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# Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma

*Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits, Morgane Wirtz, & Bruna Mikami*

**Chapter in: Enslaved**
Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes:
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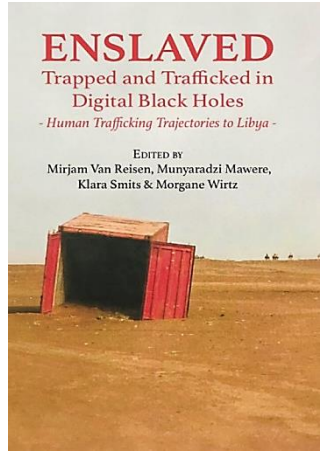


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## Chapter 3

# Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma

*Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits, Morgane Wirtz, & Bruna Mikami*

### Introduction

In human trafficking for ransom, everyone involved has skin in the game – most literally the victims of it, who carry the scars on their skin. Held in captivity, the victims are forced to beg for ransom while beaten or while hot plastic is dripped on their skin. The primary aim of this torture is to encourage the relatives of the victims – who are contacted by phone while the torture is taking place – to pay large sums of money to the traffickers. The skin of the victims carries, quite literally, the score of human trafficking for ransom for the rest of their lives. This is captured eloquently in the film *Under the Skin* (Deloget & Allegra, 2015).

*This study is an explorative case study of the situation of Eritrean migrants and refugees in Libya, largely from an emic perspective. It was conducted as a series of interviews, mainly with survivors of human trafficking, but also with smugglers, translators, representatives of humanitarian organisations and others. The fieldwork was supplemented by a systematic literature review, which revealed that there has been little published on this topic. This research focused on Eritreans, as they constitute an important part of the survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya.*

The relatives of the victims have 'skin in the game', as they must decide whether or not to pay the ransom, how to secure the safe release of their loved one, and how to deal with the repercussions of all of these events on their lives. The large sums of ransom paid by the families of the victims are financially devastating, as shown in the documentary *Sound of Torture* (Shayo, 2013).

The skin in the game for the researchers is the impact of the traumatising content they are collecting and analysing, which is exacerbated by their inability to immediately help those who are sharing their stories. This kind of research can affect their mental health (Coles, Astbury, Dartnall & Limjerwala, 2014; Shannonhouse Barden, Jones, Gonzalez & Murphy, 2016; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017). This gives rise to certain ethical considerations in relation to the extent to which the outcome of the research may be affected by the mental state of the researcher (Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019; Kidane, 2021).

So, is such a topic researchable? This is the foundational question when considering the research design and methodology of such a study. In this chapter, the search to see how we can make this topic researchable is presented.

As a starting point, the researchers first reviewed the experiences of researchers engaged in similar work undertaken previously. In the following section, the challenges and ethical concerns associated with such research are explored. Subsequently, the research design chosen for this study is set out, taking into account the limitations of the setting and the objectives of the study. In the sections that follow, a detailed overview of how the data was collected and analysed is presented. The final section contains a consideration and assessment of how the researchers regulated their emotions during this research. This is followed by a brief conclusion.

## Is human trafficking for ransom researchable?

### *Experiences in previous research on human trafficking for ransom*

The research available on human trafficking for ransom in Libya is limited, which is not surprising given the difficulties associated with the study of this practice (Surtees, 2014). The situation has a devastating impact on large groups of people – victims, survivors, their families and communities, as well as the perpetrators and the people who work for them. Human trafficking for ransom in Libya

has particularly affected refugees from Eritrea, and continues to affect them, even after they arrive in Europe or elsewhere (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017; Rozen, 2019; Mouton, Schoenmaeckers & Van Reisen, 2019; Schoenmaeckers, Al-Qasim & Zanzoretta, 2019; Van Reisen *et al.*, 2019b). While victims[1] are a primary source of information for research on human trafficking (Rijken, 2018), it is often difficult to physically reach victims; it is also challenging to gain their trust and interview them (Surtees, 2014).

Carrying out research in such a situation is difficult. From experience, it is relevant to say that no researcher is left emotionally untouched. Such research cannot be comprehensively carried out without a reflection on how the emotions of survivors and researchers play a role. Due to the emotions involved, questions must be asked prior to the research on how to avoid the re-traumatisation of respondents and secondary trauma to the researchers, their assistants, and translators (Kidane, 2021). Taleb (2018) explores how *Skin in the Game* is important for good academic work; how being engaged with the situation is necessary for an in-depth understanding and to make what is done 'somehow' meaningful – somehow, because the sense of powerlessness that those held in captivity feel is also an emotion that the researchers feel. Confronted with the devastating situation of the victims and survivors, questions about how to change this and what responsibility to take become very real.

How to regulate the amount of skin in the game that the researchers and the respondents have is challenging, particularly in a situation as serious as human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The mental state of all involved is critical to the success of the endeavour and to make decisions that do not compromise others. The researcher is very present in such research and how the researcher emotionally labours

[1] A 'trafficking victim' is defined by the United Nations Declaration on the Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power as: "'Victims' means persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power" (UN General Assembly, 1985). See also Glossary of Terms.

through the information, interprets it, and develops the research based on it must be explicitly thought through, and reported, at each step.

The first time that the issue of Sinai trafficking was brought to the attention of two of the original researchers (Estefanos and Van Reisen) was at a conference held in Brussels in 2009. At this conference, a trusted person among Eritrean refugees, Father Mussie Zerai, presented the problem to an audience that included Estefanos and Van Reisen (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). In 2010, when work began on this topic, the initial perspective was that human trafficking for ransom (then occurring in the Sinai) was not suitable for academic research. While at that time the researchers were not as aware of all the academic and ethical implications, it simply felt wrong to 'academise' a situation that was so deeply problematic and needed a practical response. However, the researchers learnt that, because of the egregious nature of the situation, journalists and politicians had difficulty believing that this situation could be real. This observation prompted the first attempts to conduct research that was rooted in academic rigour. The research prompted high-level visibility, and political and law-and-order anti-terrorist operations were carried out, which ultimately ended the situation of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai. This encouraged others to see the research as an acceptable and relevant way to prompt responses to address the situation.

As the situation has evolved, the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom has expanded to Libya. This provoked the hypothesis that a larger set of drivers was fuelling this phenomenon. Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) explored this further and found that a hierarchically-led criminal operation was exploiting the situation in Eritrea in a systematic and structural way, and that the operations were expanding to Libya. This research was based on interviews with a wider set of people with a stake in the situation, including survivors

of human trafficking for ransom, migrants and refugees,[2] and resource persons knowledgeable about the situation.

In 2015 and 2016, Van Reisen, together with researcher Selam Kidane, conducted interviews with survivors of human trafficking for ransom who had relocated to refugee camps in North Ethiopia (Tigray) (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). When the researchers sought to identify survivors, trousers were lifted to show the scars on their skin. The survivors did not consent immediately to the research. Long discussions were held with them before they consented. The survivors raised lots of relevant issues and complained that they felt their voice had been taken away by the events – and by the interest of journalists and academics in their story – without any concrete benefit to them. Exploring their expectations further, the researchers found that there were three main concerns that were important to the survivors: they wanted to have a medical check-up (which they had not had, despite the serious torture experienced), they wanted their situation explained to the officials dealing with refugees in the camp, and they wanted justice.

In response to this clear expression of their interests and conditions for participating by the survivors, the researchers involved a medical physician in the research to assist the victims of torture; translated research findings in reports so that they could be considered by the authorities in the refugee camps; and sought ways to deliver the findings as relevant input for the organisations dealing with the prosecution of international crimes. The agency of the victims and those interviewed for the research is presented in the book that resulted from this study (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen, Kidane & Reim, 2017).

So, is human trafficking for ransom researchable? From the experiences detailed above, the conclusion was drawn that the topic is researchable, but that it leads to a particular set of concerns that

[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).

must be considered and addressed. Researching the situation in Libya, under COVID-19 restrictions, came with its own set of challenges. It required patience, reflection, and time to develop the right conditions for the research. The following section sets out the difficulties associated and the steps taken to address these.

### *Challenges of studying human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai*

There are numerous challenges associated with researching human trafficking for ransom, and each one provokes questions and concerns. How does the research affect the safety of participants and researchers? What are the many ethical considerations relating to how testimonies are obtained, analysed, and used, and how to deal with these? How reliable are the testimonies obtained, and how should they be triangulated and analysed? What are the emotional implications for the participants and researchers, and what are their expectations of the research in terms of outcomes?

