Analysing the documentary *'It will be Chaos'* (Luciano & Piscopo, 2018), Vdovychenko (2019) claims that the Lampedusa crisis can be seen as a focusing event, which opened a policy window. She points out that the framing of the problem, the wording chosen to address it, and the policy directions made available to address the problem were hotly contested and negotiated. In particular, the use of the term 'illegal migrants' as opposed to 'refugees' determined whether or not these people were considered to be deserving of help or not – governing the policy response. Smits and Karagianni (2019) state that, unfortunately, rather than framing this disaster in terms of the human right to life and, hence, the failure to protect refugees, it was framed as a crisis caused by the movement of 'illegal' migrants. They argue that since 2013, the issue of human trafficking of migrants and refugees has become part of a larger problem frame in which migration itself is seen as a crisis. In this framing of the problem, the very movement of people has been problematized.

Mawere, Van Reisen and van Stam (2019) highlight the dominant new language introduced in this agenda, such as 'irregular' and 'illegal' migration. The introduction of this language created a new frame, turning migration, which is a normal lifestyle in Africa, into a problem with negative connotations associated with being 'irregular' and 'illegal'. This language diminishes the status of the lives of refugees and migrants, creating or exacerbating vulnerabilities, dehumanising the experience as 'not normal', and placing refugees and migrants 'outside-the law', as well as creating fear around their existence and movement among those in host communities (Mawere, Van Reisen & van Stam, 2019). Following Rorty (1998), the framing of mobility as a generic problem – with connotations of being undesirable,

outside-the law, dangerous and instilling insecurity and fear – may situate people on the move as being less worthy of the enjoyment of human rights. This impacts on whether or not issues like human trafficking are seen primarily as a human rights problem.

Figure 2.1. March for human rights for refugees and migrants in Brussels, September 2015

Source: Photograph: Han Soete, Solidaire (2015)

Schwarz's (2012) feelings-as-information theory explains how perceived feelings are also information and, as such, influence the judgement of people. Linking this with the question of whether a problem is regarded as a human rights problem, Rorty (1998) points out that perceiving a situation as a human rights problem requires *sympathy* and *security*. Sympathy requires knowledge of the situation of other people and the possibility of emotionally relating to them. Security relates to the need to feel safe, in order to have the space to consider any concerns that relate to the situation of other people. Rorty's argument is relevant to understanding how the infliction of severe human rights violations often has the effect of dehumanising the victim, undermining emotional engagement with, and sympathy for, the victim.

As seen from this (and the previous) section, the framing of a problem has a direct impact on the policies (solutions) formulated to address it. When the theories used to understand a problem are flawed, the resulting policies are likely to be ineffective. The framing of migration as an issue of push and pull involving 'illegal' migrants has led to the formulation of policies that focus on the creation of obstacles for people to move along migration routes, such as interceptions and returning people to where they came from. The idea that intercepting people on the migration routes deters them from moving onwards is overlooking alternative (and possibly better) ideas on how this issue could, or should, be addressed. The following section looks at the emergence of human trafficking for ransom in conjunction with the development of ICTs.

Black holes in the digital infrastructure

Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, Van Stam and Ong'ayo (2019) observed that human trafficking is fuelled by black holes in the digital landscape.[5] Using spatial imaginaries, they make the case that unequal access to ICTs starts with the very design of core infrastructure. As depicted in Figure 2.2, fibre optic submarine cables connect the African continent to Europe. About 99% of the total international data transmissions run through these cables (Bischof, Fontugne & Bustamante, 2018). All traffic that moves through these cables automatically travels through the centre, which is located in Europe or the United States, even if the information is transferred between nodes placed in another continent (Gueye & Mbaye, 2018). Developments in ICT, particularly the rise of the Internet and mobile phones, have led to a world in which people are more connected than ever before, which has led to the perception of a ubiquitous connected (and informed) world (Castells, 2011). In this digital structure, information circulates within a globalised social network (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam & Ong'ayo,

[5] 'Black holes' in the digital landscape are places where access to connectivity is limited, either because of lack of ICT infrastructure and Internet connectivity or control over information technology (see Glossary of Terms).

