

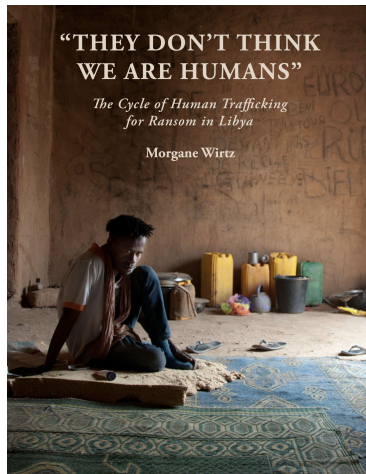
Researching what Words Fail to Describe

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Chapter in:

“They don’t think we are humans”

The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya



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Table of Contents

Summary	7
Table of Contents	11
Acronyms	18
Glossary	21
Acknowledgements	29
Ethical clearance	32
Prologue: Genesis of a thesis	33
Chapter 1	
Researching what Words Fail to Describe	37
1.1 Dying to live	37
1.2 A word on terminology	40
1.2.1 Defining human trafficking for ransom	40
1.2.2 Defining survivors/victims of human trafficking for ransom	41
1.2.3 Defining smuggler and human trafficker	41
1.3 Problem statement and problem gap	42
1.4 Objective of the research and research questions	45
1.5 Location of the research and population studied	46
1.5.1 Libya as a geographical area of human trafficking for ransom	46
1.5.2 Niger, Tunisia and Sudan as strategic places to research human trafficking for ransom	48
1.5.3 Eritreans as victims of human trafficking for ransom	49
1.6 Theoretical framework	51
1.7 Relevance of the research	53
1.8 Philosophy of knowledge and research approach	54
1.8.1 Philosophy of knowledge: Interpretivism in a pragmatic mixed episteme approach	54
1.8.2 Inductive research approach	59
1.8.3 Qualitative research design	59
1.8.4 Ethnography as a research strategy	60
1.8.5 Cross-sectional and longitudinal techniques and procedures	62
1.9 Timeline	62
1.10 Research collaborations	64
1.11 Ethical, emotional and security considerations	66
1.11.1 Ethical considerations of FAIR Data management and re-use	67
1.11.2 Ethical considerations concerning the emotional handling of the material	68
1.11.3 Emotional issues of the interviewees	70
1.11.4 Detecting and supporting emotional issues of the researcher	72
1.11.5 General security measures	74

1.11.6 Methods to keep respondents anonymous and de-identified	76
1.11.7 Conversations with minors	76
1.12 Previous published work	77
1.13 Structure of the thesis	80
Chapter 2	
Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Theoretical Framework	85
2.1 Introduction: Framing migration as a human rights issue	85
2.2 Push and pull theory of migration	87
2.2.1 Flaws in the theory	87
2.2.2 The framing of the migration ‘crisis’ and its consequences	89
2.3 Accessing human rights	91
2.3.1 The right to have rights	91
2.3.2 Human rights culture	93
2.4 The human trafficking cycle	94
2.5 Black holes in the digital landscape	99
2.6 Categorising acts of sexual violence	100
2.6.1. Sexual violence as a tool for subjugation	102
2.6.2 Sexual exploitation	102
2.6.3 Sexual violence as an opportunistic crime	103
2.7 Conclusion on key concepts for the research	103
Chapter 3	
The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges	107
3.1 Introduction: Positionality and emotions as information	107
3.2 Research methodology: Ethnography	109
3.3 Data collection	112
3.3.1 Positionality and access to the field	112
3.3.1.1 Agadez (Niger)	113
3.3.1.2 Niamey (Niger)	115
3.3.1.3 Tunis (Tunisia)	116
3.3.1.4 Medinine (Tunisia)	117
3.3.1.5 Tunisia	119
3.3.1.6 Sudan	120
3.3.2 Overview of respondents	121
3.3.3 Data collected	123
3.4 Data analysis	128
3.4.1 Framework analysis	128
3.4.2 Coding-labelling strategies	130
3.5 Use of artificial intelligence	131
3.6 Data management	132

3.7 Ethical challenges	132
3.7.1 Trust building and ethical challenges in answering the hopes of the interviewees	134
3.7.1.1 Financial compensation	134
3.7.1.2 Hope for help	135
3.7.1.3 Desire to denounce	137
3.7.1.4 A need for information	138
3.7.1.5 Gender relations	139
3.7.1.6 Power relations	140
3.7.2 Changing thesis topic to address an ethical conflict	141
3.7.3 Empathy and relationship with interviewees	142
3.8 Emotional challenges	146
3.8.1 Dealing with interviewees' trauma	147
3.8.2 Dealing with my secondary trauma	148
3.9 Conclusion: Growing as a researcher	150
Chapter 4	
The Situation of Human Trafficking for Ransom in the Literature	153
4.1 Introduction: A look behind	153
4.2 From human smuggling to trafficking: Blurred boundaries	154
4.3 The context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya in the literature	157
4.3.1 Thirteen centuries of uninterrupted trade in people	157
4.3.2 From 1959 to 2011: Human trafficking and smuggling under Muammar Gaddafi	159
4.3.3 2011 onwards: War as a breeding ground for human trafficking	161
4.3.4 Containment policies	165
4.3.4.1 Libyan containment policies	165
4.3.4.2 The case of Niger and law 2015-36	166
4.3.4.3 EU containment policies	168
4.4 Human trafficking for ransom in Libya in the literature	171
4.5 Official detention centres as new hubs in the human trafficking cycle	174
4.6 Literature review on sexual violence in Libya	177
4.6.1 A culture of sexual violence in Libya	177
4.6.2 Sexual violence as part of the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom	179
4.6.3 Sexual violence in official detention centres	183
4.6.4 Sexual exploitation	185
4.7 Desk Study: COVID-19 pandemic and migration flows in the region of Libya	186
4.7.1 Closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes	186
4.7.2 New health protocols and quarantine arrangements	189

4.7.3 Economic repercussions	190
4.7.4 Access to support	191
4.7.5 Crossing the Mediterranean Sea	191
4.8 Conclusion: A need to understand human trafficking for ransom	193
Chapter 5	
Slavery, War and Criminalisation: A Context of Human Trafficking	195
5.1 Introduction: Crossing the desert is not just a job	195
5.2 Dependence on smugglers to cross the Sahara desert	197
5.3 Racism and slavery	201
5.4 Migrants and refugees as collateral damage in the civil war	204
5.5 A constant state of insecurity	206
5.6 Criminalising migration as one of the roots causes of human trafficking for ransom	210
5.7 Arrests by Libyan Coast Guard feeding human traffickers	213
5.8 The human trafficking cycle as a consequence of containment policies	216
5.9 Conclusion: A succession of obstacles	218
Chapter 6	
Routes, Hubs and Prisons: Mapping Migration in Libya	221
6.1 Introduction: Straight lines in the sand	221
6.2 Southwest route (from Niger)	224
6.2.1 Qatrun	227
6.2.2 Sabha	227
6.2.3 Brak	228
6.3 Southeast route (from Sudan)	229
6.3.1 Kufra	231
6.3.2 Shwayrif	232
6.4 Western route (from Algeria)	233
6.5 North-western route (from Tunisia)	235
6.6 Northeastern road (from Egypt)	237
6.6.1 Tobruk	240
6.6.2 Jaghbub	240
6.6.3 Benghazi	241
6.6.4 Ajdabiya	242
6.7 North Libya – Departure point for the Mediterranean Sea	244
6.7.1 Tripoli	245
6.7.1.1 Qasr bin Ghashir Detention Centre	246
6.7.1.2 Tajoura Detention Centre	247
6.7.1.3 Tariq al Matar Detention Centre	248
6.7.1.4 Tariq al Sikka Detention Centre	249
6.7.2 Bani Walid	250

6.7.3 Garabulli	251
6.7.4 Gharyan	252
6.7.5 Khoms	253
6.7.6 Misrata	253
6.7.7 Sabratha	254
6.7.8 Sirte	256
6.7.9 Zawiyah	257
6.7.10 Zintan	258
6.7.11 Zuwarah	259
6.8 Conclusion: Bloody pathways	260
Chapter 7	
The Warehouses: At the Heart of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya	263
7.1 Introduction: Living skeletons	263
7.2 Conditions of detainees in trafficking camps	265
7.2.1 Starvation, disease and lack of hygiene	266
7.2.2 Torture	267
7.2.3 Use of drugs by traffickers	270
7.2.4 Solidarity among detainees	272
7.3 Extortion of ransoms	273
7.3.1 Use of mobile phone	273
7.3.2 Ransom amounts	274
7.3.3 How ransoms are paid	276
7.3.4 Ransom negotiations on the phone	280
7.3.5 Trapped without room for negotiation	282
7.3.6 Humans commodified: Sold and resold from on trafficker to another	284
7.3.7 Forced labour	288
7.4 Conclusion: Dehumanise to exploit	290
Chapter 8	
Official Detention Centers in Libya and their Link to the Human Trafficking Cycle	293
8.1 Introduction: Official prisons in containers	293
8.2 Arrests by Libyan Coast Guard	295
8.3 Conditions in official detention centres	297
8.3.1 Panic and incomprehension	297
8.3.2 Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions	298
8.3.3 Treatment of women	300
8.3.4 Torture, violence and punishment	301
8.3.5 Death	306

8.3.6 Payments	307
8.3.7 Forced labour and enslavement	309
8.3.8 Sold to human trafficking networks	311
8.3.9 Caught in violent conflict	313
8.4 Relationship between detainees and humanitarian organisations, UN agencies, journalists and authorities	315
8.4.1 Lack of access	315
8.4.2 Assistance received	318
8.4.3 Distrust	319
8.4.4 Resettlement and ‘voluntary’ return	322
8.5 Conclusion: Detention, commodification and exploitation of migrants	324
Chapter 9	
Sexual Violence on Migratory Paths in and Towards Libya	327
9.1 Introduction: Many did that... rape	327
9.2 Sexual violence as a tool of subjugation	329
9.2.1 On route through the Sahara	329
9.2.2 In trafficking camps	330
9.2.3 In official detention centres	334
9.3 Sexual exploitation	335
9.3.1 Prostitution networks	336
9.3.2 Perpetrated by ISIS	339
9.3.3 In official detention centres	339
9.3.4 Prostitution as a way to survive in Libya	340
9.4 Sexual violence as an opportunistic crime	341
9.4.1 On route in the Sahara desert	342
9.4.2 In trafficking camps	344
9.4.3 In official detention centres	346
9.4.4 In urban areas	346
9.5 Impact of rape: Trauma and secondary trauma	348
9.6 Conclusion: The objectives of rape	350
Chapter 10	
‘On the Move’ in the Region of Libya during COVID-19	353
10.1 Introduction: Perfect circumstance to test the push and pull theory	353
10.2 Closing of borders, increased deportations and creation of new routes	357
10.3 New health protocols and quarantine arrangements	360
10.4 Economic repercussions	364
10.5 Access to support	367
10.6 Crossing the Mediterranean Sea	371
10.7 Conclusion: Moving on, despite the restrictions, whatever the risks	374

