10. INCREASED VULNERABILITY TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING OF MIGRANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE IGAD–NORTH AFRICA REGION

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Introduction

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)[1] and North Africa regions[2] are transit regions for northbound migration, but also experience high rates of intraregional mobility encouraged by regional economic blocs and designed to facilitate economic integration and free movement across borders.[3] Intersecting crises, like the current conflict in Tigray and the coup in the Sudan, further fuel ongoing large-scale displacement and migration. Between them, the Sudan and Ethiopia alone host 2 million refugees and 7.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs).[4] Migrants in this region are known to be particularly vulnerable to human trafficking, especially those travelling across the Sahara and into Libya via the Central Mediterranean Route.[5] Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was estimated that human trafficking was more prevalent in this area than elsewhere in the world. Estimates from IOM surveys in 2016 indicated that 73 per cent of migrants along the central Mediterranean route experienced human trafficking or a form of exploitation.[6]

This paper employs a gender-responsive lens to explore the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the risk of human trafficking and migrants' experiences of human trafficking in the IGAD–North Africa region. Findings are based on an extensive review of evidence and a series of interviews held with stakeholders, completed in 2021. A first round of interviews was held with 22 stakeholders working in government, criminal justice, migration governance and humanitarian organizations in March–April, exploring the impact of COVID-19 on human trafficking in and through the Sudan. Analysis of these interviews suggested that (a) the gendered dimension required further analysis, and (b) a regional approach was needed. Thus, a further round of targeted interviews was held in September 2021 with 12 additional stakeholders in Libya, Tunisia, Ethiopia, and the Sudan to elicit further information on the gendered impacts of COVID-19 on migrants.

[1] IGAD includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan and Uganda.
[2] Chiefly here we refer to the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), which has stated its desire to eliminate visas and open borders; see COMESA, 2018.
[3] McAuliffe and Kitimbo, 2018; IGAD, 2020.
[4] UNHCR, 2021a, 2021b; IOM, 2021a, 2021b.
[5] UNHCR, 2020a.
[6] IOM, 2017.

The definition of human trafficking

In international law, human trafficking is defined in the 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, on the basis of three cumulative elements:

1. **An act**: "… the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons";
2. **A means**: "… by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person";
3. **The purpose of exploitation**: "Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs".

Only the act and the purpose of exploitation are required as elements of trafficking in cases of the trafficking of children.

Our analysis indicates that the pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities to human trafficking across migrant populations, but with particularly severe effects for displaced persons. Intersecting factors – namely migratory status, gender and livelihood strategy – increased vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation of individuals. Migratory status already restricts livelihood options. The pandemic further negatively impacted common livelihood strategies and led to increasingly restrictive (and hostile) border regimes. The combination of reduced incomes and limited legal migration routes encouraged riskier and more hidden migration pathways. These entailed increased risk of trafficking and sexual or gender-based violence. In turn, the pandemic-induced reductions in institutional presence – such as police, schools and health care – reduced opportunities for victim identification and limited survivor care.[7] Implications for policy and practice to address the risk of human trafficking and exploitation for migrants and migrating populations are proposed in the concluding section.

Research methods and approach

This paper is based on two strands of qualitative research to understand the gendered impacts of the pandemic on the risk of human trafficking and on people's vulnerability to human trafficking, focusing on migrating populations.[8] The first strand explored the impacts of COVID-19 on human trafficking in the Sudan (February to May 2021), combining a systematic review of existing and emerging evidence with 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews.[9] The systematic review mapped the current state of knowledge, compiling and analysing relevant literature, as well as relevant legal, regulatory and policy standards. Due to the recent and rapidly changing nature of the COVID-19 situation, newspaper articles and other forms of popular media were also included. A total of 94 pieces of evidence were selected for inclusion and thematically coded. Evidence reviewed was limited to that published in English from 2018 to 2021 and accessible online.

[7] Within the text of the paper, victim is used to refer to someone still experiencing human trafficking while survivor is used to refer to people who have exited human trafficking. The exception is in the use of first-person quotes where victim of trafficking and survivor of trafficking are being used interchangeably.