2019). With terms such as 'global village', ICTs are seen as something that innovate economies and solves social problems (Smart, Donner & Graham, 2016). However, as ICTs are the product of human invention, it is inevitable that the digital architecture of these inventions has certain social characteristics. While ICTs have enabled coordination at a high level and across borders, at the same time they are creating an increasing divide between those who are connected to the Internet and those who are not (Fuchs & Horak, 2008; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

Figure 2.2. Submarine cable map
Source: Wikimedia (2015)

Castells (2000) argues that this creates a new social structure in which the elite profit and others get stuck in 'black holes' of informational capitalism. Such black holes are not just caused by lack of access to devices or connectivity, although this can play a role, but access can also be deliberately limited or denied. According to the Research and Evidence Facility (2020), (not) being able to make use of ICTs is an essential part of understanding the impact of technology on people on the move. They found that the number of mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people in the Horn of Africa (51) is far lower than in sub-Saharan Africa (82) and the world (106). In particular, the number of subscribers in Eritrea is very low (20 per 100 people). In addition, the Research and Evidence Facility explains that the use of smartphones is limited in the Horn of Africa and that most people

with a mobile phone subscription make use of phones mainly, or only, for calling or text messaging (SMS).

In terms of Internet use, data provided by the World Bank (2021a) show that Eritrea has only 1% Internet usage. This means that hardly anyone in the country has access to the Internet. The main explanations for this are the Eritrean government's tight control over SIM card access and the extremely poor fibre-optic broadband infrastructure in the country (BBC, 2019; Research and Evidence Facility, 2020). Internet use in Ethiopia is 19%, in Libya 22%, and Sudan 31% – and it is not equally distributed (World Bank, 2021b). In addition, the Research and Evidence Facility (2020) explains that some countries in the Horn, such as Ethiopia and Sudan, are able to shut down the Internet when deemed necessary. Such Internet blackouts are frequent during exams, for example, but also at times of protest or conflict.

Within a black hole, people are not, or are barely, connected and depend on others for access (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam & Ong'ayo, 2019). Such actors are referred to as gatekeepers of information (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam, and Ong'ayo (2019) describe how particularly youth living in a black hole may seek to leave their home in search of better opportunities and 'connectivity'. They are often attracted to nodes with a better information position and better access to connectivity. However, being in a black hole, they have very limited information about where to go and what routes are safe to take (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam, and Ong'ayo, 2019).

The fact that unequal access to ICTs is associated with vulnerability, which can lead to exploitation, is a problem everywhere. For instance, not having access to a mobile/smart phone and the Internet is associated with greater risk of exposure to abuse among elderly. One author asked: "Are elderly in a cage, under a lockdown within a lockdown?" (Rina *et al.*, 2020). In the next section, the authors will further investigate empirical evidence on black holes in the digital landscape. Investigating the impact of reduced mobility under the COVID-19 lockdowns, researchers found that protecting vulnerable

elderly citizens who could be in a situation of neglect or abuse in New York (as elsewhere) was difficult due to lack of access to a phone:

> *However, such remote work can be challenging, as it may not be safe for victims to speak on the phone if they reside with the actual or potential perpetrator. The abuser may even prevent the older adult from having access to this technology.* (Elman *et al.*, 2020, p. 692)

This is similar to what Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz (2019) found in relation to the situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya in the context of human trafficking for ransom. Using the network gatekeeping theory of Barzilai-Nahon (2008), these authors found that Eritrean refugees were more repressed than the most repressed category of 'gated' communities suggested by the theory (i.e., traditional gated). This was because not only did the Eritrean refugees have no access to, or freedom to distribute information, but in the context of human trafficking for ransom, were forced to distribute information (on their own torture) using mobile phones, as part of forced begging (for ransom). The authors suggest that the term 'exploited gated' be used for this group (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

