

Hidden Figures

Women on the Move in Libya

Insights from the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism initiative (4Mi) in Libya, Mali and Niger



Introduction

This briefing paper looks at women and girls travelling in mixed migration movements from West Africa to Libya.¹ Based on data collected by the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) of the Danish Refugee Council in Libya, Mali and Niger,² the article examines the journeys of women and girls from West Africa. It further analyses the ratio of women and girls in these mixed migration movements, and asks whether currently available data captures this ratio accurately.

The data collected by 4Mi shows that the ratio of women could potentially be underestimated in Libya. This undercount could be the result of particularities in travel arrangements, with more women than men taking pre-arranged and guided trips. It could also stem from duration of stopovers and locations women and girls pass through in Libya. Lack of freedom of movement for women and girls in Libya could be an additional factor.

In an environment where access to those in need is challenging for many reasons, underestimating the number of women and girls among people on the move in Libya could mean that a significant portion of the female migrant population in Libya is invisible and therefore inaccessible to protection and assistance programming.

Women in migration flows from West Africa to Libya

Despite its current security and political situation, Libya is still an important transit and destination country for migrants who arrive searching for employment or trying to reach Europe. Migrants from West Africa are among the largest groups of foreigners recorded in Libya.

As of June 2017, Libya hosted a recorded migrant population of 390,000,³ with estimates of the actual figures being significantly higher.⁴ Women and girls comprise large numbers within these complex mixed migration flows, yet reliable knowledge and data remains scarce.

West Africans are often traveling between cities and working while in Libya to finance onward journeys, they tend to be relatively visible in public spaces.⁵ However, this is more true for male than for female migrants, as women and girls are often more difficult to access in public spaces in Libya. Moreover, if moving as part of an organised journey with smugglers or traffickers, they tend to transit more quickly. Women and girls held in so-called “connection houses” and “ghettos” in Libya are particularly difficult to access.

According to 4Mi monitors in Mali and Niger, Nigerians are the main nationality of women on the move towards Libya. In 2016 and 2017, Nigerian women were also the main nationality to arrive

1 In the text, the term “migrant” is used when referring to all people on the move. This might include potential asylum seekers, refugees and others.

2 This article is based on 198 interviews collected by 4Mi in Libya from May to July 2017 and 446 in Mali and Niger from June to July 2017.

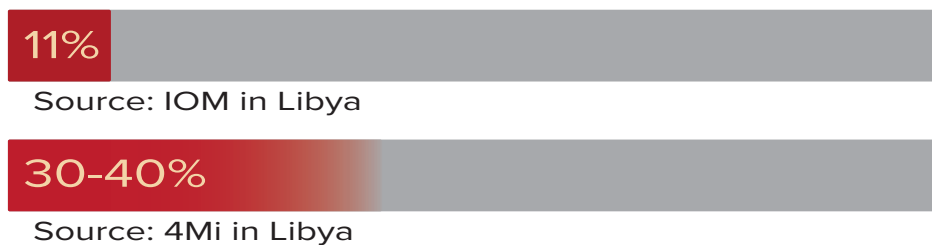
3 IOM (2017). DTM Libya — Migrant report information package 11 (June — July 2017). Available at: <http://www.globaldtm.info/dtm-libya-migranti-report-information-package-11-june-july-2017/> (accessed: 11 September 2017)

4 [IOM \(2016\). Libya. International Organization for Migration.](#) The IOM Libya website provides figures for mid-2016. It mentions estimated from Embassies of 700,000 to 1,000,000 migrants present in Libya (with 276,000 recorded by IOM at the time). <https://www.iom.int/countries/libya> (accessed: 8 September 2017)

5 UNHCR (2017). Mixed migration trends in Libya: Changing dynamics and protection challenges, p. 42. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/595a02b44/mixed-migration-trends-libya-changing-dynamics-protection-challenges.html> (accessed: 8 June 2017).

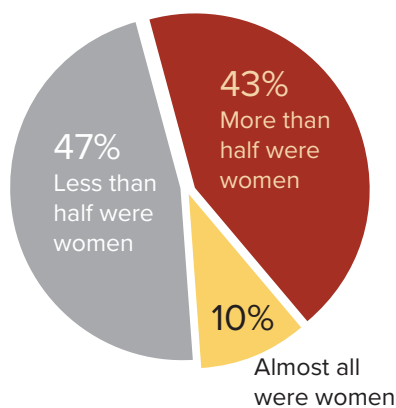
in Italy by sea and the overwhelming majority travelled through Libya. However, 4Mi has so far interviewed women from 19 countries across West and sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of women were from Nigeria, followed by Guinea, Burkina Faso and Ghana.

