

Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature-Review

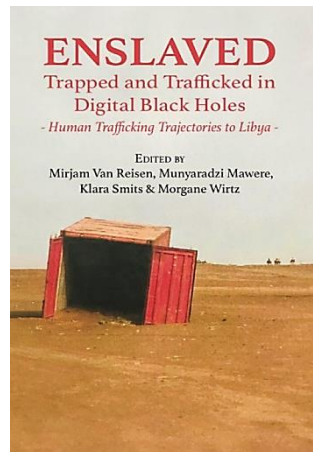
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Chapter in: Enslaved

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

From the book Series:

Connected and Mobile: Migration and Human Trafficking in Africa



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Contents

Preface by Honourable Chief Fortune Charumbira.....	vi
Acknowledgements	xix
Acronyms	xx
Glossary of Terms.....	xxii
Chapter 1.....	1
Human Trafficking for Ransom in Black Holes in the Digital Landscape: An Introduction	1
Trapped in a human trafficking cycle for ransom	1
Methodology and aim of research.....	4
Organisation of this book	5
Summary of findings.....	7
Human trafficking trajectories: A string of black holes.....	18
Number of migrants and refugees detained in Libya.....	20
Number of Eritreans and payments in Libya.....	23
Conclusion	23
Acknowledgements	25
Ethical clearance.....	25
Author contributions	25
References	26
Chapter 2.....	30
Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration	30
Introduction	30
Methodology	35
The flaw in the push and pull theory of migration	37
Problem framing.....	40
Black holes in the digital infrastructure.....	45

Ethnographic monitoring of black holes in the digital landscape	48
Remoteness and cultural entropy.....	54
The human trafficking cycle: Living in a black hole in the digital landscape	55
Conclusion	57
Acknowledgements.....	60
Ethical clearance.....	60
Author contributions	60
References	60
Chapter 3.....	70
Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma.....	70
Introduction	70
Is human trafficking for ransom researchable?.....	71
The research contributors.....	79
Research approach	80
The research Social Dynamics of Digital Innovation	83
Locations and materials for SDDI research.....	91
Fieldwork preparation and conduct	94
Data analysis.....	100
Management of potentially traumatising experiences of the research team	103
Conclusion	110
Acknowledgements.....	112
Ethical clearance.....	112
Contribution by authors.....	112
Author contributions	112
References	113

Documentaries and videos.....	118
Chapter 4.....	121
Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature-Review.....	121
Introduction	121
Methodology	123
Description of human trafficking for ransom	125
Practices	126
Human trafficking networks.....	133
Trauma of victims	136
Prosecution and delivery of justice.....	139
Unintended effects of ICTs	141
Documentation of human trafficking for ransom beyond the Sinai	145
Conclusion	145
Acknowledgements	147
Ethical clearance.....	148
Author contributions	148
References	148
Chapter 5.....	154
The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya.....	154
Introduction: Crossing the desert is not just a job.....	154
Methodology	157
A fertile ground: Historic context.....	160
Migrants and refugees in Libya today: Findings from the interviews	174
Discussion	184
Conclusion	185
Acknowledgements	187

Ethical clearance.....	187
Author contributions	187
References	187
Chapter 6.....	195
Enslaved by their Own Government: Indefinite National Service in Eritrea	195
Introduction	195
Methodology	200
The definition of slavery: Ownership vs control.....	203
Forced labour, but not slavery?.....	214
Forced labour for the purpose of economic development	221
Control over Eritrean national service conscripts	226
Conclusion	238
Acknowledgements	240
Ethical clearance.....	240
Author contributions	240
References	240
Chapter 7.....	255
Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking	255
Introduction	255
Methodology	257
Literature review: Exodus from the ‘black hole’ of Eritrea	260
Reasons for fleeing Eritrea	268
Leaving Eritrea	274
Situation in neighbouring countries.....	280
Conclusion	287
Acknowledgements	289

Ethical clearance.....	289
Author contributions	290
References	290
Chapter 8.....	296
TRUST Works: Delivering Trauma Recovery Understanding Self-Help Therapy (TRUST) to Refugees from Eritrea.....	296
Introduction	296
The need for mental health support for Eritrean refugees	297
Research question.....	305
Research design	307
Results	315
Discussion and conclusion	320
Acknowledgements	323
Ethical clearance.....	324
Author contributions	324
References	324
Chapter 9.....	332
Deceived and Exploited: Classifying the Practice as Human Trafficking	332
Introduction: From the Sinai to Libya	332
Documentation of human trafficking routes	333
Methodology	339
The start of the journey.....	341
The routes to Libya.....	355
Conditions on route across the desert	361
Payments for the journey	368
The organisation of trafficking to Libya	376
Discussion	379

Conclusion	383
Acknowledgements	386
Ethical clearance.....	386
Author contributions	386
References	387
Chapter 10	392
Straight Lines in the Sahara: Mapping the Human Trafficking Routes and Hubs through Libya.....	392
Introduction	392
Holding camps, official detention centres and departure points	394
Methodology	397
Southern route (from Niger)	400
South-eastern route (from Sudan)	405
Western route (from Algeria)	410
North-western route (from Tunisia)	412
North-eastern road (from Egypt)	414
North Libya – Departure point for the Mediterranean Sea	422
Discussion	443
Conclusion	445
Acknowledgements	446
Ethical clearance.....	446
Author contributions	447
References	447
Chapter 11	451
“You are the Ball – They are the Players”: The Human Traffickers of Eritreans in Libya	451
Introduction	451
Methodology	455

The relationship between refugees and traffickers.....	459
Key human traffickers and where they work.....	461
Libya as a ‘black site’ for Eritrean government’s nefarious activities	503
Cloaking of human traffickers.....	505
Synthesis: Tracing the trafficking network	506
Discussion	511
Conclusion	514
Acknowledgements	515
Ethical clearance.....	515
Author contributions	516
References	516
Chapter 12.....	521
Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya	521
Introduction: Living skeletons	521
Human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai and Libya	522
Methodology: Exploring the perspective of survivors	525
Experiences of detainees in holding camps	528
Extortion of ransoms	538
Discussion	560
Conclusion	564
Acknowledgements	566
Ethical clearance.....	566
Author contributions	566
References	566
Chapter 13.....	570
Hell on Earth: Conditions of Eritrean Refugees in Official Detention Centres in Libya	570