Ethnographic monitoring of black holes in the digital landscape

Black holes in the digital landscape are associated with social situations and are naturally unequal in terms of resources, which Bourdieu refers to as 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1986). This section looks at black holes in the digital infrastructure and how these place people, especially people on the move, in vulnerable situations, increasing the likelihood that they will fall victim to human trafficking and human rights violations. Using ethnographic monitoring the authors selected and compared key incidents from their data that lead to a general idea, from which one can abstract the existence of a black hole.

People seek information through connectivity

It could be assumed that people who are living in a black hole in the digital landscape are unaware of the need to connect. However, some ethnographic observations point to the desire of people to connect and of people making efforts to be digitally connected, even when

such connectivity is not readily available. An evening observation tour by one of the authors around Great Zimbabwe University in Masvingo showed youth flocking to the compound's fences at night to pick up a WiFi signal from the university; apparently the youth had found ways of circumventing the password and restrictions to gain Internet access (Van Reisen, 2020a).

For her master's thesis, Smeets conducted a case study on Masvingo City, Zimbabwe, looking at the gatekeeping of information. She concluded from interviews that those having more digital access would have an information advantage, and those without similar access would be more vulnerable and prone to being exploited. A female media student she interviewed said that without access to information:

> *[…] you know nothing at all. People can take advantage of you just because you don't, you don't have information [… But with access] you can defend yourself, you know what is going on, and you can't be manipulated.* (Smeets, 2020, p. 46)

In Masvingo City, the editor of the local newspaper added, as an explanation:

> *So what happens with those with less access to digital technology, that means that they are left out. They are disadvantaged, that means that they are more vulnerable to exploitation, all forms of exploitation. […] information is a liberating tool because nobody can easily take advantage of you, [without information] you can't make rational decisions.* (Smeets, 2020, p. 46)

Control over the flow of information is a way of controlling the narrative about what is going on in a particular situation. A testimony of a witness to an aid delivery in Darfur reported how an enterprising person made good use of technology:

> *In Darfur in 2009 I was part of a mission that took 35 trucks of food, medicine and other items to a location where there had been fighting and displacement. When we arrived we found a person who had set up public telephone service with a satellite telephone and a solar chargers. People could do reverse charge telephone calls with family and friends. There were just as many people in line for the telephone as there were for food and medicine.* (Interviewee 3006, Resource person, Zoom-seminar, GAIC Research Group, May 2022; chat record held by MvR)

The barriers imposed by a two-year stringent shut-down of Internet connectivity during the war in Tigray (Ethiopia) were circumvented by moving phones to other states with connectivity, from where messages were up and downloaded, and screenshots were flashed between phones unconnected to the Internet using Bluetooth (Interviewee 3007, resource person, Zoom-seminar, GAIC Research Group, May 2022; chat record held by MvR; Interviewee 3009, resource person, conversation with Van Reisen, 4 May 2022).

The incidents reported here show that people are creatively and innovatively using alternatives to receive and distribute information, if and when they can.

Controlling information on mobile phones as a source of power

Focus group discussions held by Van Reisen and other researchers with an elderly population living in impoverished circumstances in Northern Uganda on the use of mobile phones gave an interesting perspective on the anxiety caused by not being able to control the information (Van Reisen, 2020b). The elderly participants reported being anxious over not being able to read the screens of their typically small (Nokia) feature phones due to deteriorating eyesight. They were clearly fearful of their lack of control over information, including digital payments made per phone, and missing out on other information. They also feared that other people would take advantage of the situation (Van Reisen, 2020b).

In her research in Zimbabwe, Smeets quotes a resource person who is knowledgeable about online media in remote areas in relation to the power of those with access to social media:

> *…those who have information can manipulate those who are less informed […those] who are informed, they become more powerful* (Smeets, 2020, p. 46).

