

Key Messages

Book 3 in series ‘Connected and Mobile:
Migration and Human Trafficking in
Africa’:

Mobile Africa: Human Trafficking and the Digital Divide

By Van Reisen, M., Mawere, M.,
Stokmans, M. & Gebre-Egziabher, K.
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Part I. Theoretical Perspectives

Chapter 1

Black Holes in the Global Digital Landscape: The Fuelling of Human Trafficking on the African Continent

Mirjam Van Reisen, Munyaradzi Mawere, Mia Stokmans, Primrose Nakazibwe, Gertjan Van Stam & Antony Otieno Ong'ayo

Today's digital architecture is based on the information networks of colonial times, which carried information and goods – including slaves – to knowledge centres in the West. Hence, structures like the Internet reflect biases in social and political connectivity. Those living in 'black holes' in the digital architecture are 'mined' for information, without enjoying any of the benefits of information flows. Hence, it is clear that digital technology is not impact-neutral. In fact, it seems to be fuelling trafficking in human beings, particularly trafficking for ransom on the African continent.

Chapter 2

Network Gatekeepers in Human Trafficking: Profiting from the Misery of Eritreans in the Digital Era

Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits, Mia Stokmans & Munyaradzi Mawere

Human trafficking for ransom is a new form of trafficking facilitated by digitally-supported communication, particularly, mobile phones. But why do Eritreans appear to be among the most vulnerable to this form of trafficking? This chapter looks at the role of network gatekeepers, and the dependence of Eritrean refugees, who live in a 'black hole' in the digital architecture, on these gatekeepers, placing them at the mercy of smugglers and traffickers.

Chapter 3

Bound Together in the Digital Era: Poverty, Migration and Human Trafficking

Munyaradzi Mawere

Poverty in the digital era has a new face. Those living in poverty are often attracted by the opportunities offered by migration or targeted by traffickers, who lure them with false promises of marriage or a high-paying job. However, rather than lifting them out of poverty, many find themselves trapped in a cycle, where poverty drives migration and trafficking, which results in more poverty. The solution? Tackle the root cause: enhance livelihoods and the resilience of vulnerable people living in poverty by democratising access to digital innovation.

Chapter 4

Tortured on Camera: The Use of ICTs in Trafficking for Ransom

Amber Van Esseveld

ICTs, such as mobile phones, are being used by human traffickers to facilitate a new form of human trafficking – trafficking for ransom – which is causing primary, secondary and collective trauma. The use of ICTs in this way is evolving, from the sound of torture transmitted through a mobile phone to video footage – all to motivate family and friends to pay the ransom. However, ICTs are also used to enhance the wellbeing of refugees and migrants, who use phones and social media to stay in touch with relatives, receive vital information about their journey and store photos and memories.

Part II. Traumatizing Trajectories

Chapter 5

‘Sons of Isaias’: Slavery and Indefinite National Service in Eritrea

Mirjam Van Reisen, Makeda Saba & Klara Smits

In Eritrea, anyone over 18 is conscripted into indefinite National Service, where they are assigned to forced labour programmes in construction, teaching, health and administration. This is tantamount to slavery. Conscripts have no freedom to communicate, their movement is restricted, and they live in inhumane conditions. Under constant surveillance, feelings of hopelessness and fear propel the mass exodus of refugees from Eritrea, despite the shoot-to-kill policy at the border. This exodus is feeding human trafficking for ransom, as people desperately search for ways to flee the country.

Chapter 6

Journeys of Youth in Digital Africa: Pulled by Connectivity

Rick Schoenmaeckers

With limited access to the Internet and mobile phones, young people in Eritrea are living in a ‘black hole’ of digital connectivity. This, together with other factors (fear of recruitment into National Service, lack of educational opportunities and social fragmentation), explains why youth are drawn to migration, despite the serious risks involved. As they flee the country, they prioritise getting connected. Adapting to the low connectivity context in refugee camps, their interest in digital connectivity leads to creative digital innovation.

Chapter 7

Not a People's Peace: Eritrean Refugees Fleeing from the Horn of Africa to Kenya

Sophie Kamala Kuria & Merhawi Tesfatsion Araya

The Peace Agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia of July 2018 seems to have had no impact on the number of people fleeing Eritrea, many of whom end up in Kenya. The main reason given by refugees for leaving Eritrea is family reunification; the lack of documentation means that they have to move illegally. In Kenya, Eritrean refugees face many challenges, including a lack of legal protection as refugees, which is aggravated by the lack of legal documents. When asked what is needed to stop the exodus from Eritrea, the majority state that changes at home are needed before it will be safe to live in Eritrea again.