Chapter 11

Discussion and Conclusion: The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya	377
11.1 Introduction: A closing trap	377
11.2 Discussion: Expanding networks	378
11.2.1 Internal consistency	378
11.2.2 Validation through the presentation of results	383
11.2.3 External validity	385
11.2.4 Limitations	388
11.3 Towards a development of the Human Trafficking Cycle	389
11.3.1 The context of human trafficking for ransom	389
11.3.2 The places of human trafficking for ransom	392
11.3.3 Extortion and torture practices associated with human trafficking for ransom	393
11.3.4 Sexual violence in the context of human trafficking for ransom	394
11.3.5 Impact of the measures to contain COVID-19 on survivors of human trafficking for ransom	395
11.3.6 The Human Trafficking Cycle	396
11.4 Policy recommendations	401
11.5 Conclusions	402
11.6 Final word	403
References	405
Annex 1: Interview Topic List	441
Annex 2: Information Letter for Interviewees	443
Annex 3: Consent Form	447
Annex 4: Relationship Between Labels and Research Questions	449
Annex 5: List of Duplicated Work per Chapter	453
Annex 6: Publications	459

Chapter 1

Researching what Words Fail to Describe³



Figure 1.1. An Eritrean man at Wedsherry checkpoint in Sudan.
(*Photograph: 2021, © Morgane Wirtz*)

1.1 Dying to live

Trapped. That is the graphic illusion that can be perceived from the picture above. It was taken at the Wedsherry checkpoint on the

³ Parts of this chapter are based on the chapters ‘Human Trafficking for Ransom in Black Holes in the Digital Landscape: An Introduction’ authored by Van Reisen, M., Mawere, M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M., ‘Living in a Black Hole: Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom in Migration’ authored by Van Reisen, M., Smits, K., Wirtz, M. & Smeets, A., ‘Skin in the Game: Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma’ authored by Van Reisen, M., Smits, K., Wirtz, M. & Mikami, B., ‘The Past is not Past: The History and Context of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya’, authored by Wirtz, M., Ferdi de Vries, D., & Van Reisen, M., ‘Living Skeletons: The spread of human trafficking for ransom to Libya’, authored by Wirtz, M., & Van Reisen, M. and ‘Hell on Earth: Conditions of Eritrean Refugees in Official Detention Centres in Libya’, authored by Wirtz, M., & Van Reisen, M. published in Van Reisen, M., Mawere, M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (2023). *Enslaved. Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG. I (Morgane Wirtz) was an active contributing author to the research undertaken for the chapters and the writing of the chapters. The re-use and reproduction of part of the text has been approved by the other authors.

border between Eritrea and Sudan. The man pictured has just fled Eritrea and was waiting to be taken to a refugee camp in Sudan. In this place, at the time this picture was taken, that man was considered to be ‘safe’ and ‘protected’. Yet, this picture shows poor conditions... and boredom. These are amongst the reasons why refugees often decide to continue their migratory journey in the direction of Europe, through Libya. This is why this situation at the Wedsherify checkpoint can be considered as one of the first steps in the human trafficking cycle.

Migrants and refugees know it before leaving: the Central Mediterranean route, connecting Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt to Italy and Malta, is the world’s deadliest migration route (Missing Migrants Project, 2024a). Not only there is the risk of drowning in the Mediterranean Sea, but they know that in Libya, human beings are tortured, raped and killed (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2019). They are exploited, traded, and commodified, in a new form of slavery that is called ‘human trafficking for ransom’ (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits, & Wirtz, 2023). Many die. The survivors of this form of human trafficking all have in common that in their desire to live, they took a risk so large that they could have died.

The Missing Migrants Project, an initiative implemented by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), states that between 2014 and February 2024, 29,032 humans were recorded as missing on this route while crossing the Mediterranean Sea (Missing Migrants Project, 2024a). Images of boats being rescued, humans in distress and bodies floating in the water flood the media and social networks without the situation being fixed. The word ‘humans’ is used here to highlight the fact that these people are human beings, not ‘illegal migrants’.

On this route, 6,131 humans were also recorded as missing while in transit through the Sahara desert between 2014 and February 2024 (Missing Migrants Project, 2024b). This reality is less well-documented, firstly, because it is almost impossible to access this part of the world. The Sahara desert is huge and unsecured. Visas to access countries like Libya are difficult to obtain for aid workers, observers, researchers, and journalists. However, the silence around deaths in this region can also be explained by the fact that words fail to describe the situation that migrants and refugees⁴ find themselves in places like Libya.

⁴ See Glossary.

One might think that deaths in the Sahara are due to the harsh conditions – extreme heat, dehydration, illness, car accidents and suffocation in the back of trucks are cited as the cause of death in most cases on this route (Missing Migrants Project, 2024b). However, the reality goes beyond these reasons. As the Missing Migrants Project notes, many experts think that the number of missing people on this road exceeds the 6,131 reported and that “violence at the hands of smugglers, traffickers and border officials in the region also make up a significant proportion of deaths on migration routes recorded in the Sahara” (Missing Migrants Project, 2024b).

Human trafficking for Ransom first appeared in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula around 2009, where victims, principally Eritreans, were tortured using mobile phones to broadcast the torture to relatives to extort ransom (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Since then, human trafficking for ransom has become a global phenomenon. It has been described in Mexico (Meyer & Brewer, 2010), South America (Cooper, 2021), Thailand and Malaysia (Rijken, *et al.*, 2018), Yemen (Michael, 2021), North Macedonia (MacGregor, 2020), Greece (Ekathimerini, 2019), and Libya (Van Reisen and Estefanos, 2017a).

Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits, and Wirtz (2023) estimate that around 450,000 humans were detained in trafficking camps in Libya between 2016 and 2021. These people are extremely vulnerable, trapped in a situation in which they are abused and exploited. Violence is used as a tool to control and dehumanise them to facilitate their ‘commodification’. For people in this situation, human rights do not exist. As they are not citizens of the countries in which they are trafficked, they have no status to claim their human rights – they have no ‘right to have rights’ (Arendt, 1951). Plunged into irregularity, the victims are voiceless and “locked in a cycle of trafficking, extortion and violence without an exit” (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014, p. 27).

Human trafficking for ransom in Libya is often wrongly framed and wrongly addressed politically. By placing the entire responsibility for this situation on human traffickers and smugglers, the policy response so far has been to increase the number of obstacles on the Central Mediterranean route to stop the practice. At best, these migration policies are ineffective, at worst, they are actually

exacerbating the vulnerability of the victims and making it more profitable for the perpetrators of these crimes (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits, & Wirtz, 2023).

This research builds on the book *Enslaved. Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya* (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits, & Wirtz, 2023). It is a result of my journey to meet the human beings who survived this ordeal. It aims at providing an explanation to the gross violations of human rights perpetrated against migrants and refugees, who became victims of human trafficking for ransom in Libya between 2016 and 2021. To do so, it provides a description of the situation from the perspective of the survivors of this practice, as well as other stakeholders and experts on the ground.

Before describing the problem statement and setting out the research questions, the following section looks at a few terminology points. This is followed by a description of the location of the research, a brief presentation of the theoretical framework and of the relevance of the research, a presentation of the philosophy of knowledge, the timeline of the research, as well as the research collaborations and by ethical, emotional and security considerations. The previous published work is then presented before a description of the structure of this thesis.

1.2 A word on terminology

To write about this situation, there needs to be some common understanding of the terminology used in this research. To help you, my reader, the terms used in this thesis are described in the Glossary. When specific terms are used in the chapters, they are explained in footnotes or the reader will be referred to the Glossary. However, before we start, it is important to set the context by explaining three of the main terms used: human trafficking for ransom, survivors/victims of human trafficking for ransom and smuggler/human trafficker.

1.2.1 Defining human trafficking for ransom

Human trafficking for ransom is defined as a specific form of trafficking that combines slavery, forced begging, severe violence, and torture (or threat of torture), often using information and communication technology (ICT) such as mobile phones to broadcast this torture to relatives or friends to motivate payment of

the ransom (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). It is described by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2014, p. 23) as:

[...] particularly brutal, and [...] characterised by abduction, displacement, captivity, extortion, torture, sexual violence and humiliation, commodification, serial selling and killing. The 'trafficking' aspect of the phenomenon involves the taking of people against their will or by misleading them and holding them as hostages for ransom or further sales. The trafficking victims are exploited as they are forced to beg for money from relatives, extended family or people in the diaspora to pay the ransoms demanded. Furthermore, the trafficking victims are sold from one person to another as if they were the traffickers' 'property'. As such, those who are trafficked are treated as slaves.

1.2.2 Defining survivors/victims of human trafficking for ransom

The use of the words 'victim' and 'survivor' carry with them indications of agency. They also influence the way that we perceive people. In this thesis, the term 'survivors of human trafficking' refers to migrants or refugees who have survived (been released or escaped) captivity by human traffickers. The term 'victims of human trafficking' refers to migrants or refugees who are still held in captivity by the human traffickers or who died while caught in the human trafficking cycle. However, it should not be forgotten that survivors are also victims and that this is an important question in terms of reparation. In Libya, survivors and victims of human trafficking for ransom are of a variety of African and Asian nationalities (IOM, 2022a).

1.2.3 Defining smuggler and human trafficker

In this thesis, the term 'smuggler' is used to refer to people who organise the illegal transportation of people across borders in exchange for financial compensation. Passengers are free once the destination is reached and they are not coerced, exploited, or enslaved. In some cases, for example during wartime, the work of smugglers is essential to enable people to cross borders, even illegally. Three interviews with smugglers were analysed in this research. It should be noted, however, that the activities of smugglers are often associated with human rights violations against migrants and refugees.

The term ‘human trafficker’ is used to refer to people who organise the illegal journey of people in exchange for financial compensation but with the purpose to exploit those people. This is the case, for example, of the perpetrators of human trafficking for ransom.

In the context of the organisation of illegal journeys of people through Libya, the line between ‘smugglers’ and ‘traffickers’ is often blurred. This issue is further elaborated in Chapter 4: *The Situation of Human Trafficking for Ransom in the Literature*.

1.3 Problem statement and problem gap

Human trafficking for ransom was first referred to as ‘Sinai trafficking’, because this form of trafficking was first observed in the Sinai desert in around 2009 (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012; 2014). Those researching the phenomenon reported that approximately 90% of the victims and survivors of Sinai trafficking were of Eritrean origin (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2012). Weldehaimanot (2011) explains that the victims of Sinai trafficking were refugees who had been kidnapped in Sudan or who had contacted smugglers to be driven to Egypt or Israel. Upon arrival in the Sinai, refugees were taken hostage and tortured. This torture was shared with the relatives of the victims via cell phones to encourage them to pay a ransom for their release (Mekonnen & Estefanos, 2012; Jacobsen, Robinson & Lijnders, 2013; Ghebrai, 2015; Oette & Hovil, 2017). Families of the victims are reported to have paid ransoms of up to USD 40,000 (Van Reisen, Estefanos, & Rijken, 2014). The inhumane treatment faced by those kept in trafficking camps in the Sinai is meticulously described by Van Reisen, Kidane and Reim (2017). They present the torture and the physical and sexual violence the victims faced as part of a daily routine.

After 2014, Sinai trafficking ended following the launching of military operations in the peninsula to counter an insurgency by Islamist militants (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). However, the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom appears to have spread and is now reported on nearly every continent (Meyer & Brewer, 2010; Cooper, 2021; Rijken, *et al.*, 2018; Ekathimerini, 2019; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). This indicates a widening criminal economy based on human beings as commodities.

Libya is one of the countries where human trafficking for ransom has developed recently. After 2014, Eritrean refugees took new

migration routes. One of these routes goes through Sudan and then Libya, where they have once again found themselves victims of human trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014).

