



# Women Refugees and Human Trafficking in North Africa – Impact and Implications for Security



A JOINT REPORT BY  
THE NATO STRATEGIC DIRECTION-SOUTH HUB  
AND  
THE UNIVERSITY OF BARI "ALDO MORO"

The **NATO STRATEGIC DIRECTION-SOUTH HUB (NSD-S HUB)** was established at Allied Joint Force Command Naples in order to improve NATO awareness and understanding of common global challenges in the area of interest and to identify opportunities for cooperation with selected Partners, while contributing to the overall coordination of NATO activities and efforts.

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## CONTENTS

CONTENTS .....	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	5
Methodology .....	5
MAIN FINDINGS .....	5
Root causes of HT .....	5
Building Capacities .....	6
Feminization of HT.....	6
Victim-Centred approach .....	7
The Role of Religious Organisations .....	7
Women and Child Victims.....	8
Technology and HT .....	8
The role of Parliamentarians in fighting HT.....	8
The Relationship between the NSD-S HUB and Universities .....	9
Conflict and Instability in Libya .....	9
SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT RECOMMENDATIONS.....	10

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The workshop on "Women refugees and human trafficking in North Africa: impact and implications for security" represented the first concrete collaboration between the NATO Strategic Direction-South Hub ("the Hub") and the University of Bari, a member of the Union of Mediterranean Universities (UNIMED). The Parliamentary Assembly of Mediterranean (PAM) and the Arab Women's Organization (AWO) were also actively involved, as well as a representative of the African Union network, FemWise-Africa. The workshop is fully aligned with the recent document "NATO 2030: United for a new Era".<sup>1</sup> The intent of the document is to place NATO at the centre of an informal system of academic networks, grants and fellowships to respond to threats, stabilize the region, strengthen targeted efforts in public diplomacy and raise NATO's profile among the populations of its Southern Partners.

The workshop brought together local practitioners and experts from several north African countries to discuss how human trafficking (HT) affects security and to explore strategies to contribute to global security dynamics. Civil society, academia and international organizations (IOs) together with local governments and women's networks worked together to study preventive strategies to tackle HT and protect the rights of vulnerable people and victims. In addition, it assessed the impact of HT on global security and in particular its impact on the rights of refugee women. The Workshop<sup>2</sup> was an excellent example of how to expand and strengthen cooperation between the Hub and universities.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/2106-factsheet-nato2030-en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The workshop took place on November 30, 2022 at the University of Bari (Italy). The Scientific Committee of the workshop was composed of the following members: Prof. Laura Sabrina Martucci, Ms. Erika Monticone, Prof. Zineb Benall and Prof. Raffaella Scelzi.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the Global Organised Crime Index<sup>3</sup> Report<sup>4</sup> (2021), Human Trafficking (HT) is the most pervasive criminal market worldwide and features in the top five criminal markets of every continent in the world.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, according to the report, there is increased evidence of connections between organized criminal networks and terrorist groups.<sup>6</sup>

HT is growing by 5% annually and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that more than 50 percent of refugees, internally displaced, or stateless populations are women and girls.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, the most common form of HT (79%) is sexual exploitation<sup>7</sup> and its victims are predominantly women and girls. Worsening socio-economic conditions aggravated by the pandemic and climate change generated situations of poverty that increased the number of people who experienced vulnerabilities to HT as a form of modern slavery, according to the Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) published in June 2021. Collaboration between national and international institutions is the most appropriate method to achieve ever greater implementation of international standards and the empowerment of judicial systems in preventing and combating HT.

## Methodology

The workshop approached HT through a multidisciplinary and predominantly juridical-political lens by bringing together experts from various disciplines and tackling the topic from the following perspectives: sociological, geo-economic and geo-political, anthropological, socio-religious and high-tech. This method provided an overview of HT in North Africa in the current and medium-term from a local and regional perspective.

## MAIN FINDINGS

### Root causes of HT

The root causes of HT are varied and often differ from country to country. There are, however, many factors that tend to be common. Some of these are local conditions that push populations to migrate in search of better conditions: poverty, oppression, lack of human rights, lack of social or economic opportunities, dangers arising from conflict or instability, political instability, civil unrest, internal armed conflicts and natural

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<sup>3</sup> "The Global Organized Crime Index is the first tool of its kind designed to assess levels of organized crime and resilience to organized criminal activity. It includes in its rankings all UN member states – 193 countries. The Index is designed to provide metric-based information that allows policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders to be better informed in terms of developing strategies to counter organized crime in their countries and/or regions, as the index is continually updated".