Chapter 8

Israel's 'Voluntary' Return Policy to Expel Refugees: The Illusion of Choice

Yael Agur Orgal, Gilad Liberman & Sigal Kook Avivi

Under Israel's Anti-Infiltration Law, more than 2,000 people have been deported to Eritrea, 4,500 to Sudan, and 5,400 to Rwanda and Uganda. Although 'true consent' is required under Israeli law, the voluntary nature of such returns is dubious, with deportees being given a choice between indefinite detention and deportation. The deportees leaving in this way risk imprisonment, slavery and persecution in their countries of origin or third countries. Some flee again, often through Sudan, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea to Europe, perilous journeys that are driven by lack of choice and often facilitated by state-sponsored smugglers.

Chapter 9

The Plight of Refugees in Agadez in Niger: From Crossroad to Dead End

Morgane Wirtz

The European Union's policy to control migration from Africa has led to the restriction of the free movement of people from Agadez in Niger to Algeria and Libya – despite the fact that the Economic Community of West African States guarantees such movement. This has left migrants and refugees in dire situations, restricting their options and ultimately making their journeys more perilous. It has also left 'migration business professionals' without a source of income, stifling a trade that has existed for generations. The impact of the EU's policy is that Agadez has been transformed from a migratory hub into a land of lost migrants and refugees.

Chapter 10

Lawless Libya: Unprotected Refugees Kept Powerless and Silent

Mirjam Van Reisen, Klara Smits & Morgane Wirtz

After the legitimisation of some militias as enforcers and coast guards, the landscape of human smuggling and trafficking in Libya has changed drastically. The trafficking networks have gone underground and profit-making has become less about moving people across the Mediterranean Sea and more about human trafficking for ransom and forced labour. Refugees are kept in warehouse, abused and commoditised, sold and extorted for ransom. The almost total control of digital technology by 'gatekeepers' keeps the refugees in a 'black hole', which plays a vital role in the repression and human trafficking of refugees in Libya.

Chapter 11

The Voices of African Migrants in Europe: Isaka's Resilience

Robert M. Press

Although migration is a hot topic at the moment, refugees and migrants' voices and stories from their own perspective are hardly told. This chapter shares the stories of refugees and migrants and the hardships they have suffered told in interviews with the author. This chapter makes the point that refugees are not numbers. Like Isaka, every refugee has a name. Each person has a story: experiences, courage, loss, pain, resilience and dreams. Their presence among us bids us to listen to their voices.

Chapter 12

Desperate Journeys: The Need for Trauma Support for Refugees

Selam Kidane & Mia Stokmans

The critical flaw in Europe's migration policies is the logic that underpins them – that refugees' decisions about migration are rational. But fleeing is not a rational process and often happens as a result of traumatising events, which can prompt refugees to take life threatening risks. This study examines the possibility of alleviating the worst symptoms of post-traumatic stress by using an app offering psycho-social support in refugee camps in Ethiopia. The study finds that psycho-social support can decrease trauma levels and significantly increase social and economic resilience among refugees.

Chapter 13

Identifying Survivors of Torture: “I Never Told What Happened to Me in the Sinai”

Sigal Rozen

Human rights organisations estimate that there are around 4,000 survivors of Sinai torture camps in Israel today. However, survivors of trafficking and slavery end up incarcerated with other refugees and migrants under Israel's harsh law for 'infiltrators'. These survivors need to be identified and provided with support, including health and social benefits, in order to help them rehabilitate and reintegrate into society. In line with international law, they need to be recognised as victims of torture and human trafficking and offered long-term protection, as well as access to retributive justice.

Part III. Psychological Impact of Ongoing Trauma

Chapter 14

Refugee Parenting in Ethiopia and the Netherlands: Being an Eritrean Parent Outside the Country

Bénédicte Mouton, Rick Schoenmaeckers & Mirjam Van Reisen

Refugee parents often experience post-traumatic stress due to their past experiences, but how does this affect their parenting? Surprisingly, this study found a high level of parental self-efficacy among Eritrean refugee parents in the Netherlands and Ethiopia. However, this raises concerns about the emotion regulation skills of refugee parents, who have a high level of emotional control and may have learnt to value self-reliance, which can impact on the socio-emotional development of their children. This requires further research as it may affect the long-term development of children of refugee parents and contribute to generational trauma.

Chapter 15

Journeys of Trust and Hope: Unaccompanied Minors from Eritrea in Ethiopia and the Netherlands

Rick Schoenmaeckers, Taha Al-Qasim & Carlotta Zanzottera

This study looked at unaccompanied Eritrean refugee minors and their relationships with their caregivers in Ethiopia and the Netherlands. It found that there is misunderstanding and mistrust on both sides of the relationship, which affects the way the refugee minors receive and process information. The authors conclude that discussion of the issues that affect trust would improve the relationship between caregivers and minors. Understanding would provide a strong basis for forging better connections between caregivers and minors and improve the life satisfaction of the minors.

