

Migrant Vulnerability to Human Trafficking and Exploitation:

Evidence from the Central and
Eastern Mediterranean
Migration Routes



International Organization for Migration (IOM)

The UN Migration Agency



Executive summary

Over the past years, public attention has gradually turned to the experiences of migrants along the precarious Mediterranean routes to Europe. A large number of migrants continue to risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea on the way to Europe, often enduring long and perilous journeys.

In 2015 and 2016, there was a large increase in arrivals of migrants and refugees fleeing protracted conflict, poverty and persecution, and seeking security and economic opportunities in Europe. The largest number of recorded migrant arrivals to Europe in 2015 occurred on the Eastern Mediterranean route. Also, the largest number of recorded migrant arrivals on the Central Mediterranean route occurred in 2016, which was also considered the deadliest and most dangerous year on record for sea crossings to Europe.

A growing body of evidence is beginning to highlight the scale and scope of exploitation experienced by migrants along these routes, including human trafficking. In particular, the abuses endured by migrants in Libya – the main departure point for sea crossings to Europe – have been well documented.

This report examines migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation by exploring risk and protective factors associated with unsafe migration, through the systematic evidence collected by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix operations in 2016. It presents the results from the largest existing set of survey data on the vulnerability of migrants to abuse, exploitation and human trafficking on the Mediterranean routes to Europe. Data derive from interviews conducted over a one-year period with more than 16,000 migrants in seven countries, namely, Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Serbia, Slovenia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

In the context of the analysis, migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation is operationalized as the positive response to at least one of the five key questions included in the survey that refer to an individual experience during the journey. The key questions are related to potential human trafficking for labour exploitation, forced marriage and other experiences that could signal coercion (such as being held against one's will) in a possible human trafficking scenario. The survey did not collect information on potential human trafficking for sexual exploitation or on other forms of gender-based violence. More information on the choice and implications of the questions included in the survey can be found in the Methodology ([Chapter 2](#)).

Definitions related to key terms, such as vulnerability and human trafficking, can be found in the Methodology and Appendix 1.

The analysis of the IOM survey data shows that more than one third (37%) of all interviewed migrants had a personal experience that indicated the presence of human trafficking or other exploitative practices along the route. Seventy-three per cent of migrants interviewed along the Central Mediterranean route presented at least one indicator of exploitation, along with 14 per cent of migrants interviewed along the Eastern Mediterranean route.

The analysis in this report goes beyond describing the correlates of vulnerability, and it explores whether potential predictors can be associated with vulnerability when statistically controlling for the effects of other variables. Advanced statistical analysis (a set of multilevel logistic regression models) was undertaken to identify factors that predict migrants' vulnerability during the journey. The Methodology ([Chapter 2](#)) and the Analysis ([Chapter 3](#)) give additional details about the statistical model used and the way vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation is measured.

Key findings:

- **Migrants travelling along the Central Mediterranean route are more vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking than migrants travelling on the Eastern Mediterranean route. The profiles of migrants and the characteristics of the journey on each route explain some of the difference in vulnerability.** After accounting for all observable differences between migrants on the two routes and the observable differences in their journeys, 48 per cent of migrants who take the Central Mediterranean route are predicted to be vulnerable to exploitation or human trafficking, compared to 31 per cent of migrants taking the Eastern route. This difference between migrant experiences on the two routes is both substantively large (17 percentage points) and statistically significant. Compared to the large gap between the two routes in terms of the rates of positive responses (71% of migrants on the Central route and 13% of migrants on the Eastern route), statistical analysis shows that some of the difference can be explained by the differences in sociodemographic profiles of migrants travelling on the two routes and the characteristics of the journey.
- **Specific sociodemographic characteristics predict higher vulnerability to exploitation during the journey to Europe.** For example, men (compared to women) and those individuals with no education or primary or higher education (compared to those with secondary education) are more likely to be vulnerable to the kind of exploitative practices recorded by the survey. These findings should be considered with the caveat that vulnerability to sexual exploitation on the route is not measured because, while the survey included a question on forced marriage, it did not provide information on sexual exploitation and other types of gender-based violence.
- **West African migrants are the most likely to be vulnerable to exploitative practices on the migration journey, while North Africans appear the least likely to be vulnerable to such practices on both routes.** Gambian and Guinean migrants are the most vulnerable to exploitation on the Central Mediterranean route. Afghan and Bangladeshi migrants have the highest predicted probability to respond positively to the survey questions on exploitation on the Eastern route. Anecdotal evidence and qualitative narratives from previous research point to discrimination and racism as a factor in the experiences of sub-Saharan African migrants on the route.
- **Other characteristics of the journey, such as travelling alone, secondary migration movements, the duration and cost of the journey, also predict vulnerability.** A lengthy journey increases vulnerability: the longer the journey, the higher the predicted probability that a migrant suffers an experience indicating human trafficking or other exploitative practices. Furthermore, migrants whose journey to Europe occurs after longer periods spent in countries of temporary residence (such as Libya or Turkey) are more vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking than respondents who travel directly from their country of nationality. Travelling alone also makes migrants more vulnerable than migrants who travel in a group.