The earlier studies of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai were based on material obtained through conversations that journalist and researcher Meron Estefanos held with Eritrean refugees. Estefanos is a Swedish journalist of Eritrean descent; she speaks Tigrinya, the language that all Eritrean refugees can converse in. As a radio host, she was known to an audience of refugees from Eritrea. At a certain point she made the conscious decision to focus her radio programme solely on the issue of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai – until it stopped – as she felt devastated by the lack of understanding that this was really happening and the lack of interest and follow-up to make it stop.

In the Sinai, Eritrean refugees were held in isolated camps – often in underground rooms; they were given phones to contact relatives while they were tortured and forced to beg family members to pay large sums of ransom. The refugees often contacted Estefanos, as she was known for assisting Eritreans to find ways to collect these ransoms through her radio programme. Estefanos would obtain the phone numbers used to beg for the ransoms and follow up with refugees in secret conversations. She also visited the Sinai, which is

documented in the film *Sound of Torture* (Shayo, 2013). In addition, she and researcher Van Reisen conducted additional interviews in places where survivors of human trafficking for ransom could be reached after the ordeal was over, in Egypt, Israel and Ethiopia.

As a methodology, it is rare to obtain an insight in real-time during a real-life situation – while a crime is being committed. The analysis of the extensive interview transcripts of Estefanos collected during her radio programme allowed for an in-depth understanding of the modus operandi through which the ransoms were collected from the victims who were detained in the Sinai torture houses (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; 2014).

There were important ethical decisions involved in this methodology and the use of the transcripts of the phone calls. One consideration was that the facilitation of the collection of ransom in this way, facilitated this modus operandi to thrive and continue. Estefanos was well aware of this dilemma. In the film *Sound of Torture* (Shayo, 2013), Estefanos explains that she understood this problem, but in the face of refugees begging her to help, she felt that she had no other choice than to respond to their call. She also explained that, in her understanding, the threat of being killed if the ransom was not paid was real. She drew the conclusion that, as she knew that people might be killed, she had a moral obligation to try and avoid this outcome by sharing the information she obtained from the victims with their family members.

In the film *Sound of Torture* (Shayo, 2013), there is a scene in which survivors discuss how human trafficking for ransom can only be stopped if all families stop making the ransom payments. This is a heated conversation. The documentary shows the faces of those who are silent, and their expressions speak louder than words. They convey their doubts; describing how it is difficult, or even impossible, for families to not pay, knowing that this will result in more torture and the possible death of their loved one.

Estefanos did not explicitly ask for the consent of the victims and survivors who called her to use their testimonies for research, but she made it clear that the testimonies were being used to inform the

outside world of their ordeal in a systematic and organised manner. This was the basis for their reuse in the investigation. Estefanos believed that they wanted to break their isolation and were reaching out for support. A difficult ethical point is the dependency of a respondent held in isolated captivity on the research, as the researcher is the sole point of contact. There is a constant need to check the relationship, and the intentions of each person involved, and deliberately consider how the situation influences the information obtained.

Obviously, this state of affairs puts pressure on researchers to deliver more than an academic publication, and to obtain clarity on the use of the research findings to document the atrocities committed, to explore pathways to end the impunity of the perpetrators, and to deliver support and justice to the survivors. This gives the researchers 'skin in the game', as they are deliberately present in the research to reach these aims and facilitate greater understanding of the experiences of the survivors and of all involved.

### *Psychological support as a preventive strategy for secondary trauma among researchers*

Survivors of horrendous practices, such as human trafficking for ransom, are at high risk of developing prolonged symptoms of trauma. Human trafficking for ransom is considered a 'sensitive' research area as, in one way or another, researching this topic threatens the participants in the study (Condomines & Hennequin, 2013).

As well as those who have been through these experiences, people who have not experienced them directly, but have learnt about or interacted with stories about the traumatic events, can also develop trauma symptoms. This phenomenon is known as secondary (or vicarious) trauma (Pearlman & MacIan, 1995). Researchers who investigate traumatic events are, therefore, vulnerable to trauma. Frequently, they might not be able to distance themselves from the traumatised person's experiences, especially if they are carrying out qualitative research, in which they need to go deep into certain aspects

of the traumatic event and establish an empathic relationship with the survivor (Van Reisen, Stokmans, Mawere & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019).

Investigating how trauma can affect researchers is also relevant because, unlike healthcare professionals, they do not usually receive training to deal with trauma. Another problem is feelings of inadequacy, as it is not their role to assist victims and they often do not have the means or skills to do so, which can increase the distress of the researcher (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Connolly & Reilly, 2007). Thus, it might be that this population is more vulnerable to developing symptoms of (secondary) trauma after learning about a traumatic event than trained clinicians. In other words, defence mechanisms might be lacking in researchers to protect themselves from secondary trauma.

According to the United States National Institute of Mental Health, "a traumatic event is a shocking, scary, or dangerous experience that can affect someone emotionally and physically" (National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). As a result of a traumatic event, people can experience various reactions, including negative emotions, trouble concentrating, and repetitive thoughts about what happened. These reactions generally diminish with time. However, some people are affected for longer periods, which can have a negative impact on their everyday life. Prolonged symptoms of trauma are described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) as criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The most recent edition (DSM-V) groups the behavioural manifestation of trauma into four clusters: re-experiencing (recurrent memories, dreams and distress), avoidance (of elements that remind the person of the event), negative cognitions and moods (feelings and inabilities), and arousal (aggressive, reckless or self-destructive behaviour) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Much literature has been produced about the clinicians (counsellors, therapists, social workers, etc.) dealing with trauma (Arvay, 2001; Elwood, Mott, Lohr & Galovski, 2011). However, there are only a few studies that address the impact of traumatic experiences on researchers. The results of these studies support the potential for researchers to develop secondary trauma (Coles *et al.*, 2014;

Shannonhouse *et al.*, 2016; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017). Nevertheless, as the articles are still small in number, much more information needs to be gathered.

It is anticipated that the research conducted for this book may provide an interesting perspective, as the key empirical chapters were based on the analysis of a single body of interviews. The interviews were conducted by three researchers, but the analysis team that contributed to the coding and labelling consisted of eight persons (including two of the researchers who conducted the interviews). Even though research on this subject is insufficient, the lead researchers from the broader study in which this chapter is inserted were aware of the risk of secondary trauma to those who would deal with the data collected for the research. Before going into this further, a brief contextualisation of the focus and direction of the study is necessary.

## The research contributors

This book is based on the work of researchers under the Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western Communities (SDDI) research stream and external researchers. All of the researchers who contributed to this book are part of a research network that falls under the Globalization, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC) network. Most of the chapters (except chapters 6, 8 and 17) are based on the work of the SDDI research team.

The SDDI research builds on and is informed by research on trauma by Dr Selam Kidane, author of Chapter 8. The mixed method research for her chapter was carried out in the Hitsats and Shimelba refugee camps, located in Tigray (Ethiopia) in 2017–2018, with 103 respondents, all of Eritrean nationality. In this research, she measured levels of trauma, social and economic resilience, and social capital, before and after an intervention to reduce levels of trauma via an online app and videos; she also interviewed the participants. Dr Kidane is not part of the SDDI research stream. Sara Palacios-Arapiles (PhD researcher at the School of Law of the University of Nottingham), author of Chapter 6, and Sara Creta (PhD researcher at

Dublin University), author of Chapter 17, also do not fall under the SDDI research stream. Sara Palacios-Arapiles used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with a total of 50 respondents from Eritrea in her chapter. The fieldwork was carried out over a 6-month period, from October 2019 to March 2020, in several locations in Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark. The chapter of Sara Creta is the result of two years of fieldwork among Eritrean refugees in Libya and online from 2018–2020. She takes a multi-sited netnographic approach with multiple rounds of in-person and virtual discussion. All three authors are collaborating in the research network under GAIC.

The SDDI research stream looks at the social disruptions caused by digital innovation in non-Western communities. Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen is Principal Investigator of SDDI. The PhD research projects of Morgane Wirtz and Klara Smits fall under the SDDI stream. The SDDI research presented in this book received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics and Data Management Committee (REDC) of the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences. All authors and contributors to this book, except for Selam Kidane, Sara Creta and Sara Palacios-Arapiles, fall under the guidelines and ethical approval of the SDDI stream. Sara Palacios-Arapiles' contribution falls under the guidelines and ethical approval of the School of Law Research Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham.