Figure 1: Estimated percentage of Women in total migrant population according to different sources



While IOM estimates that 11% of migrants in Libya are women,⁶ 4Mi data and observations of local monitors put the overall percentage closer to 30-40%. Of the 37 smugglers interviewed in Libya, in Sabha and Tripoli, 16 (43%) of the smugglers report that half or more than half of their clients are women, and 4 (10%) report that they transport almost only women. 7 of the interviewed smugglers are women themselves. Where Malian, Nigerien, Chadian, Burkinabe women in the 4Mi sample tend to travel with their husband and therefore represent a lower rate in these countries' migration flows (between 10 to 30%), Nigerians, Ghanaians and Ivorians have higher rates of women and girls (up to 40%). In Mali and Niger, monitors estimate the percentage of women and girls in the overall numbers going towards North Africa to be between 30 and 50%. They report that the percentage of female migrants has significantly increased over the last 3 months, which could increase the ratio of women and girls among the migrant population in Libya over time.

Figure 2: Percentage of women among clients of smugglers interviewed by 4Mi



Local NGOs in Sabha report that up to 10% of the women smuggled or trafficked are under 18 with arrivals of girls as young as 11 years old recorded in the second quarter of 2017. 18 of the smugglers interviewed report smuggling children, with 3 reporting that 50% of their clients are minors. 28% of migrants interviewed in Libya report that they observed children making the journey.

These figures seem to indicate that female migrants are more numerous than originally estimated, but less visible than men. While there is no statistical confirmation for the accuracy of

these estimates, the fact that 4Mi monitors are integrated members of the communities they observe makes them reliable sources. Nevertheless, further research and data collection are needed to have a more precise breakdown of these numbers and 4Mi will continue to examine the situation.

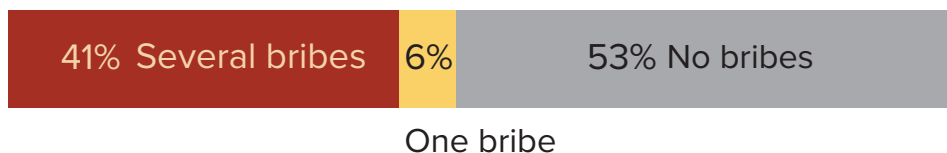
⁶ IOM (2017). DTM Libya Round 11 Migrant Report June – July 2017, p. 7. Available at: <http://www.globaldtm.info/dtm-libya-migrant-report-information-pack-age-11-june-july-2017/> (accessed: 13 September 2017).

Routes and conditions of travel

4Mi data from Mali and Niger suggests that traveling within West Africa is relatively easy. Migrants from the ECOWAS bloc are able to move along the route through Niger without a visa for 90 days. As such, reaching the north of Niger or Mali is largely a matter of taking busses and other forms of public transport. However, only 8% of respondents to 4Mi in Mali and Niger reached their place of interview without the support of a smuggler. Smugglers in West Africa organize the trip, get bus tickets, give advice, and, most importantly, organize the connection with other smugglers at the end of the bus line that will take people through the desert. This shows how thin the line can be between a travel agent and a smuggler.

Exceptions are specific border crossings such as between Burkina Faso and Niger,⁷ where bribes to border officials, short-term detention to extort payments and physical abuse have been reported in many cases. The border between Nigeria and Benin is mentioned by female respondents in Libya as a place where border guards extort bribes to allow border crossings of Nigerians, supposedly knowing that the travellers are bound for Libya and have money on them. In general, bribing government officials for passage seems a common necessity for people on the move. Overall, 47% of respondents in Mali, Niger and Libya had to pay a bribe at some point – 6% on one occasion, 41% on more than one. Three women interviewed in Libya also report having been asked for sexual favours to be allowed to cross the Southern border of Libya.

Figure 3: Percentage of respondents that had to pay bribes



Major risks emerge at departure points to cross the desert. Dangerous modes of transport (increased by smugglers trying to avoid authorities), harsh environmental conditions, the prevalence of criminal networks, the absence of the rule of law (particularly in Libya) and limited access to food, water and medical services contribute to the perils of the journey.⁸

The routes and modes of transport of migrant women and girls are similar to the ones of men who travel to Libya. Both smugglers and migrants report that there are mixed groups (women and men traveling together) as well as, women-only and men-only groups.