Introduction	570
Methodology	578
Arrests by Libyan Coast Guard.....	581
Conditions in official detention centres.....	583
Relationship between refugees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities.....	603
Discussion	613
Conclusion	618
Acknowledgements	619
Ethical clearance.....	620
Author contributions	620
References	620
Chapter 14.....	627
“Dead-dead”: Trapped in the Human Trafficking Cycle in Libya	627
Introduction	627
Methodology	631
Escape from detention – what’s next?	634
Travel within Libya	637
Urban areas	641
Facilities provided by humanitarian organisations	643
Slavery in Libya.....	644
The sea.....	648
Escaping by land to Tunisia.....	652
Evacuation to Niger.....	655
Discussion	659
Conclusion	662
Acknowledgements	663

Ethical clearance.....	663
Author contributions	663
References	663
Chapter 15	669
“We had no Choice; it’s Part of the Journey”: A Culture of Sexual Violence in Libya	669
Introduction: Many did that...rape	669
Methodology	672
Literature review: The culture of sexual violence in Libya	675
Theoretical considerations: Three categories of sexual violence	683
Sexual violence as a tool of subjugation	685
Sexual exploitation	691
Sexual violence as an opportunistic crime.....	697
Impact of rape: Trauma and secondary trauma.....	703
Discussion	706
Conclusion	709
Acknowledgement.....	710
Ethical clearance.....	710
Author contributions	710
References	710
Chapter 16	715
“Gate Closed”: The Situation in Libya during COVID-19	715
Introduction	715
Methodology	719
Push and pull theory of migration during COVID lockdowns.	723
Findings of the interviews.....	725
Findings of the desk review	740

Conclusion: Moving on, despite the restrictions, whatever the risks	747
Acknowledgements	748
Ethical clearance.....	749
Author contributions	749
References	749
Chapter 17	759
Active Agency, Access and Power: Social Media and Eritrean Refugees in Libya	759
Introduction	759
Digital connectivity in exile: Power and agency.....	762
The Eritrean online public sphere	765
Methodology	767
Findings	770
Discussion	778
Conclusion	779
Acknowledgements	780
Author contributions	780
References	781
About the Authors	786

Chapter 4

Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Literature-Review

Eva Lorger & Piet Gotlieb

Introduction

Migrants and refugees¹ often depend on human smugglers to undertake their migration journey, making them extremely vulnerable (Meyer & Brewer, 2010). However, what often begins as smuggling turns into trafficking when migrants and refugees are asked for more money than originally agreed upon or are taken to a location against their will (Chapter 1: *Enslaved in a Black Hole: Eritreans in the Hands of Human Traffickers in Libya*). At this point, the smuggling involves hostage-taking and exploitation (Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2012).

The discussion around human trafficking is usually centred on either labour trafficking or sexual exploitation. However, in 2009 a new form of trafficking was seen in the Sinai desert in Egypt. Dubbed ‘Sinai trafficking’ or ‘trafficking for

First documented in the Sinai in 2009, in this form of human trafficking victims are extorted for ransom while being tortured on the phone to their relatives to motivate payment. Trafficking for ransom has also been documented in other places and seems to have arisen in conjunction with the global spread of mobile connectivity. Sinai trafficking ended in 2014, but appears to have morphed into trafficking for ransom in Libya. However, the practice is not as well documented in Libya – a gap which urgently needs to be filled to eradicate the practice, prevent its further spread and bring those responsible to justice.

¹ In this chapter the terms ‘migrant’ and ‘refugee’ are used interchangeable in a non-legal way to refer to people on the move, without drawing any conclusions about their legal status (see Glossary of Terms).

ransom', this form of human trafficking entails the coerced displacement², sale, torture and extortion of victims (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Trafficking for ransom began with a convergence of events that negatively affected Eritreans, including the return of Eritreans from Italy (Van Reisen, 2014) and the indefinite extension of compulsory national service in Eritrea on the back of the 1998–2000 border war with Ethiopia (Buck & Van Reisen, 2017). Hence, the majority of victims of this form of trafficking, at that time, were Eritrean refugees.

This was the picture of Sinai trafficking, which was first observed in 2009 (but may have started earlier), which involved the trafficking, torture and holding for ransom of Eritrean refugees in the Sinai desert. Since then, trafficking for ransom has also emerged in other parts of the world, such as 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) and Greece (Callaghan, 2019). In addition, as migration trajectories change, the practice has also spread to other African countries, such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti (Buck & Van Reisen, 2017), and Libya (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Heisterkamp, 2018; Al-Dayel, Anfinson & Anfinson, 2021). Moreover, aided by developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs), the *modus operandi* of the traffickers continues to evolve (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018; Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). These changes in setting and practices have meant that the legal definition of trafficking does not always apply. Hence, a challenging question is how human trafficking for ransom is to be included in the international legal framework (Brhane, 2015).

² 'Coerced displacement' refers to the kidnapping of individuals, as opposed to 'forced (secondary) displacement', which is displacement prompted by circumstances that force people to leave their place of origin or residence (see Glossary).

The definition of human trafficking for ransom is the subject of some debate, both in empirical and judicial arenas. This chapter investigates *how the description of human trafficking for ransom has developed in the extant literature since 2009*. For this, a systematic literature review was carried out. This chapter offers an overview of the developments in the realm of human trafficking for ransom as reported in the academic literature.

Methodology

The methodology detailed here, describes a part of 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 full methodology of the research underpinning this book can be found in Chapter 3: *Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma*. The literature review presented in this chapter was done by Piet Gotlieb and Eva Lorgier between April 2021 and September 2021. For the purpose of this review, searches were carried out in Web of Science and Google Scholar databases. We started with the Web of Science.³

The list of articles obtained was scanned manually for relevance. Only articles that contributed to answering the research question and that

³ The following Boolean string was used:

TOPIC: ("human trafficking" OR "kidnap" for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR money OR exaction OR payment)" OR "sinai trafficking" OR "trafficking for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR payment OR exaction OR money)" OR KFR OR "captivity for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR money OR exaction OR payment)" OR "capture for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR exaction OR money OR payment)" OR "abduct" for (ransom OR blackmail OR extortion OR exaction OR money OR payment)" AND TOPIC: (refugee* OR *migrant* OR *migration) AND TOPIC: (ransom OR payment OR pay-off OR extortion OR blackmail OR exaction) NOT TOPIC: ("sex industry" OR prostitution OR "sex work*" OR "sex trafficking")

The timespan was 'All years' and the following databases were searched: WOS, KJD, MEDLINE, RSCI, SCIELO, using the search language 'Auto'.

were available in English were included. A list of four articles was used to perform a reference search, which yielded nine additional articles.