Onuoha and Okafor (2021) explain the rise of this trafficking in Libya by the context of the political vacuum that followed the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, who had been in power since 1969. After the revolution, armed groups proliferated in Libya, seeking to claim control of the State. According to Onuoha and Okafor (2021), the trade of migrants is a means of generating funds for these groups. Van Reisen and Mawere (2017) have also noted the emergence of a criminal culture involving armed groups and terrorist militias exploiting and extorting migrants and refugees in Libya. Expanding human smuggling and trafficking is only one part of the growing war economy in Libya, which, according to Shaw and Mangan (2014) is composed of four parts: weapons, migrants, drugs, and smuggled goods. Eaton (2018) estimates that the revenue generated by human smuggling in 2016 (for overland travel and the crossing of the Mediterranean Sea) was around USD 978 million, which is equivalent to 3.4% of Libya's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2015. Onuoha and Okafor (2021) point out that the absence or dysfunction of the State institutions makes the commodification of migrants possible.

Human trafficking for ransom in Libya is mentioned in some NGO reports and press articles, but generally receives little coverage. Little academic research has been conducted on the subject. According to the few researchers who have studied the subject, migrants and refugees in Libya are likely to be locked up in unofficial detention centres and forced to pay a ransom to be released (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2019). These places of detention are controlled by traffickers, smugglers or armed groups (Al-Dayel, Anfinson and Anfinson, 2021). For the purposes of this research, I use the term 'trafficking camp' to refer to them (see glossary). Harsh detention conditions are reported in those places. Researchers describe poor hygienic conditions, prevalence of disease, lack of food and water, abduction, extortion, sexual violence, forced labour, regular beatings and torture in trafficking camps. (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2019; Reitano, 2018; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019; Al-Dayel, *et al.*, 2021). Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou (2019) conclude that this practice constitutes a crime against humanity. Van Reisen, Smits and Wirtz (2019) qualify human trafficking for ransom in Libya as

"similar to slavery" and describe the Eritrean refugees among them as a "particularly repressed closed community" (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019, p. 290).

Being illegally on the territory, migrants and refugees in Libya (or en route to Europe from Libya), are also likely to be incarcerated in official detention centres operated by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM) which is part of the Ministry of Interior. Arbitrary detention, lack of water, food and access to healthcare, sexual abuse and torture are reported by researchers in official detention centers (Beşer and Elfeitori, 2018; Creta, 2021c).

Al-Dayel, Anfinson and Anfinson (2021) establish that "the treatment of detainees across both official and illicit channels constitutes conditions of human trafficking, gender-based violence, and enslavement" (Al-Dayel, *et al.*, 2021, p. 280). Highlighting that both guards of trafficking camps and official detention centres sold detainees, the authors state that they are "perpetuating an indefinite cycle of exploitation and abuse" (Al-Dayel, *et al.*, 2021, p. 291).

The role of the EU migration policies and the fact that since 2017, the EU is financing the Libyan Coast Guard to arrest migrants and refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea is pointed out by researchers (Creta, 2021c; 2023) Beşer and Elfeitori (2018) call on the EU to avoid encouraging and legitimising local armed groups through bilateral agreements to combat what the EU considers 'illegal' migration, as it "contributes to the vicious cycle of abuse in the country" (Beşer & Elfeitori, 2018, p. 4). Reitano (2018) argues that while policies to stem the 'migration crisis' have been successful in the short term in reducing migration flows, they have also led to a significant increase in the mortality rate of migrants in the Mediterranean. She points out that by erecting obstacles on migration routes, the EU has increased the risks for migrants stranded in Libya, exposed to traffickers and armed groups seeking new ways to exploit them, including through the country's detention system. Reitano (2018) draws attention to the fact that the profits from the trade in migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe have attracted criminal groups of other kinds, both within Africa and between Africa and Europe.

The academic literature paints a scene of egregious circumstances associated with the human trafficking for ransom in Libya. However, extant literature provides little detail on what exactly this new form of trafficking consists of and on the modus operandi of

the traffickers, which is necessary to come to a determination of what causes it and what perpetuates it. That is why, with my colleagues (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits & Wirtz, 2023), we researched the topic in depth from 2018-2021, and in 2023 we published the book *Enslaved. Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*. The book presents a detailed ethnographic study which identifies the routes, modus operandi, organisation, and key actors involved in the human trafficking for ransom of refugees and migrants. As a phenomenological work, it describes the modus operandi of how Eritrean refugees are being trafficked and enslaved in Libya, where they are tortured to force their relatives to pay a ransom for their release.

The research gap now lies in understanding this phenomenon such that causes can be identified, including the reasons for the persistence of the gross violations of human rights that have been reported by researchers as well as by migrants and refugees in Libya (Creta, 2021c). Onuoha and Okafor (2021) explain the rise in the commodification of migrants in Libya by the absence or dysfunction of the State. It is certainly necessary to look at the current and historical context of Libya to understand how such abuses can take place today, but it is also necessary to ask why refugees and migrants in Libya do not seem to be eligible to enjoy the most basic of human rights. The academic literature mentioned above, as well as NGO reports and other types of publications (presented in Chapter 4: *The Situation of Human Trafficking for Ransom in the Literature*) refer to a cycle of violence, exploitation and abuse. There is a need to understand why migrants and refugees in Libya are trapped in such a cycle and how this cycle is fueled.

1.4 Objective of the research and research questions

The objective of this research is to provide an understanding of human trafficking for ransom on the southwest and southeast routes in Libya between 2016 and 2021. Built on the book *Enslaved. Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya* (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits & Wirtz, 2023), this research aims to contribute in providing explanations of the gross violations of human rights perpetrated against migrants and refugees victims of human trafficking for ransom.

To do this, this research provides a description of the current and historic context, the hubs and places, the extortion, the torture and

sexual violence associated to human trafficking for ransom in Libya from the perspectives of survivors. It also looks at the effect of obstacles raised on migratory paths, by looking at the impact of the measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic on the experience of migrants and refugees in the Central Mediterranean era.

This research explores the concept of the "right to have rights," the broader culture of human rights, the dynamics of the human trafficking cycle, and the classification of sexual and other forms of violence. These perspectives are used to provide a comprehensive understanding of the causes that perpetuate human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

The main question investigated in this research is: *What can explain the persistence of the human rights violations reported by survivors of human trafficking for ransom on the southwest and southeast routes in Libya between 2016 and 2021?*

This will be answered through a series of sub-questions:

Sub-question 1: *What do survivors report on the context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya?*

Sub-question 2: *What do survivors report on the main migratory routes to and inside Libya, as well as the hubs and places where human trafficking takes place on these trajectories?*

Sub-question 3: *Which extortion and torture practices associated with human trafficking for ransom in Libya do survivors report?*

Sub-question 4: *What is the prevalence and nature of sexual violence in the context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya, reported by survivors?*

Sub-question 5: *What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it on the experiences reported by survivors of human trafficking for ransom?*

These questions will be answered in the empirical chapters of this research.

1.5 Location of the research and population studied

1.5.1 Libya as a geographical area of human trafficking for ransom

This research focuses on human trafficking for ransom in Libya. In 2017, video footage released by CNN caught international attention

on the issue of modern slavery in Libya. This footage presented people being auctioned off as slaves for USD 400 each (Elbagir, Razek, Pratt & Jones, 2017). As part of slavery in Libya, reports on human trafficking for ransom started to be released (Van Reisen and Mawere, 2017). As a journalist and researcher based in Niger from September 2017 to July 2019, I observed an escalation in the violence reported by migrants and refugees after having fled Libya (Wirtz, 2017). The topic particularly caught my attention after conducting 15 interviews with Eritrean refugees in Niamey, the capital of Niger. These refugees had been evacuated from Libya through the Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM) and reported grave human rights violations in trafficking camps and official detention centres in Libya (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

This thesis was conducted as a continuation of this first set of interviews. However, due to the civil conflict in Libya, the difficulty of obtaining a visa as a journalist or researcher, and the fact that part of this research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, I did not have the opportunity to conduct research in Libya. I, therefore, worked from neighbouring countries such as Niger, Tunisia and Sudan.



Figure 1.2. Map of North Africa (©2024 Google)

1.5.2 Niger, Tunisia and Sudan as strategic places to research human trafficking for ransom

Niger is a strategic place from which to research the situation of human trafficking for ransom on the southwest and southeast routes in Libya, as the country is crossed by migrants and refugees on route to Libya. Agadez, where I lived for one and a half years, is the last stopover for people on the road to Libya or Algeria. It is where tarmac ends. From there, people on the move can no longer travel by bus and are obliged to turn to drivers – often through smugglers – if they want to cross the Sahara. The driving distance from Agadez to Sabha, in the south of Libya is five days. Agadez also hosts many migrants and refugees who flee, or who have been expelled from, Algeria or Libya. It is a key place to gather testimonies of people right before their departure to Libya, and right after their return.

Interviews were also conducted for this research in Niamey, in Niger, which hosts vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees who have been repatriated from Libya by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) through the ETM. They wait for their files to be processed and to be resettled in a Western country. Interviews with survivors of human trafficking for ransom could, therefore, be conducted in Niamey.

As a neighbouring country of Libya, Tunisia is also a good place to research human trafficking for ransom in Libya. The checkpoint of Ra's Ajdir at the border between both countries is only 200 kilometres from Tripoli. Migrants and refugees cross this point to flee Libya. Many also arrived in Tunisia after their being rescued in the Mediterranean Sea by Tunisian sailors. The survivors of human trafficking for ransom met during this research in Tunisia were resting there, expecting support from humanitarian organisations. Some of them later decided to return to Libya. At the time of the research, Tunisia was not a main departure point to Europe for sub-Saharan migrants, who preferred to return to Libya, where they already had connections. Since the start of the civil conflict in Libya in 2011, many Libyan citizens have lived in Tunisia. Tunis also hosts the Libyan offices of embassies and NGOs.

Research in Sudan was conducted following the war in Tigray, which lasted from 3/4 November 2020 to 3 November 2022. Together with my colleague, Kai Smits, we wanted to determine whether the conflict in northern Ethiopia was feeding human trafficking for

ransom in Libya. We went to the border between Sudan and Eritrea and Ethiopia to meet refugees and investigate their knowledge of the situation in Libya, their current condition, and their motivation to take the road despite the risks.

Besides fieldwork in Niger, Tunisia and Sudan, research was also conducted by phone and social media with migrants and refugees in Libya and with experts in Europe and Africa.

1.5.3 Eritreans as victims of human trafficking for ransom

Studying human trafficking in the Sinai, Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken (2012) estimated that approximately 90% of the victims and survivors of Sinai trafficking were of Eritrean origin. These people had fled Eritrea's compulsory and indefinite national service (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014). Since 2002, national service in Eritrea has been compulsory for anyone – men and women – between the ages of 18 and 40. In practice, some citizens are conscripted before they reach 18 years and military service can extend up to 57 years for men and 47 years for women (Palacios-Arapiles, 2023; Landinfo, 2015; Amnesty International, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2019). Military service is not limited to military duties. Some are assigned to economic development activities, working for private companies, and domestic work for their superiors, for which they are paid barely enough to live (Palacios-Arapiles, 2023). Eritreans who try to escape national service or who are labelled as political opponents are arrested and incarcerated in inhumane conditions (Williams, 2021). It is because of these conditions that up to 5,000 Eritreans flee their country each month (UN Human Rights Council, 2015). As fleeing Eritrea is illegal, they have no possibility of going back (Smits & Wirtz, 2023), as they risk being sent to detention centres upon their return.