[8] Gender refers to the "socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to people based on their assigned sex." It is important to emphasize that gender is not used interchangeably with "women", but rather the concept refers to women, men and other gender groups, and the often unequal relations between them. See IOM, 2019, citing UN-Women, 2014).

[9] Rights Lab, 2021.

Building on this initial research, a further targeted evidence review and 12 additional interviews were conducted with stakeholders working in migration and women's rights within Libya, Tunisia, and the Sudan (September 2021). This supplementary research focused specifically on impacts on migrants and migrating populations, and the role of gender in shaping vulnerabilities and risk in the pandemic world.

Together, interviewees represented organizations working on issues of gender, migration, and governance across the IGAD and North Africa region, including Better Migration Management (BMM), Danish Refugee Council, the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ), Global Partners Governance (GPG), Iteru, Midanik, the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Salmmah Women's Resource Centre, The Refugee Law Initiative and the University of Addis Ababa. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, and were held via video conferencing software due to the pandemic. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded.

Additionally, in response to data requests, the Mixed Migration Centre provided specific analysis of survey data collected in Tunisia and the Sudan. This is referenced to support findings. The data and analysis are drawn from 370 interviews with refugees and migrants in the Sudan and 2,523 interviews with refugees and migrants in Tunisia undertaken by the centre in the context of its Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi), conducted between 2020 and 2021.[10]

Increased risk along migration routes

On 14 February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was identified in Africa (specifically, in Egypt).[11] Cases were quickly identified elsewhere, precipitating implementation of COVID-19 restrictions including bans on public gathering and widespread school and border closures.[12] This had a number of effects on migrants, limiting possible transportation options, increasing security at borders,[13] and restricting access to "regular migration" (including through reduced access to visas, reductions in the number of flights, and halted refugee processing).[14] Simultaneously, migration aspirations increased, driven by socioeconomic deterioration and violent conflict.[15]

The combined reductions in income and limited access to transport encouraged the use of smugglers to circumnavigate border restrictions,[16] with implications for the risk of human trafficking and exploitation.[17] As one interviewee put it, under COVID-19 the available legal routes for movement were very limited: "the only option is different forms of fake visas … or to go through irregular or illegal routes using smugglers and traffickers."[18] This shift towards irregular routes was evidenced after the Sudan closed its borders in March 2020 to agricultural workers entering from Ethiopia. Seasonal agricultural workers from Ethiopia were initially prevented from entering the Sudan by the Ministry of Health. Dependent on their incomes and access to work, this group of (predominately) men found less populated border crossings, using more dangerous irregular routes with the help of facilitators (smugglers).[19] An interviewee from GIZ described the ways in which the COVID-19 restrictions in particular impacted the ability of this population to move, with implications for trafficking:

10 MMC, 2021a, 2021b.
11 BBC, 2021.
12 IMREF, 2020; MMC 2021b.
13 Interview with representative from the University of Addis Abada, 2021.
14 UNODC, 2021a.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Schofberger and Rango, 2020; Sanchez and Achilli, 2020.
18 Interview with representative from the Forum for Social Studies, Addis Abada, 2021.
19 Comparatively, Italy relies on 370,000 migrant workers, and Canada 60,000. See IOM, 2020.

Every year there are hundreds of thousands who cross into Sudan to work in the agricultural sector in El Ghadaref. Seasonal labourers play a critical role in agricultural production on the Sudanese side. Sudan cannot afford to close the border. There is no alternative to Ethiopian labourers, so they had to find a way of letting these people in to Sudan, while ensuring like, full compliance with COVID-19 related safety measures. … What is at stake here is also a major food security issue, because if there is no production, as you know on the Sudanese side which is very fragile … so there are definitely more people who have crossed than in previous years irregularly. Which comes along with the vulnerabilities which are associated with crossing into a country irregularly, at human trafficking level.[20]

As this indicates, travelling as an "irregular" migrant along these more hidden routes and the nature of engaging a smuggler to facilitate "irregular" movement increases the risk of human trafficking and exploitation.[21] Why?

