



CHAPTER 2

Trafficking in persons
in and from Africa;
a global responsibility

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IN AND FROM AFRICA

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*This special chapter of the Global Report presents what is known about trafficking to, from and within the continent of Africa, drawing upon the most comprehensive data collection on Africa and trafficking in persons to date, based on information from 40 of the 54 African UN Member States. The analysis looks at patterns, flows and prevalence of trafficking in persons in Africa, alongside the risk factors impacting each of the subregions of North Africa, West Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa.**

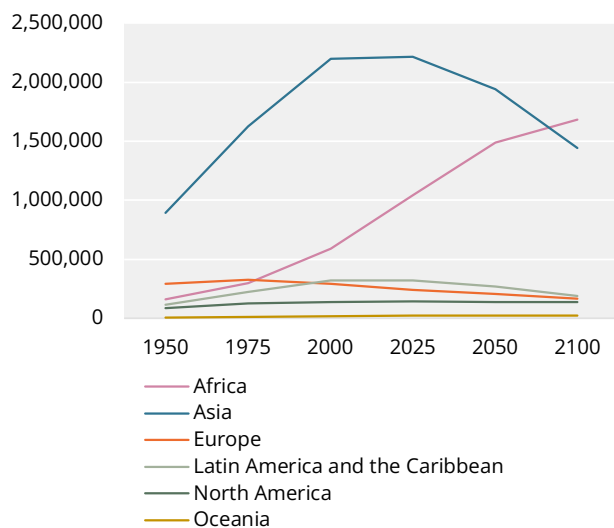
The analysis of the trafficking flows shows that over the past few years, victims trafficked from countries in Africa have been recorded in an increasing number of countries across the world and within the continent – making Africa the region from where the highest share of trafficking flows originate (see *Trafficking flows: increasing geographical complexity* in Chapter 1, page 57).

Africa is home to 1.4 billion people and growing,¹ with 990 million under the age of 30.² By 2050, the African continent is projected to hold a quarter of the world's population.³ Alongside its booming, youthful population, African countries also possess some of the world's largest mineral, precious metal and gem reserves.⁴ The continent contains 65 per cent of the world's arable land, 10 per cent of internal renewable freshwater sources and a significant share of marine and freshwater fisheries.⁵

As discussed in previous editions of the Report,⁶ poverty and social inequality are among the root causes of trafficking in persons, often resulting in victims exploited in their attempts to address their economic needs.⁷ Large segments of the population in poverty⁸ coupled with weak institutional responses⁹ expose more people to the risk of trafficking.

* The large coverage of the African continent for this year's edition of the Global Report is the result of initiatives and joint activities developed with the African Union Institute for Statistics (STATAFRIC), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the IOM and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Police Division (UNPOL) of the UN Department of Peace Operations - Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions. Enormous support to the data collection was provided by the UNODC Field Offices in Africa. In addition, an extensive review of literature, studies and reports from regional and international organizations was carried out, combined with interviews conducted by UNODC with UNPOL personnel operating in the African missions.

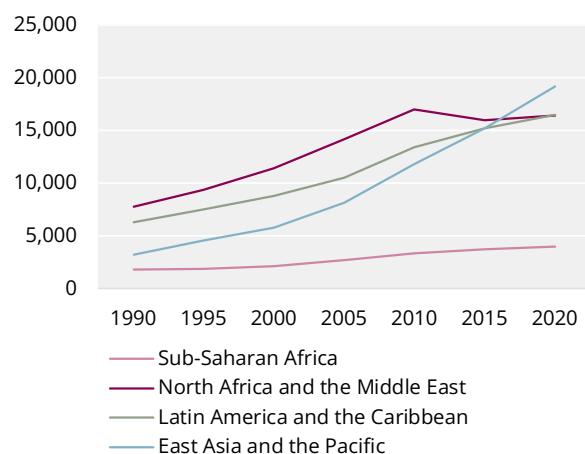
Fig. 67 Projection on population under 30, by region



Source: UN Population data 2021.

Note: the projections from 2022 onwards are based on the UN medium-fertility estimates.

Fig. 68 Gross Domestic Product per capita, PPP, selected regions, 1990–2023¹⁰



Source: World Bank.

Beyond the socio-economic conditions, some specific factors exposing countries in Africa to trafficking in persons are explored in this chapter:

- i. The existence of prolonged conflicts, the resulting large displaced populations¹¹ and use of children in relation to combat.¹² (see *Enduring and expanding conflicts*, page 74).
- ii. An abundance of natural resources, often in areas with weak oversight and governance. (see *Forced labour and the depletion of African natural resources*, page 77).
- iii. The impact of climate change on economic systems still predominantly based on agriculture.¹³ (see *Climate change and lost livelihoods*, page 80).

The following analysis will describe how these three factors are interconnected – conflicts may be linked to disputes over resources, and tensions may be enhanced by climate-induced scarcity or displacement.

Trafficking within and out of Africa; short and long-distance flows

Over the past decade, UNODC has been able to develop a picture of the trafficking patterns impacting Africa. While regular data over time is unavailable

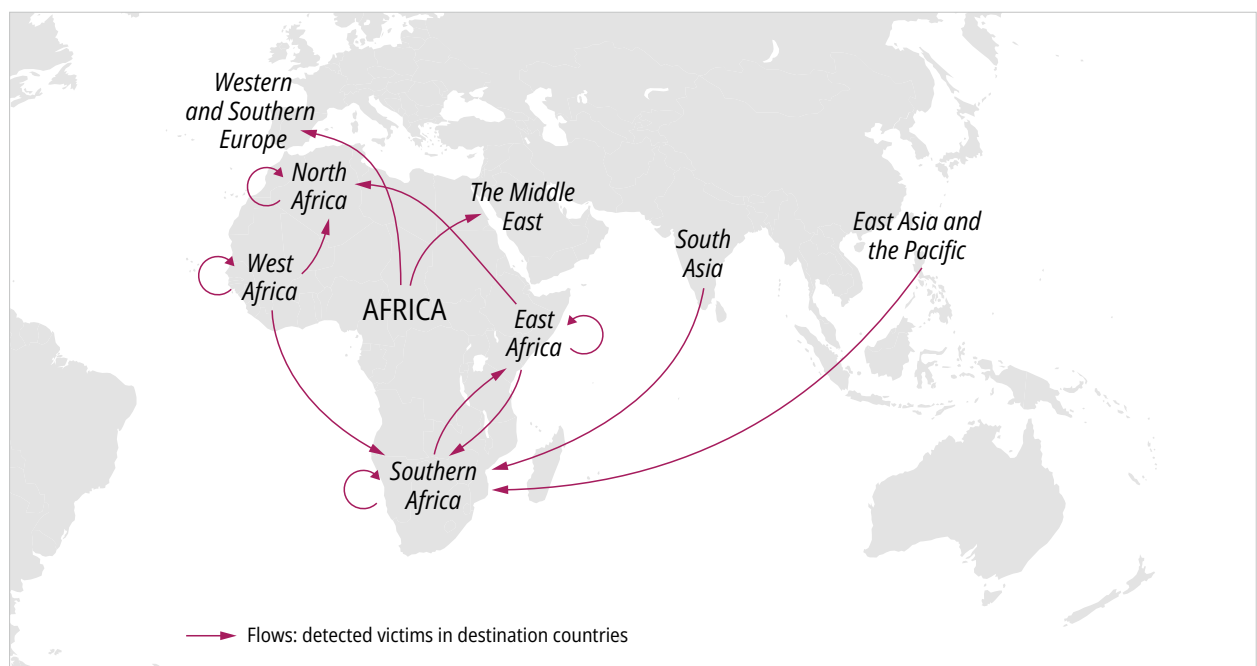
for many countries on the continent, the data on identified victims and court cases shared by national authorities in Africa and from other regions allows for an analysis of the profile of victims and traffickers, of the forms of exploitation, of flows and of the response of criminal justice systems.

Data collected globally draw a picture of trafficking mainly remaining within the African continent, at sub-regional and national levels. Most victims detected in Africa are children exploited for forced labour.

Trafficking of African youth: traffickers and poverty

Child trafficking appears as one of the main challenges for the countries of Africa. Trafficked children are more frequently detected than adults in most parts of the continent. In West Africa and East Africa, both boys and girls are more typically trafficked for forced labour, including domestic work. Girls are also commonly reported as trafficked for sexual exploitation across the whole continent. The trafficking of children for begging is also reported across the whole continent. In North and West Africa, child trafficking for the purpose of begging has been

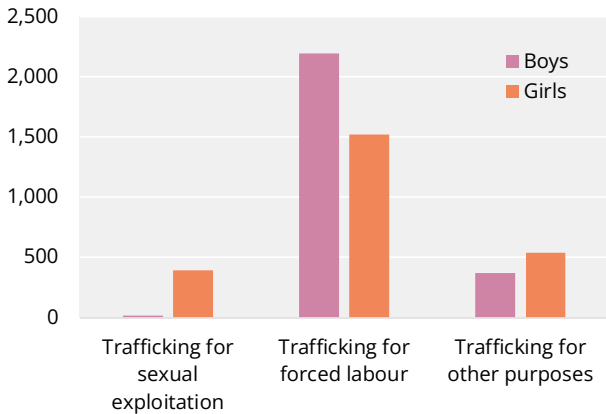
Map. 9 Main trafficking flows within, out and into Africa, 2022 (or most recent)



Source: UNODC elaboration on national data.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

Fig. 69 Number of trafficked children detected in Africa, by form of exploitation, 2022 (or most recent)



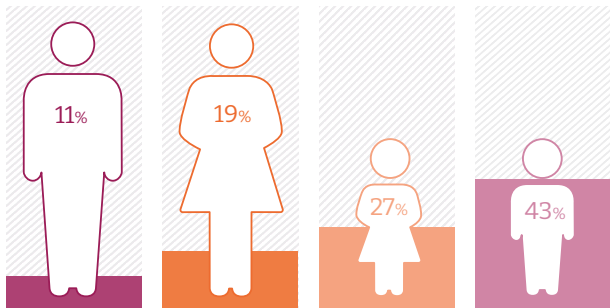
Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

linked to the practice of sending boys to residential religious school. Cases of students (*talibe* or *al-majiris*) being exploited for forced begging by their teachers (called *marabouts* or *mallams*) have been reported by international organizations.¹⁴

Child trafficking, particularly for forced labour, must be understood within a socio-economic context where traffickers prey upon the vulnerability of families who rely on sending their children to work. Africa experiences high levels of child labour as compared to other regions with some regional diversity: West Africa, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa record higher levels of child labour compared to North Africa or Southern Africa, for instance.

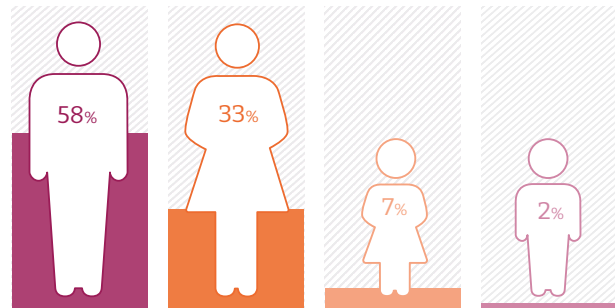
Fig. 70 Regional variations in victim profile and forms of exploitation across the subregions of Africa, 2022 (or most recent)*

Trafficking for forced labour in West Africa



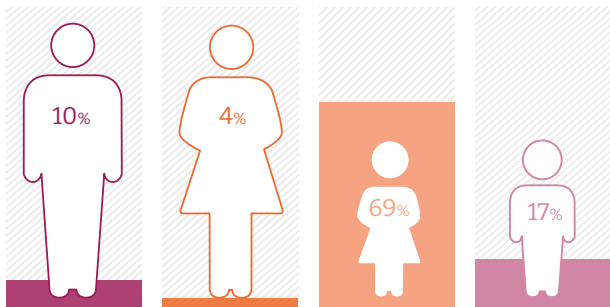
* Based on 4,712 victims of trafficking for forced labour detected by countries in West Africa.

Trafficking for forced labour in Southern Africa



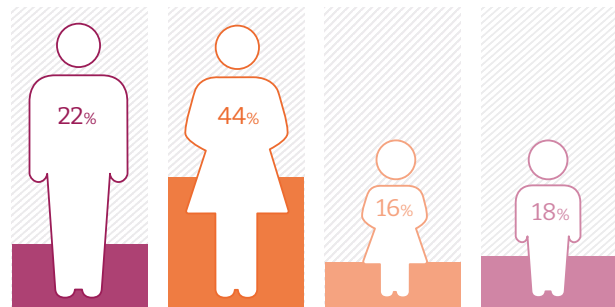
* Based on 124 victims of trafficking for forced labour detected by countries in Southern Africa.

Trafficking for forced labour in East Africa



* Based on 183 victims of trafficking for forced labour detected by countries in East Africa.

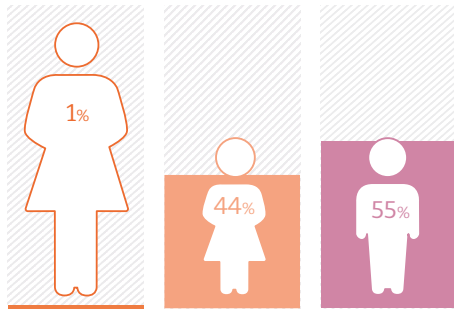
Trafficking for forced labour in North Africa



* Based on 772 victims of trafficking for forced labour detected by countries in North Africa.

Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

Fig. 71 Trafficking for forced begging in North Africa

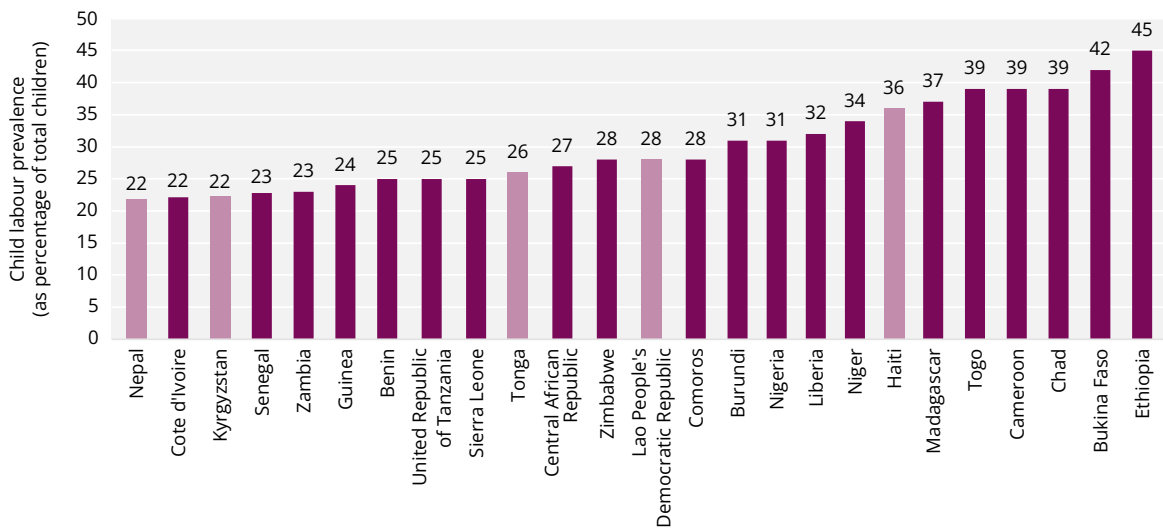


While child labour is not child trafficking, in areas of the world where children are typically sent to work, in connection with community practices and economic needs,¹⁵ traffickers are more likely to find opportunities to operate and traffic children for forced labour.¹⁶ Trafficking for forced labour in agriculture or the mining sector is particularly prevalent on the African continent (see *Forced labour and the depletion of African natural resources*, page 77).

* Based on 186 victims of trafficking for forced begging detected by countries in North Africa.

Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

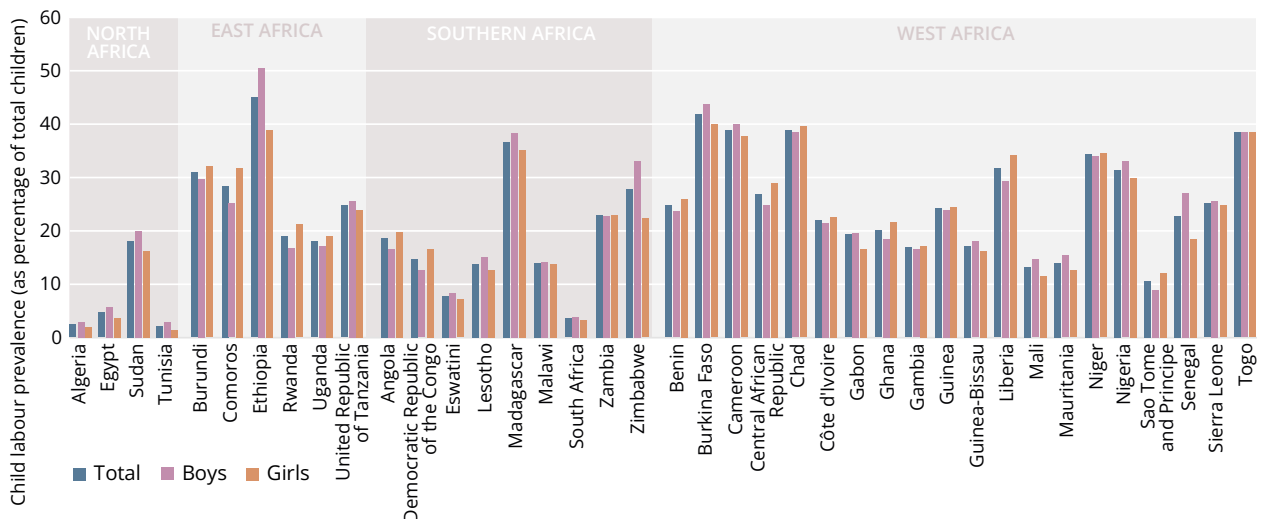
Fig. 72 Prevalence of child labour – top 25 countries globally, 2014–2022*



* The Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) are periodic, face-to-face household surveys conducted by a trained fieldwork team on a variety of topics. See <https://mics.unicef.org> for more information.