Smeets (2020) also found that youth in remote areas with access to social media through their phone had relatively more power and independence than the elders of the community, because of the advanced information position they had on what was reported within the community, as well as outside on social media.

This example speaks to the more general principle that digital information distributes power, giving more power to young people, who can more easily access the information. This can upset traditional power structures in communities, in which elderly people would previously have had greater authority.

Controlling information to control a population

Gatekeeping is particularly relevant during times of conflict. Control over the flow of information is a way of controlling the narrative about what is going on in a particular situation. When crimes are perpetrated, black holes are purposefully created by removing access to the Internet and confiscating mobile phones. Restricting information prevents the media, international actors and policymakers from obtaining a detailed image of what is happening on the ground, including the perspectives of everyone involved. An example is how, during the war in Tigray, Internet access was shut off in the entire Tigray region for nearly two years. In collaboration with EEPA, the research team collected regular updates on the situation and first reported the black-out in Situation Report 11 in November 2020: "Phone and internet to the Mekelle and Tigray region remains closed off (EEPA, 2020).

Controlling phone and Internet traffic is a powerful tool for turning a location into a black hole and dominating the information-stream of what is going on in that place. In Situation Report 65, EEPA quoted a local from Tigray who described the situation in Tigray as follows:

> *[...] there is no telephone, no aid, no electricity, no freedom to movement even locally, no access to any external organization of any kind whatsoever in the border areas with Eritrea. Eritrean forces also denied access to the interim government in Tigray and the Ethiopian army staff to go past Adigrat town.* (EEPA, 2021b)

The following account is given in Situation Report 75, published in March 2021, of the confiscation of mobile phones by Eritrean

soldiers in Mekelle, the capital of Tigray, presumably to continue to tightly control all information channels:

> *Ethio-Forum reports that residents of Mekelle said that ENDF allied forces are confiscating their mobile phones. Especially residents found with pictures of Dr Debretsion, other TPLF officials and a flag of Tigray regional state in their mobile phones are intimidated and beaten whilst their phones are confiscated. According to the sources, Eritrean soldiers dressed in ENDF uniform are the main perpetrators of mobile phone confiscation.* (EEPA, 2021c)

Similar tactics are also reported in other places in Ethiopia (Situation Report 163, July 2021):

> *The OLF [Oromo Liberation Front] added that the Eritrean troops were confiscating mobile phones, cash and looting private belongings from local civilians.* (EEPA, 2021d)

This illustrates the fact that the existence of a black hole is not just dependent on factors such as lack of infrastructure, but also on deliberate policies of control over information. Control over mobile phones is a tool used by states to control the narrative about what is going on.

Controlling migrants and refugees by controlling mobile phones

The mobile phone is an indispensable feature of human trafficking for ransom. Taking control over mobile phones is often the first indicator of an (emergent) operation of a human trafficking network. A resource person reported on an incident in which Eritrean refugees in a refugee camp in Ethiopia were attacked:

> *I already asked one of our refugees in the new camp and he said that yesterday between 7pm and 8:30pm during Al Eshaa prayer, some of the Amharic people attacked the refugees and took their telephones after they beat them. This issue is happening 2 or 3 times a week and the committee of the refugees there has asked for help more than 10 times, but always the Federal Security promises them, but no action is taken at all.* (Interviewee 3004, resource person, Signal communication with Van Reisen, April 2022, emphasis added)

The following testimony about the abduction of Eritrean refugees from camps in Tigray, Ethiopia, was published in EEPA Situation Report 56 on 15 January 2021:

> *Eritrean refugees in Tigray are taken to Shiraro, others to Badme. There are at least 10,000 refugees, and they are slowly taken to Eritrea. What happens with them in Eritrea, is not known. The refugees held in Shiraro and Badme are held by Eritrean soldiers. They have no food, and they are forced to contact their family to send money. However, the refugees are dependent on the Eritrean soldiers to be able to phone relatives.* (EEPA, 2021a, emphasis added)