First, although smugglers are to be differentiated from traffickers, smugglers often abuse migrants, through violence or even exploitation, and can thus easily turn into traffickers.[22] As a representative of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated, "we cannot deny it … individuals, migrants, or persons of concern who use the help of smugglers to move from one country to another, they become the victim of trafficking."[23]

Second, travelling on irregular routes through ungoverned areas – areas virtually void of national or international law[24] – in order to avoid identification increases the exposure to dangers, including to targeting by traffickers.[25]

Third, the need to stay invisible has further implications for victim identification: migrants are unlikely to seek help from authorities given their irregular migration status. Traffickers leverage this power to maintain control, allowing them to act without police reprisal. An interviewee working for OCHCR summarized: "… you never go to the police if you have an issue. If you are a victim of a crime, we would not turn to the police or to the State because you risk being arrested because of the law criminalizing irregular, illegal migration."[26]

Fourth, the difficulties in travel caused by border closures and other limitations on movement led to longer routes, increasing the length of individual journeys and the period of engagement with smugglers and traffickers. Prolonged journeys and longer periods of engagement with smugglers or traffickers are known to increase the risk of exploitation, as well as the number of deaths and disappearances.[27]

Interviewees cited several other examples of COVID-19 restrictions impacting the mobility of individuals and groups in the region, encouraging use of irregular routes and simultaneously increasing the risk of trafficking. These included migrants who, according to interviewees, had been "forcibly expelled" from Libya and abandoned at the Libyan border,[28] Ethiopian women trapped

[20] Interview with representative from German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ), 2021.
[21] Sanchez and Achilli, 2020.
[22] See Appendix A for discussion of distinction between smuggling and trafficking.
[23] Interview with representative from UNHCR, 2021.
[24] For a further discussion of the governance structure in this geography, see Kuschminder and Triandafyllidou, (2020), which explores southeast Libya, which is governed by different and competing tribal regimes.
[25] UNHCR, 2021c.
[26] Interview with representative from OHCHR, Libya, 2021.
[27] Sanchez and Achilli, 2020:6.
[28] Interview with representative from UNHCR, 2021.

in the Middle East after their domestic work evaporated and with it their housing,[29] and women with domestic contracts for work in the Middle East travelling "irregularly" and abandoned in the Khartoum airport when restrictions suddenly went into effect.[30] As the UNHCR representative noted, these groups had no legal option to "go back or move forward, because of border restrictions and closure of the airport",[31] leaving them dependent on alternative (irregular) modes with associated dangers.

Initially, COVID-19 also contributed to prolonged periods of time spent in refugee camps and immigration detention settings. UNHCR initially stopped formal processing of applications for resettlement (May–June of 2020), and relocations of refugees were slowed or halted.[32] Elsewhere, migrants were unable to disembark from transit vehicles, leaving them trapped at sea.[33] In both cases, this extended the period of displacement and detention.[34] According to UNODC, individuals are "stuck in precarious conditions in camps or shelters or on the streets. These individuals are likely to try and continue their journeys, which may create a surge in demand for migrant smuggling services as some borders reopen", with associated risk of trafficking.[35]

The increased duration of detention that resulted from government COVID-19 policies increased the risk of exploitation and violence. This was particularly true in Libya, a State where ongoing conflict problematizes oversight and impacts governmental capacity. Interviewees in Libya described the impact that the security situation had on the ability of the State or civil society organizations to protect survivors, once identified. In addition to the dangers noted above, interviewees spoke of alleged detention centre raids by militias or security forces.[36] Women and underage girls were targeted: "we've seen groups … forcing their way into detention centres and abducting the women." The interviewee went on:

> *We had a group of women who had been victims of trafficking and who had spent some two years in Beni Walid in the hands of traffickers. That's a major trafficking hub. Eventually they were released from the hands of traffickers, but the response of the authorities was to send them to a detention centre, even if officially that centre was called the Centre for the Vulnerable. And they were also wanted by the authorities in relation to a criminal investigation into trafficking, they were witnesses. They were Somali girls … underage, [who] ended up in a detention centre under the Department for Combating Illegal Migration … where they were repeatedly raped by, by the guards. In detention centres where you don't have women guards and I think it exemplifies everything that's wrong in with the systems and the laws in Libya. The fact that victims of trafficking might end up in a detention centre simply because they are still considered by the authorities … as illegal migrants. The fact [is] that they there's no comprehensive framework for victims of trafficking. You're released from the hands of your traffickers, and you end up in a detention centre where you are still at risk.*