Source: UNICEF – Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

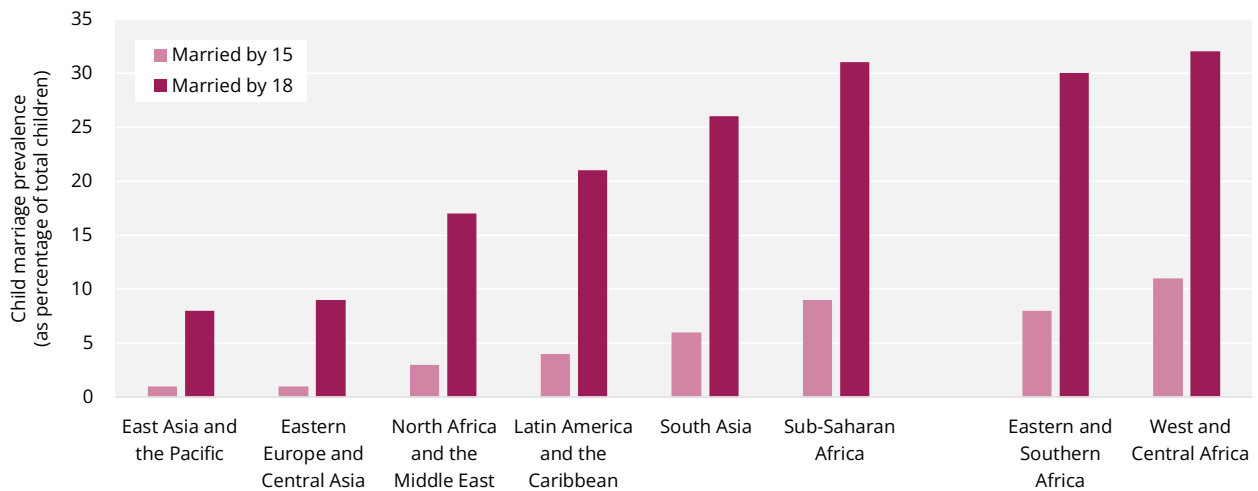
Fig. 73 Prevalence of child labour in Africa, by sex and country, 2024*



* The Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) are periodic, face-to-face household surveys conducted by a trained fieldwork team on a variety of topics. See <https://mics.unicef.org> for more information.

Source: UNICEF – Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

Fig. 74 Prevalence of child marriage, by region, 2015–2022*



* The Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) are periodic, face-to-face household surveys conducted by a trained fieldwork team on a variety of topics. See <https://mics.unicef.org> for more information.

Source: UNICEF – Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS).

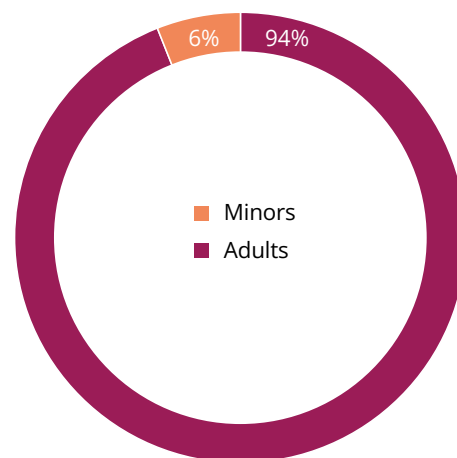
Conditions of extreme poverty could also explain the trafficking of girls for forced marriage in the region.¹⁷ As with child labour, child marriage is also not always the result of trafficking, but in regions where these practices are prevalent, it is more likely for traffickers to find an opportunity to commit their crimes. East and West Africa record more child marriage¹⁸ compared to other parts of the continent, and also have the highest number of identified cases of trafficking of girls for forced marriage.¹⁹

Trafficked while migrating: exploiting hope

In addition to the significant domestic and sub-regional trafficking within the continent, UNODC has mapped a large number of African victims trafficked across continents and for many different forms of exploitation. Between 2019 and 2023, some 15,000 victims from Africa were officially detected outside the African continent, particularly in Europe and in the Middle East, but also in East Asia and North America.

As opposed to the main profile of victims trafficked within the African continent, most African victims detected in Europe are adults, more typically exploited in forced labour.

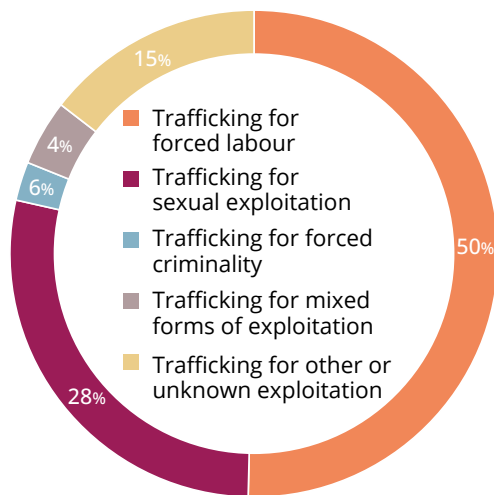
Fig. 75 Share of African victims detected in Western and Southern Europe, Central and South-Eastern Europe, by age group, 2022 (or most recent)*



* Based on 2,619 victims were detected in countries in Western and Southern Europe, Central and South-Eastern Europe.

Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

Fig. 76 Share of detected victims of trafficking from Africa in Western and Southern Europe, Central and South-Eastern Europe, by form of exploitation and subregion of origin, 2022 (or most recent)*



* Based on 772 victims detected in countries in Western and Southern Europe, Central and South-Eastern Europe.

Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

This type of trafficking occurs within the broader context of labour migration. It may start as an attempt by people to reach a better life somewhere else, only for them to fall prey to criminals along the way or at the destination.

According to UNODC field research and interviews with migrants, accounts of kidnappings, “sale of persons” and trafficking in persons are common along African migration routes to North Africa and from there to Europe.²⁰ The practice of selling migrants who have been captured by third parties for forced labour has been widely reported in North Africa.²¹ Same patterns are documented in the Sahel, usually perpetrated by armed groups operating in these territories.²²

Similar trends are reported along the routes that lead migrants and refugees from the Horn of Africa to the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council across East African land passages and via the Red Sea to the Arab peninsula into Yemen.²³ The route is used by hundreds of thousands of people every year,²⁴ mostly men with smaller numbers of children and minors.²⁵ Once at the destination, migrants are exploited to repay debt accumulated with the smugglers who organized their travel to reach the

countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council.²⁶ Female migrants are reported to be sexually exploited by being “rented” to specific “clients” for periods of time, exploited as domestic workers or forced to work in the hospitality industry. Male migrants are reported to be trafficked into the construction sector. In some cases, smugglers have forced migrants to work as “mules” transporting drugs and guns within Yemen.²⁷

Trafficking in persons is also documented on the route from the Horn of Africa to Southern Africa, where refugees and migrants are exploited by different actors. Field studies reported extortion and exploitation as well as torture and physical and sexual violence on this route.²⁸ Further research on the Southern route indicates that smugglers “*may in some instances take advantage of irregular migrants’ weak positions to exploit and engage them in criminal activities.*”²⁹ Smugglers are increasingly using violence and abduction along this route as means to extort money from victims’ families.³⁰

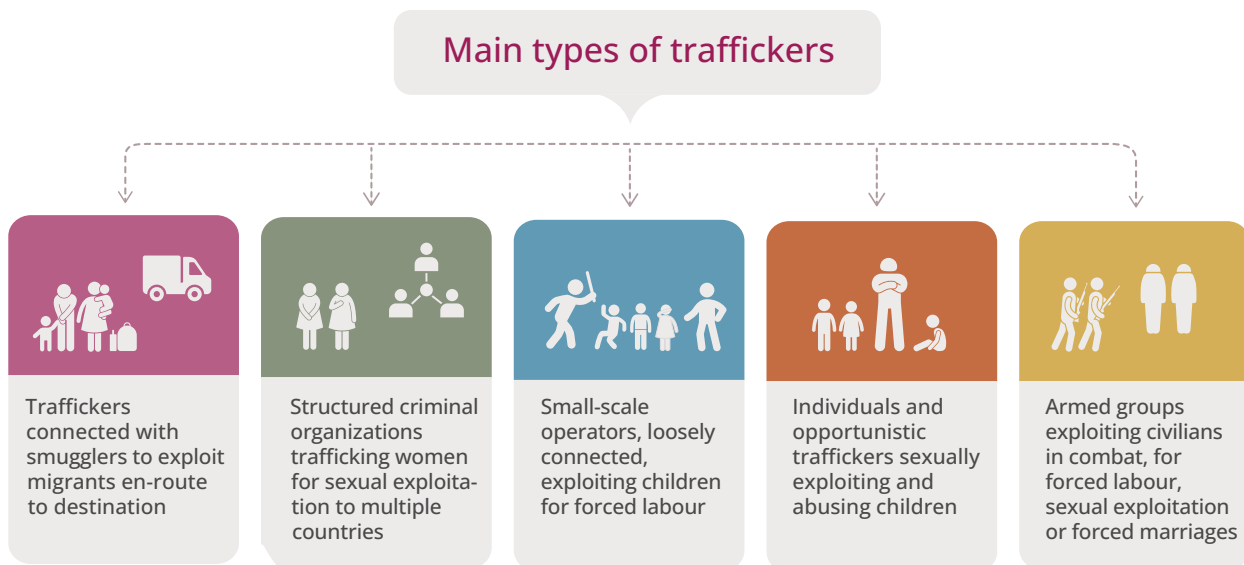
Traffickers: small-scale operators, organized crime groups and militias

Africa has a unique landscape of traffickers, with large-scale and systematic criminal activities carried out by organized crime groups operating internationally, armed groups and small-scale and less organized traffickers, including individual and community-based activities.

In the context of trafficking occurring along migration routes, the same actors involved in the smuggling industry may opportunistically collaborate with, or operate as, trafficking networks aiming at exploiting migrants.³¹ Research on the routes to North Africa or to the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council has shown how, in some cases, smuggler-traffickers seem to be part of a broader system that starts with an initial contact with migrants in their community of origin and concludes with exploitation in transit or at the destination.³² Also seen in this context are traffickers who, as opportunistic criminals or individuals, are able to exploit these vulnerable migrants *en route*.³³

Another scenario is the case of large international organized criminal groups based in Africa operating among different continents and involved in the long-distance trafficking of many victims across

TYPE OF TRAFFICKERS' STRUCTURE REPORTED IN AFRICA



multiple countries. A number of court cases describe groups that recruit victims, particularly women and girls, for sexual exploitation within and outside of Africa. Victims are tied to their traffickers by being trapped in debt bondage schemes, the threat of violence on their families back home or through the leveraging of some rituals, such as the *Juju* (see box on *Generation 30 paper*, page 91).³⁴

The most prevalent form of trafficking within the continent – children trafficked into forced labour – is more typically carried out by small-scale operators that provide services through an unstructured connection to those who carry out the exploitation, for example, in mine sites, plantations or other production facilities. Some of these services include recruiting and transporting victims. These operators engage families with the agreement that recruitment or transportation costs can be paid once at destination after the child employment begins. Once at the destination, however, the debt is bought by the exploiters, is inflated, and children are forced to work trapped in a debt bondage scheme.³⁵

National authorities in Africa have also reported a variety of traffickers operating as individuals, in pairs or as occasional groups trafficking victims across short distances.³⁶ These traffickers are to be found in different forms of exploitation. For example, court cases involving individual traffickers trafficking children for sexual exploitation have

been reported by African countries. Typically, they are child sexual abusers leveraging the extreme poverty of the victims or their families in order to exploit them in connection with other abusers.³⁷

Finally, militias and armed groups engage in the trafficking of civilians for a variety of reasons in Africa. In 2023, between 80 and 90 armed groups were counted to recruit children and used them in conflict-related operations in Africa.³⁸ These groups recruit children to use them as fighters, support personnel, or force them to work for generating income.³⁹ Trafficking by armed groups, both non-state and state actors, is carried out in different contexts. In South Sudan, for instance, children have been reported to be directly recruited from their homes across villages.⁴⁰ In other situations, children remain vulnerable to forced recruitment even in refugee camps or similar settings. The methods used to engage children may vary and can range from abductions to the use of threats, force, coercion, deception or exploitation of vulnerabilities.⁴¹

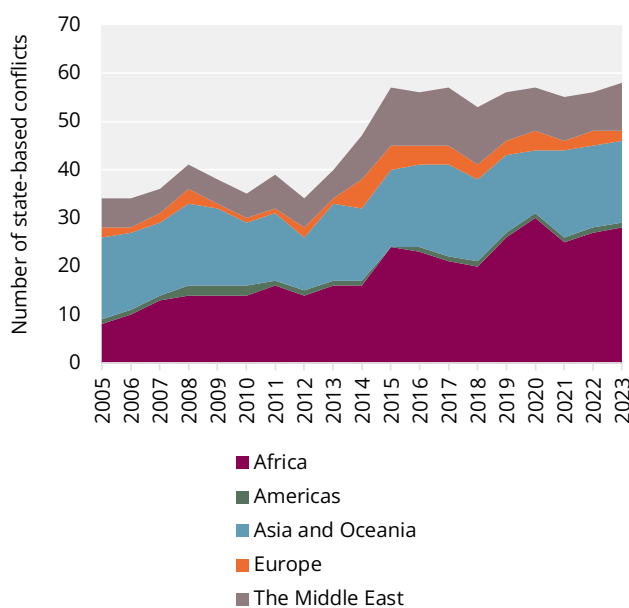
The roots of trafficking in persons in Africa

Enduring and expanding conflicts

Trafficking in persons in conflict situations has been extensively documented by UNODC in previous editions of the *Global Report*.⁴² In Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan, field research has found that living in villages that had suffered armed attacks was associated with higher odds of slavery-related abuse⁴³ than living in villages that were not attacked prior to displacement.⁴⁴

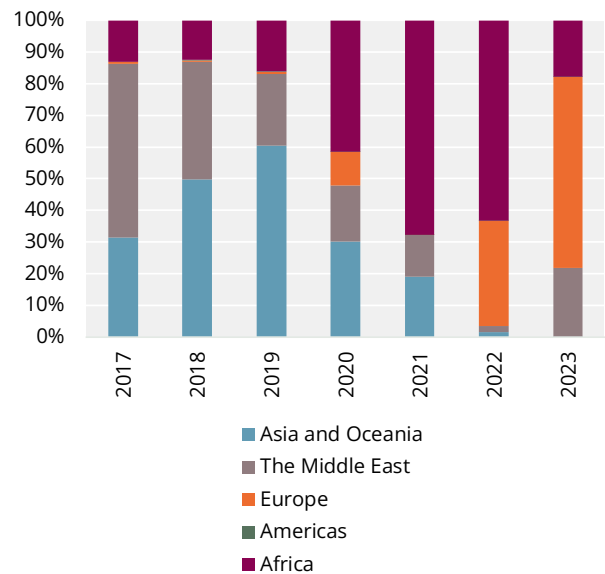
The African continent is the region of the world most affected by armed conflicts. Depending on the criteria and definitions used, approximately 30–35 situations of armed conflict have been identified in Africa as of 2023, as opposed to around 20 in Asia and fewer in other regions.⁴⁵ The degree of violence has considerably escalated since 2019–2020, directly and fatally affecting civilian populations. Reports indicate that the war in Ethiopia alone accounted for more than 100,000 fatalities in 2022.⁴⁶ Other African countries registered high numbers of conflict-related fatalities.⁴⁷

Fig. 77 Number of state-based conflicts by region, 2005–2023



Source: The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).

Fig. 78 Share of fatalities in state-based conflicts by region, 2017–2023



Source: Global Change Data Lab, “Deaths in state-based conflicts by region”.

Displacement and risks of trafficking for those who seek refuge

Globally, at the end of 2023, more than one in three displaced persons was an African national, totaling more than 40 million.⁴⁸ In the same year, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated the displaced population resulting from the conflict in Sudan alone could reach more than ten million in 2024.⁴⁹

Conflict-related displacements exacerbate civilians’ risk of being trafficked as peoples’ support networks collapse (e.g., family ties, community bonds, self-protection mechanisms).⁵⁰ Displaced people often end up being socially and culturally isolated, lacking access to resources and livelihood opportunities.⁵¹ Such circumstances directly place them at severe risk of being trafficked by criminals seeking to profit from their vulnerabilities.⁵²

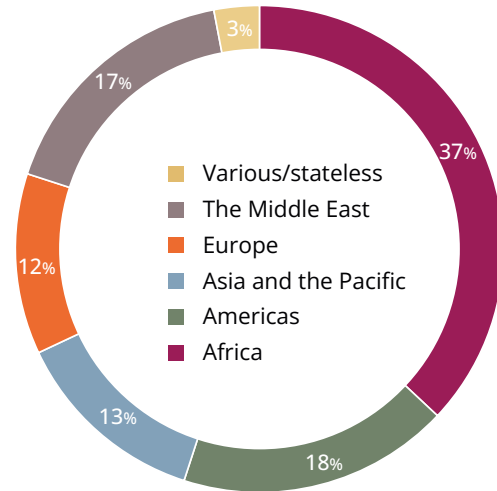
Exploitation of forcibly displaced populations may occur in any place along their journey, in resettlement areas, refugee camps and away from their countries or regions of origin. UNHCR has, for example, documented some internally displaced women in camp settings forced to engage in transactional sex in exchange for food and resources.⁵³

At the same time, the impact of conflict on African nationals can reach distant regions. According to the elaboration of the national data shared with UNODC for the *Global Report*, in 2022, nationals from African countries experiencing conflicts – Sudan, countries in the Horn of Africa and in the Sahel, Central African Republic, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo – accounted for about 2,000 victims detected in Europe, amounting to 7.5 per cent of total victims detected, a substantial increase from 2017 when victims from the same countries accounted for only 1.5 per cent of all the recorded victims. This increase quantifies the higher level of trafficking risk produced by new or intensified conflicts.