Between 2009 and 2014, Eritrean refugees were particularly targeted by human traffickers operating in the Sinai. They were either kidnapped on their way to Egypt or Israel or directly from refugee camps in Sudan (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). In 2014, after the launching of anti-terrorism operations, human trafficking for ransom ceased in the Sinai (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017; Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

In Libya, Eritreans are particularly targeted by human trafficking for ransom, but they are not the only ones. East African (e.g., Somalis and Ethiopians), Asian (e.g., Pakistanis and Bangladeshis) Central,

West and North African migrants and refugees are among the victims of human trafficking for ransom in Libya (Malakooti, 2019; Wirtz, 2019b; IOM, 2022a). Ransom amounts claimed by human traffickers differ according to the nationality of the victim. Asian and East African migrants and refugees are perceived to pay the highest rate (Malakooti, 2019; Hayden, 2022). Pakistanis and Bangladeshis interviewed by researcher Malakooti and her team paid as much as EUR 9,000 in a single ransom payment. The Somalis in their sample paid between EUR 5,000 and EUR 9,000. Ransoms for Eritreans were between EUR 4,000 and EUR 6,000 (Malakooti, 2019). Hayden (2022a) and Malakooti (2019) agree that Sudanese, Chadians, and West Africans are charged lower ransoms of between EUR 300 and EUR 1,000.

East African migrants and refugees are charged higher ransom, expressed in United States dollars, because they are considered to be backed by a well-connected diaspora in Europe and the Middle East that can afford ransom payments (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014, Malakooti, 2019; Hayden, 2022). “Migrants who traverse long distances to reach Libya are also perceived to have greater economic means”, adds Malakooti (2019, p. 6). West Africans, Sudanese and Chadians, for the most part, are charged in Libyan dinars (Malakooti, 2019).

There is concern that Eritrean officials are involved in the trafficking networks in Libya (Van Reisen, Estefanos, & Reim, 2017). Individuals of Eritrean nationality are reported to be among the top human traffickers operating in the country (UN Security Council, 2018; Smits, 2023a).

For this reason, and because Eritrean refugees are among the victims forced to pay high ransom rates and have no possibility to go back to Eritrea, which place them in a greater vulnerability, there is a focus in this research on human trafficking for ransom of Eritrean refugees. Half of the interviews analysed in this thesis were conducted with Eritreans refugees. In order to have a larger understanding of the issue of human trafficking in Libya and to report on the situation of human trafficking for ransom not only on the southeast route (taken by Eritrean refugees) but also on the southwest route, the other half of the interviews analysed in this thesis were conducted with survivors of human trafficking for ransom from other countries, including: Cameroon, Guinea,

Ethiopia, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Gambia, Nigeria, Tunisia, Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan.

1.6 Theoretical framework

The push and pull theory (Lee, 1966) which is the leading theoretical model of migration, explains migration as the consequence of factors that drive a person to leave their place of residence (push) and attract them to the new destination (pull) (Ravenstein, 1885; 1889). However, various researchers have questioned the adequacy of the push and pull theory as a general explanation of migration behaviour and trajectories (Haug, 2008; Zimmerman, *et al.*, 2011; Cheng, 2017) The limitations of the push and pull theory is especially salient in a study that concerns the grave situation that people face when fleeing or migrating to Libya. For instance, researchers found that Eritrean refugees were generally aware of the difficulties they would face in Libya but that this did not prevent them from travelling there (Kuschminder & Triandafyllidou, 2019; Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits & Wirtz, 2023).

Despite its flaws, the push and pull theory is frequently used by researchers, international organisations, and policymakers to explain the migration phenomenon and to devise strategies to curb it. This flawed problem framing has real consequences for how the situation is approached. Since the 2010s, the migration issue in the EU has been presented as a 'migration crisis'. European States have mainly chosen to react to it by raising obstacles on the migratory paths towards Europe (Schmoll, 2020). For Schmoll, if there is a crisis, it is a crisis of hospitality and solidarity with migrants and refugees. Entering Europe 'illegally' has become the only way to enter for many people. In Libya, migrants and refugees are also considered 'illegal'. A 2010 law condemns illegal migrants to forced labour in jail or a fine of 1,000 Libyan dinars, before being expelled from Libyan territory (General People's Congress, 2010).

The 2013 sinking of a ship with more than 600 refugees off the coast of Lampedusa, where over 300 people drowned, mostly Eritreans, illustrates the dire consequences of this framing. Smits and Karagianni (2019) note that rather than framing this disaster in terms of the human right to life and, hence, the failure to protect refugees, it was subsequently framed as a crisis caused by the movement of 'illegal' migrants.

With a view to suggest an alternate framing of migration as a human rights issue, this research looks at the right to have rights and the human rights culture sustaining and perpetuating this situation. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt states that ‘the right to have rights’ is not reserved for all people, but only for citizens (Arendt, 1951). For her, the application of human rights depends on the willingness of nations to uphold these rights. She argues that a political belonging is required to enjoy the right to have rights. The attribute of citizenship gives to a person the context, the audience, and the community in which to claim their rights (Dinsmore, 2010). Those who have no protection of the State, and are not considered citizens, have difficulty to access rights.

Rorty (1998) further argues that the idea of human rights is a cultural concept. If certain groups or people are excluded from society, they may, in practice, not be able to access rights in the same way as others, even if the legal foundation is the universality of human rights for all human beings. Linking this with the question of whether a problem is regarded as a human rights problem, Rorty (1998) points out that perceiving a situation as a human rights problem requires sympathy and security. Sympathy implies knowledge of the situation of other people and the possibility of emotionally relating to them. Security relates to the need to feel safe, in order to have the space to consider any concerns that relate to the situation of other people.

In Libya, the status of migrants and refugees as ‘irregular’ prevents them from accessing their human rights. If they go to the security forces to ask for justice, they will be arrested and held in official detention centres. This is one of the components of the human trafficking cycle (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014, p. 27). This concept was first described by Van Reisen, Estefanos and Rijken in relation to Sinai trafficking and explains how “victims become locked in a cycle of trafficking, extortion and violence without an exit” (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014, p. 27).

Smits (2023b) studied how Eritrean refugees, who managed to escape trafficking camps in Libya, remain within a human trafficking cycle. He found that the migrants and refugees who escape trafficking camps in Libya, face great difficulties when travelling in the country as they run the risk of being captured, kidnapped or arrested and then sent back to detention, either in trafficking camps, or in official detention centres. Smits’ study shows that “Once

caught in the human trafficking cycle, people find themselves trapped in a cycle of abuse and vulnerability, and are often re-trafficked” (Smits, 2023b, p. 663). The lack of protection of victims can lead to them again falling victim to human trafficking and other crimes.

Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans, Nakazibwe, Van Stam and Ong’ayo (2019) observed that human trafficking is fueled by ‘black holes’ in the digital landscape. In trafficking camps, migrants and refugees don’t have access to their phones. They are kept in a black hole as they have lost their access to connectivity. The human traffickers, as gatekeepers, decide how they communicate with the outside world. They use ICTs to broadcast the torture of their victims to their relatives and encourage them to pay the ransom for their release (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019).

Violence is at the heart of human trafficking for ransom. Serious human rights violations are reported by survivors (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits, & Wirtz, 2023). Sexual violence is one of them. In my work (Wirtz, 2023), I outline three different forms of sexual violence, as a framework for analysis: sexual violence for subjugation, sexual exploitation and sexual violence as an opportunistic crime. These are distinguished by their central purpose: to dehumanise and control; to exploit; and simply because they are there and easy to abuse. They happen in the context of human trafficking and in the broader context in which the migrants and refugees experience violence in Libya. Understanding sexual violence provides insight into how violence is used to keep victims locked in the human trafficking cycle.

1.7 Relevance of the research

This thesis is about grave human rights violations. In the pages that follow, survivors of human trafficking for ransom describe atrocities. They give details of the inhumane conditions in which they have been transported and detained in trafficking camps as well as in official detention centres. They describe the lack of water, unsanitary conditions, and overcrowded cells, hangars or containers in which they were imprisoned for months, sometimes years. They describe humiliation, beatings, torture by different means, sexual assault, forced labour and subjugation. It is a state of slavery to which they have been reduced, at the doors of Europe, in a search for safety or for a better life.

On account of their ‘illegal’ status, migrants and refugees in Libya are not considered eligible for human rights, despite the fact that Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that: “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country” (United Nations, 1948).

Despite the atrocities reported by migrants and refugees in Libya, and despite the fact that around 450,000 people were estimated to be detained in trafficking camps between 2016 and 2021 (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits & Wirtz, 2023), human trafficking for ransom in Libya persists. Escape is at life risk. In 2022, 105,131 people arrived in Italy after having illegally crossed the Mediterranean Sea (UNHCR, 2023a), 1,368 went missing during the crossing, and 24,684 people were arrested by the Libyan Coast Guard and returned to Libya where they are at risk of falling again into the hands of human traffickers (UNHCR, 2023a; The Libya Update, 2023).

It is of great importance that these human rights violations are addressed, that the protection of the survivors is ensured, and that this practice ends. By contributing to the academic literature on this topic, this research seeks to raise attention on the issue of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. By providing explanations as to why this practice persists, this research aims to provide an understanding of the problem, which is essential if it is to be resolved. Of course, these explanations can and should be compared with and complementing those given by other researchers and experts. The explanations provided in this thesis do not claim to be the only ones exclusively available to explain the persistence of human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

1.8 Philosophy of knowledge and research approach

1.8.1 Philosophy of knowledge: Interpretivism in a pragmatic mixed episteme approach

This research follows largely an interpretivist approach, however, the emic approach to reveal the interpretation of survivors of human trafficking of their situation, is combined with a from-above perspective in which the researcher analyses and combines findings with data, information and interpretation from elsewhere. The researcher emerges in this study as a knowledgeable actor, who makes space for survivors to speak on their situation, but

categorises, compares and concludes - based on the combination of data and other sources examined.

Hence, following from this, it is important to realise that human trafficking for ransom in Libya is understood differently according to the social actors explaining it. It is agreed, for instance, that the situations studied in this thesis are not understood similarly from the perspective of its survivors (migrants and refugees), its perpetrators (human traffickers), or the academic researchers (me).

During data collection, priority was given to understanding human trafficking for ransom from the perspective of its victims and survivors. It is their point of view of the situation that was considered as the main focus of data collection. They are the ones who can best and firsthand explain what happens in human trafficking camps, the violence they faced, how it affects them still today and how, according to them, it has affected their relatives and communities. Their testimonies are considered to be key to understanding why human trafficking for ransom continues to exist. Time has been spent with them and efforts were made to get close to them and to gain trust, in order to understand their reality today and what they have been through.

Sometimes during data collection, opportunities were seized to meet people connected to human traffickers – mainly drivers and smugglers. Their perspective was understood mainly when I was living in Agadez, a city in Niger at the edge of the Sahara desert.. Although the three smugglers interviewed in this research may have agreed with the survivors of human trafficking for ransom in relation to the extortion committed in trafficking camps, their understanding of the situation is different.

A shift in perspective occurred during the data analysis. Although the perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom was still the priority, a ‘from-above’ perspective was also taken. Occasionally, secondary data in the form of grey literature and other media, such as academic articles, books, NGO reports, news articles, documentaries, non-fiction comics, radio and video reports, webinars and social media posts, was used to triangulate and complete some information. The results of this data collection are mainly presented in Chapter 4: *The Situation of Human Trafficking for Ransom in the Literature* and used for triangulation in Chapter 11, *Discussion and Conclusion: The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*. In the writing process, priority was given to the perspective of

the victims and survivors of human trafficking for ransom. This can be seen in the use of quotes from survivors of human trafficking for ransom presented in this thesis. However, in order to adapt to the readers targeted by this dissertation (researchers, academics, policymakers, journalists, activists, etc.), academic terms have been used in the writing. For instance, ‘human trafficker’ is a word that was almost never used by the interviewees, who referred to ‘smugglers’ or ‘connection men’. For a better transparency on this, the terms used by the researchers/translators and the interviewees are explained in the Glossary at the front of this thesis. The table below details the perspective from which each empirical chapter of this thesis was written.