[29] Henry, 2021.
[30] Interview with representative from GIZ, 2021.
[31] Interview with representative from UNHCR, 2021.
[32] Migration Data Portal, 2021.
[33] Ibid.
[34] UNODC, 2021a.
[35] Interview with representative from University of Addis Ababa, 2021; UNODC, 2021a.
[36] See coverage from *The Guardian* for further similar examples of dangers to migrants in Libyan detention. For instance, www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/oct/08/reports-of-violence-libya-arrests-5000-migrants.

Both the duration of detention and the lack of adequate victim care were impacted by COVID-19, prolonging the period of detention and thereby increasing the risks faced by migrants. This example demonstrates the intersecting vulnerabilities faced by certain individuals: in this case, both the lack of survivor services and an adequate framework for victims of trafficking increased the risk of further exploitation for migrant women caught up in a system of immigrant detention.

Smugglers and traffickers also raised costs for migration facilitation during the pandemic.[37] As one interviewee summarized, "what I've noticed … when things get tough to cross the border then the costs also get higher."[38] To extract payment, traffickers are known to kidnap migrants and hold them hostage, or use debt bondage.[39] The form of exploitation is often gendered, and women are more likely to experience sexual exploitation.[40] A UNICEF official described the impact on cost for one woman: in exchange for moving her across the Sudan to Khartoum, a trip which took something like ten nights, the trafficker forced her into commercial sexual exploitation in each of the places he hid her to "recoup" his costs.[41] Diasporic networks were also asked to pay more for the release of their peers through ransom payments:

> *Either people can leave if they pay money for smugglers to get them to Libya and then onwards, or if they don't have money, they'd need to earn it en route or … through family means. … [Y]ou know extended families to transfer some … no one in the camps has much money. They may have some wealthier family elsewhere, or you know, in diaspora.*[42]

Working to pay smugglers for transit is known to increase the likelihood of trafficking, highlighting the risk created by COVID-19 restrictions.[43]

In sum, the use of smugglers, reliance on alternative migratory routes, and prolonged processing times increased for migrants the risk of exploitation and human trafficking. The gendered nature of these processes resulted from differences in industry distribution and form of exploitation. In general, migratory routes and access to visas are gendered by the migrants' livelihood strategy. Women in this region are more likely to work as domestic workers or caregivers, while male migrants are more likely to travel to work in the informal agricultural sector, security, or construction.[44] Both domestic workers and agricultural labourers often rely on tourist, temporary, or sponsored work permits.[45] COVID-induced restrictions temporarily altered these normal flows, causing increases in irregular movement with impacts on both the location and the type of exploitation experienced.

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37 UNODC, 2021a.
38 Interview with representative from University of Addis Ababa, 2021.
39 Interview with representative from The Regional Operations Centre in Support of the Khartoum Process (The ROCK), 2021; UNODC, 2021a.
40 Interview with gender consultant from OHCHR, 2021.
41 Interview with officiant from UNICEF, 2021.
42 Interview with representative from the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), 2021.
43 Interview with representative from the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), 2021; UNODC, 2021b.
44 Gezahegne, 2020.
45 Ibid.

Impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods

> *I don't think there's been sort of high levels of fear or anxiety from COVID itself in … the camps that we've worked in. … I think it just contributes to the economic deprivation of that situation and … more limited, you know, labour or livelihood prospects and people feeling forced to … seek their basic needs being met elsewhere in the world.*[46]

The pandemic has restricted options for regular migration while encouraging migration, in many cases by negatively impacting socioeconomic conditions. Restrictions on freedom of movement, the closure of workplaces, and migrants' overrepresentation in particularly hard-hit industries increased economic precarity for migrants, and with it the risk of exploitation. This was exacerbated where migrants lacked access to work permits.[47] Initially, for instance, in Libya, 90 per cent of migrants who relied on day labour experienced difficulty finding work.[48] In Tunisia, around half of the total migrant populations surveyed reported COVID had reduced access to work, and 38 per cent in the Sudan reported loss of employment income.[49]