Next, a literature search was done using Google Scholar. We used ‘Sinai trafficking’ OR ‘trafficking for ransom’ as well as NOT ‘hospital’ as a search strategy. This yielded 30 relevant articles written in English, some of which overlapped with our previous searches. In addition, we included five books that we knew were relevant to our research question and performed a reference search for these as well. The second reference search provided nine additional articles, again, some overlapping with our previous searches.

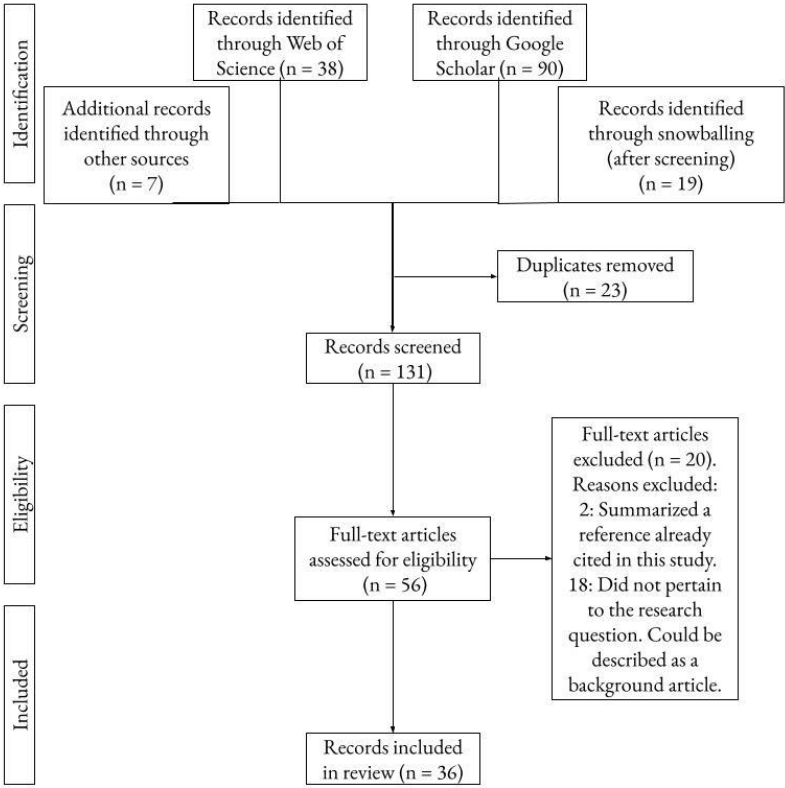


Figure 4.1. Flowchart of the selection process for the articles reviewed

This chapter is based on 36 articles and publications relating to the human trafficking of migrants and refugees for ransom that were selected at the end of the searches using the methodology described above. It provides an overview of the development of trafficking for ransom. The findings below are a summary of the selected articles and publications.

Description of human trafficking for ransom

‘Sinai trafficking’ is the synonym often used for human trafficking for ransom. The reference to Sinai relates to the geographical scope of the place where human trafficking for ransom was first described (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Historically, victims of trafficking for ransom were primarily trafficked to the Sinai desert (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; 2014), lending Sinai trafficking its name.

Today, human trafficking for ransom is no longer understood to only occur in the Sinai desert. Around the same time that Sinai trafficking happened, similar practices were reported in South East Asia and Mexico (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015; Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018). So, the definition of human trafficking for ransom has evolved from describing a modus operandi associated with a particular location to a focus on the practices involved, in the understanding that these practices are occurring in various locations. Human trafficking for ransom is defined as:⁴

[...] a specific form of trafficking characterised by a combination of different forms of trafficking such as trafficking for slavery, and forced begging and in which [...] severe violence and torture is utilized to invigorate the extortion of ransom. (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015)

This definition of human trafficking for ransom does justice to the scope, scale and nature of the practices involved in trafficking for ransom.

⁴ See also Glossary of Terms.

Practices

Human trafficking for ransom involves the following practices: recruitment and kidnapping; sale and on-sale; extortion, torture and extortion through forced begging; and payment of ransoms. An overview of these practices, emerging from the literature, is discussed in this section.

Recruitment and kidnapping

The ways of seeking out migrants and refugees to be trafficked varies between locations. For instance, migrants crossing from Mexico (mostly Tabasco and Veracruz) can find themselves kidnapped while traveling by train or following a train track. Sometimes, they are approached by someone who claims to be either a smuggler who can take them to the United States border or a representative of a humanitarian organisation offering assistance. Either way, they are tricked into going with that person, who then uses the situation to extort money. At other times, they are kidnapped by force (Meyer & Brewer, 2010).

The description of recruitment and abduction in Africa can be distinguished between pre-2013, when research was concentrated on human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai, and post-2013, when the destinations for abduction moved towards Libya.

Pre-2013

Prior to 2013, most of the articles about human trafficking for ransom in Africa described a similar way of recruiting victims. Weldehaimanot (2011) found that most Eritrean refugees sought out smugglers to be taken across the border – at that time to Egypt or Israel. The price and the method of payment was set beforehand. Then, the smugglers/traffickers⁵ broke their side of the contract by

⁵ The terms ‘smugglers’ and ‘traffickers’ are used interchangeably in this chapter in a non-legal way to describe practices, not to draw legal conclusions (see Glossary of Terms).

taking the migrants and refugees hostage and demanding a much larger payment than the one first agreed on.

Many migrants and refugees quoted in the literature reported that the price to be smuggled to Israel ranged from USD 2,500 to 3,000, but that this increased substantially once they arrived in the Sinai. The same is described by Mekonnen and Estefanos (2012), Jacobsen, Robinson, and Lijnders (2013), Ghebrai (2015), and Oette and Hovil (2017). Humphris (2013) described situations in which the family in the diaspora arranged and paid a smuggler to get their relative out of Eritrea, only to later find out that the relative had been kidnapped and extorted for ransom.

In other cases, migrants and refugees did not seek out smugglers, but were kidnapped before they reached the Sinai desert (Weldehaimanot, 2011) or were forced to travel there (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2013). Humphris (2013) reported that individuals who were kidnapped were given the opportunity to pay more and be released in Sudan as opposed to the Sinai. However, no matter the payment, they were released in the Sinai. This resulted in many individuals being kidnapped by another trafficker in the Sinai all over again.