Research question and chapter	Perspective	Data collected	Analysis	Explanation
SQ1: What do survivors report on the context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya? (Chapter 5)	Perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom Perspective of smugglers	Semi-structured interviews with survivors of human trafficking for ransom, smugglers and experts Observations Photographs Stills from documentaries	Coding labelling	Chapter 5 presents the current and historic context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya from the perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom. Occasionally, interviews with smugglers and experts are used as supplementary information.
SQ 2: What do survivors report on the main migratory routes to and inside Libya, as well as the hubs and places where human trafficking takes place on these trajectories?	Perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom	Semi-structured interviews with survivors of human trafficking for ransom, smugglers and experts Observations	Coding labelling, and comparison	Chapter 6 presents the routes, hubs and places mentioned by the interviewees who survived human trafficking for ransom. Interviews with smugglers and experts, photographs,

(Chapter 6)		Photographs Reports, books, news articles, social media posts and videos/ photographs Google Maps		observations and secondary data retrieved from reports or Google maps are used occasionally as supplementary information.
Research question and chapter	Perspective	Data collected	Analysis	Explanation
SQ3: Which extortion and torture practices associated with human trafficking for ransom in Libya do survivors report? (Chapter 7)	Perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom	Semi-structured interviews with survivors of human trafficking for ransom and smugglers Observations Photograph Stills from documentaries	Coding labelling, and comparison	Chapter 7 presents the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom from the perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom. Occasionally, interviews with smugglers are used as supplementary information.

SQ3: Which extortion and torture practices associated with this new form of human trafficking for ransom in Libya do survivors report? (Chapter 8)	Perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom	Semi-structured interviews with survivors of human trafficking for ransom, smugglers and experts Observations Photograph	Coding labelling, and comparison	Chapter 8 presents the conditions of migrants and refugees in official detention centres in Libya from the perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom. Occasionally, interviews with smugglers and experts are used as supplementary information.
SQ4: What is the prevalence and nature of sexual violence in the context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya, reported by survivors? (Chapter 9)	Perspective of survivors of sexual violence on migratory paths in and towards Libya	Semi-structured interviews with survivors of sexual violence, smugglers and experts Observations Photographs	Coding labelling, and comparison	Chapter 9 presents the prevalence of sexual violence in and towards Libya from the perspective of its survivors. Occasionally, interviews with smugglers and experts are used as supplementary information.
SQ5: What was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it on the experiences reported by survivors of human trafficking for ransom? (Chapter 10)	Perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom	Semi-structured interviews with migrants, refugees, smugglers and experts Observations Photographs Reports, books, news articles	Coding labelling, and comparison	Chapter 10 presents the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region of Libya and the measures to contain it from the perspective of survivors of human trafficking for ransom. Interviews with smugglers and experts, photographs, observations and secondary data retrieved from

				reports or news articles are used occasionally as supplementary information.
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Figure 1.3. Perspective and empirical data presented in each chapter

As an interpretivist, I am well aware of the impact of my positionality on the results and the way they are presented. A description and reflection on my positionality and its impact can be found in Chapter 3: *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*.

1.8.2 Inductive research approach

Very little has been published on human trafficking for ransom in academic articles and in the press. The first task in carrying out this research was, therefore, to collect data, conduct interviews and understand what human trafficking for ransom in Libya is and how it works. For this reason, this research was started without a theoretical framework. There was an intention to be detached from any lens and to be open to any information, without judgement, on the topic studied. This research was conducted in optic to first receive and then analyse and try to understand. It was, therefore, developed using an inductive approach. The theoretical framework came later. This research proposes the concepts of the "right to have rights," the "culture of violence," the "human trafficking cycle," the “theory of black holes”, and the "categorisation of sexual violence" as analytical frameworks to interpret and explain the phenomenon of human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

1.8.3 Qualitative research design

The primary data for this research was collected in particular⁵ from qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with migrants, refugees, experts and smugglers. Before starting the fieldwork, I knew almost nothing about human trafficking for ransom in Libya. Hence, it was decided to give the interviewees the space to discuss the topic.

⁵ The description of all data collected for this research is provided in Chapter 3: *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*.

Before the fieldwork, a questionnaire containing a dozen broad questions was developed. Most of the time, the interviews were conducted in a way that retraced the journeys of the interviewees from their country of origin to where they lived at the time of the interview. When necessary, details were asked, for example, about the description of a location, the ransom amounts paid, and the means of transport. Many of the interviewees exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Hence, a qualitative research design was used as this allowed me to adapt to the state (mental and physical) of the interviewee. Two focus group interviews were conducted (one with 7 Eritrean refugees and the other one with 6 West African migrants and refugees). They were not planned as focus group discussions, but happened because the participants all expressed the desire to talk and wanted to talk together. The focus groups interviews were adapted to a more conversational level, on the general situation of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. Details on ethical challenges and emotional challenges of this research are presented in Chapter 3: *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*. On average, the interviews lasted 1.5 to 2 hours. Some lasted only 15 minutes, others 4 days. All interviews ended with the question, “Is there something else that you want to talk about?”

1.8.4 Ethnography as a research strategy

In this research my point of departure was the lived experience of the survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya and my interest was to understand how they perceive their situation and what had happened to them. As much as possible, I tried to also get a viewpoint from other stakeholders in the situation. This ethnographic lens, in which I tried to understand the situation through the eyes of the participants in my research, and contrast them, was chosen so that I could develop an emic understanding of the situation.

Much of the fieldwork was conducted in Niger, Tunisia and Sudan. I lived for one year and a half in Agadez, a city in the north of Niger and have resided in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, from 2019 till 2024. By living in the field, I was able to gain an understanding of the situation in places crossed by migrants and refugees on their way to Libya. This enabled me to understand smuggling and human trafficking dynamics.

I took Hausa and Arabic lessons in order to better understand the situation. When possible, I lived close to the interviewees and spent as much time as possible with them. Nights were spent in refugee camps, in apartments where refugees are hosted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and in the Sahara with smugglers. Days were spent in 'ghettos', where migrants hide in Agadez before taking the road to Libya. Human trafficking being an illegal activity, I did not have the chance to personally meet with a human trafficker or to enter a trafficking camp. A visa application to enter Libya was submitted in 2019, but due to COVID-19 and the security situation, no positive answer has been received so far. I am well aware that due to the fact that I have never entered Libya, or a human trafficking camp, I will never entirely understand what the interviewees have been through. In addition, my positionality – the fact that I am a woman, white, Belgian, with an academic background and that I do not share the religious beliefs of the interviewees – creates barriers to fully understanding the situation. However, those aspects of my personality are perceived as useful to share the knowledge I have gathered in the field. That is the objective of this dissertation.

Attention has been given through the whole process of this research to the interviewees. Building trust was key in the data gathering. Methods have been adapted through the research in order to answer the dilemmas encountered. This research has been conducted with a deep respect for the interviewees, even when I, as a researcher, did not agree with them. I feel grateful to the people who opened their doors to me.

The topic of this research implies grave human rights violations. The interviewees have been detained, commodified, tortured, physically and sexually assaulted. This implies that every conversation was very personal and emotional and therefore it was important to take time. If the interviews required the respondent to go back to traumatic events, the interview was conducted with a care to do no harm. As a researcher I also needed to be physically and emotionally present in the situation. In the process of reflecting, organising and inducting inferences, I have tried to the best of my abilities to have an awareness of the impact of my own presence in the process of the research I conducted.

This thesis is written in the first person, using 'I', in acknowledgment of the fact that my presence in the research, as

researcher, does have an impact, as described by Ansoms, Nyenyezi Bisoka and Thomson:

The norm of scholarly writing requires that the author is seen but not heard in the text; third person and often-passive voice predominate, e.g. 'it was found', rather than the active and more honest, 'I found' or 'I experienced'. [...] There has been in the last fifteen years or so a move away from a strictly neutral authorial voice, as journals and presses make space for the personal motivations and ethical choices of fieldwork. (Ansons, Nyenyezi Bisoka & Thomson, 2021)

More details on ethnography as a research approach can be found in Chapter 3: *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*.

1.8.5 Cross-sectional and longitudinal techniques and procedures

As very little was known about human trafficking for ransom in Libya when the research started, a plurality of testimonies was first sought, with the intention to triangulate them in a second phase. This is why in the majority of the cases, a cross-sectional technique was adopted in this research. Interviewees were met only once. However, the contact details of the researchers were always given at the beginning of the interview. This was done so that the interviewees could come back to the researchers if they had questions or if they changed their mind and did not want parts, or the whole, of their interview to be published. As explained to the interviewees, a high level of attention was paid to their safety during the research process. Some interviewees contacted the researchers after the interview. Sometimes to ask for help, sometimes to ask for information and other times to share more information. In the later cases, longitudinal techniques were adopted. The interviews with 12 participants who were interviewed on several occasions over an extended time are used for analysis in this thesis. The contact was maintained with them by me and/or my colleagues. Messages, pictures, videos and screenshots were shared by the participants on Messenger and WhatsApp and additional interviews were conducted on the phone or face-to-face when possible.

1.9 Timeline

The preparation for the research started in 2019. At that time, I was living in Agadez (Niger). The photographs I had taken, some press articles and the documentary that I directed, *Teghadez Agadez* (Wirtz,

2019b) have been (re)used in this research (see Chapter 3: *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*).

In March 2019, Kai Smits started conducting interviews with survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Europe (the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy). These were followed by the interviews I conducted in Niamey (in Niger) in April 2019 and by other interviews by Kai Smits, also in Niamey, in June 2019.

In September 2019, I moved to Tunisia. At the end of 2019 and in January 2020, I conducted interviews as part of the fieldwork carried out in Tunis and Medinine (in Tunisia).

In April 2020, I received a ZonMw grant to research the impact of COVID-19 on refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in the Central Mediterranean area. This project was called 'Corona: Fast-track data' (reference number 440.20.012). The first phase of the research consisted of fieldwork and data collection. I combined the research on the impact of COVID-19 with research on human trafficking and sexual violence in Libya. In May and June 2020, I conducted fieldwork in Tunis, Zarzis, Medinine, Djerba, Sfax, Kerkennah, Soussa and Kalibia (Tunisia), and Adoum Moussa conducted fieldwork in Agadez (Niger).

In June 2021, I conducted fieldwork in Sudan together with Kai Smits.

Additional interviews were conducted in various countries throughout the research period, up to 2022. Interviews were also conducted by Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen, by WhatsApp messenger, phone and through email testimony.

Kai Smits, Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen and I were able to conduct research within Libya through conversations with refugees residing in Libya. Some of them had access to secretly held mobile phones. Six migrants and refugees were interviewed in such a way, in the form of longitudinal conversations over several years, which included calls, as well as the exchange of videos and photographs, and sometimes eventually face-to-face meetings. When contact was maintained, it was often at the initiative of the interviewee.