These effects have been acutely felt in the informal economy. Informal employment is common in the IGAD–North Africa region. The ILO estimates that 67.3 per cent and 91.6 per cent of workers are employed in the informal sector in Eastern and sub-Saharan Africa respectively.[50] Migrants – in particular refugees and especially those in camp situations – are disproportionately represented in informal work, and frequently rely on informal day labour.[51] In States like the Sudan where refugees cannot hold legal employment, they rely on informal or day labour to support themselves. In cities like Khartoum, migrants frequently work in poorly regulated industries including hospitality, domestic work, and the service sector.[52] Within camps, the forms of employment available are further limited due to the encampment policy and further restrictions on mobility:[53] In general, refugees in camps work within the camp or immediate surroundings in income-generating activities like laundry, markets, construction, or agriculture.[54]

When the informal sector was hit by pandemic restrictions, many refugee and migrant households lost all household income. MMC reports indicate that, within the Sudan, "most informal and service sector jobs had vanished" by March, leaving many refugees and migrants without income.[55] These impacts were gendered, with disproportionate impacts on activities where women were more likely to work. Women who work in the informal sector in the public sphere – such as tea sellers and those with market stalls – were heavily affected by lockdown restrictions on public gatherings, preventing them from working. COVID-19 also impacted the demand for labourers in service industry roles reliant on expendable income, like laundry, another female dominated area.[56] For male refugees and migrants, the primary industries differed. In addition to seasonal agriculture, construction work was negatively impacted. The pandemic impacted growth, slowing investment and with it the need for labourers. This reduced available work for men, and with it, their incomes.[57]

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46 Interview with director-level representative from a non-profit refugee service, 2021.
47 OCHCR, 2020b.
48 OHCHR, 2021.
49 MMC, 2021a, 2021b.
50 ILO, 2018.
51 Interview with representative from GIZ, 2021.
52 Interview with United Nations gender consultant, Libya, 2021.
53 Interview with representative from DRC, 2021.
54 Ibid.
55 MMC, 2021b.
56 Interview with representative from DRC, 2021.
57 Ibid.

Interviewees noted that in addition to the impacts of COVID-19 on the informal sector and agricultural labour, domestic workers were severely impacted by both job loss and increases in exploitation. Migrant domestic workers are heavily concentrated in urban areas like Khartoum or Tripoli, where they live in private homes. Social distancing regulations restricted their mobility to their employers' homes, as one interviewee describes:

> *[Domestic workers] were already more, quite vulnerable, in terms of human exploitation. When it comes to human exploitation, the crisis has made the level of vulnerability more acute, due to worsening of the isolation, and disconnection from the rest of the community … the impossibility to move freely.*[58]

Increased social isolation and a lack of support was believed to have contributed to an increase in abuse and exploitation. In addition, COVID-19 response measures limited their ability to seek safety or assistance and contributed to an underreporting of abuse resulting from restrictions.

Overall, Mixed Migration Centre data suggest that losses in labour opportunities led to concurrent increases in risk of labour and sexual exploitation.[59] More than 50 per cent of migrants in North Africa reported increased risk of labour exploitation due to COVID.[60] Sixty per cent of migrants surveyed in Khartoum had lost their income, and women were more likely to report increased risk of labour exploitation (59%) and sexual exploitation (53%) because of the pandemic. Women in Libya, Tunisia, and the Sudan reported that COVID increased the risk of labour and sexual exploitation.[61] Again, this has impacts for migrants working to pay their smuggler fees. Many migrants engage in day labour during their travel to pay back costs; as noted, migrants who work to pay off the cost are more at risk of exploitation and trafficking than those who pay in advance.[62]

Impact of COVID-19 on survivor care and institutions

COVID-19 also contributed to the reduction in and suspension of existing forms of victim identification and survivor support. This had particularly severe consequences in places with already limited care and assistance infrastructure for survivors of trafficking. These impacts interacted with structural factors shaping experiences of support along gendered lines.