In this chapter, the research methodology used by the authors and contributors from the SDDI research stream are explained in detail. The methodologies used by Sara Palacios-Arapiles (Chapter 6), Dr Selam Kidane (Chapter 8) and Sara Creta (Chapter 17) are not included; their methodologies are explained their individual chapters.

## Research approach

### *A case study on Eritrean survivors of human trafficking for ransom*

This study is an explorative investigation of the situation of Eritrean migrants and refugees in Libya. A systematic review of the extant literature reveals that there has been little academic work published

on this topic. The study was performed as a case-study that zooms in on Eritrean survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The reason for this focus is that the research in the literature demonstrates that Eritreans consistently constitute an important part of the survivors of human trafficking for ransom, particularly in the research on Sinai trafficking, which found that the majority of victims were from Eritrea (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). In addition, Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) found Eritrean facilitators at the top of the human trafficking network, including on the route to Libya. It is, therefore, hypothesised that human trafficking for ransom may affect Eritreans more than others, and this demarcation may help obtain greater clarity about the modus operandi, which first came to attention in the Sinai in 2009 and is now seen in Libya.

The research design for this study has a comparative element. While the majority of interviews were conducted with Eritrean refugees, a number of interviews were carried out with refugees from other countries. In some chapters of this book, this allowed for the analysis of how the experiences of Eritrean people compare with the experiences of people from other countries. This comparison is carried out in relation to two principal topics to shed light on the differences and commonalities. The first topic is the experiences of sexual violence, which is known to be widespread in human trafficking for ransom, but also more generally in the Libyan context. The second is the experience of COVID-19, and subsequent border closures, which affected all people on the move, regardless of their nationality. A comparison is made, with the objective to be clear on the specific effects relating to human trafficking for ransom.

In this research, identifiers such as 'Eritrean' are self-identifications, mostly referring to the nationality that the interviewees self-identify with. Important differences related to ethnicity and age relate to how Eritreans identify themselves and there are differences in the extent to which being Eritrean is the most important identifier. The use of the term 'Eritrean' in this book is not intended as a reductionist category, but as a demarcation of the focus on the people included in this study.

The research was carried out as an ethnographic study, with the purpose of fostering an emic perspective of the situation; in other words to strive for an understanding from an insiders' perspective. Reed-Danahay describes 'autoethnographic space' as "a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (1997, p.9). For Butz and Besio, fieldwork is an 'autoethnographic space' (2009). The position of the researcher also has an impact on the research process and outcomes (Butz & Besio, 2009; Compaoré, 2017).

The choice of this research design is justified by the mere realisation that most of what is written on the situation of refugees and migrants in Libya does not involve them. In particular, recognition of those held in isolated captivity is lacking. Moreover, the dominant paradigm in Europe, which is set in assumptions that refugees are 'pulled' to Libya (and Europe) to find better lives and livelihoods, needs testing, as this current research aims to do. The push and pull theory, which is set in rational choice theory, can be tested using an insiders' perspective of how refugees and migrants view their world and what choices they make within the perceived options they have. Thus, this chapter is written from an emic perspective.

***Participatory fieldwork and netnography***

The main material obtained for the ethnographic research was collected through participatory fieldwork (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). To understand how human trafficking for ransom in Libya is experienced by its survivors, it seemed important to be on the spot where survivors could be met and to spend time with them. The researchers engaged with Eritrean refugee communities in different places, notably in Niger, Sudan, Tunisia, Ethiopia and Europe and, to the extent possible, directly in Libya. In Libya this engagement was often through social media, such as WhatsApp or Signal. Research was also undertaken in Eritrea through resource persons with contacts on the ground in relation to the situation in the country.

Zoom was also an important platform where the lead researchers and assistant researchers met regularly during the analysis of the fieldwork, as they were residing in different places and were unable

to travel during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the analysis was undertaken.

## The research Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation

The methodology detailed in this chapter shows the collaborative effort of the research team Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation in Remote non-Western communities (SDDI). This team worked under the leadership of Van Reisen who acted as principal investigator. The results of this study are presented in chapters 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16.

### *Research tasks*

The researchers involved in this study conducted interviews, focus group meetings and fieldwork, and collected observations. The researchers and research assistants were also required to translate, transcribe, read and code the reports of victims. Such work requires a mental engagement with the situation. The material produced and analysed related to respondents, who went through terrifying experiences, a process that could affect the emotional wellbeing of the researchers and research assistants, as well as re-traumatising the respondents.[3]

[3] The division of tasks was as follows. After performing the field research, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz transcribed interviews, receiving translation and other support by an international team composed of Sarra Achour, Whitney Atieno, Wejden Ben Aziza, Asma Ben Hadj Hassen, Wiem Ben Hamouda, Cyrille Bozon Seabe, Bryan Eryong, Kobe Goudo Désire, Francis Kinyua Gathua, Abir Menssi, and Anouk Smeets. In the coding/labelling phase, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz received the help of a team of researchers composed of Anouk Smeets, Asma Ben Hadj Hassen, Annelies Coessens, Sara Gianesello, Bruna Mikami, Lucy Murray and Letizia Storchi. Dion de Vries assisted with researching the human trafficking context in Libya. The mental health of the team of researchers and research assistants was given special attention during this period of data collection and analysis. Besides the support of the principal investigator Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen, Dr Mia Stokmans offered support ahead of the fieldwork and during the drafting of the research.

### *Mental health support to researchers*

Particular care was taken in this research to protect the mental wellbeing of the research participants and the research team. Researcher Bruna Mikami began her participation in the research project as a research assistant, coding and labelling the interviews. Shortly after, as she is a trained clinician with professional experience as a clinical psychologist, she was invited to support the research team to help them to protect themselves against secondary trauma. As Mikami was already participating in the research, she was acting as a clinician/researcher and research assistant/subject at the same time; hence, it can be said that she was living the experience while also investigating the experience.

The team also benefited from advice from Dr Selam Kidane, who participated in the research at distance, and provided advice drawing on her experience as a psycho-social councillor, with particular experience in dealing with Eritrean refugees and survivors of human trafficking. In addition, the team benefited from the supervision of Dr Bénédicte Mouton, a trained psycho-social councillor, who advised Wirtz. This included preparation on how to approach the respondents and deal with concerns about after-care, as well as how to ensure a healthy environment for research.

None of the prior studies mentioned earlier in this chapter had researchers, trained as clinicians, working within the research team to support it with counselling. This is one of the main contributions of the method used and we believe it enhances the researchability of the topic.

### *Theoretical perspective and literature review*

The research benefited from a systematic review of the literature on human trafficking for ransom in Libya, which was carried out by Piet Gotlieb and Eva Lorger (Chapter 4: *Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature Review*). The methodology included a systematic review of the literature using a snowballing methodology, in which all the literature was checked through the references, and experts were asked to confirm that the literature was complete. The objective was to create a complete overview of the extant literature on human

trafficking for ransom, particularly in Libya. For this, the literature was analysed using a purposeful, closed coding-labelling overview, in which all of the literature was compared on key aspects, which were pre-defined by the research team.

The theoretical framework for the research is outlined in Chapter 2 (*Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration*), which considers the concepts underpinning this book. While the different chapters focus on different elements of the research, and a limited set of elements of the theoretical framework may underpin the work documented in a particular chapter, it is all part of the overarching framework. This framework builds on the assumption that greater theoretical plurality is needed to understand human trafficking for ransom, and that this cannot be adequately explained by push and pull and related theories, which (incorrectly) assume that people on the move have all the information available to them to analyse the benefits and disadvantages of a decision. Moreover, the theory underestimates the relevance of the person's mindset and the psychological drivers of their decisions (Kidane, 2021).