Chapter 16

Refugees' Right to Family Unity in Belgium and the Netherlands: 'Life is Nothing without Family'

Mirjam Van Reisen, Eva Berends, Lucie Delecolle, Jakob Hagenberg, Marco Paron Trivellato & Naomi Stocker

Although refugees have a right to family reunification, less than a third of Eritrean applications are accepted in the Netherlands. Family reunification is largely inaccessible due to complex legal procedures and the inability of refugees to collect the documents required. This is compounded by the lack of diplomatic relations with Eritrea and the discretionary, and sometimes unjustified, practices of the authorities in both Europe and Eritrea. There is concern that the onerous legal requirements are causing the relatives of refugees to cross borders illegally and make payments for unobtainable documents, as well as fuelling unsafe and dangerous migration trajectories.

Part IV. Problem Framing

Chapter 17

The Representation of Human Trafficking in Documentaries: Vulnerable Victims and Shadowy Villains

Nataliia Vdovychenko

How the problem of human trafficking for ransom is framed shapes how people and policymakers react to the issue, thereby impacting on the solutions employed. By looking at the framing of human trafficking for ransom in documentary films, this study found that there is no connected framing of the problem, making it difficult to put it on the policy making agenda in a consolidated way. A unified framing may facilitate the emergence of more successful policies to address the issue.

Chapter 18

Language Dominance in the Framing of Problems and Solutions: The Language of Mobility

Munyaradzi Mawere, Mirjam Van Reisen & Gertjan Van Stam

Words explain the world, and on the basis of this understanding we act. Denying the reality that mobility has been a normal part of life on the African continent, the Western dominated narrative on mobility from Africa to Europe uses words with negative connotations. The term 'illegal migration' is used to describe the movement of refugees fleeing their country in search of protection. The term devalues their need to escape dangerous situations, while dehumanising their intentions. Terms such as 'illegal' and 'irregular' migrants criminalise Africans who move. Taking experiences out of context makes their lives look incoherent, inferior and cheap. As a result, loss of life on migratory trajectories is framed as collateral damage and seen largely as irrelevant losses.

Part V. Extra-territorialisation of Migration and International Responsibilities

Chapter 19

The Shaping of the EU's Migration Policy: The Tragedy of Lampedusa as a Turning Point

Klara Smits & Ioanna Karagianni

In 2013, 360 refugees drowned off the coast of Lampedusa in Italy. At that point in time a policy window opened to put the issue of refugees on the policy agenda in Europe. However, the issue was framed as a 'migration crisis' and one of 'illegal immigrants' instead of refugees. This language drove the response, and instead of implementing solutions focused on the protection of refugees, the EU externalised its borders and focused on stopping people entering its territory. Framed as a security issue, European policies have created a hostile environment for refugees fleeing inhumane and dangerous circumstances. Despite the large sums thrown at these policies, they are both unlikely to work and reflect badly on the EU's human rights record.

Chapter 20

Sudan and the EU: Uneasy Bedfellows

Maddy Crowther & Martin Plant

A convergence has developed between the aims of the EU and the (former) Sudanese leadership, making them uneasy bedfellows. Through the Khartoum Process, the EU seeks to reduce migration, while the Sudanese government sees migrants as useful pawns in their attempts to reduce international pressure for reform. Trapped between them are the refugees and migrants themselves, many of whom are desperate to find sanctuary.

Chapter 21

Uncomfortable Aid: INGOs in Eritrea

Makeda Saba

INGOs in Eritrea operate in a highly restricted space under the direct supervision and control of the government. Three NGOs still work in Eritrea in the development sector, including in education. As the legal basis for their work is uncertain, they depend on the personal favour of key persons in power. As the government has integrated education with the Warsay Yikaalo National Development Programme and indefinite National Service, which involves forced labour, these NGOs are propping up a system that uses slave labour and a government that oppresses its people and has been accused by the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in Eritrea of ongoing crimes against humanity.

Chapter 22

Complicity in Torture: The Accountability of the EU for Human Rights Abuses against Refugees and Migrants in Libya

Wegi Sereke & Daniel Mekonnen

Amnesty International estimates that there are 20,000 refugees and migrants detained in horrific conditions in different Libyan detention centres administered by the country's General Directorate for Combating Illegal Migration, a government entity that receives support from Italy and the EU. In addition, horrendous violations are committed against African refugees and migrants by the Libyan Coast Guard, another government entity receiving enormous amounts of support from Italy and the EU. The EU and EU governments carry responsibility for the situation of refugees in Libya and they need to be held accountable for their complicity in the human rights abuses taking place.

Playing Cat and Mouse: How Europe Evades Responsibility for its Role in Human Rights Abuses of Migrants and Refugees

Annick Pijnenburg & Conny Rijken

The EU tries to stem migration flows before they reach its borders. Its policy of externalising its borders and cooperative migration controls puts people on the move – regardless of whether they are refugees or migrants – at risk of sometimes severe abuse. The dire situation of migrants rescued in the Mediterranean Sea and returned to Libya, where they face arbitrary detention, torture and slavery, is but one example of the many ways in which such policies can negatively affect the rights of refugees. But who is responsible for the human rights abuses against refugees and migrants? The EU cannot claim that it has no responsibility, as it controls, at least in part, the conditions under which these human rights abuses take place.