The pandemic reduced institutional presence and capacity, affecting both identification of trafficking victims and access to services. Organizations and institutions that consistently interact with populations and are thus more likely to recognize signs of exploitation or abuse – such as schools – were closed.[63] In the Sudan, where survivor care and support are limited, provision was further reduced during the pandemic with the closure of safe houses.[64] Interviewees indicated that at the start of the pandemic there were no publicly funded safe houses for survivors due to negative gendered preconceptions about "independent women" (women without a present guardian), as they are perceived to "encourage broken homes."[65] A small number of safe houses or shelters existed, administered by non-governmental entities. However, due to a failure (or inability) to meet COVID-19 health requirements, at least one of those safe houses was closed.[66]

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58 Interview with representative from a multi-state anti-trafficking organization, North Africa/Horn of Africa, 2021.
59 MMC, 2021a.
60 OHCHR, 2021.
61 MMC, 2021a; OHCHR, 2021.
62 IMREF, 2020.
63 UNODC, 2021c.
64 Interview with representative from The Rock, 2021.
65 Interview with former director of a women's organization in Khartoum, 2021.
66 Interview with representative from The Rock, 2021.

Survivors – all women – were immediately released from the safe house without appropriate supportive infrastructure, exposing them to the risk of re-trafficking or, for undocumented women, deportation.

COVID-19 also altered the nature of services available to victims of trafficking, prolonging wait times and access to forms of care. Entities positioned to identify populations of concern and to provide services to victims – for instance, the International Planned Parenthood Federation and UNHCR – closed their doors to in-person services. Services were provided via a hotline instead.[67] A UNHCR interviewee flagged that this slowed service delivery, increasing the wait time for services to persons of concern. Elsewhere, slowed processing of asylum claims lengthened the period of uncertainty and time spent without legal status.[68] These temporal interruptions again encouraged legal precariousness, encouraging reliance on informal work (for which possible options were reduced) and increasing the likelihood of exploitation.

Multiple interviewees raised concerns about the impacts of COVID-related reductions in international aid budgets on support services addressing vulnerability to exploitation. Initially, at least, money was redirected from humanitarian projects to COVID-related health needs. As a camp director underscored, these cuts came at a time of reductions in aid more broadly from States: "it also happened at a time where you know multiple governments for different political reasons were reducing their global aid budgets".[69] The reductions in aid further reduced the resources that supported populations of concern, such as refugees in camp settings. This encouraged outward migration and increased the likelihood that a refugee would choose to move with the help of a smuggler via an irregular route, given pandemic restrictions.

Finally, criminal justice presence and policing was halted in many areas out of a concern over the threat of COVID-19.[70] This had immediate short-term consequences for victim identification and for the criminal prosecution of traffickers. Within the Sudan and Libya, most courts were temporarily closed in early 2020, reducing the processing of trafficking cases. Police were also informally told not to conduct operational activity in the Sudan due to social distancing.[71] A severe lack of protective equipment for the police led to the cessation of operational work.[72] The lack of policing contributed to missed opportunities to identify cases of exploitation and to connect identified survivors with care.

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67 Interview with representative from UNHCR, 2021.
68 MMC, 2021a.
69 Interview with representative from DRC, 2021.
70 Interview with representative from The Rock, 2021.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.

Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has evidenced intersecting impacts at multiple levels that increase the risk of human trafficking for migrants within the IGAD–North Africa region. COVID-19 has contributed to acute economic vulnerability, increasing migration aspirations while simultaneously limiting mobility by closing borders and slowing visa application or processing. This has had multiple ramifications for individual safety, exacerbating the existing risk of exploitation, including the risk of trafficking.

The lack of opportunities for individuals to access legal temporary or seasonal labour visas, international protection, or refugee resettlement is driving reliance on smugglers and traffickers. While this was the case before the pandemic, the pandemic has shown that drastic border closures are not stopping migration but rather fuelling the use of irregular migration routes and increasing migrants' risk of experiencing trafficking. More than ever, this echoes the need for enhancing the availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration.[73]

The pandemic and its economic impacts have also highlighted the centrality of addressing and reducing migrants' vulnerabilities, including in a gender-responsive manner when those may relate to gender identities.[74] The risk of exploitation and trafficking faced by migrants, refugees, and other displaced persons are distributed unequally. Those with existing vulnerabilities were more likely targets. Those with intersecting identities associated with increased vulnerability face compounding risk. For instance, migrants without legal status working in day labour and the informal sector were vulnerable to livelihood loss and had limited access to alternative forms of formal labour. The impacts of pandemic restrictions further exacerbated those existing precarities. Gender played a role in determining vulnerability, shaping the sectoral distribution and the form of exploitation. Women were overrepresented in informal work and therefore more likely to have lost their income, resulting in increased risk of targeted exploitation. Other industries or sectors with large impacts and particular gendered labour distribution included seasonal agricultural and construction workers (who are largely male) and domestic workers (predominantly women).