The analysis of interviews started in July 2020. After the transcription of the interviews, Kai Smits and I directed a team of research assistants to proceed to the coding and labelling of all interviews we had gathered together on human trafficking for ransom in Libya. This resulted in a general table including a variety

of labels per interviewees: Interviewee, gender, origin, age, key dates of their journey, reason for leaving country of origin, subsequent place of residence (e.g., a refugee camp), border(s) crossed, payments made, payment procedure, 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, interaction with officials, interactions with compatriots, interactions with people in Libya, access to information, information produced, feelings mentioned, crossing of the Mediterranean Sea, arrest by Libyan Coast Guard, resettlement process, other things mentioned.

In April 2021, on the basis of this general table, Kai Smits and I started a second analysis of the interviews and the identification of key findings. Three new tables were created on the basis of the first one and the transcription of interviews; an overview of official detention centres and trafficking camps, an overview of the trajectories and ransom paid and an overview of testimonies of sexual violence in Libya (For more details, see Chapter 3: *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*). On the basis of the findings, I (co)authored ten chapters in the book *Enslaved. Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya* (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits & Wirtz, 2023).

The findings of the study were published in January 2023. The public availability of the findings helped in the assessment of the validation of the findings. The comments received have been considered as part of the analysis for this research. Five chapters of the earlier publication form the basis of the current analysis. The material in these previously published chapters is reconsidered in light of the research questions of this current research.

1.10 Research collaborations

This research is the product of a collaboration with the following researchers:

- **Kai Smits**, PhD candidate at Tilburg University working on the migratory paths from Eritrea to Europe, participated in the data collection, data analysis, understanding and the writing of the results of this thesis. Interviews conducted during his fieldworks have been shared with me and

triangulated with the interviews I conducted. We maintained permanent contact during this whole research and worked in close collaboration.

- **Adoum Moussa**, researcher and journalist in Agadez, Niger, also worked in close collaboration with me. He conducted fieldwork in Agadez during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, where he interviewed smugglers and migrants and refugees. He was also contacted on several occasions when I needed detailed information on the situation in Agadez.

- **Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen** supervised this research. Being in permanent contact with me, she advised me and indicated to me the path to follow at each phase of the research. Prof. Dr Van Reisen also conducted interviews with refugees in Libya hiding a phone to share information about the conditions of detention.

- **Dr Bénédicte Mouton** supervised and orientated this research. She played an important role in the editing of this manuscript.

- **A team of research assistants** was put together after fieldwork in Tunisia to help in the transcription, coding and labelling of the interviews.

A full list of all the people who made this research possible is provided in the front of this thesis under Acknowledgements.

Several collaborations with institutions were also undertaken during this research:

- Important findings presented in this research were collected during fieldwork conducted for the project ‘Corona: Fast-track data’ (reference number 440.20.012) and financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). Research on the impact of COVID-19 on migrants and refugees in the Central-Mediterranean area was combined with research on human trafficking and sexual violence in Libya and key findings were gathered during this period.

- The Europe External Programme in Africa (EEPA) supported this research through the project Europe-Africa

Response to Human Trafficking and Mixed Migration Flows.

- I am a member of the research team of Globalization, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC), led by Prof. Dr Mirjam van Reisen. She hosts weekly meetings to assist PhD students to advance their understanding on how to conduct academic research, work with peers in duets and in peer groups and share experiences. The meetings are also occasions where PhD students can present their work and receive feedback. Regular discussion with researchers from different countries and with professors attending the meetings provided insights on how to reflect on the research and analyse data, the different methodologies that could be applied, and how to deal with the ethical and emotional issues faced.

1.11 Ethical, emotional and security considerations

The considerations on the ethical handling of this research and the data management were discussed with the Research Ethics and Data Management Committee of Tilburg University⁶. The considerations concerned the strategy for data handling and management as well as the emotional and security considerations associated with this study for myself as a researcher and my fellow team members, as well as the participants of this research⁷. The boundaries included safe data collection during the COVID-19 lockdown. The effort and risks associated with data collection, prompted an in-depth consideration of the importance of FAIR data management as part of the research procedure that respects research ethics.

⁶ Ethical clearance was received from the Research Ethics and Data Management Committee (REDC) with approval identification code: REDC# 2020/01 3a and amended for the fieldwork on 30 September 2020.

⁷I was subject to stringent agreements with my supervisors who set clear boundaries on what I was allowed to do as a researcher and when and where I could travel under which conditions. These boundary rules were regularly discussed within University Management and the Ethics Committee. We also discussed these regularly in the GAIC Research Network and received guidance from the leadership on ethical research in a global setting.

1.11.1 Ethical considerations of FAIR Data management and re-use

This research is based on five chapters that were previously published in Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits and Wirtz (2023), *Enslaved. Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya*, Bamenda, Cameroon: Langa Research & Publishing CIG. They are republished in part in this research⁸. I have considered the issues of scientific FAIR data management, re-use, plagiarism and self-plagiarism.

Given that the research is based on the empirical material that was used for the previous publication, this material was re-used. The re-use of empirical data is encouraged by the EU policy that since 2020 requires scientists to consider that their data is Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable . The re-use of data is desirable, since data collection is an expensive process, and this is all the more the case for the data collected on human trafficking for ransom (Ghardallou *et al.*, 2022; Jacobsen *et al.*, 2020; Van Reisen, Stokman, *et al.*, 2020; Van Reisen, Amare, *et al.*, 2023). This data is costly to collect, not only for the researcher but also for the participants, who pay an emotional cost for sharing their story. I therefore explicitly chose to re-use the available material, because I felt that the research questions could be answered by considering this data.

In order to study the benefits of data FAIRification of data and texts, I conducted a study on the FAIRification of migrants' data in Tunisia, Libya and Niger (Ghardallou, *et al.*, 2022), which demonstrated the possibilities of applying FAIR data guidelines on data concerning human trafficking conducted with ethnographic methods. From this study it was concluded that it was possible and desirable to FAIR-ify data in this field and that this can lead to new insights. FAIRification of data needs to be accompanied by FAIRification of methods, tools and text material and enables

⁸In other dissertations such a process is referred to as a dissertation based on journal articles. I prefer the term “data re-use” and reconsideration of earlier published material, because the articles previously published appear in this research in a new light, as a basis to answering new research questions. This research therefore does not just duplicate but builds on the earlier work and expands. In order to account for duplication, every section which was published previously and which is duplicated here is identified in the footnotes. To maximise accountability, a list of duplicate sections, which were published previously, is added in Annex 5: *List of duplicated work per chapter*.

ethical data-production and re-use acknowledging Ownership, Local provenance and Regulatory compliance associated with the conditions where the data is produced (FAIR-OLR) (Van Reisen, Amare, *et al.*, 2023).

Plagiarism is a cardinal sin in academia. The nature of what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it is informed by the new tool for automated detection as well as the dynamic debate on the desirability of FAIR-principles in science, which includes re-use of material (Van Reisen, Amare, *et al.*, 2023). Although often understood as an issue of copy paste, the real issue with plagiarism is the need for scientific transparency in the provenance of the analysis and the material presented. This is also the case for self-plagiarism, which suffers from the same problem if no adequate account is given from the duplication, the reasons for duplication and the method through which new conclusions can be derived from the duplicated material (Broome, 2004). In this research, written material is directly re-used, but considered within the frame of a different set of questions, which allows me to throw a new lens onto the material that is presented here. I have provided transparency and indicated all places where I have duplicated the earlier published (parts of) chapters⁹. I have accounted for the way in which I have re-analysed the material to obtain the answers to my research questions. In the re-consideration of the material previously published, I have benefitted from any comments received on the previous publications and made adaptations where I considered this would improve the presentation of the material.

1.11.2 Ethical considerations concerning the emotional handling of the material

As it might be understood from this introduction, the pages that will follow will be difficult to read. They have also been difficult to write. But this is nothing compared to the pain of the interviewees who agreed to share their testimonies for this research. Their security, the do no harm principle and ethics were the primary consideration during this whole research. Challenges have been discussed in the winter class 2022, on Ethical and Emotional Challenges in Field

⁹ Core practices of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) defines a set of guidelines for ethical handling in publishing: “Core practices of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) encourage editors to define plagiarism in their instructions and explicitly guide readers on how to reuse their published articles.” (Zimba & Gasparayan, 2021, p.132).

Research, given by An Ansoms at the University of Louvain. The topic has also been continuously addressed during the weekly meetings hosted by the research team of Globalization, Accessibility, Innovation and Care (GAIC) since 2019.

Chapter 3: *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*, is dedicated to the methodology applied during this research and to ethical considerations. It provides a full reflection on the ethical challenges encountered during this research. The main issue during fieldworks was to gain the trust of the interviewees, with a deep concern for respecting them.

Before starting the interviews, I have always allocated a time to introducing myself and the people accompanying me, if there were. The goal of my research was explained, in transparency. I let interviewees ask as many questions as they want before, during and after the research.

All interviews were preceded by a written or oral consent with the interviewees. This consent gave details on the duration of the interview and its purpose. It warns the interviewee that difficult topics will be raised during the interview and that it could affect them. It stipulated that interviewees had the right to not answer question(s) or to put an end to the interview at any time and without any consequences. It detailed the security measures taken to protect them during and after the interviews and the way data will be managed. With authorisation of the participants, interviews were audio recorded. If consent for recording was not provided, notes were taken. Financial compensation was given to the interviewees for transport costs to the place of the interview and for phone costs if they were to call other potential participants.

During the whole research, I took care that the interviews were conducted in a place where the participants would feel at ease. I had to move from places several times. In most cases, I interviewed people in their house/shelter. I sometimes had no other choices than to conduct the interviews in the UNHCR office or the office of one of their partners. When it was the case, I had a private room inside their building.

I only allowed the translator or one of my research assistants to attend the discussion. In the ETM facility at Hamdallaye, a UNHCR officer insisted on being present during the interviews with refugees who had been evacuated from Libya. That is why I only conducted four interviews inside the camps and the others in discreet places in

Niamey. In Um Racuba refugee camp, a representative of the Sudanese government also insisted on attending the interviews. I minimised the interviews there, instead focusing on photography.

Drinks and snacks were often shared during the interviews. With time, I got to understand that the interviews were easier to conduct for the participants and for me when food was shared. With time also, in order to face emotional issues, I started to provide the help I could provide to the participants. When they indicated they were in need of food, a doctor or medicines, I provided it to them. Though, it was always mentioned before the interview that no compensation will be given to the participants. But, at a certain point, I couldn't anymore leave the house of people who had shared their story with me and explained that they needed help without doing at least a small thing.

I always shared my phone number with the participants in case they had questions after the interview. Contact was maintained with them only at their initiative. In case of doubt on the risks of publishing an information provided by an interviewee, was the only reason for which I took the first initiative to call them. If I didn't have their contact details, I have not published the information.

1.11.3 Emotional issues of the interviewees

The majority of the interviewees met for the purpose of this research have experienced trauma. Kidane, a psychologist by training and expert on post traumatic stress in Eritrean refugees who have experienced human trafficking for ransom, has seriously considered how trauma affects them:

Trauma often comprises situations that are so threatening to life or integrity that a person's ability to cope is diminished. In order to cope, the person may dissociate during the event or may be affected in such a way that he/she is not able to hold together the different elements of the event afterwards and 'integrate' them. This diminishes the ability of the traumatised individual to think coherently about what happened or express and connect their feelings about the experience. Traumatic stress, thus, includes the individual distress and enduring pain and suffering, including PTSD and comorbid disorders, such as depression, caused by traumatic events including, war, torture and human rights violations. (Kidane, 2021, pp. 27–28.)