<sup>4</sup> <https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/global-ocindex-report.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Criminal Markets, Global Averages; Figure 4.3; Global Organised Crime Index, 2021, pag.39.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/middleeastandnorthafrica/2020/EUTF/UNODC\\_ROMENA\\_-\\_Dismantling\\_human\\_trafficking\\_and\\_migrant\\_smuggling\\_criminal\\_networks\\_in\\_North\\_Africa.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/middleeastandnorthafrica/2020/EUTF/UNODC_ROMENA_-_Dismantling_human_trafficking_and_migrant_smuggling_criminal_networks_in_North_Africa.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly, in 30% of the countries which provided information on the gender of traffickers, women make up the largest proportion of traffickers. In some parts of the world, women trafficking women is the norm. <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/global-report-on-trafficking-in-persons.html>

disasters. In some States, social or cultural practices also contribute to HT. For example, the lack of rights for women and girls in a society makes them more vulnerable and disproportionately exposed to HT.

## Building Capacities

Building the capacities of prosecutors and judges in investigating, prosecuting and adjudicating trafficking offences is essential. Well-trained judges and prosecutors play a crucial role in countering HT. They are an essential part of the response to anti-trafficking policy. Therefore, innovative methods of investigating, prosecuting, and adjudicating trafficking offences with gender and child protection consideration which respect and restore the human rights and needs of victims is pivotal. According to Justice Mohsen Dali (Tunisia) and Justice Meriem Ellefi (Tunisia), although Tunisian legislator adopted new methods of investigation there is a lack of awareness of the specifics of HT cases, especially cases involving women, and often HT cases are qualified as ordinary crimes. Hence there is an urgent necessity to strengthen the capacities of judges and the competent authorities to tackle the specifics of HT cases. In addition to this, “the financial capacities of criminal organizations help them to erase the traces of their crimes and they use their huge financial and technical capabilities to avoid prosecution. Therefore, law enforcement authorities have to confront them by using new and advanced investigation methods.” stated Judge Dali, and consequently “most investigation does not lead to positive results. Impunity of criminals continues and the suffering of victims continues” he concluded. From the perspective of the representative of the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention, Resolution and Mediation, (FemWise-Africa), Khadija Elmadmad (Morocco), there is the need to improve the protection of refugee women and to ensure security for them, their families and their hosts. To do that, she noted, placing women in decision making positions and including their needs in policies and solutions would be extremely effective. This is, therefore, the primary mission of FemWise-Africa.<sup>8</sup>

## Feminization of HT

The feminization of HT, and especially the feminization of labour trafficking, once male-dominated, has increased in recent years. Women are trapped in fields, factories, mines and restaurants, often suffering the dual demons of forced labour and sexual assault.<sup>9</sup> Refugee women constitute 48.1 percent<sup>10</sup> of forced migrants and, in theory, there should be special protection for them. In practice they are victims of exploitation and violence. *Khadija Elmadmad (Morocco)* spoke about a “*dual vulnerability*” (violence and HT) for women refugees: vulnerability as women and as migrants, and violence and HT. According to her, there is a need to improve the protection of refugee women and to ensure security not only for them but also for their families and for their hosts. *Alima Ounada (Tunisia)* spoke clearly about the feminization of this migratory flow as a “new phenomenon” in Tunisia.<sup>11</sup> Restrictive Tunisian policy relating to the status of foreigners in Tunisia and to the employment of

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<sup>8</sup>The African Union Network aims to strengthen women’s participation in conflict prevention, mediation processes and peace promotion and stabilisation.

<sup>9</sup><https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/144617.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/themes/gender-and-migration>

<sup>11</sup> Irregular Immigrants who entered Tunisia by way of smugglers (alone or with their families) by land stated that they came for three main reasons: Marriage or family reunification in 36.6% of cases, employment and improved living conditions for 35.1% of migrants and studies in 15.5% of cases. (Source Beity 2021)



migrants<sup>12</sup> provides that entry into Tunisia must be through legal channels and that foreign workers must have a regular employment contract.<sup>13</sup> These legal restrictions induce migrants and women to work in the informal sector, in low-skilled, low-paid jobs. For women, this is mainly domestic work or dishwashing in restaurants. Several trafficking networks operate throughout the country, offering women from sub-Saharan countries for domestic work and even prostitution, collecting their wages for them. In addition to this, restrictions on the employment of migrants have also excluded them from any form of social security coverage and increased their vulnerability. The condition of refugee women is worsening: they are sold, raped and exchanged and, even worse, forced under threat to become traffickers or collaborators of terrorists. *Ambassador Naela Gabr (Egypt)* also emphasized how the vulnerability of women refugees impacts their children and pointed out the necessity for refugee women's economic empowerment through vocational training courses and microcredit.