A recent report from UNICEF, confirmed by 4Mi monitors, find that the majority of migrant women and girls coming from West Africa journey through Libya under the control of smugglers or traffickers.⁹ During this journey, migrant women and girls are not free in their movement and access to them is severely restricted. According to 4Mi monitors, women and girls are moved quickly from one location to another while journeying through Libya and are only staying in towns at night. While staying in 'connection houses' in Libya, they are not permitted to go out onto the streets. As reported by IOM, access and support to women who might be victims of trafficking remains challenging even upon arrival in Italy.¹⁰

7 Thomas Munsch, William Powell and Sonia Joly (2017). Before the desert. Conditions and risks on mixed migration routes through West Africa. Available at: <http://www.westafrica.regionalmms.org/images/Before%20the%20Desert.pdf> (accessed: 3 September 2017)

8 An upcoming 4Mi article will look into the issue of protection concerns of women and girls on the move from West Africa to and through Libya.

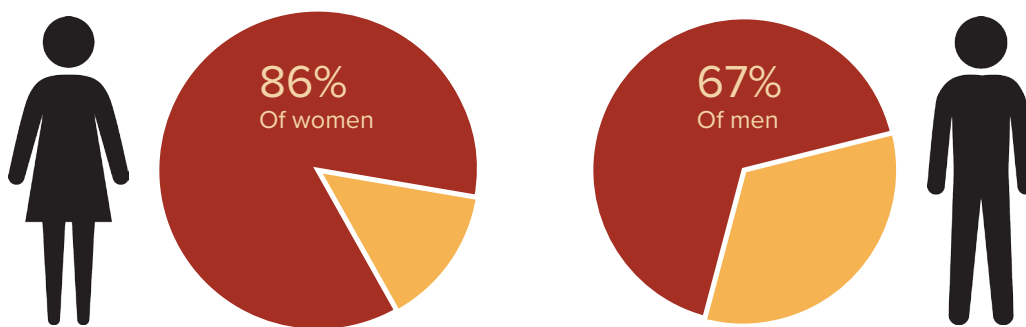
9 UNICEF (2017). A deadly journey for children. The central Mediterranean migration route, p. 4. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/files/UN053732.pdf> (accessed: 11 September 2017).

10 IOM (2017). UN migration agency issues report on arrivals of sexually exploited migrants, chiefly from Nigeria. Available at: <https://www.iom.int/news/un-migra->

Smuggled or trafficked?

Once the official roads end, both men and women are virtually always either smuggled or trafficked. 4Mi data reveals a distinction between male and female respondents in this regard. In Libya, 86% of women in Libya responded that they travelled with only one smuggler from the start of their journey, and only one of the women interviewed reports that she started her journey without the financial help of the smuggler or her family. Among the men interviewed, 67% report having journeyed with a single smuggler.

Figure 4: Percentage of respondents who travel with one single smuggler



This aligns with a recent UNICEF study which reports that almost all the women interviewed had paid a smuggler at the beginning of their journey to reach Libya, after which it was expected they would have to work in transit to raise the funds required to make the next leg of the journey to Europe.¹¹ Out of the 73 women interviewed in Libya, 15 report that they worked to earn money for subsequent travels at one or more points along the route, and 19 report that they worked at various points on the journey in order to gain access to cash. Agadez, Zinder and Madama were most frequently cited as places where migrants stop to work. 4Mi monitors in Agadez also observed that female migrants worked as street vendors in Agadez while waiting to be taken northwards. Many migrant women and girls reportedly also work in the sex trade in Agadez. Local observers also describe how the red light district has increasingly taken over parts of the artisanal market which used to be a major tourist attraction.

The above figures suggest that women predominantly travel to and through Libya in pre-organized journeys and at a higher percentage than men. Travelling in organized journeys increases the control of smugglers over migrants and reduces the decision-making and freedom of choice of migrants. This doesn't necessarily mean that migrants become victims of trafficking, but exploitative practices of smugglers tend to increase where dependency of their clients is higher.¹² As with the possible undercount of female migrants, these early findings from 4Mi need to be corroborated by further data and research. However, even if approximate, they could point to a substantial part of the female migrant population in Libya being subjected to restricted freedom of movement in exploitative situations .

[tion-agency-issues-report-arrivals-sexually-exploited-migrants-chiefly-nigeria](#) (accessed: 11 September 2017)

¹¹ UNICEF (2017), p. 10.

¹² Lois Bastide, Mixed migration in West Africa. Data, routes and vulnerabilities of people on the move (Extended summary), p. 15. Available at: <http://www.westafrica.regionalmms.org/publications/Data%20Routes%20and%20Vulnerabilities%20of%20People%20on%20the%20move.pdf> (accessed: 11 September 2017).