Because of their experience on migratory paths, many survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya interviewed for this research presented symptoms of post-traumatic stress¹⁰. They had headaches, some had forgotten important sections of their migratory journey, many mentioned nightmares and suicidal thoughts. They were also highly preoccupied by their current situation. If they were living in places considered as safe at the time of the research (Niger, Tunisia, Sudan), many stated that their situation was far from being settled. Many felt guilty because they originally left their country to help their family financially and in reverse had crippled them with debt. Many could not make a good living in Tunisia or Niger and couldn't earn enough to start sending remittances or reimburse their travel expenses. Many also were young. They had dreams of building a family, work and being financially independent. Instead, they felt trapped in a foreign country far from being what they expected when they had started their migratory journey. This haunted them at the time of the interview. Many also had also experienced racist or xenophobic behaviour towards them in their new country of residence.

Before beginning the interviews, I warned the interviewees that going back to the memories of Libya might be painful for them. It carries risks of re-traumatisation¹¹. It feels a cynical thing, but I always brought tissues with me when I went to an interview. We also shared drinks and snacks. Later, I extended it to meals.

The stories told by survivors of human trafficking for ransom in Libya are sometimes hard to believe because of their degree of cruelty. That is why, at the start of my research, I wanted to conduct a large number of interviews, so that I could then adopt a distractive positionality and triangulate the testimonies. On several occasions, I met people in different places who had been detained in the same trafficking camps together in Libya and who described the same

¹⁰ Since I have no qualifications as a psychiatrist, and was not qualified to perform any tests, I did not have the capacity to diagnose Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, but as a researcher working with people who had experienced (severe) trauma, I could observe aspects of trauma-related behaviour and I needed to be aware of the danger not to re-traumatise the participants in the research. In order to train myself and the research team to observe signs of trauma, I worked with psychologists who guided me on this matter.

¹¹ Informed consent implies that participants in a research are aware of the potential consequences of their participation for themselves (See Annex 2: *Information letter for interviewees*).

conditions. I quickly realised that however horrific the stories told by the survivors, they reflected what had happened to them. Naturally, there could be inconsistencies in what participants said, gaps in memory and even lies. I can never be sure that everything an interviewee told me is true. But I can be sure that everything that person says carries a message and is an information in itself. My duty was to identify them and to understand what this information referred to.

After having gathered enough testimonies to be able to have a general picture of the situation, I adapted my strategy. I came to understand that I should conduct interviews with fewer participants, but engage in longer in-depth interviews. This was also a good way of facing the emotional issues of the interviewees, as well as my own mental coping. I felt better when I had the opportunity to meet a participant several times. Walking along the city and discovering places together while having informal conversations really helped in trust building from both sides. I took as much time as I could with the respondents. I really worry about their fate, even if, in many cases, there is little I can do to help.

Interviews were carried out in a semi-structured way and the questions were open. The classical way of conducting the interviews was to invite the participants to recount their journey from their country of origin to their current country of residence. When necessary, details were asked, for example, about the description of a location, the ransom amounts paid, and the means of transport. When this format did not suit the respondent, I simply asked to testify to what they wished to reveal. In that case the interview consisted of an open and non-linear discussion. I moved into conversational interview modes immediately when the participants appeared to be minors and in the case of spontaneous focus groups interviews.

When interviewees showed signs of vulnerability, aches or fatigue, I 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 – it was the second time I asked him. He had a headache. In Libya, a human trafficker had beaten his skull with a metal bar.

1.11.4 Detecting and supporting emotional issues of the researcher

Is human trafficking for ransom in Libya researchable? This is the question I asked in a chapter entitled ‘Skin in the Game:

Methodology of an Ethnographic Research with Exposure to Trauma' co-authored with Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen and Kai Smits and published in the book *Enslaved. Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya* (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits & Wirtz, 2023). The chapter states that human trafficking for ransom is researchable, but requires 'skin in the game'; in other words, being engaged with the situation, in order to have an in-depth understanding of it and to make what is done as meaningful as possible (Taleb, 2018). I agree with Taleb and admit that the topic of this research has had a profound effect on me and is now part of my daily life. Living in Tunisia, I cannot go out to buy bread without having a discussion about migration to Europe. In the year 2022, 18,465 Tunisians were among the refugees and migrants reaching Italian shores. This represents 18% of the total sea arrivals to Italy (UNHCR, 2023b). Migration is a current topic in Tunisia – but human trafficking for ransom is the dark side of this migration. Few people know about it and talk about it. And, in a different way from the survivors, I now also carry in me the scars of the topic I studied. An in depth reflection on the emotional issues I encountered during the research is provided in Chapter 3: *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*.

Prior to, and during, the research I have received specific support on this issue. I have had many conversations about it with my main supervisor Prof. Dr Mirjam Van Reisen, who has always been available for me to discuss this matter, and others in formal and informal meetings. Dr Bénédicte Mouton, my second supervisor, was specifically requested to assist me in this research. As a doctor of psychological sciences, she helped me to identify signs of trauma in the interviewees and gave me advice on how to handle the conversations with people suffering from trauma. She also supported me in a more informal way and we have had deep conversations on the impact of my positionality on the research as well as on the impact of the research on me.

An Ansoms, Professor in development studies at the University of Louvain, Belgium greatly assisted me in facing the emotional issues I encountered during this research. I attended her winter class on 'Ethical and Emotional Challenges in Field Research' in 2022. It is thanks to this seminar that I could take the necessary distance from the challenges I faced during the research. It was a real discovery for me to learn that emotions could be part of the research, as they carry information and also have an impact on the research (Ansom,

Nyenyenzi Bisoka & Thomson, 2021; Davies & Spencer, 2010). This helped me to reflect on the impact of the respondents' emotions as well as mine in writing Chapter 3 of this thesis. It gave me a new understanding of the topic and my way of understanding it.

Vincent Dupont, certified in systemic therapy, also supported and helped me to face the emotional challenges of this research. Together, during the fieldwork, we analysed the impacts of events occurring during the day on my wellbeing. In this way we were able to identify what helped me to carry out research. From this analysis I have identified that I felt better if I was of help to the interviewees. Following this, I have started to more frequently assist the interviewees by providing food, medicine or a doctor after the interview, when necessary.

Dr Selam Kidane and Bruna Mikami also offered their psychological support and advice during the research process. The advice of Dr Selam Kidane was relevant since she specialises in trauma of Eritrean refugees and understands the cultural angle of it. Bruna Mikami took part in the analysis of the data in a systematic way, which allowed a regular interaction on the issue. In addition, the weekly meetings with Kai Smits, Ria Landa e/v Figueroa and Makeba Saba, my fellow PhD candidates, encouraged me to complete the last steps of my PhD and to finalise the research.

Finally, of course my family and friends are the ones who really helped me to overcome the emotional issues I faced during this research. I had the opportunity to have deep conversations with many of them. And, in many cases, a step back from the research and a trip or a day in nature were just what I needed to be able to smile again.

1.11.5 General security measures

The topic of human trafficking for ransom presents a certain level of risk for both respondents and researchers, as well as their collaborators. When conducting interviews in Niger, Tunisia, and Sudan, where interviewees may have connections to human trafficking networks, it becomes crucial to employ effective methods to protect their identities and minimise risks. In order to minimise exposure to dangerous situations during this research, several measures were implemented. Researchers underwent training to handle sensitive information and maintain confidentiality. The interview process itself adhered to strict ethical guidelines and

principles. Together with my team, we sought advice from security specialists before, during and after the research to ensure the safety of all parties involved. I also met with other researchers and journalists working on sensitive topics and asked them about the security measures they implemented to protect themselves, their sources and their data.

As mentioned above, the security measures dictated that interviews should take place in a secure location, and precautions were taken to safeguard communication regarding the location. I let the interviewees decide on the place of the interview, letting them know that they should choose a place where they feel safe. It happened that we had to change locations during an interview for this reason.

As security starts by being aware of the risks, I ensured that interviewees fully understood the purpose of the research and the potential risks involved, as part of the introduction to the interviews and the informed consent provided by participants.

Ensuring the anonymity and security of respondents is paramount in research, especially when dealing with sensitive topics like human trafficking. Prior to the interview, each participant was assured that their personal information would remain confidential and I explained to them the methods we would use for that (see next subsection ‘Methods to keep respondents anonymous and de-identified’).

When collaborating with research assistants, a security protocol was established, which the collaborators were required to sign and adhere to. The protocol included the measures mentioned above as others to limit the sharing of information on the specific activities of the research team. Furthermore, all collected data, including transcripts and any identifying information, were securely stored on encrypted hard-drives in different locations and accessible only to authorised research personnel. Strict data protection protocols were followed to prevent unauthorised access or data breaches. During data collection, I avoided talking about the topic of my research as much as possible. When people asked what I was working on, I simply answered ‘migration’.

My collaborators and I did not encounter any particular issue during or after the research and, as of the time of writing, we are not aware of any instances where respondents were exposed following their participation in the research.

1.11.6 Methods to keep respondents anonymous and de-identified

Keeping respondents anonymous and de-identified was one of the measures implemented to safeguard the security of interviewees. This was notified to them before the starting of the interview. After the transcription of interviews, each participant was assigned a unique number, instead of using their real names. This approach provides a layer of protection, as it prevents the direct identification of individuals by their names. By using these numbers, testimonies could be published without fear of retribution or harm to the interviewees.

To further strengthen the anonymity of interviewees, some individuals were provided with multiple different interviewee numbers. This measure prevents cross-checking of testimonies, making it harder to trace back specific details to a particular individual. By employing this technique, the risk of identification based on consistent information across interviews is significantly reduced. When, despite all the measures implemented, the publication of some findings was considered as too risky for the participants – for example, the name of places or dates of detentions – they were not published.

In some cases, fake names were used to enhance the readability and flow of the text, while maintaining anonymity. These pseudonyms serve to preserve the privacy of interviewees without compromising the integrity of the research. Careful consideration was given to ensuring that the chosen fake names did not resemble any real names, further reducing the risk of accidental identification.

1.11.7 Conversations with minors

My collaborators and I sometimes encountered minors when conducting research in the field who expressed a desire to talk to us. Assessing the dynamics on the ground, the researchers decided that the minors would be impacted negatively if the discussion was not accepted. When this happened, the interviews were immediately adapted to a more conversational level. Hence, although the interactions with the minors are counted as ‘interviews’ in the overviews, we approached these interactions as conversations. In addition, my collaborators and I would ensure that such conversations happened under the guardianship of a trusted person or persons.

1.12 Previous published work

As a researcher, journalist, photo-journalist and documentary filmmaker, I have had opportunities to publish on topics related to this research. Some texts and/or some of the interviews conducted for these works, are reused in this thesis (as explained in Chapter 3: *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*). This section presents a summary of the main works that I have authored related to the topic of this research: human trafficking for ransom in Libya.

- *The Plight of Refugees in Agadez in Niger: From Crossroad to Dead End* (Wirtz, 2019a)

Published as a chapter in the book *Mobile Africa: Human Trafficking and the Digital Divide* (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019), this work presents the situation of migrants, refugees and smugglers after the implementation of law 2015–36 in Niger, which punishes any form of commercial activity on immigration. It analysed the impact of the EU's policy to control migration from Africa on the movement of people from Agadez in Niger to Algeria and Libya. It found that these policies have left migrants and refugees in a more vulnerable situation and left 'migration business professionals' without a source of income.

