



Sexual violence along migratory routes, and in Libya ¹

Research overview:

Sexual violence along migration routes towards Libya, and inside the country is so common, that it is no longer unexpected by migrants and refugees. It is widespread and systematic, even prompting some to take precautions by sharing and planning strategies in advance to try to avoid it. Research in the context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya shows that sexual violence has become ingrained in a culture of violence that exists in Libya.

Context of sexual violence:

Sexual violence can be categorized in three motives: as an opportunistic crime, for subjugation, and for profit.

The sexual violence and discrimination against refugees and migrants in Libya is connected to the lack of a 'human rights culture'. Refugees and migrants effectively hold no legal status. Paired with widespread dehumanization, this places them in a position of great vulnerability. Along the journey, actors who hold power over them can easily perpetrate sexual violence without facing consequences.

Refugees and migrants are commonly arrested, kidnapped and sold on their journey, taken captive in official detention centres or human trafficking camps where they are exploited in inhumane conditions.

Types of sexual violence

Sexual violence is widely perpetrated as an opportunistic crime. In most human trafficking camps and detention centres, perpetrators have access and power over their victims, with victims unable to resist, creating a culture where rape is normalized. This results in many women getting pregnant. This form of sexual violence also takes place in other parts of the journey. The victims are often not assigned rights, as the perpetrators see them as 'prostitutes' or 'slaves', particularly black refugees and migrants.

The perpetrators come in the form of the drivers, their assistants, smugglers, people involved in human trafficking, guards, policemen, military men and even Libyan citizens. Often they are armed, have contacts that protect them.

Summary

This policy brief covers the prevalence and nature of sexual violence in the context of human trafficking for ransom in Libya. It highlights that migrants and refugees face sexual violence not only from traffickers but also along their journey and in urban and detention areas. Testimonies from interviewees reveal that rape and sexual violence are ingrained in Libya's culture of violence, affecting both men and women. Due to its widespread and systematic occurrence, some victims take precautions, such as carrying protection or using contraceptives, to avoid pregnancy or HIV.

¹ The policy brief has been compiled on the basis of research by Wirtz, M. (2025). Sexual Violence on Migratory Paths in and Towards Libya In: Wirtz, M. "They don't think we are humans" The Cycle of Human Trafficking for Ransom in Libya. Langaa, Bamenda. Pp. 327-351. : https://www.researchgate.net/publication/396743869_Routes_Hubs_and_Prisons_Mapping_Migration_in_Libya Additional external sources are listed below

Additionally, sexual violence is perpetrated as a tool of subjugation; aimed to degrade, humiliate and subjugate victims. Perpetrators also use it to control and punish people in overfilled vehicles and overcrowded detention or trafficking sites, enforcing obedience.

Forms of sexual violence include rape in front of other captives and relatives, or on the phone with family members. Men are sometimes castrated, genitally mutilated or penetrated, dehumanizing them by stripping their masculinity. Sometimes abuses are filmed, and used to humiliate victims, exert control, or accelerate ransom payments. Victims often find themselves in a 'black hole', with the perpetrators gatekeeping access to help, information, or justice.

Lastly, sexual violence is used to exploit victims for sexual purposes and monetary profit. In many detention centres, migrants and refugees can be sold as slaves and sex slaves for one day or longer periods. Clients then come by and pay to rape. Persons are also sometimes abused in exchange for goods or services. For example, in negotiating for their journey or for food in trafficking camps and detention centres where starvation is common. Lastly, many persons, mainly from Nigerian descent, have fallen victim to established prostitution networks, after being promised a trip and job to Europe. Instead they find themselves trafficked having to pay off large debts through prostitution.

The vast majority of migrants in Libya reside in urban areas. In these locations there have also been reports of sexual violence, perpetrated against among others maidens working in Libyan homes. Testimonies also highlight cases of extreme punishment of refugees over alleged contact with Libyan women.

The impact on survivors:

Perpetrators of sexual violence along migratory routes, and in Libya include both woman and men. They can be drivers, intermediaries, guards, traffickers, 'Madams', or clients. Victims are both Libyans and foreigners, men, women, children.

Sexual violence causes enduring psychological harm not only to victims but also to witnesses who experience secondary trauma seeing their friends, wives, girlfriends or companions getting abused, with the impossibility of intervening.

Victims of sexual violence often face taboo, stigma and isolation. Male survivors often face even stronger taboos, and abuses against them are likely underreported. Many women give birth, conceived by their abuser, often unable to share their situation, with a heavy taboo on pregnancy outside of marriage.

Key research findings:

- Sexual violence along migration routes towards Libya, is widespread and systematic. In a system which strips them of human rights, refugees and migrants hold little to none legal rights, facing dehumanization, leaving them in an extremely vulnerable position, with impunity persisting.
- Sexual violence practices usually follow three motives: as an opportunistic crime, for subjugation, and for profit. It is perpetrated on the road, in detention centres, in human trafficking camps, and in urban areas. Perpetrators are both men and women, they can be drivers, intermediaries, guards, traffickers, 'Madams', or clients.
- Victims are both Libyans and foreigners, men, women, children, with many women also getting pregnant conceived by their abuser. Often they are left scarred with trauma or secondary trauma, whilst facing taboo, stigmatization and isolation.

Recommendations for Policymakers:

Promote safe migration pathways: Work towards creating safe and legal migration pathways for individuals fleeing conflict or persecution. This can help reduce the reliance on traffickers and decrease the number of people vulnerable to (sexual) exploitation.

Stop supporting the return of refugees to Libya: Stop supporting Libyan authorities to stop migration and to return refugees to Libya. Ensure that refugees rescued in international or European waters are not returned to Libya in line with Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and other international conventions; expand search and rescue in the Mediterranean Sea.

Expand resources to identify networks: Identify perpetrators at the highest level, work on the identification of victims of human trafficking for ransom and support the provision of (mental) healthcare to victims.

Unhindered UN and INGO access: Work towards unhindered access to DCIM centres, equipping the centres with emergency services, female guards, special rules for minors, freer movement, and prevention of overcrowding.

Recommendations for NGOs:

Support survivors: Provide support for survivors that have been exploited and abused, including legal, psychological, and medical support. Make efforts to break the taboo around sexual violence.

Advocate for policy change: Engage in advocacy efforts to influence policymakers to decriminalize irregular migration, and focus on top-level traffickers and other perpetrators.

Document and share survivor stories: Document the abuses perpetrated against refugees and migrants, and collect stories of the experiences of survivors to raise awareness and inform policy discussions. Sharing these stories can help humanize the issue and highlight the urgent need for action.

References

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