The theoretical framework builds on the work of Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014) on the human trafficking cycle and takes into account work carried out on the distribution of information, and its limitations, including work on 'black holes' in the digital landscape in migration situations (Van Reisen *et al.*, 2019b; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

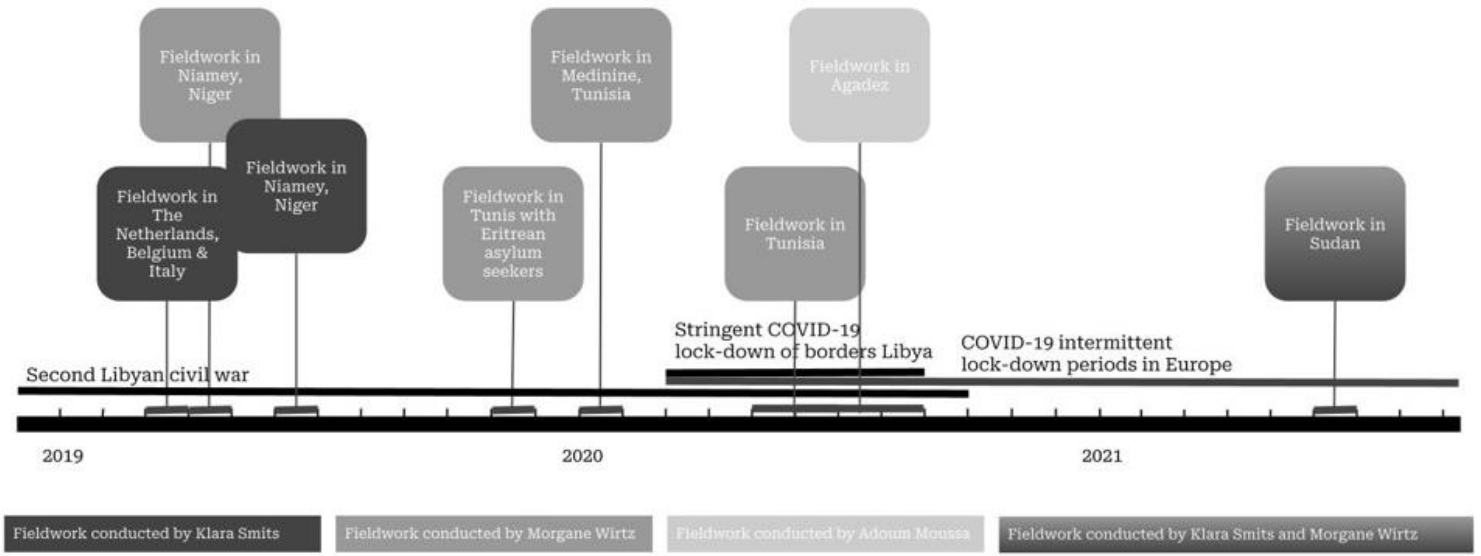
### *Timeline of the fieldwork*

The preparation for the research started in March 2019, and Klara Smits started conducted interviews in Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy) in 2019. These were followed by interviews by Morgane Wirtz and Klara Smits in Niamey (in Niger), also in 2019. At the end of 2019 and in 2020, Morgane Wirtz conducted interviews during fieldwork carried out in Zarzis, Medinine, Sfax, Sousse, Tunis, Djerba, Kerkennah and Kelibia (in Tunisia). Adoum Moussa conducted interviews in Agadez (in Niger) in 2020. In 2021, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz conducted fieldwork in Sudan. Additional

interviews that were conducted for this research took place throughout the research period, up to 2022, in various countries.

During most of the fieldwork, the second Libyan war was taking place. In 2020, interviews in Tunisia and Agadez were carried out while COVID-19 lockdowns were in place in Libya and the region. COVID-19 restrictions were still in place during the fieldwork carried out by Smits and Wirtz in Sudan in 2021. Interviews by Van Reisen were also undertaken throughout the period in small focus group meetings, to investigate a particular theme that had emerged from the analysis in more detail.

**Figure 3.1. Timeline of the SDDI research**



***Overview of respondents***

The main SDDI research included 312 participants. A total of 213 interviews were held and 12 reports based on interviews were analysed. Some of the interviews were with more than one person at a time, including 11 focus group interviews. Two-thirds of the interviewees were male. Of the respondents interviewed, 33 were experts/resource persons; 3 were smugglers; and 283 were refugees/migrants (89%). Some respondents were experts/resource persons and refugees/migrants; they were counted in both groups (but not double-counted in the total participants). Of the refugees/migrants, 128 had been trafficked in Libya. Two-thirds of the refugees and migrants interviewed were aged between 20 and 40 years. The majority of the interviewees (n=203) were Eritrean.

**Table 3.1. Nationality of respondents**

| **Nationality of interviewee (migrants and refugees)** | **Number of interviewees** |
|---|---|
| ***Greater Horn of Africa*** | |
| Sudan | 1 |
| Somalia | 3 |
| Eritrea | 203 |
| Ethiopia | 11 |
| *Total* | *218* |
| ***West Africa*** | |
| Gambia | 2 |
| Guinea | 19 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 10 |
| Mali | 1 |
| Nigeria | 2 |
| Senegal | 10 |
| DRC | 1 |
| Cameroon | 18 |
| Tunisia | 2 |
| *Total* | *65* |
| **Total all** | **283** |

The interviews were held in Belgium, Italy, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, the Netherlands, Niger, Sudan, Sweden and Tunisia. Some interviewees were interviewed in multiple locations; some online/unknown locations have been left out of the table. The majority of interviewees were in Tunisia (n=83), Sudan (n=73), Niger (n=54) and the Netherlands (n=48).

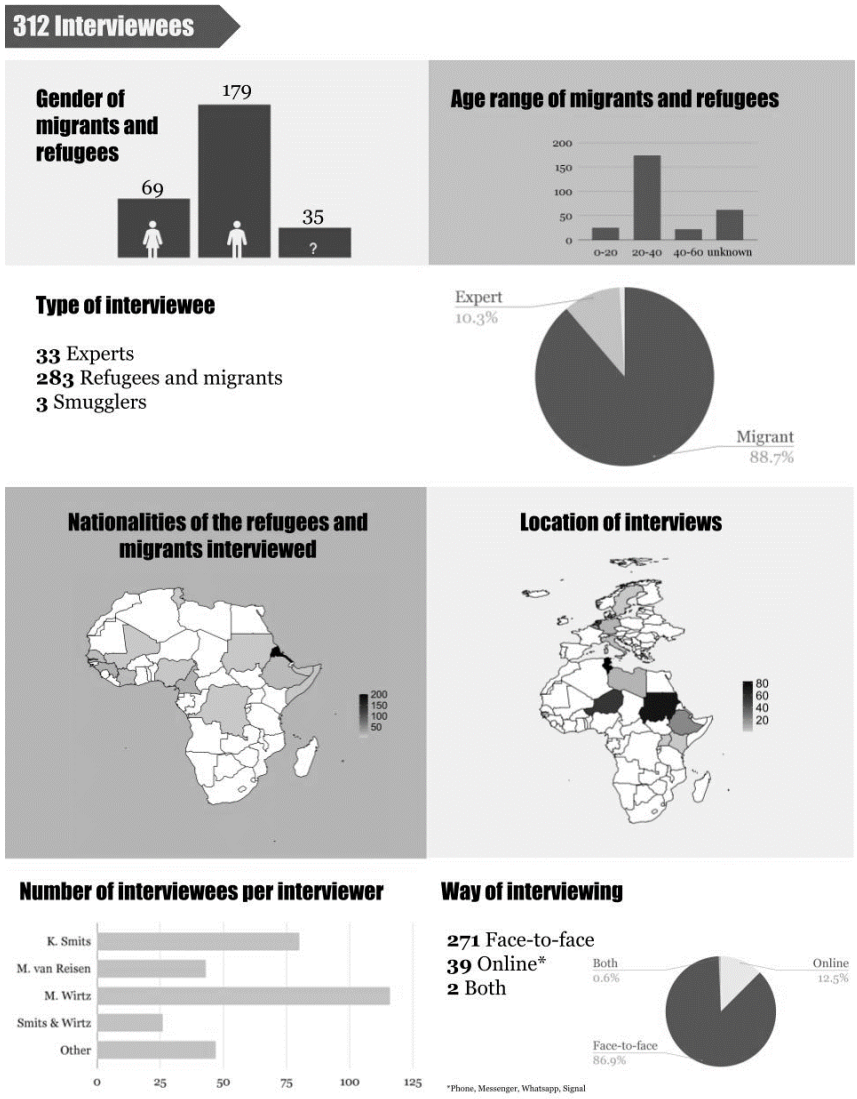
**Table 3.2. Locations in which interviews took place***

| Location in which the interview took place or interviewee was located (in online interviews) | Number of interviewees |
|---|---|
| Belgium | 13 |
| The Netherlands | 48 |
| Italy | 5 |
| Libya | 7 |
| Ethiopia | 21 |
| Niger | 54 |
| Tunisia | 83 |
| Sudan | 73 |
| Germany/UK | 7 |
| Kenya | 2 |
| Sweden | 1 |
| Unknown | 1 |

* Some interviewees have been interviewed in multiple locations

The majority of the interviews were held by Wirtz, followed by Smits. Most of the interviews (271) were face-to-face, 39 were online/voice (WhatsApp, Signal, Zoom, call) and in 2 cases interviews were face-to-face as well as online. The interviews were held in English, French, Dutch, Tigrinya and Arabic. For interviews in Arabic and Tigrinya, translators were used. Most of the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant. If the interview was not recorded, detailed notes were kept. After recording, the interviews were transcribed.