This testimony shows the transactional element of the use of phones:

> *The refugees held by Eritrean troops are using mobile phones from the Eritrean soldiers to contact relatives. These are Eritrean mobile phones. The soldiers are making a business out of this, so that they get paid for this 'service'. Soldiers take a part of this money, and in some cases all of it.* (EEPA, 2021a)

In locations where the victims of human trafficking are held in captivity, human traffickers keep tight control over the use of digital technology. This often means having no access to a phone and, thus, not being able to access (to either receive or send) information. The main sources of information in these situations are the human traffickers themselves (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

Moreover, refugees and migrants can be mistrustful of varied information sources. Smugglers and human traffickers bridge this gap by offering (filtered) information, creating a dependency by the one who wants to leave on the provider of information (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam, and Ong'ayo, 2019). For human trafficking for ransom, which depends on the control of communication channels by human traffickers, this control over information is a key to their modus operandi.

The ethnographic monitoring in this section shows that information is a typical asset the control of which can lead to a more dominant social position. Hence, it can be seen that, as not everyone is equally connected, a social structure has been created by the Internet that benefits the ones who are better connected, while leaving others in

so-called 'black holes' in the digital landscape (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

Remoteness and cultural entropy

As seen from the previous section, black holes in the digital landscape leave people cut off from information and vulnerable to human trafficking. Remoteness is another concept developed to help understand areas that are cut off or remote. Anthropologist Edwin Ardener (1989) first developed the concept of remoteness in remote areas. For Ardener, remote areas are not those most far removed from "central" areas on the map, but areas that are not well "linked" (Ardener, 2012, p. 532) to the areas around them. Remoteness, as a concept, defines a place that may appear to be inaccessible to outsiders, but which, at the same time, is vulnerable and open, because people in these places do not control access. Remote areas, says Ardener, house all kinds of what the locals define as strangers. At the same time, from the outside, the people inhabiting remote locations suffer from stereotyping, not so much because of their geographical remoteness, but rather the conscious disconnection of "central" people from "remote" areas (Ardener, 2012, p. 521). Yet, despite the perceived disconnect, remote areas are constantly in touch with the outside world, and are "event-rich" (Ardener, 2012, p. 531).

Brachet and Scheele (2019) describe how stereotypes about remote areas from the outside world can also affect how locals see themselves. In the case of northern Chad, Brachet and Scheele assert that remoteness is, therefore, not only externally imposed, but also internally perpetuated. Negative stereotypes become accepted by locals, enabling them to profit off their reputation and giving them the ability to avoid government control. "Remoteness, in this sense, translates both as a structural vulnerability and a certain form of power – the power to make one's self invisible, unpredictable and hence ungovernable" (Brachet & Scheele, 2019, pp. 168–169).

Saxer and Anderson (2019) add that connectivity has brought another dimension to remoteness. According to these authors, rather than being without connectivity, remote areas are: "usually shot through

with uneven forms of connectivity, wiring them to the world economy and into global politics and mediascape" (Saxer & Anderson, 2019, pp. 4–5). This creates different power dimensions and socio-spatial constellations. This connects with the concept of black holes, as places where digital connectivity is low and gatekeepers are in control of the information flows. Black holes, then, signify digital remoteness, which shapes the socio-spatial constellations inside them.

Remoteness also links to the concept of cultural entropy. Cultural entropy is the clash of values within a system, originally described within organisations (Barrett, 2010). Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere and Gebre-Egziabher (2019) describe cultural entropy as also occurring between the values of different stakeholders in the migration process. When cultural entropy is high, the clash in values can result in ineffective policies. In remote areas, the risk of differing values with those of the so-called central areas is likely to be higher, which may result in a more significant cultural entropy – leading to policies also becoming less effective in remote areas.