Finally, the pandemic has highlighted the importance of support organizations and the need for victim-oriented responses to anti-trafficking measures that are central for the identification and protection of victims. The impacts of the pandemic – including the closure of schools, of services in camps, and of survivor shelters – were particularly significant in areas where there was limited existing institutional presence, including for refugee support organizations and services for women and children. Processing times for refugees were prolonged, contributing to extended displacement and increased risk of targeting by smugglers and traffickers. Reductions in law enforcement and criminal justice activities limited the opportunities for victim identification and for the criminal prosecution of perpetrators.

[73] This is in line with objective 5 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. See UNGA, 2018.
[74] This is in line with objective 7 of the Global Compact for Migration. See UNGA, 2018.

Appendix A

The UNODC created the following table to illustrate the differences between smuggling and trafficking in persons, as well as their similarities. Both smuggling and trafficking are considered crimes that endanger the lives of the individuals concerned, and hence persons who have experienced smuggling or trafficking benefit from assistance and protection measures. The UNODC notes that smuggled migrants are particularly vulnerable to trafficking during their journeys, due to the unequal power relationships between smugglers and their customers. Additionally, while smuggling is considered a voluntary process (as opposed to trafficking in persons), migrants often have no other options given limitations on legal migratory routes.[75]

Table 1. **Differences and commonalities between smuggling and trafficking in persons, from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime**

	Smuggling of migrants	Trafficking in persons
Geography	Smuggling always involves the crossing of international borders. It is a transnational crime.	Trafficking may occur entirely within the borders of one country or may occur transnationally.
Purpose	Migrant smugglers act to obtain a "financial or material benefit".	The purpose of trafficking in persons is the exploitation of the victim.
Consent	Consent is not an element of the definition of smuggling of migrants. It should be noted that, in practice, smuggled migrants generally consent to be smuggled.	Victims of trafficking in persons may consent to the act or exploitation, but consent is irrelevant if means have been used (and always if the victim is a child as means need not be established).
Exploitation	Exploitation is not an element of smuggling of migrants. Where smugglers do exploit migrants, this may constitute aggravated smuggling or, in some cases, trafficking in persons.	Exploitation is the purpose element of trafficking in persons.
Profit	Profit ("financial or other material benefit") is the purpose element of smuggling of migrants. Profit is generated by provision of a service (facilitation of illegal border crossing, enabling stay, or document fraud) to smuggled migrants.	It should be noted that, in practice, traffickers likely aim to generate profit through exploitation of the victim.
Victimization	Smuggled migrants are not "victims" under the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants. While the term "victim" is not used in the Protocol, they may be considered victims of crime in situations of aggravated smuggling, where their lives and safety are endangered, or where they are subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment including exploitation.	Persons who are trafficked are seen as victims of the crime of trafficking in persons. They may also be victims of other crimes committed in the course of trafficking.
Perpetrator	Smugglers may be opportunistic individuals, organized criminals, the migrant's own family or friends or others, *but only* where they act for financial or other material benefit.	Traffickers may be organized criminals, the victim's own family or friends or others.

Source: UNODC, 2019.

[75] UNODC, 2019.

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As part of community reintegration under the EU-IOM Joint Initiative IOM partnered with a local NGO called RCDO to rehabilitate a multi-purpose community centre. This centre is located in Omdurman and aims to support host communities and returnees in the area. It provides them with the space and support for various income generation activities such as soap making and laundry services. The centre is a very popular meeting space in the neighbourhood, for various interactions. It also has a reading room and a sports court utilized by the youth, mainly for volleyball and basketball.

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