### Victim-Centred approach

HT victim testimonies are crucial to investigations and successful prosecutions. Most of these victims are traumatized and suffer from high levels of PTSD<sup>14</sup> and other mental health illnesses. Therefore, building trust with a traumatized victim is critical. A victim-centred approach provides a systematic focus on the individual's needs and concerns to ensure compassionate and sensitive delivery of services in a non-judgmental manner. *Ms Dina Fazzani*, Human Rights activist (Libya), discussed the importance of conducting programs tailored to migrant and refugee women in Libya that take into consideration their psycho-social and physical needs.

As *Ambassador Naela Gabr* pointed out, “*the situation of women refugees in North Africa and its implications on security cannot be handled just from a humanitarian approach but also from a problem solving approach*”. The Ambassador continued proposing, “*funding women to start income-generating projects is necessary: micro credit facilities can promote women empowerment and can reduce poverty and unemployment.*”

### The Role of Religious Organisations

Religious organizations (churches, mosques and synagogues) are well-positioned to identify victims of HT as a result of their frequent interaction with community members. They can play an important role in providing assistance to victims of trafficking (health, education, shelter and awareness-raising activities). *Ambassador Gabr* emphasized the role of churches in Egypt in assisting HT victims. Therefore, joint collaboration with religious organisations to assist victims of trafficking can contribute to effective anti-trafficking responses. Their role has positive potential to enable micro-local prevention in order to reach a higher state of security. Religious communities can connect people to national political and judicial institutions and understand the needs, vulnerabilities and fears of populations/refugees/migrants and/or regular migrants, in order to

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<sup>12</sup> Art 5 and 6 of Law No. 68-7 of 8 March 1968.

<sup>13</sup> .Art 8 "It is forbidden for any foreigner to exercise a profession or have a remunerated activity in Tunisia if he is not authorised by the competent Secretariat of State."

<sup>14</sup> Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.

overcome them through training and skill-development actions.

## Women and Child Victims

Recent actions by DAESH in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Boko Haram in Nigeria have drawn attention to a growing nexus between terrorism and trafficking in persons.

Thousands of *Yazidis* were executed or left to die, and an estimated 6,383 Yazidis<sup>15</sup> - mostly women and children - were enslaved and transported to ISIS prisons, military training camps and the homes of fighters across Syria and Iraq. Following their enslavement, ISIS sold the women in markets. ISIS members and fighters also provided women and girls to intermediaries who would sell them to local brokers.

In North East Nigeria, Boko Haram targeted schoolgirls as part of its campaign, kidnapping 276 female students from Chibok in the Borno state (Nigeria) in 2014 and, in mid-January 2023, in Burkina Faso 50 women were suspected of being abducted in similar circumstances.<sup>16</sup> Some kidnapped girls are coerced into suicide attacks. Unless there is wider recognition of how violent extremism intersects with trafficking in persons, and the interplay of both with gender dynamics, the current approaches to address trafficking in persons and violent extremism will fail to change the ecosystem. This dramatic situation has a very high impact on international security, feeds the drivers for irregular migration and strengthens HT in the North African region.

## Technology and HT

Technology is being used by human traffickers for malign purposes during all stages of the crime, including recruitment, control and exploitation of victims.<sup>17</sup> Victims are being targeted and recruited via social media and online dating platforms, where personal information and details of people's locations are readily available. For example, in terms of recruitment there is active recruitment, such as job offers in social media, and passive recruitment, such as job scams where they request fees from their victims in return for securing employment for them. It is not until victims arrive in the new country that they discover the scam.<sup>18</sup> *Camille-Martine Antunes*, an expert from the EU Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) of EUROPOL, underlined how technology has also provided many advantages for traffickers. Anonymity and reaching out to a large audience and controlling their victims from a distance are among the advantages. Therefore, they have been exploiting technology in every phase of their criminal activity from recruitment to sexual exploitation to blackmail and control.<sup>19</sup>

## The role of Parliamentarians in fighting HT

Parliamentarians have a crucial role in prevention and ensuring protection for victims of trafficking. In this regard, the Emeritus President of the Parliamentary Assembly of Mediterranean (PAM) *Hon. Gennaro Migliore*, highlighted PAM's contribution to strengthening the collaboration between states by adopting the Naples Declaration and collaborating with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-16/key-issues/trafficking-in-persons-and-terrorism.html>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64285344>

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g. EUROPOL. Situation Report: Trafficking in human beings in the EU, p. 12. Available at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/trafficking-in-human-beings-in-eu>.