Recruitment of children by armed groups⁵⁴

Trafficking in persons in the context of conflict can take the form of the exploitation of children by groups engaged in armed operations. Children may be recruited for exploitation as combatants or in support roles, such as collecting resources, acting as porters and messengers, or cooking and cleaning. Others may be trafficked for sexual exploitation or for forced marriage. Armed groups and government forces that engage in trafficking of children appear to target more boys than girls.⁵⁵ Following

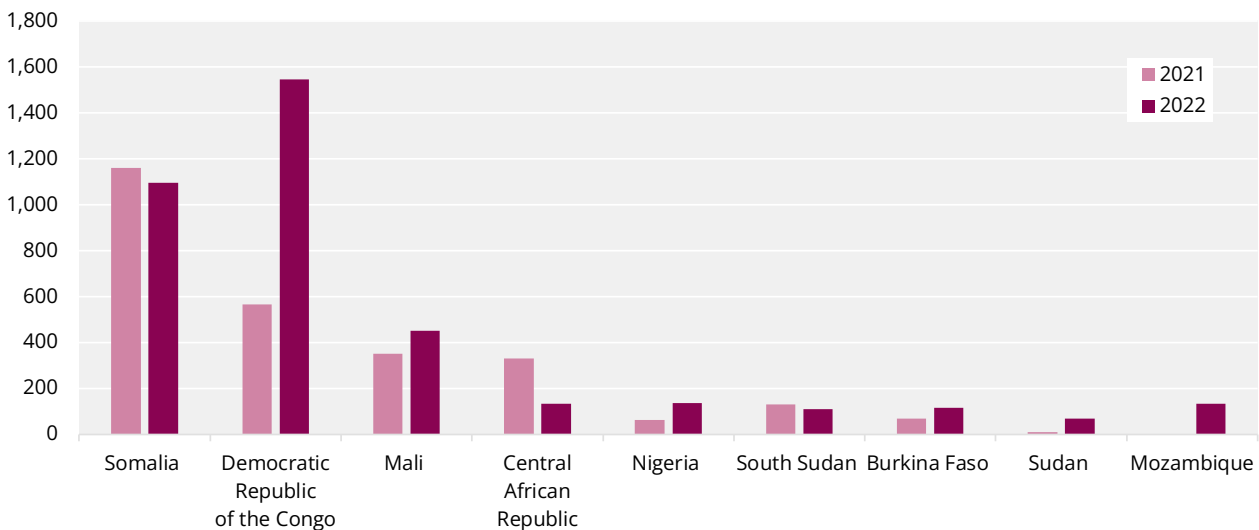
Fig. 79 Share of refugees, people in refugee-like situations,¹⁵⁴ asylum seekers and other people in need of international protection, by area of origin (end of the year-2023)



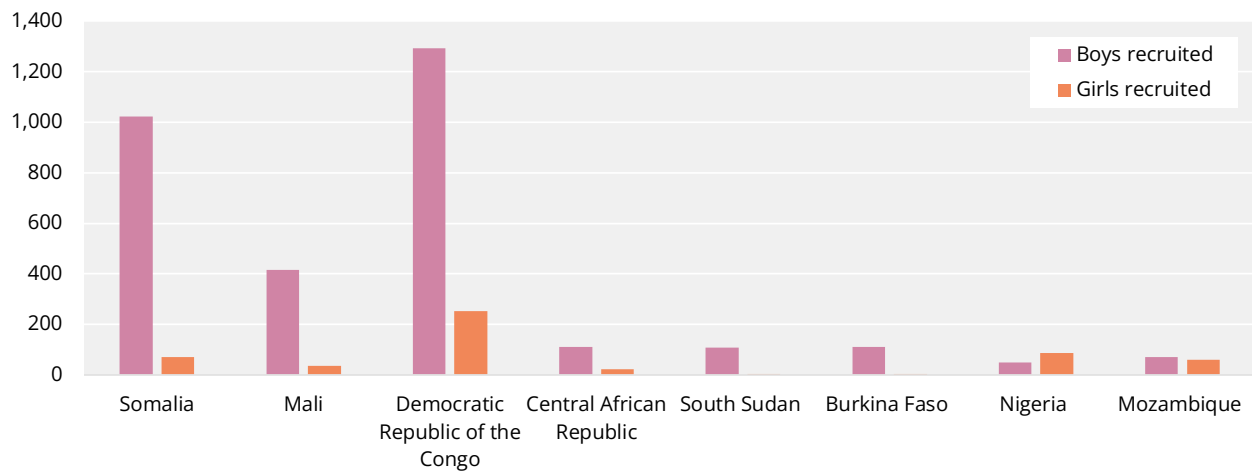
Source: UNODC Elaboration on UNHCR data.

lines of traditional gender roles, boys are generally exploited in combat roles while armed groups traffic girls more commonly for sexual exploitation or forced marriage.⁵⁶

Fig. 80 Number of children recruited and used by armed groups, by top African countries of recruitment, 2021–2022



Source: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict.

Fig. 81 Number of children recruited and used by armed groups in African countries, by sex, 2022

Source: Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for children and armed conflict.

In 2021 and in 2022, in Somalia, more than a thousand children per year were recruited by armed groups.⁵⁷ *Al-Shabab* has been the main perpetrator, among many others, conducting child recruitment for several years in the country. Use of violence, intimidation and harassment are among the strategies used by some armed groups to threaten parents.⁵⁸

Similarly, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is heavily affected by this phenomenon. Between 2021 and 2022, about 2,000 children were recruited by force.⁵⁹ In North and South Kivu, the most active militia groups directly involve children in armed hostilities, with reports of children as young as nine or ten years old being recruited.⁶⁰

Similar patterns have been documented in the Central African Republic and in Mali, with several hundred children recruited by militias and other groups in 2022 in each country. In Mali, between April 2020 and April 2022, 21 different armed groups were involved in systematic child recruitment.⁶¹ Armed groups like *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM)* and the *Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS)* are among the main perpetrators of child recruitment in the entire Sahel area.⁶² *Boko Haram* has also extended its presence to the Sahelian territories.⁶³ It has been held responsible for trafficking children to become child soldiers, for sexual exploitation and for forced labour

In 2023 in Africa, violence against children in armed conflict reached extreme levels with a 21 per cent increase in grave violations compared to the previous year.⁶⁴ Child recruitment by armed groups was documented in 12 different African countries, with between 4,500 and 5,000 children affected. Some 80 to 90 armed groups have been shown to have recruited and used children in armed conflict, in addition to hundreds of children recruited by unidentified or unknown groups.⁶⁵ In 2023, the recruitment and use of children by armed groups has been documented in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, the countries of the Sahel, the Central African Republic, Sudan, South Sudan and others.⁶⁶

Armed groups engaging in sexual slavery and forced marriage

Armed groups engage in the trafficking of women and girls to reward their fighters with brides and sex slaves. In 2022 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it is estimated that 26 per cent of girls recruited by armed groups were subjected to sexual slavery (for a total of 138 girls), forced marriage (97) and other forms of sexual violence (46) during their association with armed groups.⁶⁷

According to the Office of the Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict, in 2022, in Nigeria, girls are recruited more than boys by armed groups. Most girls are abducted and used as "wives"

for fighters, thus subjected to sexual slavery. This practice was also reported in Mali,⁶⁸ South Sudan⁶⁹ and Mozambique.⁷⁰ Several armed groups appear to also use sexual violence and trafficking of women as part of their military strategy to terrorize civilians as part of a counter-insurgency tactic.⁷¹

Forced labour by armed groups

While controlling territories and communities, armed groups resort to subjecting captured civilians to forced labour to support their military activities. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, research has documented armed groups forcing local communities into compulsory community work including extracting and transporting wood and charcoal or maintaining roads. Failure to perform weekly duties is punished with a fine, jail and whippings.⁷² In the eastern provinces of the country, militias traffic children to exploit in the gold mining sector (see the box below). In 2020, the Group of Experts for South Sudan reported that the *Sudan Liberation Army/ Abdul Wahid* set up a system of extortion and detention targeting Darfurian civilians living in the nearby areas. As a result, men and women were forced to labour in the group's farms.⁷³

Forced labour and the depletion of African natural resources

In contexts where very poor families rely on sending children to work for survival, traffickers find fertile ground to exploit children and young adults in labour intensive, low-skilled work, with little economic relief reaching the community

As discussed above, traffickers operate on the basis of a widespread system of debt bondage. The system takes place through a combination of loans, deductions and other financial penalties to carry out unpaid labour and is the foundation of the exploitative practices that are generally carried out over extensive periods of time. Debt bondage is accompanied by violent treatment, threats and coercion by employers.⁷⁴

Artisanal mining and child trafficking in Africa

One of the areas of labour exploitation for resource extraction is the mining of precious gems, metals and minerals. Besides the involvement of armed groups described in the box *Trafficking in persons, mineral resources and armed groups in the*

Democratic Republic of the Congo, transnational organized crime groups and opportunistic traffickers are involved in different mineral types using similar methods to exploit victims.

Africa is home to the largest numbers of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) miners in the world, close to an estimated 10 million in all regions of the continent, many of them children.⁷⁵ It is estimated that between 20 and 40 per cent of all workers in ASM are children aged 5–14.⁷⁶

UNODC has observed that artisanal gold mining can be implicated in multiple and concurrent types of crime, including the smuggling of mined resources, tax fraud, movement of illicit financial flows,⁷⁷ money laundering and other general organized crime group activities.⁷⁸ Gold is a perfect product for criminals to traffic. Once refined, the origin of smuggled gold is impossible to trace, it is easy to transport and carries large values in small quantities.⁷⁹ Some actors in Africa operate in the gold sector outside legal frameworks and avoid scrutiny, regulation or taxation. Consequently, gold is very attractive and extensively smuggled.⁸⁰

Being a labour-intensive activity surrounded by large criminal interests, trafficking in persons for forced labour is found in gold artisanal mining.⁸¹ As in other types of forced labour in Africa, traffickers operating in ASM appear to target mainly children for work in mines as their age makes them particularly easy to exploit. In 2018, for example, Interpol rescued 100 children who were subjected to forced labour in gold mines in Sudan and were trafficked from a variety of countries from the Sahel to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Eritrea.⁸²

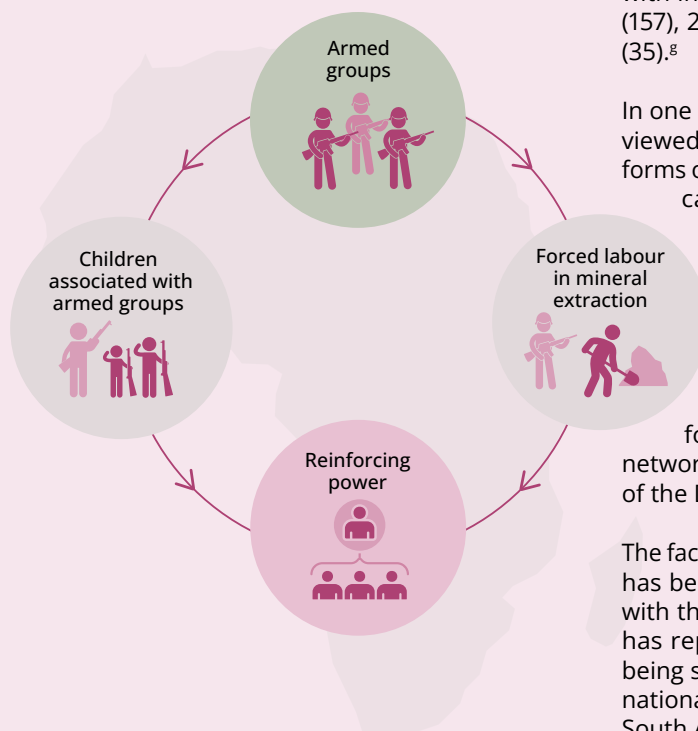
Traffickers active in ASM use debt, finance and lending systems as strategies to exploit and traffic the victims.⁸³ Furthermore, the groups leverage the geographic remoteness of mines as an advantage to traffic and exploit victims.⁸⁴ In recent field research involving interviews conducted among more than 550 miners in northern Chad, about 50 per cent of respondents reported having incurred in a debt with their employer to finance their travel to mine sites and 51 per cent were not paid as agreed before recruitment.⁸⁵ According to a study conducted on the financial system surrounding the gold mines in

Trafficking in persons, mineral resources and armed groups in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

In 2023, the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) reported sustained clashes between *Coopérative pour le développement du Congo (CODECO)* factions and *Zaire militias* for the control over illegal mining sites in the Ituri province of the DRC. Following these hostilities, increased cases of children recruited from villages and exploitation in gold mining sites were reported.^a

From the research carried out, there appears to be a link between the military operations of the many armed groups operating in the Eastern part of the DRC, the natural resources available and the trafficking for forced labour reported in these territories both to extract those resources and to reinforce the military power of these groups.

CONFLICT, MINERAL RESOURCES AND CHILD TRAFFICKING IN EASTERN DRC



The forced recruitment of children in the armed groups active in the country is mainly concentrated in four provinces where military operations are more intense: Tanganyika, Ituri, South Kivu and especially North Kivu.^b The conflict between various groups in these provinces resulted in more than 5.6 million IDPs at the end of 2023.^c As result of more recent clashes in North Kivu, around 1.4 million additional IDPs were recorded as of January 2024.^d

According to field studies, one in five displaced individuals sampled^e experienced forced labour, forced recruitment or were abducted or disappeared during the reference period. Just over 80 per cent of abductions were carried by armed groups, while criminal groups were implicated in eight per cent of cases. The vast majority of the victims were forced to fight for the armed groups or to act as porters and about a quarter were forced to work in economic activities.^f

These provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are rich with precious gems, metals and minerals, attracting armed groups to set up mining operations to finance their activities. A large number of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) operations of different valuable metals and gems are in operation, where in many cases child labour and the presence or interference of armed groups has been observed: an estimated total of 2,009 gold mines (940 with interference of armed groups), 727 cassiterite (157), 247 coltan (85) and 350 other mineral mines (35).^g

In one study,^h about seven per cent of miners interviewed in these provinces were victims of different forms of trafficking in persons. In 22 per cent of these cases, armed groups recruited victims for mining work including children.ⁱ

Armed groups traffic children to extract minerals that are then sold and smuggled out of the country. In 2023, several militia forces consolidated their control over the *Rubaya* coltan mines in North Kivu and reinforced their relationships with local criminal networks involved in the smuggling of minerals out of the DRC.^j

The facilitation of mineral smuggling by armed groups has been reported as a criminal activity connected with the phenomenon.^k In addition to gold, the UN has reported cases of tin, tantalum and tungsten being sold by armed groups and smuggled to international markets, particularly in the Middle East and South Asia.^l

a United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Report of the Secretary-General, S/2022/252, 21 March 2022; Letter dated 13 June 2023 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council (S/2023/431) 13 June 2023.

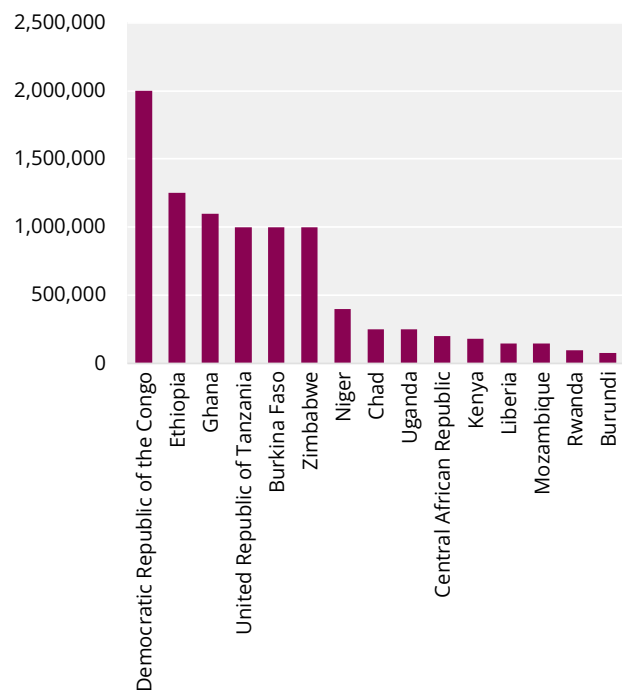


- b Children and Armed Conflict – Report of the Secretary-General in the Republic of the Congo (S/2022/745), 10 October 2022. IOM Displacement Data Matrix M23 CRISIS ANALYSIS – Report #1 February 2024.
- c IOM, *Displacement Atlas: Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo*, Round 3, Displacement Tracking Matrix, November 2023.
- d IOM, Displacement Data Matrix M23 CRISIS ANALYSIS – Report #1 February 2024.
- e The sample comprised 2,403 primary respondents who reported on their own experience and the one of 15,235 individuals.
- f IOM, ILO and Walk Free 2022, “No Escape”.
- g International Peace Information Service (IPIS), “Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in DR Congo”, available at https://ipisresearch-dashboard.shinyapps.io/open_data_app/, (accessed on 15 July 2024). The Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources (BGR), “DR Congo”, (n.d.) available at https://www.bgr.bund.de/EN/Themen/Min_rohstoffe/CTC/Mineral-Certification-DRC/CTC_DRC_node_en.html, (accessed 15 July 2024).
- h Jocelyn Kelly and others, “Artisanal Mining Towns in Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo”, (United States Agency for International Development (USAID), August 2014). The survey is intended to measure human trafficking in the artisanal mining industry in two Eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Sampling was conducted in Kalehe, Walungu, and Mwenga territories in South Kivu Province and in Kalemie and Nyunzu territories in North Katanga. Absent more accurate population figures, we cannot be completely sure of the generalizability of the results; however, the findings presented here are the product of a systematic approach to both random site and random respondent selection. The final sample included 1,522 respondents across 32 sites, which included 1,129 males (74.2%) and 393 females (25.8%). The survey results were also complemented by qualitative data collection activities in five sites.
- i Jocelyn Kelly and others, “Artisanal Mining”; Kara Siddarth, *Cobalt Red, How the blood of the Congo powers our lives*, (St Martin’s Publishing Group, 2023).
- j Letter dated 13 June 2023 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2023/431.
- k Bali Barume and others, “COVID-19 crisis threatens responsible mineral supply chains – a case study based on the DR Congo”, (The Federal Institute for Geosciences and Natural Resources (BGR), June 2020).
- l United Nations Security Council. “Letter dated 6 June 2019 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo addressed to the President of the Security Council.” June 7, 2019; Marcena Hunter, “Pulling at golden webs: Combating criminal consortia in the African artisanal and small-scale gold mining and trade sector”, *Enhancing Africa’s response to transnational organized crime (ENACT)*, Issue 8, (April 2019).