- **The presence of conflict in the country of departure can be a significant predictor of migrants' vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation during their journey to Europe.** Migrants travelling on the main routes to Europe and who departed from a country with an intermediate or a high level of armed conflict are more likely to be vulnerable to exploitation than migrants coming from countries with a low level of conflict. Migrants who reported war, conflict or natural disasters as the main reason for leaving their places of origin are predicted to be more vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking on the journey than migrants who left for other reasons.
- **The vulnerability of children travelling without their families is predicted by factors similar to those that predict the vulnerability of adults.** Approximately 13 per cent of all migrants interviewed were children aged 14–17 years, and 86 per cent of them reported to be travelling without their families. Tragically children are exposed to similar risk factors as adults but are less able to address their own vulnerabilities.
- **Children are more likely than adults to report being held against their will by entities other than State authorities.** More than half of the children travelling along the Central Mediterranean route reported being held against their will. On the Eastern Mediterranean route, the percentage of children who were held against their will was twice as large as the percentage of adults travelling on the same route.

In the case of both adults and children, the findings indicate that Libya – as a transit country or an initial destination – is the country where migrants are most vulnerable to potential human trafficking and other exploitative practices. Libya stands out as a particularly unsafe country for all migrants, and as a driver of further migration towards what they perceive to be safer destinations.

These findings are discussed and contextualized in the Discussion ([Chapter 4](#)) and the Policy implications ([Chapter 5](#)).

Recommendations:

1. **Early identification and protection during the migration journey should not be prejudiced by assumptions** that certain categories of individuals are always more vulnerable than others. The journey itself can represent a risk for migrants and can be more important in predicting their vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation than their demographic profile or the circumstances in their places of origin or departure. All types of migrants may find themselves in a vulnerable situation and can have protection needs that must be addressed.
2. **The design of programmatic interventions and the proactive identification of vulnerability to human trafficking on the route should be gender-sensitive, and pay particular attention to the different risks that men, boys, women and girls may face during their journey, as well as to the different types of exploitation they may be subject to.** Protective services must be age- and gender-sensitive and respond to the different protection needs that men, women, boys and girls may have as a result of their experience.
3. **Outreach to migrants and potential migrants should be reinforced.** Effective, evidence-based information and communication strategies should be adopted to inform migrants and potential migrants about the risks they may face en route, means of self-protection, available assistance on the journey and safer migration avenues. Information strategies should make use of multiple communication channels, including social media.
4. **Efforts are needed to strengthen legislative frameworks, including anti-trafficking legislation, as well as to support their effective implementation.** This requires working with law enforcement agencies, including border guards.
5. **Data collection and analysis must be expanded to inform evidence-based advocacy, policymaking and programming.** Data collection and analysis should be rigorously and continuously undertaken to provide systematic evidence on the specific experiences and vulnerabilities to human trafficking and exploitation of boys, girls, men, and women during the migration journey and the factors at the individual, household, community and structural level that impact or predict vulnerability, as well as those that protect them from harm. Better data are also necessary to support the monitoring and evaluation of responses.
6. **Counter-trafficking responses should be incorporated in preparedness and humanitarian relief operations to better prevent and protect crisis-affected communities from human trafficking and exploitation.** Counter-trafficking activities should be undertaken from the onset of a crisis, be it a conflict or natural disaster.
7. **Safe and regular migration channels, including family reunification and labour migration schemes, should be leveraged and expanded.**

The implications for policy and interventions of this report's findings are further detailed in [Chapter 5](#).

This is the Executive Summary of the IOM 2017 report only.

For the full version of the report, please visit:

<https://publications.iom.int/books/migrant-vulnerability-human-trafficking-and-exploitation-evidence-central-and-eastern>



International Organization for Migration
17 route des Morillons, P.O. Box 17
1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland
Tel.: +41 22 717 9111 • Fax: +41 22 798 6150
E-mail: hq@iom.int • Website: www.iom.int