- *Lawless Libya: Unprotected Refugees Kept Powerless and Silenced* (Van Reisen, Smits, & Wirtz, 2019)

Published as a chapter in the book *Mobile Africa: Human Trafficking and the Digital Divide* (Van Reisen, Mawere, Stokmans & Gebre-Egziabher, 2019), this study examines the situation of Eritrean refugees in Libya through the prism of the gatekeeper theory (Barzilai-Nahon, 2008). Eritrean refugees are described as a gated community living in a digital black hole. The study reveals that access to information in Libya is largely controlled by gatekeepers, such as human traffickers, smugglers, the Libyan authorities and international organisations. Eritrean refugees, who lack control over their situation, information and communication, can be categorised as "exploited", subject to the power dynamics of the gatekeepers. The research highlights the urgent need to recognise and address the conditions of slavery in digital black holes, with an emphasis

on protecting victims and prosecuting perpetrators as part of the fight against human trafficking.

- *Teghadez Agadez* (Wirtz, 2019b)

Teghadez Agadez is my first feature documentary. It is the result of the year and a half I lived in this city. In Agadez, migrants on the road to Europe cross paths with others who have fled Libya or been expelled from Algeria. The characters in this film are one smuggler and four migrants and refugees. It is an encounter. All people are shot as human beings, who cook, dance, sing. They explain what they have been through in Libya (if they have been there) and what is their perception of migration, free movement and hope. This documentary also evaluates the impact of law 2015–36. The documentary was awarded Best Feature Documentary at the Nova Frontier Film Festival 2020 in New York and received a Special Mention International Documentary at Vues d’Afrique 2021 in Montreal.

- *Sisters* (Wirtz, 2021)

Sisters is a photo report on prostitution in Agadez. For a month and a half, I followed several women who have decided or been forced to take up prostitution in this city at the edge of the Sahara. Some of them are from Niger and have decided to do this activity, because they did not have any support from their family. Others are from other countries and use it to send remittances to their family or to have money to pay for their journey to another destination. Others still, are victims of prostitution networks that go from Nigeria and its neighbouring areas to Europe (see Chapter 9: *Sexual Violence on Migratory Paths in and Towards Libya*). This photo report was presented in the exhibition ‘Femmes Photojournalists’ organised by Geopolis in Brussels. It has also been published on the website of Hans Lucas Photo Agency.

- *TRAMADOL* (Moussa & Wirtz, 2022)

TRAMADOL is a 31-minute documentary that I directed with my colleague Adoum Moussa. This film investigates the use and selling of tramadol, one of the most popular narcotics in West Africa. The main character is Moussa, a young Tuareg crossing Niger on his motorbike to buy and

sell the opioid. If this movie is not directly linked to the topic of this research, it enlarged my perception of the situation and of smuggling in the Sahara. As well as human smuggling, there is also the smuggling of drugs, weapons and other goods across the desert and this business is considered by many people to be the only way of making money. *TRAMADOL* was awarded a Silver Tanit in the category of short documentary at the Carthage Film Festival 2022 in Tunis and Best Short documentary at Human Screen Festival 2023 also in Tunis.

- *Enslaved. Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya* (Van Reisen, Mawere, Smits & Wirtz, 2023)

This book presents the results of four years of research conducted by my colleagues and me on human trafficking for ransom of Eritrean refugees in Libya. It is a detailed ethnographic study which identifies the routes, modus operandi, organisation, and key actors involved in the human trafficking for ransom of refugees and migrants. It describes the modus operandi of how Eritrean refugees are being trafficked and enslaved in Libya, where they are tortured to force relatives to pay a ransom for their release. As co-author of 10 of the chapters, this book was the opportunity for me to present the results of my research to a wider audience. I received comments on the descriptions provided in this book. These are used for the (re)-analysis of the phenomenon presented in this thesis.

- Press articles

Press articles I wrote for *Le Point Afrique*, *Le Soir*, *Inkyfada*, *EEPA*, *Air Info* and *InDepthNews* were an opportunity to share the results of my fieldwork. Among other things, I wrote about the impact of law 2015–36 in Niger (Wirtz, 2017; 2018a), about the security situation in Niger, about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Tunisia and its neighbouring areas, about the war in Tigray, and about human trafficking for ransom in Libya (see Annex 6: *Publications*).

1.13 Structure of the thesis

This thesis investigates the situation of human trafficking for ransom on the southwest and southeast routes in Libya between 2016 and 2021. It aims to provide an explanatory understanding for the reasons for the persistence of the human rights violations reported by survivors. This section presents a summary of the findings of each chapter.

Chapter 2, *Explaining Human Trafficking for Ransom: A Theoretical Framework*, develops a conceptual framework for understanding the persistence of human trafficking for ransom, including the conditions of cruelty, particularly sexual violence, that the practice entails. It shows that, according to several researchers, migration theories, such as the push and pull theory of migration, do not adequately explain the phenomenon. This has an impact on policies implemented to curb migration flows. With a view to suggest an alternate framing of migration as a human rights issue, this chapter explores the application of human rights, including the ‘right to have rights’ (Arendt, 1951) and the human rights culture (Rorty, 1998). This chapter then explores the concept of the ‘human trafficking cycle’ (Van Reisen, Estefanos & Rijken, 2014; Smits, 2023) and the theory of black holes applied to human trafficking for ransom (Van Reisen, Smits & Wirtz, 2019). A categorisation of acts of sexual violence (Wirtz, 2023) is finally suggested to understand the use of (sexual) violence as part of the modus operandi of human trafficking for ransom.

In **Chapter 3**, *The Story Behind the Findings: Methodology, Ethical and Emotional Challenges*, I present the methodology applied in this research. This chapter presents an in-depth reflection on my positionality in this research. The data collection, data analysis and data management that were conducted for this research are described. I then provide a reflection on the ethical and emotional challenges encountered during this research and what was done to overcome them.

Chapter 4, *The Situation of Human Trafficking for Ransom in the Literature* presents the literature review that was conducted for this research. Academic articles on the topic studied being scarce, it also includes other types of documents. This chapter first presents the historic and current context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. This is followed by an overview of the literature available on official and unofficial detention. This chapter then turns to the

findings of the literature review on sexual violence in Libya. Finally, the result of a desk review on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migration flows in the region of Libya are presented.

Chapter 5, *Slavery, War and Criminalisation: A Context of Human Trafficking* examines the historical, regional, national, political and security context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya from the perspective of survivors. It examines how containment policies increase migrants' and refugees' dependence on criminal networks to travel and place them in a more vulnerable position where they risk being sold multiple times. This chapter shows that, in Libya, migrants and refugees travelling through a country at war are exposed to racism and the risk of being robbed, kidnapped, sold, exploited or arrested by the authorities.

Chapter 6, *Routes, Hubs and Prisons: Mapping Migration in Libya*, looks at the trafficking routes through Libya, including the transit hubs, the places used to hold migrants and refugees, and the places from which people depart to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Five routes through Libya are investigated, on which migrants and refugees travel or are transported. This chapter highlights the extensive networks of human trafficking for ransom across multiple countries. It exposes the violence and human rights abuses faced by migrants, including torture, forced labour, and sexual exploitation. It finds that official detention centres play a role in the trafficking cycle, with detainees being sold or handed over to traffickers. Various actors, including drivers and armed groups, are involved. It further shows that deportations make migrants susceptible to re-entering the trafficking networks.

Chapter 7, *The Warehouses: At the Heart of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*, is the core chapter of this thesis. It focuses on human trafficking for ransom in Libya, exposing the dehumanising conditions, torture, and exploitation faced by victims. It shows that mobile phones play a crucial role in controlling victims and facilitating ransom payments. Perpetrators collude with authorities and armed groups, expanding the reach of the trafficking networks. It shows that the human trafficking cycle expands as victims are bought, sold, and subjected to forced labour in trafficking camps. The interviews reveal a grim reality of deaths, starvation, disease, and sexual violence.

Chapter 8, *Official Detention Centers in Libya and their Link to the Human Trafficking Cycle*, looks at official detention centres as a new

hub in the human trafficking cycle. Official detention centres are run by the Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration (DCIM), which depends on the Libyan Ministry of Interior. The interviewees mention harsh conditions including inadequate food, water, overcrowding, and unsanitary conditions, which lead to disease outbreaks including tuberculosis and scabies. Pregnant women lack proper assistance during childbirth, and access to medical care is limited. Mistreatment and torture, including deprivation of basic needs and electric shocks, are used as a punishment and a tool for subjugation. Guards exploit detainees by stealing their belongings, selling them as slaves or to smugglers, and even engaging in kidnappings. This chapter states that the EU's funding of the Libyan Coast Guard makes it complicit in the entrapment of migrants and refugees in the human trafficking cycle, as when they are intercepted while crossing the Mediterranean Sea, they are usually sent to these official detention centres, from where they can be sold to smugglers, human traffickers or into slavery. There is a high suspicion that those who are not brought to these prisons are directly sold to human traffickers from the shores.

Chapter 9, *Sexual Violence on Migratory Paths in and Towards Libya*, looks at the prevalence and nature of sexual violence within the context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. It reveals that sexual violence is pervasive and systematic, occurring during the journey, in urban areas, and in official detention centres. Both women and men are victims of rape and sexual violence, which are considered normal and part of the trafficking process. The three categories of sexual violence used for analysis in this chapter are subjugation, exploitation, and opportunistic crime. These acts are facilitated by the vulnerable position of migrants and refugees, their lack of access to justice and protection, and racism against 'black' individuals. This chapter shows that violence and sexual violence are part of the human trafficking cycle. Victims are no longer considered as human beings, but rather as objects that can be used for pleasure, for entertainment or for monetary profit. Once they are no longer considered useful, they can be sold or exchanged. The question of their eligibility for human rights is not raised. Victims are silenced and bound through shame and trapped in a human trafficking cycle in which violence (sexual, but also physical and psychological) is a culture.

Chapter 10, *'On the Move' in the Region of Libya during COVID-19*, explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants and

refugees in Libya. It shows that contrary to the global population, migrants' main concern was not contracting the virus, but rather the closure of borders and economic consequences. The research reveals that border closures and movement restrictions did not deter people from migrating or reduce arrivals in Europe via the Central Mediterranean route. Smugglers adapted by increasing prices and finding new routes, leading to a surge in Mediterranean crossings. Attempts to restrict movement resulted in migrants adapting and taking greater risks, while human trafficking networks quickly adjusted to the new restrictions.

Chapter 11, *Discussion and Conclusion: The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya*, begins by discussing the findings of this doctoral research through an assessment of internal consistency, peer feedback from earlier publications, external validity, and the research's limitations. This is followed by a conclusion that provides an explanation for the persistence of the severe conditions experienced by survivors of human trafficking for ransom along the southwestern and southeastern routes of Libya between 2016 and 2021, elaborating on the concept of the human trafficking cycle. The chapter identifies the context of irregularity, discrimination, and insecurity as conducive to human trafficking for ransom, where the absence of legal protections and systemic discrimination contributes to a precarious environment that fosters such exploitative practices. The commodification of individuals, coupled with exploitation and vulnerability, entraps victims and survivors in this cycle of trafficking. A human rights perspective is employed to argue that the denial of fundamental rights—including the right to security, legal recognition, and freedom from violence—plays a critical role in sustaining the trafficking cycle, highlighting the urgent need for policies grounded in human rights to disrupt this cycle.

Before launching into the body of this thesis, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the following pages are not easy to read. They deal with serious human rights violations, torture, slavery and sexual violence. In most cases, these abuses are reported by survivors of human trafficking for ransom. It is essential to inform in order to respond to the current situation. Nevertheless, I would like to warn that this awareness can be painful.