West Africa, nearly all miners on the sites work to pay back debt incurred for transportation, to use the tools required to work or for other reasons.⁸⁶

The number of children trafficked in mining in Africa is difficult to determine but according to some estimates, in 2015, between 60,000 and 100,000 children worked in ASM under exceptionally

Fig. 82 Estimated number of workers in ASM, by country, 2022



Source: World Bank, 2023 *State of the ASM Sector*.

exploitative conditions in Burkina Faso alone.⁸⁷ That would account for about 6 to 10 per cent of the total estimated population working in ASM in the country.⁸⁸

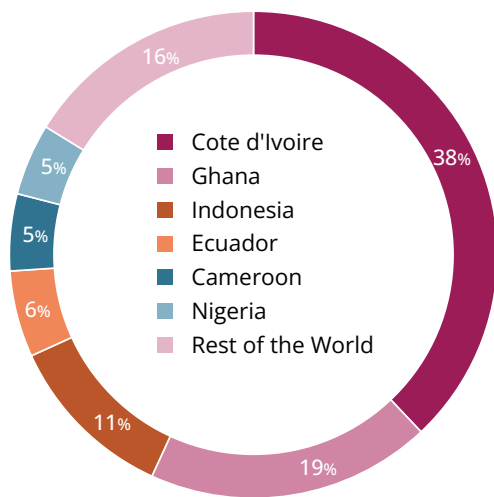
Trafficking for forced labour is not the only form of trafficking that occurs at ASM sites, with trafficking for sexual exploitation typically taking place in the surrounding areas.⁸⁹ Sexual exploitation can be driven by the presence of a large male labour force in mining areas.⁹⁰ According to one study, it is estimated that between 13 and 30 per cent of women engaged in commercial sex in the mining area of Kédougou in Senegal are victims of trafficking.⁹¹ Victims are trafficked from other countries and recruited by intermediaries who deceive them about employment in the destination area to lure them into sexual exploitation.⁹²

ASM represents a double-edged sword for people in Africa. While ASM is an economic sector associated with a high risk of trafficking,⁹³ it also provides economic relief for large communities in Sub-Saharan Africa experiencing loss in productivity in the agricultural sector,⁹⁴ highlighting the challenges in addressing the problem.⁹⁵

Trafficking in agriculture: the case of cocoa industry

Africa’s vast agriculture sector is of primary economic importance and involves intensive labour. Just over half of employed people in Sub-Saharan Africa are active in agriculture.⁹⁶ While it is an important source of economic revenue, forced labour and trafficking have been reported in the agricultural sector, particularly in cocoa production,⁹⁷ as well as in the cultivation of cotton⁹⁸ and rice.⁹⁹

Fig. 83 Share of global cocoa bean production, 2022



Source: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

One study conducted in 2017¹⁰⁰ estimated tens of thousands of people experienced forced labour in the cocoa plantation in West Africa in the previous 12 months. These estimates, although largely varying, suggest trafficking in agriculture appears less prevalent compared to the level estimated in ASM, although more extensive considering the number of people employed; just over half of employed people in Sub-Saharan Africa are active in agriculture.¹⁰¹

Cocoa production and its economic market size have increased steadily over the past 40 years, with most cocoa beans traded on international commodity markets.¹⁰² Similar to ASM, studies conducted in West Africa focusing on child trafficking into cocoa plantations have documented victims being moved across borders by intermediaries, recruiters and exploiters operating in business-like types of engagement, each with a different role along the trafficking chain.¹⁰³ Recruiters contact families or

vice versa, and facilitate connections with brokers in the destination country. The brokers facilitate the placement of the worker with a cocoa farmer. In some cases, a member of the trafficker’s group may supervise the child’s transfer to the production sites or act as a “dispatcher”, potentially posing as a child’s parent to evade police detection.¹⁰⁴

Traffickers exploit victims by enforcing debts accrued through recruitment, transportation or for other reasons that they are required to repay through labour.¹⁰⁵ In addition to debt enforcement, field research in West Africa has documented the practice of deceptive recruitment and withholding of salaries among adult and child workers.¹⁰⁶

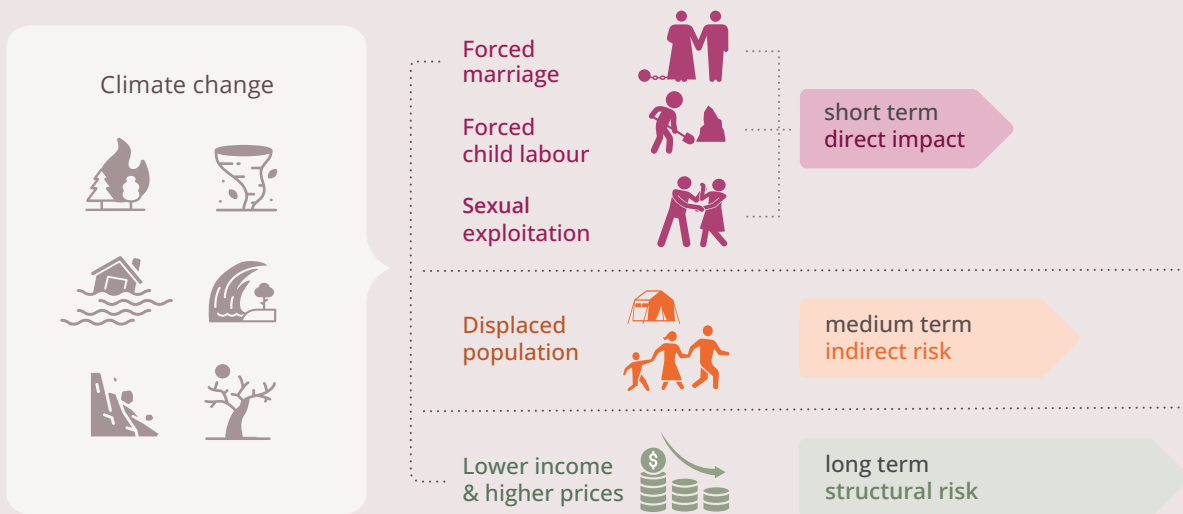
Like ASM, cocoa production in West Africa is at risk of infiltration by traffickers, and could be connected with a broader criminal context, such as illegal deforestation of protected areas in order to exploit more fertile lands¹⁰⁷ and illegal smuggling of cocoa beans across borders.¹⁰⁸ Over the last few seasons climate change has drastically reduced the productivity of traditional cocoa production,¹⁰⁹ pushing some farmers to engage in exploitative practices to compensate for the economic losses, and prompting workers and families to engage in ASM¹¹⁰ or to migrate to other regions.¹¹¹

Climate change and lost livelihoods

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Sub-Saharan Africa records the highest incidence of rural poverty. This also means that the devastating impact of climate change on agricultural production can affect the lives of Africans more severely than in other parts of the world.¹¹² Furthermore, the continent of Africa has been one of the areas hardest hit by climate change in general and specifically the resulting uptick in climate-related natural disasters over the past decade.¹¹³

In 2022 alone, weather-induced fall in agriculture productivity and natural disasters affected all African sub-regions;¹¹⁴ the Horn of Africa experienced its worst drought in 40 years with farming in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia severely affected.¹¹⁵ Somalia alone recorded 1.2 million internally displaced people due to the catastrophic effects of drought on pastoral farming.¹¹⁶ During the same period, flooding in West and Central Africa swept away crop areas and homes, leading to food insecurity and displacement.¹¹⁷

Climate change can affect human trafficking in Africa on different levels:



- › **Short term and direct risks:** communities moving away from farming due to loss of productivity resulting from climate change engage in activities at risk of trafficking in an attempt to compensate for their economic loss. These include artisanal mining, prostitution, increased child labour and child-hazardous work. Proliferation of coping mechanisms such as selling children into forced labour and forced marriages.
- › **Medium term and indirect risks:** loss of productivity and disasters result in displacement and forced migration, rupture of consolidated livelihoods and community ties, exposing the forced displaced population to traffickers.
- › **Long term and structural risks:** high food prices, aggravated pauperization and rapid urbanization increases the socio-economic vulnerabilities and intra-communitarian tensions for the entire continent.

As some people increasingly face displacement and loss of agricultural and livestock-based livelihoods, their risk of falling victim to trafficking increases as they seek ways to keep themselves and their families adequately housed, fed and supported. In other regions across the world, negative socio-economic impacts caused by climate change have been shown to create desperation and push many people to accept risky job offers for little pay in informal and dangerous sectors while others resort to transactional sex for food or money.¹¹⁸ In Africa, these consequences are only exacerbated by conflicts.

Short term and direct risks: farming communities engaging in trafficking-prone activities

Climate-adverse conditions have an immediate impact in terms of increasing labour-intensive activity to compensate in the loss of land productivity.¹¹⁹ A FAO study carried out in Côte d'Ivoire found that farmers increase both the number of working hours for children and the number of child labourers in hazardous farm work in order to keep the sector

viable during dry periods.¹²⁰ The same study conducted in Ethiopia shows that heavy rains can result in an approximately 20 per cent increase in child labour for both boys and girls, including hazardous work.¹²¹ This can result in a heightened risk of exploitative work and trafficking for forced labour. Similarly, it has been documented how immediately after natural disasters, boys in Malawi are trafficked within the country and to Zambia for forced labour on commercial farms.¹²²

A study in Ghana found that in extreme scenarios resulting from climate-related loss of livelihood, children in some rural communities have been trafficked into marriage or forced labour as coping strategies.¹²³ In South Sudan, IOM has noted that environmental fragility has exacerbated social, economic and security issues and heightened the risks of child marriage.¹²⁴ Similarly, research has shown how during droughts in Zimbabwe families marry off their young daughters as a source of cash.¹²⁵ In surveys conducted in rural communities in East

Example of indirect risks: Women *Kayayie* in Ghana

Communities in the North of Ghana rely heavily on agriculture and natural resources to support households. One study summarized that, “African women are more reliant on subsistence farming and are over-represented in poorly paid parts of the informal economy. Consequently, women and women-headed households are at greater risk of poverty and food insecurity from the impacts of climate hazards on informal economies.”^a At the same time, social norms, traditions, legal frameworks and institutions limit African women’s autonomy and agency, as well as access to property rights and economic resources.^b

Women affected by loss of agriculture-supported livelihoods and seeking employment in cities may face a higher risk of exploitative labour. One such common exploitative practice often associated with trafficking in Ghana is known as *kayayie*. This word refers to the practice of exclusively employing women, and sometimes girls, as porters in cities. They are tasked with carrying heavy loads for shoppers and merchants in markets,^c working long hours for little to no pay and sleeping on the streets or in makeshift camps.^d Some agents who operate *kayayie* businesses traffic women via debt bondage, paying for their transportation to large cities from the north, food and accommodation, if any.^e

To illustrate, one woman working as a *kayayie* in Ghana stated that, “the decision to migrate to Accra was influenced by the lack of job opportunities in my village. Farming, the main livelihood, is carried out by men while women only support with their labour. My village suffered flooding in each of the past three seasons – farmlands were submerged and eventually destroyed. I use my earnings as a *kayayie* to fend for myself and support other family members, including buying food for them during the dry season. Working as a *kayayie* has not been easy for me. When I came here, I did not know anything about the work. I was told that the woman providing our pans will also feed us and give us accommodation. However, all my earnings go to her and only sometimes will she give me a small part of the money I’ve earned. Before you can leave her camp, you have to work and pay for the pan and also the accommodation she provides. So basically, I am not getting anything from my hard work. The woman who controls me pays on condition that I work and repay that amount to her. I have been working endlessly and have not been able to repay.”^f

a Africa Climate Mobility Initiative, African Shifts: The Africa Climate Mobility Report: Addressing Climate-Forced Migration & Displacement (Global Centre for Climate Mobility, April 2023).

b Ibid.

c Kellisia Hazlewood, ‘Ghana’s Invisible Girls: The Child-Kayayei Business and its Violation of Domestic and International Child Labour Laws,’ *Journal of Global Justice and Public Policy International Human Rights Scholarship Review*, vol. 77 (2016).

d Ritu Bharadwaj and others, “Case study: drought-related vulnerability”.

e Ibid.

f Ibid.

Africa, 17 per cent of respondents cited child marriage as a coping mechanism in their community in response to environmental shock, while 13 per cent mentioned child labour outside the ward as a way that people cope with the economic consequences of climate change.¹²⁶

Further, in the fallout caused by natural disasters, displaced persons face acute, immediate risks of trafficking in persons.¹²⁷ One study conducted by UN Women in rural parts of Southern Africa found that, because of food insecurity, girls in particular may be pressured by their families to turn to prostitution as a means of accessing cash or food; this risk is heightened in a post-disaster context.¹²⁸ The study reports a rapid increase of women and girls trafficked to cities and across borders for the purpose of sexual exploitation in the aftermath of natural disasters.¹²⁹

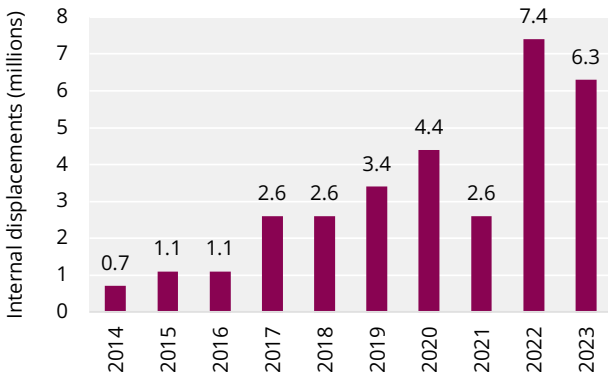
Indirect risks: unsafe labour migration and displacement

Weather-induced disaster and loss of productivity in agriculture has resulted in food insecurity for millions of Africans just in the past few years. The FAO reported that prolonged drought affecting agricultural production in 2023 and in 2024 is the cause of food insecurity for millions in East Africa and that floods have had a significant negative impact on food prices and production, limiting access to food in different parts of the continent.¹³⁰

In such a context, human mobility becomes the only hope for millions of people to escape starvation. Already in 2015, FAO described labour migration as “a common strategy in the face of climate risk and environmental degradation”.¹³¹ One recent study in Kenya found that, in the five eastern provinces, drought-affected households resort to temporary migration to cities in search of casual labour.¹³² In Ghana, it has been shown that north-to-south migration, particularly of men, is increasingly common in farming communities during dry seasons.¹³³ Once at the destination, they work as farm labourers in large cocoa, cashew and other cash crop production operations or in other jobs, at risk of exploitative conditions and in debt bondage.¹³⁴

Furthermore, weather-induced disasters in Africa have resulted in sudden displacement of millions of people. Unlike labour migration due to climate change, which occurs progressively, displacement

Fig. 84 Internal displacements caused by natural disasters in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2014–2023



Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).

generally entails rapid escape.¹³⁵ In 2023, displacement from natural disasters were the cause of an estimated 6 million displacements in Sub-Saharan African countries, decreasing from a 7.4 million peak recorded in 2022.¹³⁶

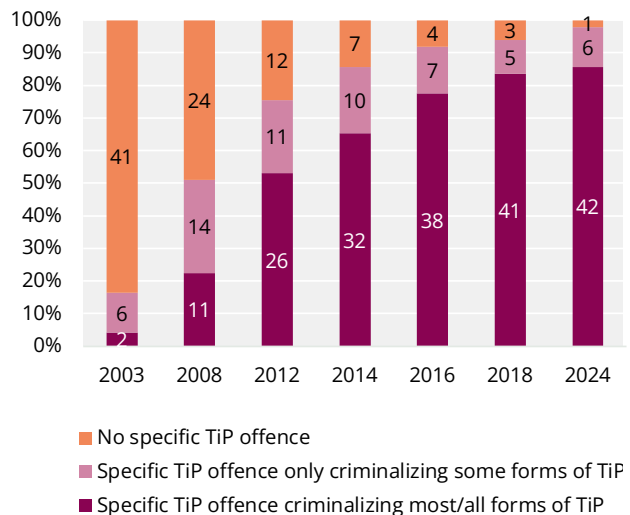
In a 2016 study conducted in Kenya, a large percentage of the climate-displaced population interviewed stated that they were willing to accept risky work offers, with 37 per cent of respondents reporting that they had had witnessed or experienced human trafficking.¹³⁷ Authorities in Burkina Faso reported in 2020 that weather-induced disasters have increased the displacement of populations towards larger cities, where they are at risk of falling prey to traffickers.¹³⁸ In other studies, it has been found that climate-displaced people have had to accept hosting arrangements that expose them to conditions of forced labour or sexual exploitation.¹³⁹ People displaced as a result of climate-related disasters often find themselves in camps and other informal settlements where women and girls especially can face the risk of sexual and gender-based violence and other human rights violations.¹⁴⁰

The impact of climate change and weather-induced disasters may extend beyond trafficking in persons within the African continent, into regions as distant as Europe. According to statistical analysis carried by UNODC, the number of displacements resulting from climate change recorded in Africa is correlated with the number of African victims of trafficking detected in Europe: the increase in people internally displaced in a country in Africa has gone up in parallel with the increase in victims from that country identified in Europe.¹⁴¹

Important advancements in criminal justice responses but measures to target organized crime still lacking

The progress of Africa in combating trafficking in persons is tangible and measurable. Over the last 20 years, most African countries have introduced legislation addressing all aspects of trafficking in persons as defined in the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol.