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/the\\_challenges\\_of\\_countersing\\_human\\_trafficking\\_in\\_the\\_digital\\_era.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/the_challenges_of_countersing_human_trafficking_in_the_digital_era.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/the\\_challenges\\_of\\_countersing\\_human\\_trafficking\\_in\\_the\\_digital\\_era.pdf](https://www.europol.europa.eu/cms/sites/default/files/documents/the_challenges_of_countersing_human_trafficking_in_the_digital_era.pdf)



(OSCE) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). *Hon. Migliore* stated that women migrants are the most vulnerable targets of HT, which is not only a transnational crime but also a “*violation of fundamental human rights and dignity*”. *Hon. Migliore* recalled the vulnerable situation in North African and Middle Eastern countries in terms of criminal networks and HT, due to protracted conflicts, economic crises and climate-induced migration. PAM is directly committed to this issue given that “*each PAM country is either a country of origin, transit or destination*” of migration flows. In terms of prevention, PAM supports the design and implementation of strategies aimed at tackling the socio-economic causes that make populations more vulnerable to organized crime. Moreover, PAM ensures that the gender perspective is considered in crime prevention and criminal justice programs.

## The Relationship between the NSD-S HUB and Universities

Anticipating and addressing global security concerns requires a 360° approach and enhanced shared awareness, flexibility, cross-organizational cooperation, strengthened crisis response capabilities and resilience. The NSD-S HUB (“the Hub”) acts as a comprehensive source for engagement and information sharing, reflecting the will of the Alliance to promote dialogue while contributing to supporting long-term stability and prosperity efforts in the South with, by and through Partners and regional actors.

Indeed, during the Workshop, the Union of Mediterranean Universities (UNIMED) provided one of the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), the UNIMED coordinator in Tunisia and expert on women refugees, *Halima Ounada*, who highlighted the importance of an inclusive policy for refugees in Tunisia as well as strengthening national and international cooperation. She also emphasized the importance of the role of universities with the youth who represent the future leaders in the security fields.

In this regard, in order to fulfil its mission to connect, consult and coordinate, the Hub is constantly expanding and reinforcing its role as a docking station for a wide variety of organizations in the South, consolidating its relationships, building trust and improving its understanding based on the «mantra» that the key to good decision making is a solid regional perspective.

## Conflict and Instability in Libya

Libyan criminality ranks first in North Africa, scoring 6.55 on the Organised Crime Global Index, and HT is the primary criminal market in Libya scoring 9.50,<sup>20</sup> while Libya’s resiliency is the lowest in North Africa, scoring 1.54. Conflict and instability in Libya are major drivers and enablers of HT, as well as other criminal activities. According to *Vittorio Stella*, Security Advisor/Head of the European Union (EU) Liaison & Planning Cell, Delegation of the EU to Libya, HT remained highly prevalent in Libya in 2020, with labour exploitation and forced prostitution reported in various regions across the country.<sup>21</sup> The control of irregular migration, HT and the withdrawal of

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<sup>20</sup> [https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/english/ocindex\\_profile\\_libya.pdf](https://ocindex.net/assets/downloads/english/ocindex_profile_libya.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> As reported by the expert, trafficking of migrants in Libya in June 2022, from more than 44 nationalities, suggested a return to pre-pandemic flow, regardless of the consolidated security apparatus of the GNU in Western Libya or the efforts by the LNA to preserve law and order in the South and in the East. In fact, in August 2022, 23% of all migrants departing from Libya and arriving to Italy departed from the East (Tobrouk or Benghazi), up from 0% in the spring, as the preferred departure point of Bangladeshi, Egyptians, and Syrians.

mercenaries along the borders with Chad and Sudan, require a focus at regional level and coordination between Libya and neighbouring countries.<sup>22</sup> Vittorio Stella also highlighted the need to balance the fight against irregular migration with a more humane management of migrants. The continued, arbitrary detention of migrants in formal detention centres and informal smuggler sites in inhumane conditions remains concerning.<sup>23</sup>

## SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT RECOMMENDATIONS

The Workshop was an opportunity to provide insights and develop discussions relating to HT and to the potential role that International Organisations (IOs), civil society, governmental and non-governmental organizations and women peacebuilders can play. Below are the key points of the discussion.