Due to their general knowledge of the dangers and abuses, many migrants and refugees were reported to avoid Israel. Therefore, the traffickers were turning to the refugee camps to recruit victims (Weldehaimanot, 2011). Some migrants and refugees were described as having been taken from the agricultural fields close to Shagarab, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) refugee camp in Sudan (Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2012). In 2012, the UNHCR addressed the security issues in refugee camps in Sudan due to the high number of abductions of asylum seekers (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Humphris (2013) also described an incident in which Rashaida⁶ abducted refugees on a Commissioner for Refugees (COR) bus on the way to Shagarab refugee camp. In another study by

⁶ The Rashaida (also called or Bani Rashid) are a tribe of ethnic Bedouin Arabs in the Horn of Africa (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rashaida_people).

Connell (2013), one interviewee described being kidnapped from Shagarab refugee camp and taken in a truck full of other refugees to a Bedouin outpost in the Sinai. Furthermore, Humphris (2013) says that there were also Eritreans who arranged the trafficking of fellow refugees from within the camp.

In addition, there have been reports of traffickers conspiring with Sudanese security forces and police (Ghebrai, 2015; Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim, 2017). These reports, as well as the bad conditions in the refugee camps, have led to a loss of trust and sense of security and safety among refugees within the camps, which has resulted in many of them fleeing to avoid being kidnapped. Unfortunately, for many, this was followed by abductions to the Sinai on their way to other cities. Again, some decided to pay smugglers, who turned against them (Ghebrai, 2015).

Brhane (2015) described different practices of trafficking for ransom of Eritreans used in different parts of the journey. The first part involved fleeing from Eritrea through Ethiopia and Sudan to Egypt. On this path, migrants passed through a chain of traffickers who extorted them for money before reaching the final kidnapper. After paying, they were either released or sold to another trafficker in the Sinai.

Post-2013

After 2013, Eritrean refugees starting taking an alternate route: from Eritrea to Ethiopia, Sudan and then Libya. This resulted in the spread of human trafficking for ransom on this route. Since the uprising in Libya in 2011, the country has largely been under the control of armed groups, which have taken over many detention centres used to house migrants and refugee and of which some are engaged in the trafficking business (Flynn, 2017; Al-Dayel, Anfinson, & Anfinson, 2021).

Another route involves Eritrea and Yemen. For Eritrean refugees to reach Yemen, they need to cross the Red Sea by boat. Traffickers pay the boat crew around USD 133 for a refugee, who they kidnap and sell on to another trafficker. After the passing from trafficker to

trafficker, refugees are taken to large camps where they are tortured and extorted for ransom (Brhane, 2015).

Detailed literature on recruitment post-2013 is limited. Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz (2019) provide an empirical study of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. They found that refugees are kept in warehouses, “abused and commoditised, sold and extorted for ransom” (p. 261). The authors classify the situation in Libya as “slave-like” and qualify the Eritrean refugees among them as a “particularly repressed gated community” (p. 290).

Van Reisen and Al-Qasim (2017) note that both pre- and post-2013, unaccompanied minors from Eritrea were/are particularly vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking for ransom. The authors state that Eritrean minors often flee due to threat of conscription into the national service and the fragmentation of families. As they are underaged and without resources, this group are often without alternatives, argue the authors.

Extortion

In almost all cases of human trafficking for ransom described in the literature, victims are taken to special places that serve the purpose of keeping the refugees from escaping. Weldehaimanot (2011) reports that victims are chained and searched for a phone or an address book to determine whether or not they have family members abroad who can pay their ransom. Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020) describe the women as being separated from the men, and ill or pregnant women being separated from the healthy women and women who are not pregnant. Sometimes, there is an Eritrean who works as a translator, telling the victims to call their families and ask for money.

The literature describes victims being forced to call their relatives or friends to beg for money to be released. The traffickers are described as using various methods to convince relatives to pay, such as shooting in the air with a gun (Weldehaimanot, 2011) or physically torturing them so that their relatives can hear their screams (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Victims’ relatives go to extensive lengths to

obtain money for their release. According to Lijnders and Robinson (2013), relatives often have to sell their belongings (such as jewellery, livestock, or even their house) or resort to begging. If they cannot pay the ransom amount demanded, victims are tortured further and even killed (Ghebrai, 2015; Goor, 2018). Furthermore, the victims may have their organs removed to settle the ransom through organ trafficking, although this is unconfirmed (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Sometimes, family members cannot pay. In this case, the literature describes a ransom negotiator as coming to assist, by acting as a concerned friend whose job it is to convince them to pay (Wille, Al-Fakih, Coogole & Human Rights Watch, 2014). The death of hostages due to their injuries or murder is not uncommon. This does not stop the traffickers from collecting money. Many relatives end up paying ransom for victims who have already died or who die later due to unsafe release (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).

Al-Dayel, Anfinson, and Anfinson (2021) describe how the victims can end up in two kinds of detention centres in Libya (often both): the official sites that are controlled by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) and the unofficial centres controlled by traffickers. Despite the DCIM proclaiming the humane treatment of refugees in official centres, horrible human rights violations are committed in both places, according to the authors. The refugees are then often trafficked in various ways. They are either extorted for ransom, sold in slave markets (if they cannot pay the ransom, or even if they have already paid the ransom), or sold to the next extorter (Al-Dayel *et al.*, 2021).

Treatment of victims: conditions of captivity and torture

The abusive treatment of victims of human trafficking for ransom includes beating, electrocution, drowning, burning, hanging and amputation, (gang) rape and forced pregnancy (Van Reisen, Estefanos, & Rijken, 2012), punching, slapping, kicking, and whipping (Lijnders, 2012), hanging by hands, burning with melted plastic (Connell, 2013), burning with cigarette butts or heated rubber and metal (Van Reisen, & Rijken), and tying male genitals with a string attached to a full water bottle (Wille *et al.*, 2014). Acts of torture with

the purpose of humiliation and degradation have been reported by several survivors of human trafficking. Lijnders (2012), for instance, reports that refugees are buried in the sand, hung by hands or legs, burned with hot iron bars, and exposed to the sun for prolonged periods of time. They can be denied access to water (Rozen, 2017) and food, as well as forced to take drugs (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018). Poor hygiene and the outbreak of disease is common in camps (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020). Mekonnen and Estefanos (2012) describe victims being chained and left in open camps where there is no water or bathroom. Furthermore, some victims are made to work for the duration of their captivity and women are used as sex slaves (Weldehaimanot, 2011). Van Reisen and Rijken (2015) report victims being suspended from the ceiling, gasoline poured on them and set on fire, or forced to stand in the desert heat for a long time. Some were urinated on or had their fingernails cut off. Women are often raped, metal pipes inserted into their vagina or anus, their genitalia and breasts burned, and stripped naked and their buttocks whipped. Men and children are also raped (Goor, 2018).