Fig. 85 Criminalization of trafficking in persons with a specific offence covering all or some forms of trafficking as defined in the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol in Africa, 2003–2024 (in 49 African countries)



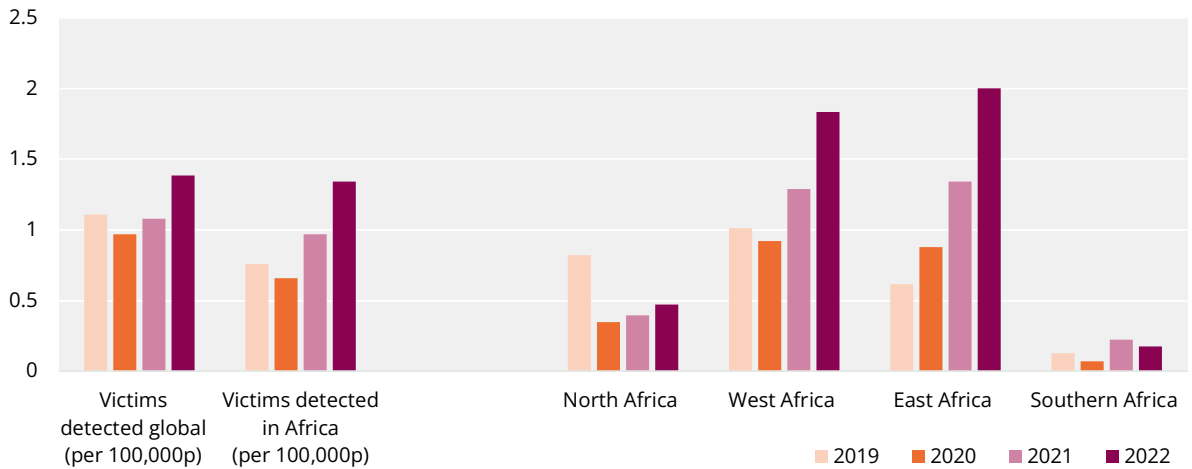
Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

Reflecting the increased efforts of national authorities, the number of detections has increased over time, from very few detections to rates that are broadly similar to the world average. In 2022, the number of victims detected per 100,000 population almost doubled from 2019.

At the same time, African countries reported staggering improvements from the criminal justice response angle with the number of convictions recorded in the continent quadrupling compared to 2017, particularly after the pandemic period. Countries in North Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa recorded more convictions compared to 2017, accelerating in 2022.

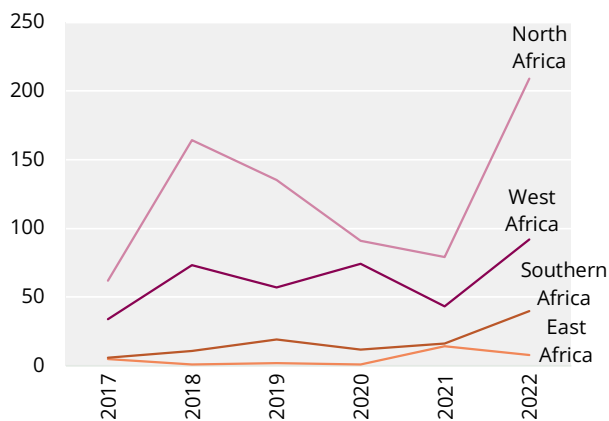
The number of convictions is reaching figures similar to those recorded in other parts of the world.

Fig. 86 Trend: Victims detected per 100,000 population, by African subregion, 2019–2022



Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

Fig. 87 Number of persons convicted in Africa, by subregion, 2017–2022



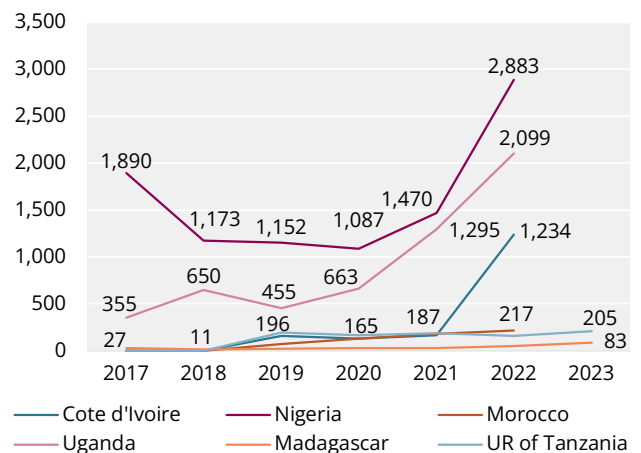
Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

While the trend is showing a rapid increase, the total number of convictions for countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are still below the global average.

The number of people convicted in 2022 represents only 10 per cent of the people investigated in 2020, suggesting prosecution and sentencing face challenges in concluding the investigative work.

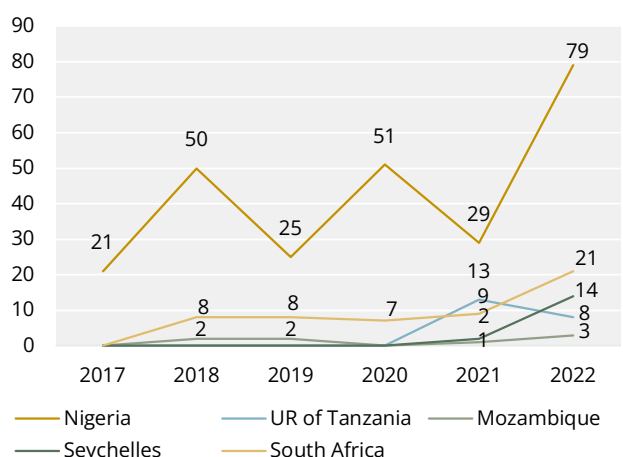
Aside from the increasing numbers of convictions, African criminal justice systems seem to concentrate their responses on small-scale trafficking actors, while they remain weak in targeting large and structured criminal organizations. The total court case summaries collected by UNODC over the

Fig. 88 Number of detected victims of trafficking in persons, by selected countries, 2017–2023



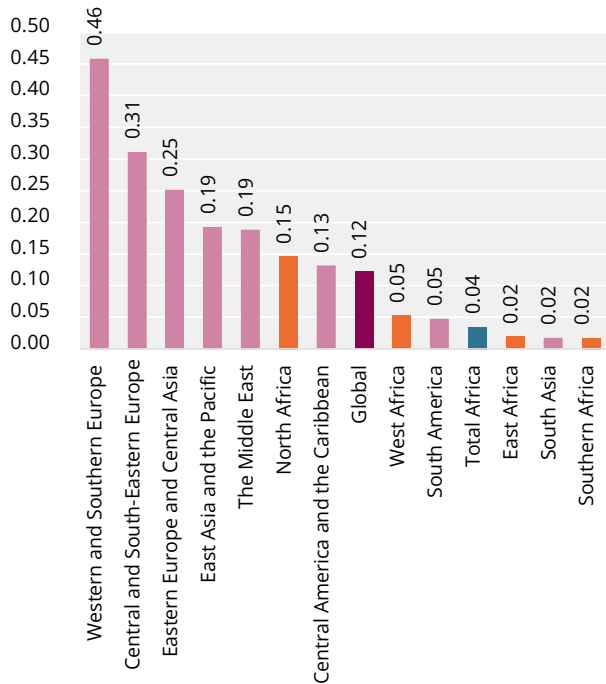
Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

Fig. 89 Number of convictions for trafficking in persons, by selected countries, 2017–2023



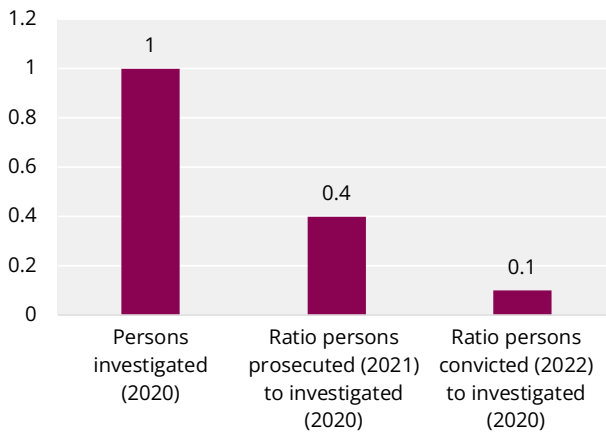
Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

Fig. 90 Persons convicted per 100,000 population, by region, 2022 (or most recent)



Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

Fig. 91 Persons convicted in 2022, prosecuted in 2021 on total persons investigated in 2020, in Africa



Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

years report on about 3,140 traffickers, about 550 of whom are part of governance-type organized crime groups (see *traffickers structure definitions*, page 73). About one third of these traffickers (170) refer to groups based in Africa that traffic victims to high income countries, another third refer to European traffickers, while the remaining cases report on structured criminal organizations from Asia and the Americas. Cases reporting of

Fig. 92 Share of traffickers operating in organized crime group of governance-type reported in court case summaries, by geographical reach involved (n: 535)

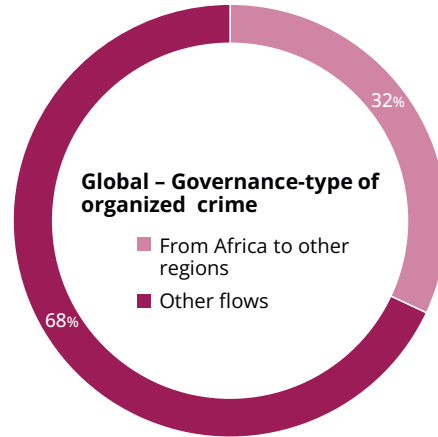
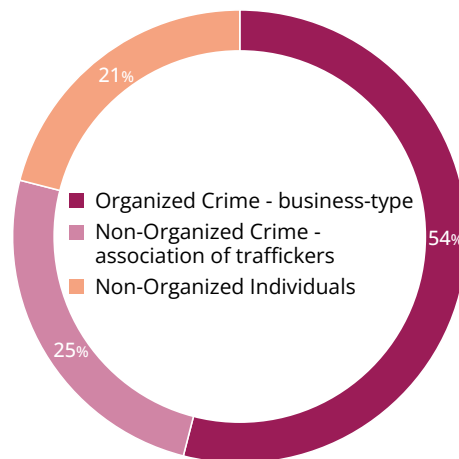


Fig. 93 Share of traffickers reported in court case summaries in Sub-Saharan Africa, by type of structure (n: 200)



Source: UNODC GLOTIP Court Case Summaries.

transnational organized crime groups operating in Africa are, however, in the vast majority related to convictions in non-African countries, typically in the destination countries. At the same time, cases reported by African countries more typically report convictions of small groups or individuals operating locally.

While the examples of court cases submitted to UNODC are not a representative sample of all convictions, this striking difference suggests that structured criminal organizations based in Africa only risk convictions outside of Africa. The challenges faced by African countries in bringing to justice structured criminal organizations require further research.

Assessing the prevalence of trafficking in persons in Africa

While increasing numbers of African victims of trafficking in persons are identified every year, there remains limited understanding about the true extent of the number of victims who remain undetected. There are a growing number of studies that have looked at the estimates of the number of victims of trafficking, particularly within the African continent, testing new methodologies and tools for empirical studies examining hard-to-reach and marginalized populations. UNODC reviewed 130 of these studies carried in the African continent after 2010. Of these, 17 applied survey methods to estimate the prevalence of trafficking in persons. These studies have assessed the prevalence of trafficking in persons in limited geographical contexts, in specific hotspots, and among population groups who have been considered most at risk.¹⁴²

Key takeaways from studies that have estimated the number of trafficking victims among specific groups in Africa

1. While the reviewed studies applied different methodologies to estimate the hidden number of victims, many of them noted that the provided total size of the phenomenon was still an underestimation of the total number of victims.
2. Estimates have been provided for some local populations documenting some specific forms of trafficking and victim profiles: trafficking among returning migrants, among internally displaced persons, trafficking for forced labour within domestic workers, agriculture and mining sectors, minors in situation of extreme poverty and other vulnerable people.
3. The studies were limited in scope and cannot be used to extrapolate a total number of trafficking victims beyond the geographical areas or the population considered by the study.
4. The results presented show large differences among the populations considered that can be explained only to a certain extent by the differences in the severity of the phenomenon. Results diverge also because of the different methodologies and definitions used, highlighting the need for a universal standard on prevalence estimates.

A broad range of prevalence estimates on trafficking in persons for different population and in different settings

Prevalence studies conducted in 2020 and 2021 in a number of provinces in West Africa characterized by high rates of child labour resulted in estimates ranging from 26 to 67 per cent of children between

5 and 17 experienced child trafficking.¹⁴³ Considering the characteristics of these provinces the results cannot be generalized or extended for other parts of West Africa.

Similar considerations for other studies conducted in 2021 found that the level of sexual exploitation among older children in some districts in East Africa could range between 1.6 and 11 per cent of the sampled children aged 13 to 17 years. The highest prevalence is estimated in territories identified by the authors as of particular concern for the high rate of child poverty and material needs.¹⁴⁴

Social norms and beliefs present within hyper-masculine environments, such where large populations of men are concentrated in isolated areas, may result in normalizing the sexual exploitation of women and girls.¹⁴⁵ As such, trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation is frequently reported in mining areas. A 2022 study undertaken in two gold mining areas in West Africa found that victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation could account for between 13 and 30 per cent of young women (age range 18–30) in prostitution in the areas surroundings of these mining sites.¹⁴⁶

As far as trafficking for forced labour in domestic servitude is concerned, studies conducted in limited urban settings in North Africa resulted in estimates ranging between one quarter and one third of women in domestic work in these areas showing indications of having been trafficked.¹⁴⁷ Also in this case, the results cannot be generalized beyond the very limited geographical areas covered.

Internally displaced people (IDPs) can be at a heightened risk of trafficking in persons. A study conducted in 2017-2018 with IDPs aged 15 and over and residing in some selected camps or host communities found estimates ranging between 0.3 and 21 per cent of those interviewed had been subjected to forced labour.¹⁴⁸ The wide range of the prevalences across the studied areas depended on the characteristics of the conflict.¹⁴⁹

Studies have also looked at emerging vulnerabilities to trafficking in the context of forced mobility beyond conflict settings. Research on trafficking in the context of migration conducted in 2016 found extremely high levels of victimization among returnees, as one out of every two people interviewed had been trafficked during their journey or at destination.¹⁵⁰ The study found young

individuals and female respondents reported more risks of trafficking compared to older people and males.¹⁵¹ Socio-economic factors often play a pivotal role in victimization dynamics.¹⁵² One study conducted in the urban areas of Southern Africa

found a lifetime prevalence rate of 17 per cent and past 12-month rate of 2.9 per cent among unhoused people and other marginalized groups, were trafficked for the purpose of forced labour or for sexual exploitation.¹⁵³

Trafficking of migrants and refugees on African routes: Evidence from the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants

Trafficking in persons is committed against people who travel on migration routes by land and sea through, from and to Africa. UNODC, through its Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants,^a has been conducting research on smuggling along migration routes in North and West Africa since 2019, which provides indications of how trafficking in persons is committed in this context.

It is important to keep in mind that smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons are distinct crimes.^b The UNODC research presented below indicates that migrants and refugees who are smuggled along African migration routes are at high risk of trafficking.

Trafficking in the context of mixed migration can manifest in a number of possible scenarios that involve different combinations of criminal offences and violations of individual rights. In some of these cases, the perpetrator of smuggling offences also victimizes the smuggled migrant. In other cases, actors other than smugglers may take advantage of the vulnerable situation of the migrant being smuggled in order to exploit them, which could constitute trafficking in persons in many instances.

a UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants: www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/observatory_som.html.

b The smuggling offence is defined in the relevant Protocol supplementing the United Nations Transnational Organized Crime Convention 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 consisting of facilitating the irregular entry of another person into a country for a profit”. The Protocol also requires the criminalization of producing, procuring, providing or possessing fraudulent travel or identity documents for the purpose of enabling smuggling of migrants, and of enabling a person to remain in a country without complying with the necessary requirements for legal stay, in both cases when committed intentionally and in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit. Smuggling offences include document fraud committed to enable smuggling of migrants, for a profit; and enabling another person to irregularly stay in a country, for a profit. The smuggling offence involves a material, usually financial, voluntary transaction between a person who seeks to enter or stay in a country irregularly, and a smuggler. United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000): www.unodc.org/unodc/en/organized-crime/intro/UNTOC.html.

Extent

Data and analysis indicate that the extent of smuggling of migrants from North Africa to Europe has increased in recent years. On all sea routes from Africa to Europe, UNODC estimates that at least 230,000 people were subject to smuggling or attempted smuggling during 2023, an increase of around 80% compared to 2022. This increase was mostly recorded on the Central Mediterranean route (175,000–228,000),^c as well as on the Northwest African (Atlantic) route. Some 39,800 people arrived on the latter route during 2023, most of whom were smuggled.^d

Most people smuggled to Europe from Africa in 2023 were West and North African.^e On the other hand, smuggling of Nigerians by sea to Europe significantly decreased in recent years.^f As of the beginning of 2024, transregional smuggling through North Africa of people from Syria, Bangladesh and Pakistan to Europe continues to increase. During the first eight months of 2024, Bangladeshis and Pakistanis comprised 25 per cent and Syrians 17 per cent of all those arriving irregularly by sea from North Africa to Italy, while during the same period in 2023 these three citizenships comprised together less than 20 per cent.^g This is indicative of a gradual increase in the use of North Africa as a hub for migrant smuggling from Asia into Europe.

c UNODC (2024). “The Migrant Smuggling Market on the Central Mediterranean.” UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants Update #2 - October 2024: www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/Observatory/2024/CMRUpdate_Oct2024.pdf.

d UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Northwest African (Atlantic) route: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/ad4bbd2969849d1b6be9792e9b7bf4f>.

e Calculations based on figures provided in: Italian Ministry of Interior “Cruscotto Statistico al 3 Maggio 2024”: www.interno.gov.it/sites/default/files/2024-05/cruscotto_statistico_giornaliero_03-05-2024.pdf.

f See: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

g UNHCR Italy, Weekly Snapshot, 23 September – 29 September 2024.