**Figure 3.2. Overview of interview statistics**[4]




A total of 126 interviews were used for the initial coding/labelling process (mainly the interviews done by Morgane Wirtz, Klara Smits

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

and Adoum Moussa). The remaining interviews were additionally analysed individually, or used for triangulation/confirmation and checking of specific elements of the research.

## Locations and materials for SDDI research

The SDDI research made use of a variety of interviews, observations and other material collected in various locations, both in-person and through digital communication. This included reports, videos, social media posts, photographs, and other information, collected and sent to us by resource persons in social media spaces and through personal communications, through participatory research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016) and netnography (Kozinets, 2017). The physical locations in which interviews and observations took place were chosen because of their importance along the human trafficking trajectories of Eritrean refugees.

### *Location of fieldwork and information collection*

Research material, which included interviews, but also continuous reports, videos, photographs, screenshots and messages, were collected in various locations throughout the research. Through the in-depth interviews and additional material, the researchers strived to gain insight into the situation of the refugees/migrants' on their journey from their country of origin, through Libya, to the (intermediate or final) destination. Therefore, material was collected in the Horn of Africa, North Africa and Europe.

In the Horn of Africa, research material was collected from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. In Eritrea, resource persons provided regular updates on the situation inside the country through messages and phone calls from within the country. The information was compared and analysed, and different sources of information were triangulated, to increase the reliability of the information. Material was also

obtained from Makeda Saba,[5] who shared information received from Eritrea collected for her research, for re-use by the research team.

The collection of material in Ethiopia from Eritrean refugees who had fled Eritrea allowed the research team to obtain information about the situation in Eritrea, as well as the conditions in Ethiopia – particularly after the start of the war in Tigray. Interviews were held with key resource persons from the Eritrean community who had escaped the refugee camps in Tigray after the start of the war. One of the key resource persons was included in the team and provided 12 reports based on interviews with Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia. A team of refugees provided six more full interviews from Ethiopia on the ongoing situation. In addition, Tigrayan resource persons provided information about the situation of Eritrean refugees, including messages, videos and photographs. In June 2021, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz conducted fieldwork in the East of Sudan, from which 20 interviews were analysed for the research. Furthermore, information was collected through resource persons in Sudan about the developing situation.

The SDDI researchers were able to conduct research within Libya through conversations with refugees residing in Libya who had access to secretly held mobile phones. Six interviews were held in such a way by the SDDI researchers, in the form of longitudinal conversations, which included calls, as well as the exchange of videos and photographs. These have been compared and analysed for this research. The conversations gave deep insights into the living conditions in the detention centres, the modus operandi of the human traffickers, and how conditions changed during the research period, including because of the war in Libya (e.g., when the forces of Khalifa Haftar attacked Tripoli in April 2019), and the changes in the situation due to COVID-19.

[5] Makeda Saba is a researcher and expert on the Horn of Africa and has as published extensively about Eritrea.

Most of the interviews with Eritrean refugees were conducted in Niger. When evacuated from Libya through the Emergency *Transit* Mechanism (ETM), Eritreans and other refugees are housed in Niamey in Niger and in the refugee centre at Hamdallaye, 40 kilometres from Niamey. The refugees who were interviewed in Niamey had all recently experienced human trafficking and detention in Libya. The interviews enabled the researchers to obtain recent information about the trafficking routes and experiences of the refugees. Other interviews in Niger were conducted in Agadez, which is a hub for migration, mainly with people from West Africa, but also with smugglers, with the goal to look at the experiences of migrants on the routes to (and through) Libya and the impact of COVID-19 and border closures.

Besides evacuation from Niger, some refugees and migrants escape Libya to Tunisia. There, Morgane Wirtz conducted interviews with Eritreans and West African people focusing on human trafficking for ransom and sexual violence in Libya. Information was also collected in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. This included interviews with Eritrean refugees who had been in Libya and had crossed the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, key informants gave testimony and material, including pictures, videos and documents, which were gathered for analysis. Several family members whose relatives were held in Libya were also interviewed. Beyond information about Libya, the Eritrean refugees in Europe also informed the SDDI researchers about the situation in Eritrea, intervention by Eritrean authorities in other countries (to surveil or control members of the diaspora), and the involvement of Eritrean traffickers in human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

### *Reuse of earlier material*

Some of the research material used by the SDDI team was taken from previous research and reused in the current research. This includes interviews and observations by Morgane Wirtz from when she lived in Agadez, in northern Niger. In addition, interviews conducted in Ethiopia and Uganda between 2015 and 2016, which were used for the book *Trafficking and Trauma in the Digital Era: The Ongoing Tragedy of*

*the Trade in Refugees from Eritrea* (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017), were reused. The reused material was selected due to its relevance to the SDDI research on the trajectories of Eritrean refugees to Libya.

### *Documentaries and reports*

Additional material was used to verify and triangulate the findings from the interviews, and to provide a deeper insight into the context. This included an analysis of 21 documentaries in relation to human trafficking for ransom, the situation in Eritrea and the situation in Libya (see list of Documentaries and Videos in References). In addition, the SDDI team continuously kept track of newly published and previous reports, books, news articles, social media posts and videos/photographs in relation to the topics analysed in this book. Not all of this material ended up being cited in the chapters, but all contributed to the understanding and analysis presented in this book.

## Fieldwork preparation and conduct

This section describes the way in which the fieldwork was prepared and conducted and the material collected and brought together for further analysis.

### *Consent of research participants*

Researching human trafficking for ransom in Libya, the team placed themselves in a position of gathering information and testimonies with the aim to then publish and disseminate the analysis as widely as possible. The researchers were in charge of how the process of publication or dissemination was undertaken. The respondents who agreed to participate and give their testimonies consented to this. This led to specific considerations by the respondents. For instance, a survivor from Libya hesitated for a long time to give her consent to the use of her testimony. She explained:

> *But, you know, I have a friend who also lives at the asylum seeker centre and who spoke with reporters. Then they published her testimony in the newspaper with her photo. But they got paid for it! You realise? They got paid. But that is her story!* (Informal conversation 1094, with Wirtz, face-to-face, May 2020)

To be as transparent as possible, all interviews were preceded by a discussion of the consent form. The participants were informed about who the researchers were, what data they were looking for, the purpose of the interview, and what was going to be done with the data. As mentioned above, the respondents were informed that their testimonies could be painful and that they could end the interview at any time. It was explained to the respondents that the interview would focus on their migratory journey and their current situation.

***Dealing with the trauma of respondents***

The majority of the interviewees met for the purpose of this research were traumatised. They had been through very difficult experiences. They were sequestered for months and years, sometimes underground or in containers without any light. They have seen people, including friends and relatives, die in front them. Many have been close to death themselves. Some were locked up with dead bodies next to them. They were beaten, tied up with their hands and feet behind their backs, or upside down, burnt (including with hot plastic), electrocuted, sexually abused and raped.

In most cases, when respondents were interviewed, they were relatively safe. However, their situation was not settled. Many of them were not in Europe, which was their destination. This situation was running in a loop in their heads, like a refrain of failure. Most of them owed thousands of dollars to their families, who had paid the ransom for their release. Even if their family had not asked them to repay the money, they considered it their duty to do so. Initially, they had set out for Libya to help their families, not to become a burden. Many showed symptoms of PTSD (i.e., flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, increased arousal) (Kidane, 2021).