- There is a need to balance public security and respect for Human Rights. It is therefore necessary to continue to harmonize the legal systems of each State with International Conventions, in particular the Palermo Convention. It is necessary to strengthen prevention, investigation and enhancement activities and resistance to the exercise of criminal prosecution. In addition to this, the need to provide reliable statistics and data on this phenomenon has been strongly emphasized by many of the experts.
- The promotion of social and labour policies for women, enhancing their skills, abilities and knowledge, can weaken the criminal networks that exploit them or threaten their families. For this reason, it is essential to finance women in order for them to start income-generating projects. Microcredit facilities can promote women's empowerment and can stabilize women and reduce vulnerabilities such as poverty and unemployment. Credit facilities granted to women can provide them with money to start investments and break the cycle of poverty, fear and dependence on criminal organizations.
- In the region, the challenge that HT and terrorism pose to States relates to their ability to establish whether refugee women are purely victims or also perpetrators of crimes, and what to do in the latter case. The challenge is to be able to modulate judicial sentencing and/or offer access to protection-specific programs when accused women have been forced to commit crimes as collaborators of traffickers and terrorists.
- Survivors of HT can play a fundamental role in combating these crimes because of their experience and perspective. Engaging with them as partners is critical to establish concrete, victim-centred, anti-trafficking policies and strategies.
- Experts from Tunisia and Morocco emphasized the need to strengthen national and international partnerships and cooperation among States, including the development of anti-trafficking strategies at national and international levels. In this

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<sup>22</sup> In this regard, a new "Conference on Cross-Border Cooperation between Libya and the Sahel" was organized by the EU (EUBAM) on 22-23 November 2022 as an incentive to promote cross-border cooperation between Libya and the Sahel countries, as an effective way to foster regional security, stability and sustainable development.

<sup>23</sup> Mr Stella mentioned the mass arrest of migrants in Tripoli at the beginning of Oct 2021, followed by the shooting of six of them (on 8 Oct 2021), the Zwara mass arrest and detention of migrants and refugees by local security forces on 13 July 2022, the 07 October 2022 death of 15 migrants in Sabratha in a dispute between groups of smugglers.

regard, the constant work of IOs such as PAM, is invaluable for the promotion of awareness of parliamentarians and, within their respective mandates and competencies, to push them to prevent and contrast transnational HT in its many forms. In fact, parliamentary contributions to security processes can be elaborated, including through the drafting of new laws or the revision of existing ones, to improve national capabilities and international cooperation.


- Tunisian experts stressed the importance of having new investigative methods through the use of technology and Artificial Intelligence. The new forms of online solicitation of victims of trafficking must be pursued by improving the capabilities of the tools available to investigators and prosecutors as well as implementing the specialization of judicial pools on the various crimes that make up the HT criminal system.
- Closer collaboration among IOs was strongly advised as this would allow for more beneficial inclusion of their knowledge and expertise. Considering the fostering of social and economic stability in the country of origin as priority goals, IOs, together with women's networks should work together i.e. organizing vocational courses for women and children.
- Civil society, NGOs, IOs and Governmental Organizations should work together to create proper integration instruments in countries of destination to rehabilitate the victims who have been abused physically and psychologically. This should be done through a multi-agency monitoring programme and the implementation of measures to leverage women's personal stories to increase their visibility and effect.
- Experts from Tunisia and Morocco highlighted the need to strengthen the capacity and awareness of judges and prosecutors to investigate, prosecute and adjudicate HT crimes, smuggling of migrants and sexual exploitation. In this regard, art. 10 of UN Resolution n. 59-116 calls for training law enforcement authorities in new investigation and prosecution methods.
- The primary mission of women networks, such as FemWise-Africa, is to strengthen the role of women in conflict prevention including by providing a platform for capacity-building. This network, which also organizes training courses for African women, plays a very important role, especially in some African countries facing conflict and instability. The need to strengthen the relationship between NATO and the network was emphasized, also exploring the possibility to co/share training activities for African women.

To conclude, the path towards full respect for human rights and the rule of law is long and difficult, but we believe that through collaboration and common ideal we can "see horizons where 'others' draw borders."





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