People on mixed migration routes are vulnerable to trafficking in persons

Research by the UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants indicates that in the context of migrant smuggling, serious crimes are committed against migrants, from trafficking in persons for forced labour and sexual exploitation to sale of a person, and deprivation of liberty for extortion. For example, one in five of the 746 Nigerians surveyed in 2021 for the Observatory's research experienced deprivation of liberty for the purposes of extortion. Almost half (48%) of Nigerian adults surveyed considered trafficking and exploitation a significant risk for Nigerian children on mixed migration routes.^h Research by the Observatory on the Western Mediterranean route from North Africa to Spain also identified instances of trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced labour and sale of a person.ⁱ

Trafficking in persons may also take place in the context of armed conflicts and related cross-border displacement. The deteriorating security situation in Sudan and in the Horn of Africa, for example, have led to significant cross-border displacement, in some cases involving smuggling of migrants offences, and increased risks of trafficking in persons.

In 2022, 100 interviews were conducted for UNODC in Sudan with people from countries in the Horn of Africa, as well as from the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The research suggests that, in the absence of legal channels for movement, some people fleeing conflicts and violence use smugglers to facilitate their movement to place of safety, making them more vulnerable to trafficking in persons. Many interviewees stated that they had been intentionally misled by their smuggler in terms of travel routes, modes of transportation and fees.

Some non-state armed groups in the Central Sahel benefit from migrant smuggling by recruiting migrants and refugees into their ranks.^j UNODC conducted 154 interviews with actors involved at various levels in the migrant smuggling industry in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in 2021. Interviewees indicated that actors involved in smuggling of migrants were

in some cases also involved in committing drug trafficking, sexual exploitation and labour exploitation.

Trafficking in persons offences in the Central Sahel are perpetrated by various actors, including private citizens, state officials, smugglers and non-state armed groups.^k UN entities have also reported a number of cases of migrants recruited for forced labour in mines or by armed groups along routes from West to North Africa.^l

The same offenders committing multiple offences: smuggling and trafficking

Trafficking in persons can be committed by the same offender who perpetrates smuggling of migrants, and in respect of the same person. The most common manifestations of this phenomenon on mixed migration routes through African countries are deprivation of liberty for extortion, forced labour, sexual exploitation and forced criminality (whereby smuggled migrants are coerced or deceived into committing migrant smuggling offences).

According to UNODC research on migrant smuggling in the Central Sahel, smugglers perpetrate trafficking offences directly or connect people on the move with traffickers. A higher percentage of smuggled people among the 2,005 surveyed in the region experienced trafficking in persons (10 per cent) compared to those who did not use a smuggler (4 per cent).^m UNODC's research on smuggling from Nigeria also revealed indications of abuses perpetrated by smugglers, ranging from deception and preventing access to means of communication, to violence, exploitation and trafficking in persons.ⁿ

Deprivation of liberty for extortion

One of the most prevalent crimes perpetrated by smugglers is deprivation of liberty and extortion of their clients. From a number of in-depth interviews (82) with migrants for UNODC's research in North and West Africa, there are indications that migrants are isolated in warehouses or private houses by

^h See: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

ⁱ See: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West Africa, Morocco and Western Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.

^j UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

^k UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

^l UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West Africa, Morocco and Western Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.

^m UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

ⁿ See: UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

smugglers or other actors affiliated with the smugglers. The smugglers either demanded a ransom or detained them at 'credit houses' until they paid the full smuggling fee.^o

Sexual exploitation

Some women smuggled in the Central Sahel are also trafficked for sexual exploitation in the course of their journeys. This may be linked to goldmining sites where women are trafficked for sexual exploitation by smugglers or other actors.^p

According to UNODC's research on the Western Mediterranean route, sexual exploitation of women who have arrived irregularly in North Africa may start when the smuggler introduces women – or 'sells' them – to a local community leader ('chairman'). In some cases, the chairman then hands them over to a pimp, for a fee. Examples were cited by interviewees of victims of sexual exploitation who are reportedly forced to repay the equivalent of up to US\$2,250 for the smuggling fee, suggesting that smuggling fees are inflated as a means of controlling trafficking victims through debt bondage.^q

Key informants for UNODC's research on smuggling along the Northwest African route to the Canary Islands, Spain, highlighted the risk that the route may be used for trafficking of women and girls from West Africa for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Europe.^r

Finally, though not necessarily indicative of trafficking in persons, some smugglers interviewed for UNODC research in the Central Sahel reported that sex can be a form of payment for smuggling services in some instances.^s

- o UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.
- p IOM, Etude sur la Traite des Êtres Humains – Etat des Lieux (2021), pp. 34–39.
- q UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West Africa, Morocco and Western Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.
- r UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). North-west African (Atlantic) route: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/adc4bbd2969849d1b6be9792e9b7bf4f>.
- s UNODC (2023). Smuggling of Migrants in the Sahel. Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment - Sahel. www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tocta_sahel/TOCTA_Sahel_som_2023.pdf.

Forced labour

In North Africa in particular, there is evidence that some migrant smugglers collaborate with traffickers who subject migrants to forced labour in agriculture and other sectors. Some situations emerged from interviewing 49 people for the Observatory research, where exploitative labour was used as an advance payment for subsequent sea smuggling to Europe; this can take the form of working without being paid for a smuggler, or for an employer intermediated by the smuggler.^t

Trafficking by other actors

Trafficking in persons is also committed against people on the move by perpetrators other than those who facilitated their irregular entry. The victims of trafficking may have been smuggled, but the perpetrator of the trafficking offence is not the same as the perpetrator of the smuggling offence. Migrants are vulnerable to trafficking by other actors because of factors linked to their being the object of smuggling.

UNODC's research indicates that abduction, deprivation of liberty for extortion and trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation are committed against migrants and refugees by various actors other than smugglers. The perpetrators take advantage of the irregular status of smuggled migrants in countries of transit and destination and their consequent fear of coming into contact with the authorities, as well as dependency on smugglers in dangerous territories crossed along the routes.^u

Deprivation of liberty for extortion

Deprivation of liberty and extortion are perpetrated by actors other than smugglers on migration routes by land through West and North Africa. Almost all of the 49 migrants and refugees interviewed for UNODC's research in West and North Africa reported being kidnapped by non-state actors along the routes from West Africa to North Africa, particularly in border areas in the Central Sahel, and while working in agricultural fields in Libya or living in Tripoli.^v

- t UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.
- u UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.
- v UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

Abductions and kidnapping for ransom have been linked with the presence of militias and armed groups in Northern Mali.^w Migrants abducted manage to continue their journey when a ransom is paid on their behalf by family members or when they are able to escape. In another scenario they are ‘sold’ by a prison guard to third parties who exploit men for forced labour in agriculture or construction and women in domestic work or prostitution.^x

Forced labour

There is often a connection between deprivation of liberty on migration routes and forced labour, particularly in North Africa. UNODC research indicates that some people who travelled on migration routes and were then detained were subjected to forced labour in exchange for being released from detention. There is also intermediation of forced labour from detention centres to private businesses and private citizens who may pay a ransom for detainees and then force them to work in order to pay off what was paid. Limited accountability and rule of law in certain areas has contributed to the proliferation of this type of forced labour.^y

Sexual exploitation

Among the 20 West African women interviewed for UNODC research on smuggling, the majority reported indications of sexual exploitation after being abducted on migration routes. Cases of women who were sexually exploited in North Africa, and were subsequently ‘freed’ by a local man were documented.^z

w UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West Africa, Morocco and Western Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf-411c8d8edd061c6c9460>; UN Panel of Experts Established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2374 (2017) on Mali and renewed pursuant to resolution 2484 (2019). (2020). Final Report of the Panel of Experts: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3876820?v=pdf>.

x UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf-411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

y UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>.

z UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2021). West and North Africa and Central Mediterranean: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/9b5bd3d4d6624d44b5d-dae6aa5af1da3>; UNODC Observatory on Smuggling of Migrants (2022). Focus on Migrant Smuggling from Nigeria: <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/edc15a9dd4cf-411c8d8edd061c6c9460>.

Generation 30 Research on Trafficking in Persons

Generation 30 is an initiative of the UNODC Research and Analysis Branch featuring contributions from young and early-career researchers who want to make a global difference with their research on trafficking in persons. Contributions were collected through an open call and selected on the basis of the quality of the empirical research and relevance of the topic.

Family involvement, juju rituals, physical and sexual violence and stigma and labelling: The convoluted experiences of young Nigerian victims trafficked to Italy

A Generation 30 contribution to the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024

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Rationale and background

Nigeria is one of the African countries that identifies the highest numbers of human trafficking victims, of which about 83 per cent are women and girls (2021).^a In 2019, Nigeria was also one of the top countries of origin of victims of human trafficking identified in the European Union.^b This research was conducted from 2018 to 2020 to document the experiences of female Nigerian victims who were trafficked from Nigeria into Italy between 2016 and 2018. The research involved interviews with Nigerian victims whose travel was organized by smugglers and traffickers, who all travelled to Italy irregularly, and whose journeys began in the South West of the country from where they were taken up North to cross the border into Niger. They travelled through the dangerous Sahara desert, crossed the border into Libya, were put on rubber dinghies and pushed out to the Central Mediterranean Sea where they were rescued by Search and Rescue ships and taken to Italy.

Methodology and limitations

The study adopted a victim-centred approach in which the participants were empowered to tell their own stories with their wellbeing and safety prioritized throughout the research process.^c

The findings of this longitudinal study were gathered from the experiences of 31 female Nigerian victims of

trafficking, interviewed in Italy and exploited in a number of countries along the route in transit or destination, who had escaped the trafficking networks. This does not presume that they are a homogeneous group and fully represent the experiences of all Nigerian victims of trafficking.^d

Key findings

1. The role of family members in trafficking in persons.^e Family involvement in trafficking in persons was one of the key findings of the study;

^d Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 31 recruited participants over three measurement (interview) moments (M1, M2, and M3) with at least six months between each measurement. In M1, there were 31 participants, 22 participants in M2, and 16 participants in M3. The main reason for the drop out was that the participants although keen on seeing the researcher again, did not wish to revisit painful past experiences. Employing a longitudinal approach crystallized the participants' experiences and the changes that they went through over the two years' timeframe allotted for the study. The majority of the participants in this study (28) were recruited by NGOs based in the regions of Sicily, Piemonte and Campania, while three were recruited directly by the researcher based on her previous encounters with them in her work as a practitioner. However, all the participants arrived in Italy between January 2016 and June 2018, and they originated from Edo (65 per cent), Delta (19 per cent) and other (16 per cent) states in Nigeria. During M1, 30 of the 31 participants were in shelters for victims of human trafficking, with 20 participants being adults, and 11 being children. Although the researcher only recruited adult participants, 10 confided in the researcher either after their interview, or a few months later during the longitudinal study, that they were actually under the age of 18. Research also shows that the experiences of children and adult victims of trafficking travelling through this route are very similar with children receiving no preferential treatment, as confirmed by our participants. Moreover, some of the participants who left Nigeria as children arrived in Europe as adults or had become adults by the time the first set of interviews were conducted.

^e Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I. and Derluyn, I., "She said this might be God's way of taking care of us. Family involvement in human trafficking", *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, Vol. 19 No. 3/4, (2023), pp. 157–172. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMHS-11-2022-0116>

^a National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), Annual Report 2021.

^b European Union Agency for Asylum, Country Guidance Nigeria/ Victims of human trafficking, including forced prostitution (2019). Available at: <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-nigeria/215-victims-human-trafficking-including-forced-prostitution#:~:text=Nigeria%20is%20the%20top%20nationality,affects%20women%2C%20but%20also%20children.>

^c Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Ghent University, Belgium and the Commissione per L'Etica della Ricerca e la Bioetica, Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, Italy

Type of family involvement in participants' trafficking experience

| Group | Type of involvement | Quote |
|---------|--|--|
| Group 1 | Family members who were aware of their children and wards travelling with a trafficker and were actively involved in their recruitment and/or journey. They encouraged and/or forced it. | <i>When they told him [uncle], we are coming here for prostitute, he said I should be the one to go. So, I have no choice, I have to go, because things get [. . .] Please, I can't say it. [bursts into tears] [her uncle raped her]. (M1)</i> <i>My sister took me to Mali... they [sister and traffickers] forced me to do prostitution work, and I did it for two and a half years. (M1)</i> |
| Group 2 | Family members who were aware of their children and wards traveling with a trafficker and were passively involved in their recruitment and/or journey. Did not initiate the travel but did not discourage it.* | <i>I knew the work was prostitution work and my mum knew, but we believed that it would benefit our family well if I go and do the work. (M1)</i> <i>My mum knew about the journey [before departure] and was happy about it, because she believed that I would be able to send money home to support her. (M1)</i> |
| Group 3 | Family members who were aware of their children and wards traveling but were deceived, and thought it was for other purposes – vocational jobs, education, etc. | <i>My mum was really excited about the journey and encouraged me to go, because she felt that I would be able to make good money as a nanny in Germany for myself and to send home, but my mum did not know it was for prostitution work. (M1)</i> <i>My grandmother said someone is coming to take me to France. She said that it's one of my aunties who travelled out of the country [. . .] and has promised to pay for my education, so I can finish school.</i> |

* Group 2 consisted of family members who clearly knew that their children's or ward(s)' travel would result in prostitution because their children or wards would be working for a madam; however, they did not recruit their children for the madams nor actively encourage them to go, but they also did not discourage their children from going or do anything about it.

during analysis, family involvement in the participants' migration journey and trafficking experiences was evident in one way or the other. However, there were different types of family involvement, and family involvement did not always mean family approval of trafficking in persons. Three main groups emerged from the analysis:

In the first group, participants' family members were part of the recruitment, and enforcement of exploitation. Working on or with family members is a tactical strategy used by traffickers who understand the key aspects of respecting and obeying elders in the Nigerian society, and use that to their advantage.

In the second group, although family members were not explicitly pushing the participants to embark on the journey, they did not stop them and/or were supportive of the idea that they were going with a trafficker, as it meant some remittances would come their way.

The common factor in group three was deception: the participants' parent or guardian was deceived about the purpose of the trip.

2. The role of juju rituals as a tool of control and liberation for Nigerian victims of human trafficking^f

A vast body of literature^g refers to how traffickers have used the traditional practice of *Juju* rituals to blackmail victims and force them into exploitative conditions. In 2018, the *Oba* (King) of Benin in

f Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I., "The Role of Juju Rituals in Human Trafficking of Nigerians: A Tool of Enslavement, But Also Escape", *SAGE Open*, (2023) 13(4), <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231210474>

g Achebe, N., "The road to Italy: Nigerian sex workers at home and abroad", *Journal of Women's History*, (2004). 15(4), 178–185, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2004.0002>; Ikeora, M., "The role of African traditional religion and 'juju' in human trafficking: Implications for anti-trafficking", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, (2016) 17(1), 1–18; Nagle, L., & Owasanoye, B., "Fearing the dark: The use of witchcraft to control human trafficking victims and sustain vulnerability", *Southwestern Law Review*, (2016) 45, 561.

Nigeria made a public declaration against traffickers in which he revoked the curses traffickers place on victims through *juju* rituals, and cursed traffickers who refused to stop the illicit trade.^h This was unprecedented, and participants interviewed in this study, confirmed that the *Oba's* declaration was the help that they needed to escape the trafficking networks. Therefore, *juju* which is utilized as a tool of control over victims, was in this case, a tool of liberation.

I asked for help from some of my girlfriends who ran away from their madam, they told me about what Oba said. So, I called my mum to ask if it was true and my mum said yes... my friend then said Oba told us not to pay and that she is a Benin girl [from Edo state] so she herself will not pay again. So, I asked her to help me. (M1)

Since our Oba said we should leave, I have peace of mind, I have not afraid for myself or my [unborn] child and I will give birth in peace. If not for that [declaration], I don't know where I would be now or what would have happened to me. (M2)

I ended up going to court to testify against her [madam]. In court, I looked my madam in the eye, and I said: "You, you are the one who brought me here and forced me to do ashawo [prostitution] work" and she was found guilty and sentenced. I think she is under arrest now. (M1).

The far-reaching effect of the *Oba's* declaration against traffickers was another key finding of this study. This finding highlights the importance of including community-based approach to address international issues and utilizing effective strategies that may be deemed as unconventional while tackling an issue as global, yet local, as human trafficking.

3. The continuous violence experienced by victims of trafficking during their trajectories.ⁱ

The participants' experiences of physical and sexual violence happened during their migration journeys and continued after arrival in the European Union. The actors changed, but the violence remained.

h Ibileke, J., "Human trafficking: Oba places curses on offenders, collaborating sorcerers, cultists", *PM News*, (2018), <https://www.thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2018/03/09/human-trafficking-oba-places-curses%E2%80%8B-on-offenders-collaborating-sorcerers-cultists/>.

i Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I., "It happened in the desert, in Libya and in Italy: physical and sexual violence experienced by female, Nigerian victims of trafficking in Italy", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2023c 20(5): 4309, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054309>.

Niger: *So, one guy tried to save me, but the boga [trafficker] shot him and killed him. So, I had no choice but to give in; the man raped me, and I also saw him killing the person that tried to help me. (M1)*

Libya: *They raped me again, and eventually just dumped me in the desert to die. I really thought I would die this time, but again, I didn't die . . . I got pregnant. (M1)*

Italy: *The new camp is ok; they have adults and minors there and the people working there are nice. One of the staff there tried to have sex with me, but I refused, and I warned him that if he tries again, I will break his head. (M1)*

This third key finding highlights the physical and sexual violence that the participants were forced to experience. The experiences of violence that they had themselves, and witnessed being done to others were so many and so common that no participant was excluded from it. These strongly impacted their physical, mental, and emotional health as described in the excerpts below.

I beat my child [conceived through rape] because sometimes, I see something in her, or one look on her face that I don't know, and I think is from her father, I feel very bad. (M2)

When I think about it [the experiences of sexual violence], I feel chest pains. (M2)

Sometimes I can't even eat when I think about it. I sometimes feel dizzy. Something has changed in my brain since then [the experiences of sexual violence]. I don't reason well. Sometimes I just panic and then try to calm myself down. (M1)

If I close my eyes, I see horrible things that make me fear or I feel as if somebody is in the room, but I cannot see them. Sometimes, I will see a shadow but there is nobody else in the room, so who is the owner of the shadow? (M2)

These excerpts highlight the lasting impact of the participants' experiences of violence, the weight of the trauma that they carry, and one can only anticipate the long road to recovery ahead of them.