Over time and with preparation, the researchers learnt how to deal with such interviewees. Certain peculiar situations arose in these interviews. One interviewee had forgotten ten years of his life. The researchers realised that often when interviewees do not mention a long period of their migratory journey it is because something has happened that they have block out or prefer not to speak about.

Sometimes the researchers said nothing; sometimes they asked: "Do you want to talk about what happened between this period and that period?" Of course, sometimes the interviews unintentionally triggered memories that had been erased.

The 'do no harm' principle was at the heart of this work, and formed the very basis of the research. The team thoroughly thought through how to put in place mechanisms to ensure the maximum support, including: secure and secret interview locations and careful monitoring of the interviewee, making sure that they were aware of their rights, including the right to stop at any time and to walk away, as well as the right to refuse to answer any question. However, how can researchers be sure that they really do no harm?

The researchers endeavoured to ensure that the respondents were safe during the interviews, so that they could feel that they were speaking in a safe space. They were given refreshments, efforts were made to put them at ease, and they were often invited to take breaks. The team learnt that eating and drinking helped the interviewees a lot – and the researchers too. When interviewees showed signs of distress or fatigue, the researchers always asked them if they wanted to resume later or if they wanted to end the interview. Only once did the person answer yes to this question; this was on the second time that he was asked. This interviewee had headache. In Libya, a human trafficker had beaten his skull with a metal bar. Only one other interviewee changed her mind after agreeing to the interview. She was afraid that telling her story would be too traumatising.

***Loss of hope by research participants***

After many years of researching human trafficking in Libya, the authors of this book have noticed a certain weariness among migrants and refugees. What is the point of continuing to speak up, as the situation remains unchanged? This question was raised and debated many times at the start of interviews. "We are tired of talking," was

repeated by several interviewees. At the beginning of a group interview, the Eritrean translator explained:

> *When we are in Libya, we are in contact with too many journalists. […] We are in contact with them, but we don't get any solutions. When you are asking for us, if you can get our ideas, what solutions will you give us? […] Maybe people ask questions, they take pictures, too many problems. We kill our pain for the people. But if you don't give us a solution, it will hurt too much, you know. That is why… But it is nothing. Just you came here. Okay. It is nothing. Maybe we will get a solution. We are always thinking: For tomorrow, another day, maybe we will get another thing for tomorrow. That is why you are welcome. But we are tired. We are giving up.* (Interviewee 1057, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, June 2020)

The fact that, despite the articles and reports written, the situation has remained unchanged has led to a general incomprehension, which is shared by many migrants/refugees:

> *Look! I gave the number of big smugglers and I know the building where they are staying. I gave the information and I told them to track. I found everybody in Europe, in Geneva, I called, I tried to call, humanitarian, the protectors, to track the number of big smugglers. If, for example, I track your number, I can get where you are. So I can bomb you with drones. Those drones, sometimes they are bombing Al-Shabaab in Somalia, in Syria, ISIS [Islamic State] … So why are they not bombing smugglers who are more dangerous than extremists? Al-Qaeda. They are more dangerous, the smugglers!* (Interviewee 1098, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, 2019)

The interviews that were conducted for this book were often punctuated with requests for help. Before starting to speak, several interviewees asked, "What will I gain from this?" At the end of the interview, migrants often asked for support. Here are examples of the answers given to the question asked at the end of each interview: "Is there something else you want to say?"

> *Yes. Me, I want you, when you stay here a long time, when you have a good place, I want you to ask UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] what happens to those people, because many people become crazy.* (Interviewee 1004, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

*Me, I told you all of my story. I hope I will get an answer. I am waiting.* (Interviewee 1010, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

*I would like to help my family and my husband as well. If you can help me in any way, I would be grateful. Thank you.* (Interviewee 1017, interview with Wirtz, face-to-face, April 2019)

*I want to ask you about UNHCR, why? I want to know. Childhood protection, what is the meaning of this? The people in UNHCR also don't know. They send the message only. The case is ongoing. Ongoing for what? Going to Eritrea?* (Interviewee 0014, interview with Smits, face-to-face, July 2019)

When the refugees asked for help that we were able to provide, we did so. We called non-government organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies on numerous occasions, until they answered the requests of migrants and refugees we met in Tunisia for medical help. We gave medicines when people asked for them. We gave hot meals when people said that they were hungry.

Some interviewees also contacted us after their interview to ask for help, such as in this message received on Messenger:

*Hi! Really we have a big problem here in Zarzis. One of our brothers fell ill. It's his belly. He has been operated on twice but so far it has not been okay. Truly. IOM is no longer supporting him now. We need your help, please.* (Interviewee 1095, interview with Wirtz, Messenger message, September 2021)

In other cases, migrants and refugees contacted us to talk about a situation or testify about their day-to-day situation. This was the case with people who contacted us while they were in detention centres. In those cases – when in contact with migrants/refugees living in detention centres in Libya – the exchanges can be frustrating for both the researcher and the migrant/refugee, as not much can be done about their situation:

KS: *We keep trying. We don't forget you.*

0010: *Any how we can try – many articles posted, but still no change.* (Interviewee 0010-1, interview with Smits, WhatsApp conversation, January 2019)

The researchers listened carefully to the interviewees' perceptions of the situation. The approach taken by the researchers was flexible and could be adapted to the conditions of the interviewee and the location of the interviews. The answers that people gave, were no doubt also shaped by those conditions.

The research team worked to ensure that all available mechanisms were in place to safeguard topics of key importance: security, privacy, and freedom to speak. In this way, the team attempted to balance considerations about what information gap exists and how to contribute to filling them. Most importantly, we asked: is the participant ready to tell their story, even if it is a difficult story to tell?

***Conversations with minors***

The researchers sometimes encountered minors when conducting research in the field. Although the researchers did not intend to interview minors, there were situations in which minors were inadvertently part of a focus group, as it became apparent after the interview had started that the participant was a minor. Assessing the dynamics on the ground, the researchers decided that the minors would be impacted negatively and that it would potentially be traumatising to exclude them from the conversation, but the interviews were immediately adapted to a more conversational level. Hence, although the interactions with the minors are counted as 'interviews' in the overviews, the researchers approached these interactions as conversations. In addition, the researchers would ensure that such conversations happened under the guardianship of a trusted person or persons.

In nine interviews that were re-used (8 in the Netherlands, 1 in Libya via WhatsApp), the research team took the approach to let a European minor (with permission and supervision of the guardian) to speak to Eritrean minors in open conversations. This was done with the permission of, and under supervision of, the minor's guardian (in the Libya case) and the school (in the Netherlands). The conversations were thoroughly prepared and followed up to ensure that the minors on both sides felt comfortable and heard and the

guardians were closely monitoring the interviews and the follow up. The purpose was to carry out an engagement at similar age level (the minors were all between 15-17 years old) after there had been a request from a minor to the research team be allowed to speak on what had happened to him/her.

### *Security*

The topic of human trafficking for ransom carries a certain risk, both for the respondents, as well as for the research team. In order to minimise exposure to dangerous situations, a number of measures were taken, which were set out in a security protocol that the members of the research team were required to sign and follow. The security measures stipulated that interviews should be conducted in a safe location, and that precautions were taken in relation to communication about the location. The stipulations also included measures to limit the sharing of information on the specific activities of the research team. The team took advice from security specialists. The members of the team did not come across any particular issues during the research, or thereafter, and are (at time of writing) not aware of any exposure of respondents following their participation in the research.

## Data analysis

For this study, the data was analysed using a coding and labelling process. This process, which Srivastava and Thomson (2009) refer to as 'Framework analysis', is composed of five steps.

### *Framework analysis*

This section sets out the four steps that were taken to analyse the data.
**Step 1: Familiarisation:** In this phase, the researcher becomes familiar with the data collected (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). This was done during the transcription phase.

**Step 2: Identifying a thematic framework:** In this phase, the researcher recognises emerging themes or issues in the data (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). In this research, 50 labels were

designed to analyse the interviews, such as key dates of their journey, reason for leaving the country of origin, the subsequent place of residence (e.g., a refugee camp), border(s) crossed, payments made, name of locations, descriptions of locations, human rights abuses mentioned, sexual violence witnessed, smugglers/traffickers/chiefs of places mentioned, nationality of human traffickers, people working with human traffickers, interactions with humanitarian organisations, interactions with visitors, access to information, information produced, feelings mentioned, and so forth. These 50 labels were put into a table and on the basis of this table, other tables were produced, including: an overview of official and unofficial detention centres (see Chapter 10: *Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya* ), a list of human traffickers (see Chapter 11: *"You are the Ball – They are the Players": The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya*), and an overview of testimonies of sexual violence in Libya (see Chapter 15: *"We had no Choice; it's Part of the Journey": A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya*).