Discrimination between victims was also reported. Firstly, victims who manage to pay the ransom amount are moved to a better location, where they are occasionally able to go outside, according to Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2020). According to some literature, Christian Eritreans and Ethiopians are kidnapped and extorted more often than other nationalities and religions, and Eritreans and some Ethiopians are exposed to harsher torture and violence than others (Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken, 2012). Furthermore, Eritreans are thought to have more money and, therefore, are extorted for larger ransoms (Weldehaimanot, 2011). Muslim victims are treated better than others and extorted for smaller amounts. They receive opportunities to work for their kidnappers, usually as an interpreter, and sometimes even have the chance to escape. Christian women are sometimes made to convert to Islam (Yohannes, 2021). Similarly, in Libya the amount of ransom money is decided based on the victim's nationality and ethnicity. If the individual is ascribed a higher value, s/he is put into one of the official

centres or handled by more established armed groups (Al-Dayel *et al.*, 2021).

Payment

The studies included in this literature review report a wide range of ransom amounts, ranging from USD 1,000 to USD 50,000. They also all report a rise in the ransom amounts demanded over the years. In the Sinai, Connell (2013) says that ransoms were set to around USD 3,500–5,000 in 2009, rising to USD 30,000 by 2012; Heisterkamp (2018) reports Sinai ransoms to be as high as USD 50,000. According to Weldehaimanot (2011), in the Sinai, Eritreans and Ethiopians paid more than victims from other countries, such as those from Sudan. Van Reisen and Rijken (2015) found that Ethiopians were often forced by the traffickers selling them to lie that they were Eritreans, so that their price would increase.

The literature describes payments as being made in various ways. In most cases, the payments were made by hand or transferred to people working with the traffickers in different urban centres (e.g., Cairo, Tel Aviv, Beersheba, Khartoum, and locations in Saudi Arabia). The money is, therefore, not taken to the place where the victim is held (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2013). For victims in Yemen, the money is transferred through international cash transfer agencies in Haradh. Some relatives pay the ransom through the *hawala* system is a system outside the formal banking system in which money is exchanged to keep parallel accounts in different monetary geographies (usually between hard and soft currencies) without the money being physically transferred to the actual destiny. As the system is informal, transfers are difficult to track. This is the preferred method of payment and, according to one report, some refugees are treated better if they use it (Wille *et al.*, 2014).

Organ trafficking

When Sinai trafficking was first uncovered, news outlets reported organ trafficking as a motive (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). However, it has not been conclusively confirmed that organ trafficking is not part of human trafficking for ransom. Organ removal could

potentially be linked to (or part of) human trafficking for ransom, especially when victims are unable to pay the required ransom (Lijnders, 2012) or as a threat to encourage the payment of ransoms (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012).

Human trafficking networks

Involvement of officials from Eritrea

In the first articles about Sinai trafficking, the involvement of Eritrean refugees as making up the majority of victims was discussed (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). The realisation that Sinai trafficking involved particularly Eritrean refugees was not immediately clear, but in subsequent descriptions the overwhelming number of Eritrean victims of this type of trafficking was described (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). The dire human rights situation in Eritrea (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Goor, 2018; Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017), the indefinite military service (Buck & Van Reisen, 2017), and the limited migration options for Eritreans were identified as having created the perfect environment for Eritreans to be targeted as victims (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Multiple sources specify a link between Eritrea and Sinai trafficking (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Similarly, in the context of human trafficking for ransom expanding geographically, refugees are the primary targets due to their vulnerability (e.g., Horzum, 2017). In a progression from the earlier literature, Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) link human trafficking for ransom to human trafficking networks that originate in Eritrea, targeting and affecting Eritrean refugees disproportionately. The evidence for the involvement of Eritrean top officials initially emerged in the United Nations Security Council Monitoring Reports, which describe in detail the involvement of Eritrean General Manjus in the network set up to traffic Eritrean refugees (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017). Being in control of the route from within

Eritrea across the (closed) border with Sudan,⁷ the traffickers make wide use of their privileges (to cross roadblocks and the border) and means (such as cars for transportation):

... the creation of a widespread illicit internal and cross-border black market, together with stringent controls on the movement of people, has created an environment in which human trafficking and smuggling were able to flourish and became embedded in the 'system'. (Van Reisen, 2017, p. 3)

Van Reisen (2017) concludes that there is:

... evidence that arms smuggling routes and networks from Eritrea were used for the implementation of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai and that the Eritrea regime controlled the arms/trafficking operation. There is strong evidence that the trafficking networks are linked directly to the Eritrean military. (Van Reisen, 2017, p. 3)

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970 (2011) and Resolution 1973 (2011) have identified human traffickers operating in Libya and imposed individual targeted sanctions, including on two human traffickers from Eritrea. Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) describe how the trafficking network was established by an Eritrean by the name of Abderaza or Abdulrazak, who set up the trafficking route to Libya as early as 2005 (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). The network made use of the diplomatic and other capabilities of the Eritrean state to do so (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017).

Other agents and handlers

The literature review for this study mainly covered articles that spoke in detail about agents during the time when trafficking for ransom went through the Sinai desert. The vast majority of articles reported the traffickers to be ethnic Rashaida, who live between the border of Eritrea and Sudan. According to Lijnders and Robinson (2013), many Rashaida work in camel pastoralism. This means that the often travel

⁷ It is extremely difficult for Eritreans to obtain an exit visa and there is a shoot on sight policy at the border for those who cross without one (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).

across borders and to Egypt, as the demand for camel meat is high there; hence, they have regular cross-border access. Furthermore, many Rashaida possess more than one citizenship, allowing them to travel easily and giving them the opportunity to engage in smuggling, which can turn into trafficking.

According to Humphris (2013), many refugees were also kidnapped by the police at the borders. In Sudan, various agents engaged in kidnapping and selling Eritreans to the Rashaida during the time of Sinai trafficking. Local Sudanese people abducted victims who were looking for refugee camps, while Sudanese authorities and police received bribes from traffickers. Furthermore, Eritreans collaborated with the kidnappers, working as translators or engaging in torture (Jacobsen *et al.*, 2013).

Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim (2017) conclude that the Rashaida in eastern Sudan “were operating directly under the authority of General Manjus” (p. 57) and allege that there was an agreement between General Manjus and an unnamed Rashaida leader. These authors also refer to an office of Manjus in eastern Sudan, to which the Rashaida directly reported. This office oversaw transactions in relation to refugees from Eritrea in eastern Sudan and collected intelligence (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Reim, 2017).

A small amount of literature is available on the agents involved in the trafficking routes that have (re-)opened to Libya since Sinai trafficking ceased in 2014⁸ (see Wille *et al.*, 2014; Brhane, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

⁸ “Even though the anti-terrorism activities in North Sinai led to actions close to the encampments of the kidnappers, no effective actions were taken to free the hostages (until the fourth quarter of 2014, when so-called ‘torture-houses’ in the Rafa area in North Sinai were destroyed)” (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015).

Trauma of victims

Primary trauma

The literature on trafficking for ransom shows that the resulting trauma can be severe. Such trauma can be physical or emotional, as a consequence of the torture endured while being trafficked for ransom (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim (2017) give a detailed overview of the trauma resulting from human trafficking for ransom based on data collected in a systematic inventory carried out with victims of human trafficking for ransom in the Sinai. This research was carried out in 2015 and 2016 among victims of Sinai trafficking in the refugee camps of Shemelba, May Ayni, Adi Harish and Hitsats in Tigray, in Ethiopia.

The most obvious visible form of trauma as a result of trafficking for ransom is the physical trauma suffered by the victims. In this category, an estimated 24% of refugees have endured severe physical and psychological trauma, with 59% suffering severe malnutrition (Rozen, 2017). Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim (2017, pp. 286–291) provide an exhaustive list of physical trauma, distinguishing between trauma sustained on the way to the Sinai, during detention in the Sinai, and after being released or leaving the Sinai. These authors also list the forms of trauma reported by Sinai survivors, in which all of the 28 interviewees reported that they often experienced food and water deprivation, a torture practice referred to as ‘head banging’, and being beaten (Van Reisen, Kidane & Reim, 2017, p. 295). Sexual violence was also reported including sadistic acts, such as ordered rape between hostages, rape in front of family members, or ordered rape by family members. Men and boys are among the victims of such rape (Van Reisen, Kidane & Reim, 2017, p. 290).

For those who survive, physical injuries can serve as a way to communicate the unspeakable things that happened to them during the trafficking experience (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim (2017) also report physical and chronic complaints by the survivors, extending several years after their release. Often times, the medical situation of survivors is left unattended.

Survivors can suffer psychological trauma, often amounting to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim (2017) report high levels of post-traumatic stress among 35 survivors of Sinai trafficking, measured using the Impact of Event Scale. Other studies have also reported a prevalence of high levels of post-traumatic stress among survivors of human trafficking for ransom (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020; Siman-Tov, Bodas, Wang, Alkan, & Adini, 2019). Individuals suffering from mental trauma often report experiencing nightmares (Wille *et al.*, 2014). The degree to which a victim of trafficking for ransom suffers trauma is more strongly correlated with the duration of the stressful event, rather than the prevalence of such events (Siman-Tov *et al.*, 2019). In addition to PTSD, research shows that victims can suffer a loss of certain beliefs and identity as a result of torture (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017).

Secondary and collective trauma

In addition to the trauma of victims, trauma can be experienced by a community as a whole, as secondary trauma or collective trauma. Trauma can be labelled as collective trauma if it affects the group identity, damages bonds and impairs the sense of community, as described by Kidane and Van Reisen (2017). Collective trauma deeply affects the culture of that community (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017; Kidane, 2021). This is certainly the case among Eritreans, who are the primary victims of trafficking for ransom.

As previously mentioned, ICTs impact on trafficking for ransom in a variety of ways, including the creation of so-called ‘secondary victims’ who suffer secondary trauma (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). Secondary victims are those who have not directly suffered torture at the hands of traffickers, but who have witnessed these practices applied to their loved ones through audio calls, videos or livestreaming. Although secondary victims have not directly experienced torture, the impact of this shared experience, enabled by ICTs, is great. In addition, traffickers create secondary trauma by damaging family structures (Buck & Van Reisen, 2017). This can

happen as a result of, for example, coerced displacement⁹ or the stigma that surrounds victims of trafficking (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012).

These different types and levels of trauma converge to fundamentally destroy the spirit of the community in the diaspora and the country of origin (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). The torture practices employed in trafficking for ransom are designed to impoverish and disempower victims (Mawere, 2019), because greater suffering by the victims equals greater profits for the traffickers. Secondary victims are, through desperation, forced to share the trauma with their community, as they cannot pay the excessive amounts of ransom on their own (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). Using ICTs, trauma can not only be spread through a community, but in Eritrea, social media and radio broadcasting have meant that this form of trauma has impact on nearly all Eritreans (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). So, as ICTs develop, so does trafficking for ransom and the trauma suffered, as ICTs enable the trauma to be collectivised and shared by the whole community (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018).

Secondary and collective trauma are exacerbated by the lack of support from the governments of host countries and countries of origin, the international community and the media. This is certainly the case for Eritreans, who have been the primary victims of trafficking for ransom. Eritreans feel ignored and neglected as a result of inaction on behalf of the media, the government and the international community (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017). Moreover, the fate awaiting the refugees who survived the torture camps is often not care and compassion; in reality, survivors are often denied access to care and, instead, faced with border shootings in Egypt, or detention in Israel, as Israel's policy has been to see all irregular immigrants as illegal (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Moreover, many

⁹ 'Coerced displacement' in this context refers to the kidnapping of individuals from within Eritrea or refugee camps to be trafficked for ransom (see Glossary of Terms).

are returned to third countries or their country of origin through refoulement or voluntary return programmes, including to Eritrea (Rozen, 2019; Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz, 2019). Authors Pijnenburg and Rijken (2019) note that as victims of human trafficking in Libya appear underreported, they may be part of the group of vulnerable migrants and refugees returned by international organisations. As Mekonnen and Sereke (2017) point out, the international community has a legal obligation to protect victims of human trafficking, which it is failing dismally to uphold.

Prosecution and delivery of justice

The victims of trafficking for ransom are looking for justice in response to the serious harm that they have suffered – not only in psychological and physical senses, but also in a legal sense. As explored previously, trauma care is difficult to obtain for most trauma survivors. However, from a legal perspective, much of the necessary legal framework does in fact exist on a national level, according to Brhane (2015). The difficulty lies in the inclusivity of international legislation, as well as the ability and willingness of national governments to prevent, suppress and punish the perpetrators of human trafficking (Human Rights Watch, 2014; Brhane, 2015; Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017).