4. The continuous experiences of stigma, specifically sexual stigma, and labelling.^j Similar to the experiences of violence, the actors changed, but the participants' experiences of stigma and labelling continued.

People always say bad things about Nigerians here [Italy], it is mostly about prostitution when you are a girl, and if you are a Nigerian boy here, then you are a criminal. (M1)

j Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I., & Derluyn, I., "You are merely a Nigerian prostitute": Sexual stigma and labeling of Nigerian victims of trafficking in Italy," *Stigma and Health*, (2023) 8(3), 279–288, <https://doi.org/10.1037/sah0000441>

*I have been at the bus stop [in Italy] several times and older men stopped to offer me a ride, I asked how much it would cost, and they said *** [sexual act]. I told them ... I had money to pay for the trip, but they told me that was the fare and that I should better get used to it because that was what my people did... (M1).*

*In the NGO, the people sometimes talked about Nigerians as if we are all bad people and troublesome. If something happened, the first person they would blame are the Nigerians. So, when the woman I was living with started behaving funny as if I wanted to steal her old husband, I was happy to leave that house and go to *** [another NGO's housing]. (M1)*

The continuous experience of stigma, specifically sexual stigma and discrimination was so prevalent that one of the participants told the researcher that “it is normal”. It happened to them so frequently, that they no longer saw it as something strange, it had become normal. The participants described experiences of stigma and labelling in different spaces including on the bus, in the shelter, on the street, etc. They felt that they were only seen as Nigerians who did prostitution work, nothing else; and they perceived this “prostitution label” as an obstacle to find a job or integrate into the local society, so they isolated themselves and stayed within their own networks. Noteworthy, was the unwavering loyalty that the participants had towards their family members, including those who were part of their exploitation and trafficking. They still regularly sent them money and had a sense of loyalty to them regardless of what they had done.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

In conclusion, the participants’ experiences during their migration trajectories while being trafficked from Nigeria to Italy were both complex and violent. They highlight the dangers encountered along the way as well as the role played by different actors including family members. The study shows that:

1. Family involvement in different capacities is prevalent in human trafficking. It highlights the key roles that family members play, and power that they have.
2. There are other strategies to consider when tackling trafficking in persons – such as how the *Oba’s* declaration against traffickers was a tool that supported several participants in escaping their traffickers.
3. Physical and sexual violence continues even after arrival in the destination country and is sometimes perpetuated by caregivers. This leaves the participants in a cycle of multiple violent experiences and stigma which can be linked to what Orsini et al^k refer to as “loops of violence”.

4. Stigma, especially sexual stigma and labelling are highly prevalent and in turn, cause the participants to ostracize themselves from the society they live in. However, research^l shows that this type of self-isolation has a negative impact on wellness and quality of life.

To support victims of trafficking in persons in a lasting manner, relevant and tailored forms of support are highly recommended, and these include:

- › Involvement of willing and safe family members not involved in their exploitation, in aftercare. Since the advice and decisions of family members are highly respected in this context, possibly linked to the belief that parents/ caregivers make decisions that are in their children/wards’ best interests,^m then involvement of family members with the participants’ wellbeing at heart would allow for lasting rehabilitation and possibly prevent re-trafficking.
- › Involvement of the victims’ communities of origin and seemingly unconventional tools may be quite effective in tackling human trafficking. This supports Lederach’s three principles necessary for establishing peace constituencies – *indigenous empowerment, cultural sensitivity and a long-term commitment.*ⁿ
- › The need for long-term support structures that factor in the types of violence experienced by victims of trafficking, and understanding that these experiences may negatively impact their other relationships,^o including with caregivers.
- › Recognizing the mental health (and other) effects of (sexual) stigma, labelling, and treatment of the participants as the ‘problematic other’ and providing relevant long-term care and support.

k Orsini, G. and others, “Loops of violence within Europe’s governance of migration and asylum: Bottom-up perspectives on the experience of everyday bordering for refugees transiting/ settling in Libya, Italy, Greece and Belgium. *Politics and Governance*”, (2022) 10(2), 256–266, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v10i2.5183>.

l Benoit, C. and others, “Stigma and Its Effect on the Working Conditions, Personal Lives, and Health of Sex Workers”, *Journal of Sex Research*, (2018), 55(4-5), 457-471. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2017.1393652>.

m Iversen, V. and Ghorpade, Y., “Misfortune, misfits and what the city gave and took: the stories of South-Indian child labour migrants-1935–2005”, *Modern Asian Studies*, (2011) Vol. 45 No. 5, pp. 1177–1226; Kakar, S. *The Inner World: A Psycho-Analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, 4th ed., (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2012).

n Lederach, J. P., “Conflict transformation in protracted internal conflicts: The case for a comprehensive frame- work”, in K. Rupesinghe (ed.), *Conflict transformation*, (St. Martin’s Press, 1995), pp. 201–222.

o Classen, C.C, Palesh, O.G., Aggarwal, R., “Sexual Revictimization: A Review of the Empirical Literature”, *Trauma Violence Abus.* (2005), 6, 103–129.

Trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced criminality to commit online scams in Southeast Asia

Contribution from the UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific^a

Trafficking for fraud and online scams

Trafficking in persons for the purpose of exploitation in criminal activities is a form of trafficking that has risen in numbers and is gaining increased attention in different parts of the world. The detection of this form of trafficking has increased over the last 10 years, passing from about 1 per cent of the total victims detected in 2016,^b to 6 per cent in 2018,^c to 8 per cent in 2022 (see Chapter 1, page 53). This form of trafficking has been detected in about 25 countries in all regions of the world. A particular form of this trafficking that has emerged in the last few years is trafficking for committing cyber-enabled frauds. The phenomenon has surfaced in Southeast Asia where well-established transnational organized groups have trafficked young professionals and forced them to commit cyber-enabled crimes.

Victims from a range of low- and middle-income countries from the region and beyond have been found trafficked to commit these crimes in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Southeast Asia, mostly located along the borders of Mekong region countries. SEZ are specific areas of industrial development that benefit from simplified regulatory regimes and infrastructure to encourage investment.^d SEZ have also been identified as areas with less stringent regulations and limited oversight of law enforcement authorities.^e High-profile organized crime groups have been increasingly involved in SEZs as owners, developers and investors.^f Human rights abuses such as child trafficking and trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation had already been reported in such areas prior to the pandemic.^g Moreover, these areas have drawn international attention for housing large scale

cyberfraud operations and money laundering schemes, in effect serving as parallel underground banking systems for organized crime in the region and beyond.^h

Since 2021, such groups have started recruiting young professionals from several countries to exploit their skills in the commission of highly sophisticated online scams. Victims have been kept in casinos, resorts, hotels, large office buildings and residential developments established in or around SEZs in the region. Due to the mix of favourable regulatory frameworks and availability of IT technology, setting up an online casino has been relatively easy and profitable.ⁱ

The risk factors

The progressive expansion of this form of trafficking in the Southeast Asian SEZs is linked to the relatively recent growth of the number of casinos and junket operators^j established in the Mekong region.^k Online gambling is banned to varying extents in many countries in Southeast Asia,^l and many operators and players relocated to SEZs, where regulations allow for complicated schemes of transactional activities. For instance, the same group may be physically located in one country, run websites hosted somewhere else, while being licensed in a third country and targeting potential customers in multiple countries around the world.^m

What had previously been designed as hotels and in-person gambling platforms were turned into operation centres managing large numbers of hybrid or online gaming transactions.

Online casinos, and junket operators and virtual asset service providers (e.g. high risk unregulated exchanges, payments services) now serve as integral components of the regional underground and unregulated, or poorly regulated financial/banking

a This box draws upon UNODC, "Casinos, cyber fraud, and trafficking in persons for forced criminality in Southeast Asia Policy Report", (Bangkok, September 2023).

b See UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*, p. 31.

c Ibid, p. 34.

d Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Online Scam Operations and Trafficking into Forced Criminality in Southeast Asia: Recommendations for a Human Rights Response*, (2023).

e Jespersen, S. and others, *Trafficking for Forced Criminality: The Rise of Exploitation in Scam Centres in Southeast Asia*, ODI Thematic brief, (London, 2023).

f UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.

g Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding Observations on Cambodia under the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography*. CRC/C/OPSC/KHM/CO/1, (26 February 2015).

h UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.

i UNODC, *Casinos, Money Laundering, Underground Banking, and Transnational Organized Crime in East and Southeast Asia: A Hidden and Accelerating Threat* (Bangkok, January 2024).

j The term 'junket' refers to a short-term gambling program arranged by an operator for one or more high-wealth players at a chosen casino, in conjunction with the relevant casino operator.

k UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.

l OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Concluding Observations on Cambodia* (2015); Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell* (October 2023).

m United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Casinos, cyber fraud, and trafficking in persons for forced criminality in Southeast Asia Policy Report*, (Bangkok, September 2023).



infrastructure allowing organized crime syndicates in the Mekong region to launder billions of dollars of illicit profit. The infrastructure originally built to launder money through online gaming platforms is used to commit financial frauds in different currencies including cryptocurrency, trading fraudulent shares in companies or romance-investment scams.ⁿ

In search of a workforce to operate such scams, criminal groups started targeting workers in Southeast Asia and as the business expanded, looked for workers beyond the countries' borders under the pretence of well-paid and interesting jobs.^o

The context where these organized crime groups operate is characterized by large-scale corruption and alliances with non-state armed groups active in the region,^p with collusion between organized crime groups and senior government officials, politicians, local law enforcement and influential businesspersons.^q

The sophisticated organized crime behind it

The limited number of ongoing investigations into and convictions for trafficking in persons for the purpose of forced criminality in Southeast Asia makes it difficult to draw a comprehensive profile of the organized crime groups involved. However, evidence resulting from investigative files suggests that groups involved in this type of trafficking are sophisticated and well organized. Ongoing investigations into money laundering and online fraud indicate that leaders of these groups are typically men from Southeast Asia, often high-profile, presenting themselves as legitimate business owners, while forming alliances with high-ranking government officials and private corporations.^r

These leaders are, or are connected with, the owners and managers of the scam sites and operate shell companies for the money laundering operations. Different types of "personnel" operate in the compound where scam operations are managed and implemented. While some of the people who operate

scams are coerced, others are willing participants as "controllers" and "agents" or as simply part of the scam work force and are either part of criminal operations, or aiding criminal groups running scamming facilities. Directors who manage the scam compounds live in close proximity and oversee the day-to-day running of the online scams, managing the operations and people involved. Controllers, for instance, ensure that "operators" meet their financial objectives through threats and use of physical force. Some of the offenders acting in the system may have formerly been victims, and later agreed to take the role of controller in the scam compound in exchange for their own release, or other privileges.^s

Agents on the other hand are often nationals of the countries in which the scam compound is located, reporting directly to the directors, and are mostly responsible for organizing the transportation of the victims. There have been instances where agents have mediated with national authorities (including immigration services) to ensure the release of those victims who have managed to escape but were not recognized by national authorities as victims of trafficking and were instead held in detention facilities. Once released, these victims were re-trafficked into a similar situation of exploitation in the same region/province or another country. Outside the compound, there are hierarchical networks that connect the compounds to individual recruiters and agencies, transporters and, in some cases, non-state armed groups. Various border areas in the Mekong region remain under the control of a number of non-state armed groups operating numerous casinos and running other illicit business.^t

Available research suggests that the nationalities of the offenders serving at the lowest level of the hierarchy tend to correspond with the nationalities of the victims, while the leading positions are occupied by nationals from the broader East Asian region.^u

Victims from all over the world

Victims from Asia, Africa, Middle East and South America have been identified in Southeast Asia to commit various types of online scams, often controlled and manipulated through debt bondage and threat.^v

Both men and women have been targeted by organized crime groups and forced into conducting cyber-enabled crimes, but the majority are men, aged between 20 and 30, and are not citizens of the

n UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*; UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime and the Convergence of Cyber-Enabled Fraud, Underground Banking and Technological Innovation in Southeast Asia: A Shifting Threat Landscape* (Bangkok, October 2024).

o OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on Cambodia (2015); Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

p United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Casinos, Money Laundering, Underground Banking, and Transnational Organized Crime in East and Southeast Asia: A Hidden and Accelerating Threat* (Bangkok, January 2024).

q OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on Cambodia (2015).

r UNODC, *Casinos, Money Laundering*.

s Ibid.

t UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*.

u Ibid; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims in forced scam labour* (2023).

v UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*.

country of exploitation.^w Victims identified in the region in 2022 were mostly described as having tertiary level education, or higher, being media savvy and multilingual, and originating mostly from countries in Southeast Asia.^x

The modus operandi

Attracting the victims

Available evidence suggests that victims are recruited through deceptive online advertisements managed by individual recruiters or private agencies; in some cases recruitment is initiated from the scam centre. Following investigative operations in the region, a minority of the victims rescued in 2022 reported that they were recruited face-to-face through acquaintances following traditional trafficking dynamics, and to a lesser degree through kidnapping.^y Some trafficking victims are used by the organized crime group to recruit other people they know into situations of forced criminality, including family members and friends, through a payment of, for example, USD300, for each person recruited.^z There are reports of victims forced to stay and work in the compound until a ransom is not paid.

Some victims have been recruited through online advertisements that initially targeted university graduates fluent in multiple languages (especially English and Mandarin), skilled in Information Technology (IT) or having familiarity with social media, and occasionally some working knowledge of cryptocurrency. These young men and women were lured by job advertisements offering high pay and interesting professional work. The pay reportedly offered was the equivalent of around USD 1,000 – 1,500 per month with benefits including free food, housing and travel costs covered. Jobs included working in digital marketing, customer services, construction, translation,^{aa} hotel, and online gaming companies.^{ab}

Through the use of scam manuals, artificial intelligence tools and other IT solutions that have defined the modus operandi for the online scams, scam scripts and methods can eventually be easily replicated across compounds and even be used by less skilled cohorts of victims.^{ac}

Automatized tools have also been used to create deceptive job advertisements mostly promoted through messaging apps and social media. Some advertisements have fraudulently used the names, logos and other branding of existing and legitimate companies to lure victims.^{ad}

Some recruitment is also conducted face-to-face or through established recruitment agencies used for legitimate employment in the past. Cases of recruitment agencies based in the Middle East had been reportedly paid approximately USD 2,500 by the organized crime group for each recruitment.^{ae}

Some victims that were exploited in scam centres in Southeast Asia reported transiting the Middle East after recruitment for an IT training.^{af} While these victims finally reached the scam compounds in Southeast Asia, they reported that some of their fellow trainees were destined to scam compounds based in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council.^{ag}

While most criminal groups in the Golden Triangle focus on the manufacturing of synthetic drugs, particularly methamphetamine, other types of illicit activities include online financial scams, wildlife trafficking, illegal resource extraction, trafficking in persons and money-laundering.^{ah} Within the same compounds for instance, there is evidence of people being trafficked for the purpose of forced labour, in order to provide cleaning or cooking services, or for the purpose of sexual exploitation.^{ai}

Confined and in fear

While in trafficking in persons deception is mostly used at the recruitment stage, other means of control are typically employed during the exploitation phase.

Victims of trafficking for forced criminality into scam centres in Southeast Asia are confined in armed compounds, which typically include both dormitories and office space. Victims' movements are limited by metal bars on windows and balconies, high fences, and

w UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*.

x Ibid.

y Ibid; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*; Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

z UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*.

aa Jespersen, S. and others, *Trafficking for Forced Criminality*.

ab Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

ac UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*.

ad UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*.

ae UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*; Humanity Research Consultancy, "Cyberslavery in the scamming compounds", HRC briefing (2022). Available at: https://humanity-consultancy.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/HRC-Briefing_Cyber-Slavery-in-the-Scamming-Compounds.pdf

af UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*.

ag Ibid.

ah UNODC, *World Drug Report 2024*.

ai Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

security staff positioned at the building entrance/exit. Their screens are linked to a central screen so that their online activities are always monitored.^{aj}

Coercive methods may start upon arrival, or when the victims refuse to commit the scams. Victims are controlled through isolation and restriction of movement, confiscation of personal documents and mobile phone, threats, and debt bonding.^{ak}

The first method to control the victims is the debt bondage scheme, and the victims are asked to pay back the money “invested” by the employer/organized crime group in their travel and training. Victims are also subject to long working hours and unrealistic sales targets. It becomes impossible for the victims to repay the initial debt which increases with time, often compounded by fines for violations. In some cases, such debts become the basis of demands for ransom.^{al} Rescued victims have reported that ransoms may range from USD3,000 to USD30,000 and seem to have increased since the beginning of 2023. In most cases, when the family pays the ransom the victim is released, but victims’ testimonies also included cases in which the victims was then forced to continue working in the compound.^{am}

Threats are also widely used as a means to traffic and exploit victims. Organized crime groups reportedly threatened victims with harming their family and friends or with selling them into sexual exploitation, for organ removal, or to another scam compound in case of underperformance.^{an}

Rescued victims also reported having suffered from physical and sexual violence.^{ao} Cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment, arbitrary detention, torture, sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are used as control mechanisms.^{ap} Access to medical care is limited, and living conditions can be cramped and unsanitary.^{aq}

aj UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*; Humanity Research Consultancy, “Cyberslavery in the scamming compounds.”

ak UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims in forced scam labour* (2023). Humanity Research Consultancy, “Cyberslavery in the scamming compounds”.

al Ibid.

am OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on Cambodia (2015); Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

an UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*; Humanity Research Consultancy, *Guidance on responding to victims*; Humanity Research Consultancy, “Cyberslavery in the scamming compounds”.

ao Shan Human Rights Foundation, *Trapped in Hell*.

ap Ibid.

aq Ibid.