**Step 3: Indexing:** In this step, researchers identify portions or sections of the data that correspond to a particular theme(s) (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). In this phase, Klara Smits and Morgane Wirtz received the help of a team of researchers comprised of Anouk Smeets, Asma Ben Hadj Hassen, Annelies Coessens, Sara Gianesello, Bruna Mikami, Lucy Murray and Letizia Storchi.

**Step 4: Charting:** In this phase, the data is lifted from its original textual context and placed in charts that consist of the headings and subheadings drawn during the thematic framework (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). This phase was conducted at the same time as step three, with the same team of researchers.

**Step 4: Mapping and interpretation:** This involves the analysis of the key characteristics laid out in the charts (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009).

### *Coding-labelling strategies*

The coding-labelling process was defined by three strategies:

**Strategy 1: Purposive labelling:** This is based on key labels identified as relevant for the research, such as, for instance, the location of camps, names of human traffickers (connection men), and information on the routes, as well as labels relevant to determine the modus operandi.

**Strategy 2: Open labelling:** This is based on the interviews. New labels were added if these appeared to be necessary to cover topics that were not in pre-determined labels (for instance, 'violence against refugees and migrants residing in the city', or 'violence experienced after release' or 'refoulement from the Mediterranean Sea'). Once a label was added, the research assistants would go through the earlier interviews to find any information relevant to this label that they had missed.

**Strategy 3: Axial labelling:** This involves using the interviews for a particular research questions, which would be supported by a conceptual framework. The cells in the coding-labelling scheme were classified according to the axial labels, categorising the key concepts of the research question at hand.

During the writing process, priority was given to the quotes of Eritrean refugees and to the most illustrative of the themes and topics that came forward from the analysis. We also paid attention to the intelligibility of interviewees' discourse out of its context when selecting a quote to use in the text. The context of the quotes given in the text clearly identify whether the quote is illustrative of a trend that was seen in some, most, or every interview, or whether it was an exception.

### *Data management*

Before giving their consent to the interview, participants were all provided with information on data management. All of the data and metadata collected in this research have been stored on external hard drives and are password protected. The file containing personal details is kept password protected and separately to the file with the depersonalised data. The depersonalised data is only identifiable via codes known to the lead researchers. Different names and numbers

have been given to the interviewees to protect their identity. Some of the testimonies have been divided and attributed to different interview numbers so that the participants' journeys cannot be traced.

The members of the research team helping with the data analysis have all signed a confidentiality agreement that specifies that they are not to discuss the content of the research, nor were they allowed to store sensitive information. The members of the research team only had access to the depersonalised material. Communication containing sensitive information was conducted over protected and encrypted communication channels such as Signal and Protonmail.

## Management of potentially traumatising experiences of the research team

### *Counselling support to researchers and assistants*

Bruna Mikami was charged with the responsibility to follow up with and support the research-team in terms of how it was handling the trauma emerging in the research. Before starting, Mikami planned an outline for the intervention, based on behavioural analysis and, in particular, acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). Because of the innovative perspective that she was able to take, as an insider and listener, the lead researchers suggested that she write this section reflecting on this experience. All of the participants signed consent forms agreeing to the use of data gathered during Mikami's intervention for the writing of this section. Before starting, she emailed all of the participants (researchers and research assistants) with information regarding the intervention.

There were seven participants (eight including Mikami), who were members of the research team that Mikami counselled, which was dedicated to the coding and labelling of data collected from the victims of human trafficking in Libya. Some of the researchers were also responsible for interviewing the victims and transcribing their interviews. The interviews varied in terms of how graphic they were. However, during the process, all of the researchers became familiar, to some extent, with disturbing reports of torture, sexual abuse, food deprivation, extortion and other kinds of human rights violations.

Hence, there was a risk of the content of the interviews negatively affecting the researchers' emotional wellbeing.

Guided by the goals mentioned in the previous section, Mikami conducted 11 individual conversations (7 first meetings and 4 follow-ups) and 1 group meeting during the coding and labelling process. The first 11 individual conversations were directed towards understanding how each team member was feeling about the project and the content of the interviews, as well as understanding if they already had coping strategies. The follow-ups aimed to check in with those who wanted a follow up meeting and for them to give feedback on what was discussed in the first meeting. These one-on-one meetings aimed to provide a safe space for the participants to share anything related to the process and, if needed, ask for help. The group conversation was planned as a place for the participants to exchange coping strategies, so they could help each other, and to share any experiences they wanted to.

Mikami started with a first round of individual check-ins. She then talked to each team member to understand the impact of the content of the interviews on them. The team discussed how they were feeling, and which coping strategies they already used for stressful situations. She also recommended two mindfulness exercises (videos of guided meditations) for them to practice. After two weeks, she held a follow-up individual meeting with those who wanted to. Near the end of the year, Mikami led a meeting with the complete team to exchange experiences and coping strategies.

After each meeting, Mikami wrote notes including a summary of the main points of the conversations. These notes are the main source of data for this section. As stated in the previous sub-section, the chosen approach is exploratory and the sample size is relatively small. This intervention, therefore, did not follow a rigorous research methodology. Rather, the discussion of the results is inductive, in other words, it is focused on what the data manifests.

***Results***

Even though some negative emotions linked to the content of the interviews were reported, the researchers and their assistants did not report having any major problems that affected their overall wellbeing. Nevertheless, there are elements that emerged from the conversations that are worth mentioning and discussing, starting with the feelings participants reported and their perceptions of the impact of interviews on them. These will be presented in this sub-section.

Throughout the first session and follow-up with each participant, the researchers and their assistants reported how they perceived their feelings and their thoughts on the subject. Their experiences, although similar regarding their overall wellbeing, were diverse in the details. It is worth noting that, for this study, the number of times an element was mentioned is not the most important aspect of each particularity. Actually, any experience that participants found relevant to mention, except for those they asked not be included, even if only mentioned once by one participant, is significant for this exploration.

The participants listed some aspects that they saw as stressful or hard to deal with. One was not being able to take any immediate action to help the interviewees, which resulted in feelings of powerlessness. Another aspect that was seen as negative was that, as some interviewees were deeply impacted by their traumatising experiences, their reports were confused, and it was hard for the participants to untangle what was said. Furthermore, one participant stated that she was more affected by the interviewee's feelings than by the actual events.

Finally, some of the researchers reported that they felt strange at not being more emotionally affected by the interviewees' stories. One participant explained that she felt like she was not being empathetic enough. Although they did see this as negative to some extent, the researchers reporting this did not place any blame upon themselves, and they thought of some reasons for feeling this way. One of the factors some researchers believed had contributed to not feeling so much impact was that they were reading a transcription of the interviews, instead of talking to the victims directly. They explained

that not seeing their faces, hearing them talk or knowing their names made it easier to distance themselves from the stories. It was mentioned that the stories in the interviews reflected a reality very far from theirs, hence, it was hard to even imagine going through this kind of traumatic experience. However, one member of the research team who had direct contact with the interviewees said that re-reading the content made them remember the interviewee and their predicament, which was experienced as stressful at times.

One ameliorating factor mentioned was that a good proportion of the interviewees were already relatively safe at the time of the interview, and the researchers believe that this might have helped to reduce their feelings of powerlessness. Moreover, most of the researchers had dealt with disturbing content before and/or had taken preparatory courses before the start of the project. It was also mentioned that they were more impacted at the beginning of the research, but became accustomed to the content over time. Furthermore, some participants said that they believed that having a safe space with a trained clinician to talk about possible issues was comforting. Although they expressed that they were not deeply affected by the data, they assumed that knowing they had support if they needed it made them feel more confident. In addition, the coping strategies that each of them were already using were seen as helpful in reducing the stress during their work.