On a national level, governments have a responsibility to prevent, protect and prosecute human traffickers (referred to as 3Ps), as set out in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol) (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017; Horzum, 2017). The forms of exploitation mentioned in the Trafficking Protocol include sexual exploitation, slavery or similar practices to slavery, servitude and the removal of organs (Horzum, 2017).

Van Reisen and Rijken (2015) argue that human trafficking for ransom involves forced begging, which falls under the Protocol. The practice of trafficking for ransom could constitute a crime against humanity under Article 7(2)(c) of the Rome Statute, given the element of slavery and the link between human trafficking for ransom and

government complicity (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017; Van Reisen & Estefanos, 2017). Moreover, torture and slavery are a violation of *Jus Cogens* norms, which means that a state can be held responsible for the violation even if they are not party to a convention concerning the violation (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). The international community can, and should, intervene in instances of crimes against humanity or violations of *Jus Cogens*.

An alternative to state responsibility is to prosecute individuals for their responsibility in trafficking for ransom. Problems regarding the practicalities of this matter include the elusiveness of the individuals most responsible (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017). However, should such a person be found, the legal process is relatively simple (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017). First, individual criminal responsibility arises from Article 7 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) with regards to enslavement. The next question is whether or not the person in question is the most responsible person. Lastly, a prosecutorial forum must be chosen, which is likely to be the ICC, a national foreign court or a court in the national jurisdiction of the victim of human trafficking for ransom under the passive personality principle (Mekonnen & Sereke, 2017).

Despite this national and international responsibility to protect, prevent and prosecute, the literature emphasises that most victims do not receive legal justice within any of the relevant jurisdictions, especially at the national level. This is mainly due to the lack of implementation of the 3Ps at a national level. As established previously, government officials in Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt are complicit in instances of trafficking for ransom, making investigation and prosecution exponentially harder in these jurisdictions (Human Rights Watch, 2014). In addition, receiving countries often do not provide the care they are legally obliged to provide to human trafficking victims. For example, refugees and victims of trafficking for ransom are detained in Israel under a 2012 amendment to the Prevention of Infiltration Law of 1954 that allows the detention of all who cross the border irregularly (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken,

2012) – and these people are seldom identified as victims of human trafficking (Rozen, 2019).

Thus, government complicity and international inaction are the most obstructive factors in access to legal justice for victims of trafficking for ransom. Even if the international legal framework is applicable, as some scholars argue (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012), this does not mean it is applied. Some scholars recommend expanding Article III of the Trafficking Protocol (Brhane, 2015), but where government action is missing, this would not have any immediate effect.

In line with this observation and the legal obligations established in this section, academics and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have made numerous recommendations to governments and the international community to remedy the situation. Some of the most important recommendations include the expansion of resources to fight and persecute human trafficking, the investigation of the responsibility of government officials, halting the refoulement of victims of trafficking for ransom from Egypt, Sudan, Ethiopia and Libya, the identification of victims of human trafficking for ransom and the provision of (mental) healthcare to victims (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Van Reisen, Kidane & Reim, 2017; Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017; Rozen, 2019).

Unintended effects of ICTs

The impact of ICTs on trafficking for ransom is difficult to overstate. As ICTs have developed, so too has trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). This is largely due to the way that ICTs are spreading rapidly and the impact they continue to have in communities around the world. This process is described in the research of Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans and Mawere (2019). Historically, imperialism had shaped the world to serve the hegemonies that dominate the global economy, with imperial powers extracting resources from less developed countries. The world's digital infrastructure has followed a similar pattern of development (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam & Ong'ayo,

2019). Although attempts have been made to provide more access to ICTs in the developing world, many communities remain unconnected and disempowered. Scholars assert that the information society is made up of nodes between which information travels. As a result, in places where nodes are few and far between, so-called ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape occur (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, van Stam & Ong’ayo, 2019). The occurrence of black holes is widening the digital divide, which is increasingly pointed to as one of the key factors enabling human trafficking for ransom to emerge around the world at almost the same time (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018).

Communities in these black holes are disempowered in four distinct ways, leading them to be more susceptible to human trafficking and especially trafficking for ransom. First, Eritreans seeking to flee Eritrea have limited access to information about the migration routes (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). Secondly, this situation is not merely caused by a lack of access to information due to black holes; in Eritrea, the government controls the media and information flows such that information about migration options is heavily restricted (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019) (see Chapter 7: *Escaping Eritrea: The Vulnerability of Eritreans to Human Trafficking for Ransom*). Thirdly, refugees are further constrained in their mobility because the use of ICTs can make them visible to the regime (Chonka & Haile, 2020). Fourthly, Eritreans attempting to migrate are susceptible to misinformation when accessing ICTs, potentially putting them in dangerous situations along the migration journey (Chonka & Haile, 2020). Thus, information about migration options is lacking, at best, and dangerous, at worst.

Consequently, refugees are dependent on human smugglers to provide them with the information they need to undertake the migration journey. Due to this culmination of difficulties faced by refugees, the smugglers and traffickers become the gatekeepers of information and the refugees a ‘gated’ community (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). The added difficulty in this instance is the inability of refugees to produce and distribute information (Van

Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). As Van Reisen and her colleagues point out, this disempowers refugees in two ways. Firstly, Eritreans are unable to disseminate information about migratory options (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019); or, if they are under the control of a human trafficking network, they are limited in how they can communicate their suffering to the outside world. Secondly, they are forced to communicate as part of a strategy to get them to begging from relatives. This comes at great risk, as victims face gruesome punishments and torture (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz (2019) propose the term ‘exploited gated’ to describe those subject to these practices, which are forced upon an involuntary gated community.

An additional factor contributing to the difficulties faced by refugees in a trafficking situation is the relationship that the ICTs facilitate between victims and traffickers (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). In a face-to-face situation between traffickers and victims, the development of a potential relationship could possibly allow victims relatively more power to negotiate. However, given the nature of human trafficking organisations as geographically dispersed and shadowy, ICTs enable those at the top of the organisation to remain anonymous, making any form of negotiation less likely (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). In a case when the Eritrean person trafficked was known to the top of the Eritrean human trafficking network, the person was actually released following the intervention of relatives (Van Reisen, Estefanos and Reim, 2017:63).