Set-up to fraud globally

Victims that are trapped into forced scams are asked to find and recruit potential new victims through interaction with social media users and make a certain number of ‘friends’ each day. These potential victims are targeted by using data bought and sold on various web platforms.^{ar} Established online friends are then enticed into various activities that will result in their financial loss through illegal online gambling or fraudulent investments and other things. Victims’ testimonies report that scam victims are generally approached with offers of small profit opportunities, such as buying and selling of cryptocurrency, perspective of online gaming, or romantic encounters. Fake websites are built to showcase fraudulent data showing the profit opportunities for the scam victims, who may even receive small amounts of money at the beginning to strengthen their trust. Several weeks or months are often needed to build a trusted relationship with the victim.^{as} Recent reports also highlighted the rising use and adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in scamming operations. Generative AI has been used to create phishing messages in multiple languages, chatbots are used to engage and manipulate victims, and deepfakes are used to bypass KYC (know your clients) security checks. Further, it has been reported that polymorphic malware capable of evading security software to identify ideal targets has been used by scammers and organized crime.^{at}

ar UNODC, *Casinos, cyber fraud*.

as OHCHR, Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on Cambodia (2015).

at UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime*.

Voices from civil society; protecting the victims, assisting the survivors

The initiative

Non-governmental and civil society organizations (NGOs and CSOs) are at the forefront of efforts to protect and assist victims of trafficking in persons around the world. For its 2024 edition, the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons has collected opinions and views of civil society to gain a clearer insight into the needs of trafficking victims.

Between July 2023 and March 2024, members of civil society active within UNODC anti-trafficking networks were invited to respond to an online survey. A total of 87 people working for anti-trafficking organizations in 37 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas completed the survey.^a

NGOs AND CSOs ON THE TOP-FIVE MOST NEEDED SERVICES FOR VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING



Source: UNODC NGO Survey.

Note: 85 respondents answered the question "In your experience, what are the five services most needed for victims of trafficking, after being trafficked?" by ranking a closed set of categories^b

a Between July 2023 and March 2024, the UNODC Research and Analysis Branch, in cooperation with the UNODC Civil Society Unit, the UN Trust Fund for Victims of Trafficking, and the UNODC Human Trafficking and Smuggling of Migrants Section, conducted an online survey to assess the challenges of anti-trafficking responses from the perspective of NGOs working with victims of trafficking. Members of civil society active within UNODC anti-trafficking networks were invited to respond to an online survey. 87 people working for anti-trafficking organizations in 37 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas answered the survey, with a higher concentration of respondents in North America (21 per cent, 18/87). Mitigation measures were taken in the data analysis phase to account for the higher proportion of respondents from North America. Among the survey respondents, 59 were women, 26 men, one preferred not to answer and one reported other identity. Nine persons had lived experience of being trafficked. The survey results were analysed through a mixed-methods approach drawing on qualitative and quantitative techniques. Results are indicative only and despite being generalizable, they are not representative of the experience of the whole population of victims of trafficking. While the survey achieved almost global coverage, it did not receive any responses from East Asia and the Pacific, and nearly 20 percent of the respondents were based in North America. The results have been analysed using relevant literature to triangulate emerging findings and account for the geographical distribution of respondents.

b Respondents were asked to rank the answer options from the most (1) to the least (5) needed, answers were as follows.

- (1) Medical assistance = 33, Reintegration services = 15, Legal support = 12, Child protection = 15, Repatriation services = 3, Other = 6, Language course = 1, Prefer not to say = 0, I do not know = 0;
- (2) Medical assistance = 25, Reintegration services = 17, Legal support = 20, Child protection = 10, Repatriation services = 4, Other = 5, Language course = 2, Prefer not to say = 2, I do not know = 0;
- (3) Medical assistance = 12, Reintegration services = 16, Legal support = 26, Child protection = 17, Repatriation services = 5, Other = 6, Language course = 3, Prefer not to say = 2, I do not know = 0;
- (4) Medical assistance = 9, Reintegration services = 22, Legal support = 13, Child protection = 14, Repatriation services = 8, Other = 6, Language course = 9, Prefer not to say = 3, I do not know = 0;
- (5) Medical assistance = 3, Reintegration services = 13, Legal support = 6, Child protection = 13, Repatriation services = 16, Other = 5, Language course = 24, Prefer not to say = 3, I do not know = 2.

NGOs and CSOs key suggestions on how to improve the ability of victims to report the crime and press charges against the trafficker

| | |
|--|--|
| <p>NGOs and CSOs suggestions on improving the chances of victims reporting to law enforcement</p> | Application of the non-punishment principle for victims of trafficking |
| | Recognition of the victims' status not dependent on the willingness to report the crime |
| | Presence of NGOs/independent actors while reporting to law enforcement |
| | No risk of forced repatriation for victims of trafficking; voluntary and compensated repatriation pathways |
| | Safe and anonymous reporting lines for victims of trafficking |

Source: UNODC NGO Survey.

Views of civil society organizations on some of the challenges of crime prevention

Misinformation

The organizations surveyed perceive misinformation, particularly through awareness raising campaigns, as one of the key challenges in tackling trafficking in persons. According to the respondents, information campaigns may fail in their crime prevention purposes, while reiterating instead stereotyped images of victims and traffickers.^c One NGO from North America, for instance, points out that child trafficking campaigns have typically failed to inform the public about the fact that children are often trafficked by family members or known acquaintances, shifting public perception of the typical perpetrators towards the ideal image of a stranger. A person with lived experience from the same region observes that boys and men victims are still invisible. He reports how boys and men are often stigmatized for their conduct during exploitation, rarely recognized as victims of trafficking, and prevented from accessing protection services.

Criminalization of the victims

Application of the non-punishment principle,^d access to legal channels for migration and residence permits,^e emerge among the key normative

developments that CSOs believe can help to prevent the crime and protect victims.^f

Despite clear international obligations to protect victims and a commitment to not consider them as criminals, most of the interviewed NGOs observe that victims of trafficking are in practice often criminalized for their illicit conduct. Their assessment corroborates the evidence gathered by academic and UN reports stating that victims are often arrested and criminalized for illicit conduct linked to their trafficking experience.^g The protection and non-criminalization of trafficked victims is particularly relevant for those victims that are exploited for forced criminality where victims are forced to engage in illegal activities. About 8 per cent of the victims detected globally in 2022 were trafficked for the purpose of exploitation in criminal activities. Detected cases have increased steadily in recent years, signaling a potential uptick in this form of trafficking in persons.^h

trafficking in persons to remain in its territory, temporarily or permanently, in appropriate cases."

c Amy Farrell & Rebecca Pfeffer, "Policing Human Trafficking: Cultural Blindness and Organizational Barriers", 653 ANNALS AM.ACAD.POL.&SOC.SCI. 46, 52-53 (2014); E O'Brien and H Berents, "Virtual Saviours: Digital games and anti-trafficking awareness-raising", *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 82-99, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219136>.

d The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT). Non-punishment of Victims of Trafficking. Issue brief No. 8. https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/ICAT/19-10800_ICAT_Issue_Brief_8_Ebook.pdf.

e Article 7.1 of the United Nations Protocol on Trafficking in Persons reads: "In addition to taking measures pursuant to article 6 of this Protocol, each State Party shall consider adopting legislative or other appropriate measures that permit victims of

f The United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol particularly urges States Parties to "consider adopting legislative or other appropriate measures that permit victims of trafficking in persons to remain in [their] territor[ies], temporarily or permanently, in appropriate cases." See Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, GA/RES/55/25, art 7(1) (2000).

g UNODC, "Female Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation as Defendants, A Case law Analysis"; Julia Einbond, Kaitlyn Zedalis and Hanni Stoklosa, "A Case of Mistaken Identity: The Criminalization of Victims of Labor Trafficking by Forced Criminality," *Criminal Law Bulletin*, vol 59, no 1, 2023, pp. 60-77; Amy Farrell and others, "Failing Victims? Challenges of the Police Response to Human Trafficking", *Criminology & Public Policy*, Vol. 18 issue 3, 649 (2019).

h United Nations, Non-punishment and non-prosecution of victims of trafficking in persons: administrative and judicial

Conversely, access to financial compensation, voluntary and compensated repatriation options and the presence of civil society actors facilitating interactions with law enforcement authorities are, in the views of CSOs and NGOs, factors typically increasing reporting rates.

Inequality and marginalization

Article 9, paragraph 4 of the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol requires that “States Parties shall [...] alleviate the factors that make persons, especially women and children, vulnerable to trafficking, such as poverty, underdevelopment and lack of equal opportunity.” Economic determinants are frequently cited among the most important risk factors affecting victims’ susceptibility to trafficking in persons and “abuse of a position of vulnerability” is one of the means listed in the definition of trafficking. Court cases have shown that the majority of victims were in a condition of economic need at the time of recruitment, often characterized by an inability to meet basic needs, such as food, shelter and healthcare.ⁱ

Similar to the findings from academic research, civil society considers trafficking in persons to be rooted in poverty, gender inequality, discrimination, and the dynamics of marginalization.^j When asked what is needed to better protect people from being trafficked, interviewed civil society stressed the urgency to tackle the root causes of vulnerability and promote more equal societies.^k

approaches to offences committed in the process of such trafficking, Background paper prepared by the Secretariat, Working Group on Trafficking in Persons (Vienna, 27-29 January 2010); Amy Farrell and others, “Failing Victims? Challenges of the Police Response to Human Trafficking”, *Criminology & Public Policy*, Vol. 18 issue 3, 649 (2019).

- i UNODC, *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020*.
- j The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT). The Role of the Sustainable Development Goals in Combating Trafficking in Persons. Issue brief No. 5.
- k Trafficking in persons is specifically mentioned in three targets under three Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) relating to justice and strong institutions, access to decent work and housing and gender equality – all of which are directly related to the prevention and protection of potential and actual victims. SDGs 5 (Gender Equality), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 16 (Peace Justice and Strong Institutions) specifically mention trafficking in persons. Further, the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol urges States Parties to adopt protection measures for victims of trafficking – including access to appropriate housing, medical, psychosocial and legal support and employment opportunities – and to address underlying factors that create vulnerability. See: Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, GA/RES/55/25, art 9(4) (2000).

Civil society organizations’ experience in protecting victims

Awareness of victims’ rights

Greater awareness of victims’ rights and the measures adopted to ensure these rights can protect people from coming under the control of traffickers. Similarly, recent academic studies have argued that such awareness actively prevents the normalization of workers’ exploitation and allows victims to build social connections outside of the trafficking space.^l Slightly more than 60 per cent of interviewed practitioners from civil society organizations agree with the idea that most victims are not aware of the rights granted by their status in certain jurisdictions.

Practical information on how to identify and rescue victims

According to UNODC research, only about 9 per cent of the cases of trafficking come to the attention of authorities as a result of an action by the community.^m

NGOs and CSOs, on the issue of the importance of information campaigns, also add that they are only effective where trustworthy and functioning services are available to victims of trafficking. In their experience, when such services are unavailable, information campaigns have limited impact on the anti-trafficking response and can even negatively affect trust in public authorities. Their concerns echo emerging findings in the anti-trafficking literature, signaling that the most sensitized members of the community may be the most reluctant to report a potential case of trafficking, due to concerns about the adequacy of support for victims and the risk of criminalization.ⁿ

When specifically asked about systems that can support victims to exit exploitation, CSOs mention the valuable role of hotlines. They stressed, however, the need to ensure that such hotlines can provide multilingual services, and guide and refer victims towards trustworthy and accessible services.

Exposure of civil society and NGOs to retaliation

Consistently over the years, the Global Report has shown how organized crime groups involved in trafficking in persons are able to traffic ever greater numbers of people, for longer times, in more violent manners. Many NGO workers and survivors surveyed (39 out of 86) live in fear of retaliation of organized crime groups and other actors with stakes in

^l K Sharapov, S Hoff and B Gerasimov, “Editorial: Knowledge is Power, Ignorance is Bliss: Public perceptions and responses to human trafficking”, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 13, 2019, pp. 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201219131>.

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trafficking. In total, 25 respondents mentioned “security” among their most pressing non-financial needs and 39 said that they need help to keep safe from retaliation of organized criminal groups and other actors. The lack of access to safe and anonymous ways to assist prosecution can be a strong deterrent to reporting the crime.

Experience on victim re/integration

Victims’ needs

The United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol urges States Parties to adopt protection measures for victims of trafficking – including access to appropriate housing, medical, psychosocial and legal support and employment opportunities – and to address the underlying factors that create or exacerbate vulnerability.^o

According to the 85 interviewed practitioners, the top five services most needed by victims of trafficking when exiting exploitation are:

- i. provision of medical assistance, especially counselling, mental health services, drug treatment, and psychosocial support for all victims;
- ii. reintegration services focusing on economic empowerment, compensation and income support, income support, job placement, education and vocational training;
- iii. (free) legal support securing access to rights;
- iv. child protection services;
- v. and voluntary and compensated repatriation services.

When asked to describe the type of services needed, the answers of CSOs concentrate on the need to ensure effective services to all victims. They note that when available, services rarely come free of charge and may not be affordable for victims at the time when they are most needed. Provision of free legal support was especially mentioned as an essential service that is too often lacking.^p

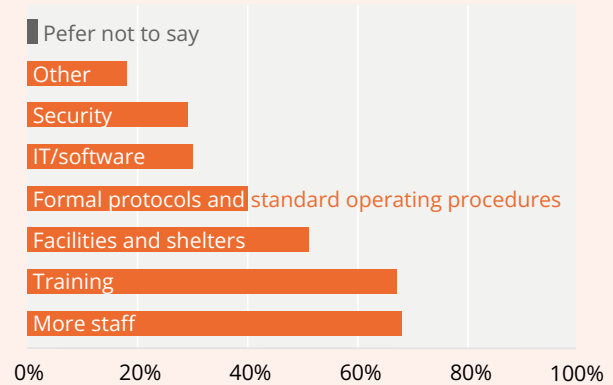
NGOs point to the lack of shelter or affordable housing as being among the main barriers for victims to exit exploitation.

Respondents from different regions emphasize the importance of ensuring access to a safe shelter for rescued victims. Some specify that shelters should accommodate all types of victims regardless of their

^o Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, GA/RES/55/25, art 9(4) (2000).

^p Julia Einbond, Kaitlyn Zedalis and Hanni Stoklosa, “A Case of Mistaken Identity: The Criminalization of Victims of Labor Trafficking by Forced Criminality,” *Criminal Law Bulletin*, vol 59, no 1, 2023, pp 60-77.

What are your organization’s most pressing non-financial needs to support victims of trafficking?



Source: UNODC NGO Survey, based on 87 answers.

profile, such as age, sex or form of exploitation, while also providing dedicated services for certain categories such as people affected by substance-use disorders or living with dependent children.

The risk of revictimization

For many victims, exiting trafficking situations means the simultaneous loss of accommodation and income, which in most settings represents a life-threatening risk. In order to be successful, respondents add, anti-trafficking initiatives need to provide viable alternatives to exploitation by, and dependence on, traffickers. If sustainable solutions are not provided to victims, there is the risk that they fall victim again.

When asked to report on the revictimization rate, most CSO members did not know how many of the victims they had supported ended up being trafficked or exploited more than once in their life (37 per cent or 32/87).

How many victims supported by you/your organization, were trafficked or exploited more than once in their life?



Source: UNODC NGO Survey, based on 87 answers.

The ECOWAS Commission's initiatives in addressing the lack of data on trafficking in persons

Contribution from the ECOWAS Commission Directorate of Humanitarian and Social Affairs

Within the last two decades, ECOWAS has scaled up efforts to improve the availability of information and data on trafficking in persons in the region. In 2007, the Network of National Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Focal Institutions, and the Annual Review of Implementation of the ECOWAS Plans of Action to Combat Trafficking was instituted by the ECOWAS TIP Unit as an annual flagship report, based on annual reporting by Member States, and as a peer review mechanism. This results from a first legal assessment conducted by the ECOWAS TIP Unit of Member States legislation in 2005/2006.

The first ECOWAS Annual Synthesis Report (ASR) on trafficking in persons was issued in 2008, based on a reporting template aligned with the ECOWAS Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons. More recently, further cross referencing and triangulation have become a feature of the ASR. The ASRs are a tool enabling ECOWAS Member States to determine the levels of compliance of their respective legal, policy and institutional frameworks with the ECOWAS Plan of Action. They also serve as a barometer for determining progress achieved and challenges encountered operationally in combatting human trafficking, including levels of arrests, prosecutions and convictions and victims rescued.

The Annual Review Meeting (ARM) is the institutional platform for consideration and validation of the ASR and supports experience sharing, planning and identification of priorities in ECOWAS Member States. The ASR has been compiled continuously since 2008 with the latest report adopted by Member States TIP Focal Institutions in Accra Ghana in 2023 with reports submitted by the 15 Member States. At the Accra meeting, Member States also agreed to extend the current ECOWAS Plan of Action (2019 to 2023) until 2027.

The ASR lies at the centre of the coordination mandate of ECOWAS and intervention programmes devised in ECOWAS countries have been informed by this analysis for close to two decades, with a majority of key intervention initiatives based on the output of this process. The ASR serves also as an important advocacy tool and for the provision of targeted technical support. The reporting template has since been upgraded in 2018 and used by member states to reflect on contemporary and new developments and serves as a programmatic tool to address gaps they have identified in the respective countries.

Currently, the Trafficking in Persons Program of ECOWAS has expanded its approach to human trafficking in recognition of the complex linkage of

trafficking in persons with related forms of violence against persons who might be especially vulnerable to victimization, including women, children, disabled persons, vulnerable migrants and the elderly. The ASR collects information on possible precursor offences and events and results of human trafficking as well as victimization which occurs within the same context. These might be offences constituting sexual and gender-based violence, domestic violence, violence against children, etc.

This is part of ECOWAS' broader approach to TIP: 'Trafficking in Persons Plus', responding to the phenomenon of human trafficking as a part of a larger complex set of vulnerabilities and victimization. Responding to associated or related crimes and victimization is especially important from the West African perspective, where institutions and services remain generally weak.

One of the deliverables of the TIP component of the Project is the development of a Regional Crime Against the Person Prevention Policy (RCAPPP) providing further clarification and concrete implementation measures for the ECOWAS TIP Plus (TIP+) approach. The RCAPPP limits itself to crimes with clear linkages with TIP and also responds to common indicators of vulnerability to TIP and related offences; dealing with gender-based violence, offences that could be connected with irregular migration and related issues. The approach is also focused on risk factors that move vulnerable persons closer to labour and sexual exploitation and employs a proactive, 'joined up' strategy.

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