The research team shared their own coping strategies during the individual meetings and, later on, with the group in the final plenary session. Taking breaks from coding and labelling was the most mentioned strategy. Other cited tactics included physical exercise, previous preparation such as courses, the acceptance of feelings and limitations, avoidance and isolation, meditation, and remembering they had support and were not alone. Each participant had their own preferred strategies and felt that some strategies worked better than others, according to what they enjoyed more. They developed these strategies in different contexts through their experiences, such as in preparatory courses, yoga practices or psychotherapy. Therefore,

some were more familiar with the mindfulness exercises suggested than others, and some enjoyed them more than others.

During the plenary session, aside from sharing coping strategies, the researchers expressed that the support offered by Mikami, as a trained clinician, as well as by the other team members, as colleagues, was very important for them to feel safe and to remember that they were not alone. They agreed that the intervention was positive and they were thankful for having this resource during their participation in the research project.

***Discussion of the regulation of emotions of the research team***

Emerging from this study is the understanding of the identification of potential protective factors against secondary trauma among researchers, especially the provision of support as a prevention strategy. Protective factors are defined in American Psychological Association's dictionary as:

> *[…] a clearly defined behavior or constitutional (e.g., genetic), psychological, environmental, or other characteristic that is associated with a decreased probability that a particular disease or disorder will develop in an individual, that reduces the severity of an existing pathological condition, or that mitigates the effects of stress generally.* (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2022)

In the introduction, it was mentioned that the few studies that have investigated the possibility of secondary trauma among researchers suggest that there is a risk of this population developing trauma symptoms. This is because most of the participants in these studies reported being significantly affected by the traumatising experiences they investigated. The results of the current study are quite different: participants stated that the effect of the content of data that they were coding and labelling was limited.

Therefore, as opposed to the risk factors identified in previous studies, physical safety, limited personal contact with interviewees, adequate training and psychological support are identified as protective factors against secondary trauma for researchers. In this project, most of the research team members, with the exception of two, participated only in the coding and labelling of data, and were

not present in risky contexts for data collection, nor did they have direct contact with the interviewees. They believe that this helped to decrease the impact of the disturbing content with which they worked. However, such measures are not possible for researchers who need to collect data directly and work in the field. Thus, adequate training and psychological support seem to be relevant factors that need attention, as organisations and institutions can work towards providing these services for researchers at risk of developing secondary trauma. The present suggestion of exploring both of these factors adds to the recommendations of previous studies (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Shannonhouse *et al.*, 2016; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017).

While the results are contrasting, this does not mean that this study contradicts the risk of secondary trauma among researchers. It might be the case that there are factors that contributed to this difference in the outcomes. The cited studies, as well as literature on secondary trauma among clinicians, point to the existence of risk factors for researchers to develop trauma symptoms. Van der Merwe and Hunt (2019), for example, suggest that high levels of empathy and proximity to the victims of violence might increase the impact of traumatising stories on fieldworkers. Furthermore, participants of the studies by Whitt-Woosley and Sprang (2017), Shannonhouse *et al.* (2016), and Coles *et al.* (2014) also had in-person contact with victims of traumatising events. Most participants in the research group for the current project (with the exception of two, who were the main interviewers) did not have direct contact with the victims, which, according to participants' reports, contributed to their feeling of distance from their stories and realities.

Working in a high-risk setting is also a factor that increases the risk of secondary trauma, and even exposure to direct trauma, among researchers (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017). This was not the case in this study. Participants were not working in a risky context where the interviewees were subjected to violence. In addition, most of the participants had preparation before starting the coding and labelling process. Lack of preparation is another factor

that can contribute to the development of secondary trauma, for both clinicians and researchers, whereas adequate training may decrease the negative psychological impact (Coles *et al.,* 2014; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019).

Furthermore, participants from the study by Coles *et al.* (2014) stressed that they found support and debriefing important to make the work easier. However, they said that they often did not receive enough support from the organisations and institutions that they were associated with. The few studies on secondary trauma among researchers mentioned previously encourage the availability of emotional support for those who work with trauma (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Shannonhouse *et al.*, 2016; Van der Merwe & Hunt, 2019; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2017). In the context of this project, psychological support was available from the beginning of the coding and labelling process. In addition to the check-in meetings, members were informed that they could ask for a meeting whenever necessary. As participants stated, although they believed they were dealing well with their work, the fact they had access to support made them feel more confident.

Lastly, another possible reason for team members to feel only slightly affected by the interviews is that all of them had previously developed coping strategies. Although some coping techniques that they mentioned, such as avoidance and isolation, might increase the risk of traumatisation (Shannonhouse *et al.*, 2016), participants in this study reported that their coping strategies had a positive impact. Among their strategies, team members highlighted informal support from friends, family and colleagues. In the study by Coles *et al.* (2014), the researchers also described this kind of support as a resource for coping with stress from their work. However, the participants in this research mentioned that they could not disclose any details of the content of the data to their friends and relatives, due to the need for confidentiality. They stated that knowing that they had a space to talk to a clinician, who was also a member of the research team, was important, as they could discuss issues related to the confidential content, if they needed.

This participation by someone acting both as a clinician and participant is most likely not common in research teams. Hence, it is hard to put this forward specifically as a suggestion. Nevertheless, it can inspire some questions about supervision. For example: if a supervisor of the research project is trained to support the researchers whom he or she will supervise, can that protect those researchers from secondary trauma?

Being an open exploration with a small sample size, the present study is very limited in terms of providing substantial evidence on the subject. Therefore, recommendations for future studies include the use of a further defined methodology and samples that cover different situations and could explore the representativeness of the findings presented here. In addition, as expressed earlier, this section suggests further investigation into strategies for the prevention of secondary trauma in researchers.

**Conclusion**

This study is an explorative case study of the situation of Eritrean migrants and refugees in Libya, largely from an emic perspective. It was conducted as a series of interviews, mainly with survivors of human trafficking, but also with smugglers, translators, representatives of humanitarian organisations and others. The fieldwork was supplemented by a systematic literature review, which revealed that there has been little published on this topic. This research focused on Eritreans as they constitute an important part of the survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The individual chapters contain more details of the methodologies used for the specific chapters.

This chapter also looked at whether or not the highly traumatically charged situation of human trafficking for ransom is researchable. In order to investigate this question, an explorative look was taken at how the disturbing and traumatising experiences of the victims of human trafficking, might affect the researchers in touch with this content, as well as the outcomes of such research. It also looked at the ethics involved in relation to obtaining the real consent of the

survivors of this practice to their testimonies being used and the need to understand their interests and conditions for participating. Furthermore, the security and (data) privacy of both respondents and researchers needed to be carefully considered and protective measures taken to ensure that the 'do no harm' principle could be followed. This process required patience, reflection, and time.

This chapter identified the fact that researchers and research participants both have 'skin in the game'. Human trafficking for ransom is a topic that deeply affects the emotions of all involved. Accordingly, the particularities of this specific research team were identified, their perceptions and thoughts on the subject assessed, as well as the way they were dealing with their feelings. A research strategy was adopted to explicitly address the concerns associated with the emotional strain that the topic carries. The research team had to be conscious of the effect of the research on all the participants and regulate their own emotional challenges related to the pressures generated by the research.

Another challenge posed by this research was the risk of secondary trauma to the researchers. In this research, support was provided by a clinical psychologist – who was also part of the research team – to counter this risk. It was found that the availability of psychological support seems to have a preventive effect. This way, there is the possibility that researchers do not need to develop symptoms of trauma to seek a psychological service. Moreover, support offered by a professional clinical psychologist who is also involved in the project seems to be positive: the researcher and psychological supporter can discuss confidential content more openly and may be able to exchange similar experiences.

Hence, it is concluded that human trafficking for ransom is researchable, but that it leads to a particular set of concerns that must be considered and addressed to protect both the respondents who participate in the research (the victims and survivors of human trafficking for ransom) and the research team.

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**Ethical clearance**

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**Contribution by authors**

Mirjam Van Reisen is the author of several sections of this chapter and edited the overall text. Morgane Wirtz is the author of several sections of the chapter and provided detailed input for the sections on the implementation of the research. Klara Smits is the author of several sections of this chapter and provided detailed background on the information presented in this chapter. Bruna Mikami presented the documentation of her research as part of this chapter and is the author of several sections of this chapter.

**Author contributions**

Mirjam Van Reisen is the author of several sections of this chapter and edited the overall text. Morgane Wirtz is the author of several sections of the chapter and provided detailed input for the sections

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