The distinction between smuggling and trafficking is not always clear cut.¹³ Migrant smugglers seek to facilitate irregular border crossings for profit. Typically, the relationship between migrant smuggler and migrants ends when the destination is reached.¹⁴ In human trafficking situations, purpose and profit are linked to the exploitation of migrants.¹⁵ By all accounts, smugglers in many instances and varying forms exploit their customers, blurring the line between smuggling and trafficking.¹⁶

The distinction between the two phenomena is particularly challenging with regards to women and girls. Many trafficked women, however, do not understand that they may be victims of trafficking, considering themselves to be migrants who are obliged to repay a debt to travel agents or facilitators.¹⁷ Rather than referring to smugglers or traffickers, they use the terms “sponsors”, “guides”, “travel agent” or “madames”.¹⁸ Francophone migrants commonly use the terms “passeur” or “coxeur”. 4Mi monitors describe that women and girls are not aware of the trafficking risks they face in transit or at a final destination.

This raises the question whether the women and girls encountered by 4Mi who report traveling with one smuggler from beginning to end are effectively in situations of trafficking and either do not realize or refuse to acknowledge it vis-à-vis their interlocutors. In any case, as they are under the control of the organizers of their journey, they tend to be vulnerable to exploitation – whether or not the exploitation amounts to forms of trafficking.

13 Jorgen Carling, Anne T. Gallagher, and Christopher Horwood (2015). Beyond definitions: Global migration and the smuggling-trafficking nexus, RMMS Discussion Paper 2, p. 4-5. Available at: http://www.regionalmms.org/images/DiscussionPapers/Beyond_Definitions.pdf (accessed: 28 August 2017).

14 Smuggling is defined as “The procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.” United Nations (2000) Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, A/RES/55/25.

15 Trafficking in persons as defined by the Palermo Protocol requires: the recruitment, transportation, harbouring or receptions of persons; by means of threat or use of force (or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, position of vulnerability, inducement of consent of a person to have control); for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation includes, but is not limited to prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery, servitude or removal of organs. United Nations (2000). Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, A/RES/55/25.

16 [Save the Children \(2016\). Young Invisible Enslaved. The child victims at the heart of trafficking and exploitation, p. 9. Available at: https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/young%20invisible%20enslaved%204%20low.pdf](https://www.savethechildren.net/sites/default/files/libraries/young%20invisible%20enslaved%204%20low.pdf) (accessed: 16 July 2017).

17 Specifically on Nigerian Victims of Trafficking, see: Finnish Immigration Service (2015) Human Trafficking of Nigerian Women to Europe. Country Information Service: Public theme report.

18 Sine Plambeck (2014). ‘Between “Victims” and “Criminals”’: Rescue, Deportation, and Everyday Violence Among Nigerian Migrants’, *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 21(3), pp382–402. doi: 10.1093/sp/jxu021; Baye, E. M.-O. (2012) Experiences of Nigerian Trafficked Women: Voices and Perspectives from Italy. Available at: <https://thesis.eur.nl/pub/13232/> (accessed: 19 August 2017).

What does this mean for protection programming?

Whether these women and girls are smuggled or trafficked is of interest from a legal perspective. Beyond this legal distinction, 4Mi data suggests that female migrants in Libya seem to be simultaneously less visible and accessible and more often highly dependent on the organizers of their journey.

Therefore, this could have significant impacts on the protection and assistance that international and national organizations are able to deliver to these women and girls. If the tendencies revealed in 4Mi data prove representative, women and girls could be more often than men under the control of the organizers of their journey, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

With less freedom of movement in public, and less visibility, women and girls are harder to access for international and non-governmental organizations and assistance. A recent article based on IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix data found that men might be more prone to exploitation including trafficking.¹⁹ Based on this, commentators described the assumption that women on the move are more vulnerable than men as a "myth".²⁰ It might be that women's cases are simply less detected.

Travel conditions for women migrating to Libya from West Africa and the protection risks they face will be explored in an upcoming 4Mi publication.

This briefing paper was jointly produced by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat West Africa and 4Mi Libya. This briefing paper was written by Sonia Joly and Thomas Munsch with contributions from Amélie Gatoux, James Martin, William Powell, and Steve Thorpe.

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¹⁹ Eliza Galos, Harry Cook and Laura Bartolini (2017). Migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation in the irregular migration context of the Mediterranean routes. In: Migration Policy Practice, Vol. VII, Number 2, April–September 2017, p. 34-37. Available at: https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migration_policy_practice_journal_30.pdf (accessed: 7 September 2017).

²⁰ Megan Passey (2017). Migration to Europe. 4 myths about women and girls on the move. Available at: <https://www.nrc.no/perspectives/2017/4-myths-about-women-and-girls-on-the-move/> (accessed: 13 September 2017).