The lack of access to ICTs by refugees creates an imbalance in political power, both in relation to the state of Eritrea, in the case of Eritrean refugees, and in relation to smugglers and traffickers, in general (Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). In relation to the gatekeepers, the gated suffer a severe disparity in political power, because they experience no autonomy (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). This is largely a result of the aforementioned factors, with victims not being able to receive or distribute information. So,

access to ICTs is unequally distributed between traffickers and victims, and the gatekeepers and gated.

Traffickers make extensive use of ICTs for various purposes. First and foremost, ICTs have increased the ransom amounts demanded by traffickers through the use of phones to communicate the suffering of their victims to family members (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2020; Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2012; Connell, 2013; Goor, 2018; Buck & Van Reisen, 2017). Hearing the suffering of a loved one motivates the collection of money for the payment of their ransom. Traffickers obtain the number of a contact at the beginning of the journey, as smugglers ask for one valuable piece of information – the phone number, address and name of a friend or relative (Meyer & Brewer, 2010; Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019). Since 2016, traffickers have started to shift from audio calls of the victim while being tortured to visual livestreams of the events as they happen (Van Esseveld, 2019).

ICTs are used by traffickers and victims alike to collectivise the suffering endured by victims in an attempt to raise the ransom amount. Most ‘secondary victims’ – those receiving the phone call or livestream – are unable to raise the ransom amount on their own. Hence, they share the suffering with others in an attempt to appeal for help to raise more money. This has worked to the advantage of human traffickers as it has enabled them to increase ransom amounts (Kidane & Van Reisen, 2017; Buck & Van Reisen, 2017).

In addition, traffickers use ICTs for the purposes of organising their operations. This includes coordinating with their associates and other traffickers, communicating with migrants and refugees, networking, and collecting ransom through digital transfers (Van Esseveld, 2019; Van Reisen, Smits, Stokmans & Mawere, 2019) (Chapter 12: *Living Skeletons: The Spread of Human Trafficking for Ransom to Libya*). In addition, ICTs allow traffickers to maintain their anonymity (Van Esseveld, 2019) through the use of codes exchanged between traffickers, mediators and those being trafficked (Van Reisen, Gerrima, Ghilazghy, Kidane, Rijken & van Stam, 2018).

Despite the relative lack of access to ICTs by migrants and refugees, they do often carry mobile devices and use them for various purposes. ICTs can be used to find family members and access support (Van Esseveld, 2019). In addition, mobile devices are used to contact smugglers to transport them to the desired destination (Van Esseveld, 2019). Moreover, mobile devices can store photos of the migrant/refugee's life, as a way to remain connected with their origins (Van Esseveld, 2019).

Documentation of human trafficking for ransom beyond the Sinai

Although the literature review for this chapter aimed to include all available literature on human trafficking for ransom, literature on situations other than those that occurred in the Sinai are limited. As can be seen from the methodology, the authors not only included terms such as 'ransom' and 'human trafficking', but also broader terms such as extortion, kidnapping, and a combination of such alternative terms. Particularly with regards to Libya, there have been a number of non-academic reports on human trafficking for ransom. However, it appears that there is not (yet) extensive academic research and documentation on human trafficking for ransom. There are some articles that assess the situation in Libya, which have been included in this review, but the vast majority of articles on human trafficking for ransom are related to the Sinai. The literature suggests that study of human trafficking for ransom in situations other than Sinai is not systematic and incomplete, and there is a need for solid academic engagement.

Conclusion

The purpose of this systematic literature review was to understand how the description of human trafficking for ransom has evolved. Prior research on trafficking focused primarily on trafficking for labour or sex trafficking, and mostly excludes trafficking for ransom, which is a fairly new phenomenon. Most of the extant literature on human trafficking for ransom relates to the events that took place in

the Sinai desert from 2009 to approximately 2013.¹⁰ So far, the situation in other locations, including Libya, has not been covered in great detail. Only a few academic works were found that explicitly focus on this topic. Despite attempts to further analyse the references of these articles through snowballing techniques, the authors of this chapter were not successful in finding more articles.

Trafficking for ransom is reported to have first been seen around 2009 in the Sinai desert in Egypt. People fleeing their countries and crossing the desert found themselves exploited when their understanding with smugglers to take them across the border turned into a new situation and they were abducted, held against their will, tortured and extorted for ransom. The emergence of this new form of trafficking – known as trafficking for ransom – runs parallel to the development of globally connected ICTs. These innovations in ICT have enabled traffickers to run well-organised criminal networks on an international scale, as these networks rely on good communication among themselves, with other agents colluding with them, and with the families of those extorted for ransom, who are forced to pay vast amounts to save their family member from torture and possible death. Furthermore, ICTs also enable traffickers to receive, or coordinate to receive, payment in a more or less untraceable way.

The extortion described in the literature has been successful due to the inhumane, dehumanising and humiliating torture techniques used, and their portrayal through ICTs to motivate victims and their families to collect money as fast as they possibly can. The amounts paid as ransom differ between locations, as well as according to the nationality of the victim. Because of this major variability, it is hard to determine the average ransom from the available literature. One thing is clear, however, ransom amounts are increasing, becoming more and more difficult for family members to collect. Furthermore, ransoms often have to be paid more than once, as victims are passed from trafficker to trafficker, each demanding their share.

¹⁰ Although Sinai trafficking did not end until 2014.

This form of human trafficking ends in death for many, and others are almost always left with some form of trauma, resulting in physical and psychological issues. The psychological trauma is affecting entire families and communities through secondary and collective trauma. In the case of Eritrea, the entire diaspora has been affected by secondary and collective trauma, fundamentally altering what it means to be Eritrean. Eritrean refugees make perfect victims, as they often leave their country without documentation and have no protection from their own country.

Human trafficking for ransom has evolved through international criminal networks that include, among others, top Eritrean military officials, Eritrean smugglers, and smugglers and traffickers from other countries like Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia. These networks prey on Eritrean refugees and their families. The acknowledgement and identification of victims and perpetrators is a first step to obtaining justice and providing victims with the medical and psychological care that they need, as well as legal protection.

This review shows that human trafficking for ransom in Libya is an understudied area in the understanding of these practices. The scarce documentation suggests that human trafficking for ransom is taking place with impunity. It is urgent to understand the development and practice of human trafficking for ransom in Libya and to study how this *modus operandi* is evolving, and who the perpetrators are. Human trafficking for ransom constitutes an egregious crime. It must be a priority for the international community to eradicate it and to ensure it is not carried out with impunity.

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Author contributions

Eva Lorger and Piet Gotlieb are each the author of several sections of this chapter. They performed the literature review and documentation together. The text was edited by Mirjam Van Reisen and Klara Smits.

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