The human trafficking cycle: Living in a black hole in the digital landscape

In human trafficking for ransom, being cut off keeps the victims remote from information exchange, from accountability mechanisms and unable to access justice and support, even when they are released. This can cause what the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) refers to as the re-victimisation of victims of human trafficking. According to UNODC this as "a significant problem" (UNODC, 2006, p. 140).

In the book *The Human Trafficking Cycle: Sinai and Beyond*, Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken (2014) describe human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai as a 'trafficking cycle'. These authors go beyond previous descriptions of how "victims become locked in a cycle of trafficking, extortion and violence without an exit" (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014, p. 27). They argue that the process of human trafficking cannot be analysed in isolation, but should rather be seen as a process

of violence in which the victims are trapped before, during and after the trafficking event(s). This includes the human rights abuses that cause the victims to flee in the first place, and detention in transit, host or third countries.

Noting that most of the victims of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai were Eritrean refugees, these authors trace the human trafficking cycle back to Eritrea, where the refugees had fled forced labour in the form of Eritrea's indefinite national service (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). They describe how the victims of human trafficking in the Sinai were sold and resold, and how they did not receive adequate protection from authorities in, among other countries, Egypt and Israel, and were even deported, which led to re-victimisation (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Rozen, 2019). In addition, victims would often have to go through the process again, but now on the other end of the line – having a family member who had fallen victim to such trafficking, and would call them to beg for ransom. Paying ransom would lead to debt and even greater vulnerability (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). Even if the refugees eventually arrive in a situation where they receive protection, the process of family reunification exposes family members to risky paths associated with the vulnerable situation the family members are in, including human trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen, Berends, Delecolle, Hagenberg, Trivellato & Stocker, 2019). Thus, the violence and lack of protection of the rights of the survivors creates further vulnerability at each stage.

All of these compounded events in the human trafficking cycle have led to the normalisation of violence. For example, Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz (2019) report that Eritrean refugees view it as normal to be put in prison, often for minor offenses. Rozen (2019) describes how refugees who are the victim of human trafficking for ransom do not always realise that they have been 'trafficked', and fail to disclose this in interviews with authorities or researchers. In addition, the payment of ransoms has also become normalised. In rational decision-making processes, as presumed by the push and pull model, the normalisation of violence is not taken into account. If where you come from is as

dangerous as where you are, and where you are going to is also dangerous, how do you weigh one danger against another?

When the human trafficking cycle is defined as such, it is not sufficient to look at what happens to victims during and immediate after the trafficking event, but also what happens leading up to it; and what happens within the communities that the victims are part of. The lack of protection of victims can lead to them again falling victim to human trafficking and other crimes. Adams (2011) notes that the protection of victims is, therefore, key to breaking the cycle of trafficking, but is often pushed aside in favour of a purely criminal approach to tackling human trafficking. The cycle referred to here is one in which the victim is more vulnerable to being trafficked again, once 'free', and from which it is difficult to escape for structural, legal, and policy reasons.

Conclusion

Theory matters, as it underpins what people think, what they do and how they act – and theory underpins policies as a scripted and agreed form of responding to a certain situation identified as a problem. Theories such as the push and pull theory of migration, on which the policies of the EU and international organisations are reliant, assume that refugees and migrants – including the victims of human trafficking – are in a position to make rational choices and have free access to information. However, this theory does not take into account how information streams are restricted, made unavailable, controlled or manipulated by 'gatekeepers'. It also does not take into consideration the fact that sustaining high levels of trauma and continuous stress and fear can contribute to the decision to flee situations perceived as dangerous and to continue to move on (secondary migration), despite the risks involved.

In addition, which policy options are considered is mediated by the framing of the problem, and how the conditions referring to the problem are categorised – which is influenced by stakeholders and actors, including the media. Problems are, therefore, not neutral facts, but are, rather, constructed through social processes. Whether a

problem is recognised as such, is also determined by who can speak about it. This process of framing is all the more important, as problem framing creates conditions in which issues may be taken up on the public agenda. When a policy window emerges for issues to enter the agenda, such as those triggered by a focusing event, the framing of the event is particularly important in determining what policies may be considered to solve the problem. What information is available to whom, and who controls the disbursement of information, is of critical importance in this process. In addition, if the problem is analysed in isolation – e.g., only the act of trafficking, rather than the full cycle of human trafficking, which includes before, during and after the event – the analysis of the problem may be incomplete.

On this note, this chapter seeks to contribute to a more pluralistic approach to seek alternative explanatory frameworks to understand migration, in general, and human trafficking for ransom, in particular. The digital landscape gives unequal access to ICTs, leading to a digital divide between those who have access to ICTs and the Internet and those who do not. Furthermore, gatekeepers (which can be governments, but also non-governmental actors) can control access, for example, by shutting down the Internet or restricting access through infrastructure or price. This allows them to control the flow of information, giving those controlling the ICTs – the so-called 'gatekeepers' – a significant advantage.

Investigating the concept through ethnographic monitoring, it can be concluded that black holes in the digital landscape have four aspects:

- People seek (digital) information, even if they are not connected, or barely connected, and this information is important to them.
- The control over how information can be obtained in barely, or unconnected, situations can be a source of power.
- Those who have more power can control others by removing (access to) connectivity by shutting down the Internet or taking mobile phones.
- Migrants and refugees, who are already in a vulnerable situation, are at risk of finding themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation in which all communication is regulated by those in control, as a means of subjugation in order to exploit them.

Given the importance of technology and control over information in human trafficking for ransom, the concept of a 'black hole' can help explain how, and why, unequal information flows and restrictions on information by gatekeepers benefit the perpetrators of human trafficking for ransom. The human trafficking networks also serve as gatekeepers, controlling what information reaches people in vulnerable situations. Black holes in the digital landscape also prevent information from getting out. Therefore, it is difficult for anyone to obtain a clear picture of what is happening on the ground inside these areas. A lack of information and access isolates people, causes false information to proliferate, and increases the vulnerability of people to extortion and other crimes.

Black holes can also be described as 'remote areas', places that are disconnected from the 'centre'. This 'remoteness' contributes to vulnerability, while at the same time allowing people to remain invisible and, hence, ungovernable. Remoteness shields areas from government control. Stereotypes about people in remote areas can be internalised by locals, reinforcing their status (e.g., of people in Libya as criminals, operating outside the law). Human trafficking for ransom thrives in such places. At the same time, according to the principles of cultural entropy, the plurality of stakeholders and values can render policies ineffective.

Finally, it is important to understand human trafficking for ransom as a cycle. Seeing it as a cycle allows a broader perspective on the vulnerability of persons to human trafficking and a more nuanced understanding of what is driving it and what might help break the cycle. Such an understanding takes into account the cycle of violence accompanying the trafficking, from human rights abuses experienced in the country of origin, to the trafficking itself, and beyond, as well as the vulnerable economic situation of people on the move (e.g., debt, labour conditions due to illegal status) and lack of protection, also due to their illegality. These factors place migrants and refugees in a powerless position and can lead to re-victimisation.

Due to the dehumanisation of people in such situations, barriers to sympathy emerge and feelings of fear and danger are aroused, fuelled by narratives around security and terrorism. In human trafficking for

ransom, human beings are commoditised, stripped of their dignity and humanity. Following Rorty (1998), this generates a situation in which people in a black hole are regarded as less worthy of the enjoyment of human rights. If the framing of the problem is determined by such sentiments, and the policy agenda follows this frame, this explains why human rights are less of a consideration in the policies that have emerged to address the problem of human trafficking in Libya.

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Author contributions

Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits, and Anouk Smeets are the authors of several sections in this chapter. Mirjam Van Reisen edited the overall text. Anouk Smeets drafted an early version of this chapter. Morgane Wirtz provided input for this chapter and provided background on the information presented in this chapter.

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