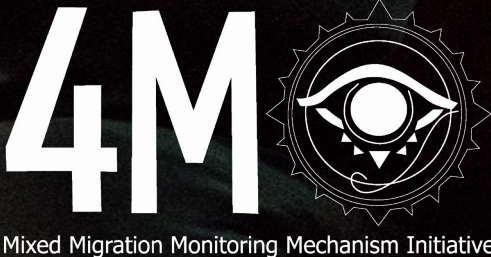




# Invisible Labour

Women's labour migration to Libya.

4MI MAGHREB  
DECEMBER 2017



Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative



## Introduction

This briefing paper, based on data collected through the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism initiative (4Mi) in Libya from May to December 2017<sup>1</sup> and additional interviews with migrants and key informants, explores the Libyan work environment for migrant women. The paper aims at providing a better picture of the specific factors that affect the working context and migration trajectories of migrant<sup>2</sup> women in Libya.

Among the scarce literature on women's migration to Libya, little or no attention is paid to the independent economic motivations behind their journeys or their role in the workforce. While the common narrative on female migration to and through Libya generally portrays women as victims of trafficking and forced migrants to follow their husband or family,<sup>3</sup> data collected by 4Mi shows that women's role as independent economic actor plays a significant push factor in their migration. Whether motivated to transit Libya or to settle and work there, many women are inclined to seek employment, and independently navigate their status and opportunities in the new country.

## Working scenarios for migrants in pre and post-revolution Libya

Despite the recent international focus on mixed migration flows to and through Libya, immigration is part of the Libyan history. From the 1970s to the 1990s, the Government of Gaddafi actively encouraged migration from Arab countries and later from the entire African continent to meet manpower needs in sectors such as agriculture and construction. Immigrants were attracted by the country's relative wealth and by an open-door policy,<sup>4</sup> which granted them visa-free entry. Several bilateral agreements were negotiated to ease the employment of foreign workers<sup>5</sup> and a blind eye was turned on the recruitment of undocumented immigrants.

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1 The 4Mi data used in this report has been collected from May to December 2017 in various locations in Libya. 1043 migrants, of which 360 women, have participated in the survey. Additional in-depth interviews have been conducted in October 2017 with 15 migrant women and 15 key informants in Libya and Italy. The sample used for this report does not intend to be representative of the whole migrant population in Libya, rather to present some of the specific working-related situations faced by migrant women in the country.

2 While it is fully acknowledged that there are large numbers of refugees among this population, for the purpose of this report, "migrant" is used as an umbrella term to describe all people moving within mixed migratory flows in the country, including refugees, asylum seekers, irregular migrants and others.

3 Altai Consulting (2013). Mixed Migration: Libya at the Crossroads. Mapping of Migration Routes from Africa to Europe and Drivers of Migration in Post-revolution Libya. Available at: [http://www.altaiconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Altai\\_Consulting-UNHCR-Mixed\\_Migration\\_Libya-1.pdf](http://www.altaiconsulting.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Altai_Consulting-UNHCR-Mixed_Migration_Libya-1.pdf) (Accessed: 20 October 2017).

4 Migration Policy Center (MPC) (2013). Libya – Migration Profile. Available at: [http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration\\_profiles/Libya.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration_profiles/Libya.pdf) (Accessed on 20 October 2017).

5 See, for example: The agreements on agriculture manpower (1971) and circulation of persons and establishment (1988) with Niger; The convention of establishment with Tunisia (1973); The labour agreement with Morocco (1983); The convention in the field of work and the use of human resources with Algeria (1987); The labour agreement with Jordan (1998) among others.

While some managed to regularize their situation if their employer supported their application for a residence permit (Iqama), the majority continued to work in the country irregularly, tolerated by a general lack of controls.

*“[Working in Libya] In the past it was easier than now, all women could easily find a job somewhere. I worked in a Travel Agency as an assistant at first only for cooking and later to carry out daily errands. Some of the employees also asked me to work in their houses as a maid. I had a great relationship with my employer, and I was able to manage well my own daily life and duties. But I didn’t have permits or documents, it was all off-the-books.”*<sup>6</sup>

47-year-old Moroccan woman, interviewed in Italy

This scenario changed in the 2000s, when Gaddafi began to cooperate with Europe over the control of irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea – a significant factor in the removal of the international embargo towards Libya.<sup>7</sup> Large-scale expulsions were carried out and foreign nationals lost free access to public health and education.<sup>8</sup> In addition, stricter controls were applied to their visa and work permits. This trend continued in the following years. It culminated in 2010 with the adoption of a law on combating irregular migration which allowed for the indefinite detention, forced labour and deportation of those considered irregular aliens on the Libyan territory.<sup>9</sup>

The conditions of foreign workers continued to deteriorate during and after the Libyan Revolution of 2011, as the breakdown of the justice system increased opportunities for labour exploitation and trafficking rings. Nonetheless, Libya remained a country of transit and destination for labour migrants. Today, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and particularly West Africa continue to enter the country for permanent, temporary or seasonal purposes with 44% of migrants interviewed by 4Mi indicating Libya as a destination country.

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<sup>6</sup> All quotes have been collected via phone interviews. For ease of reading, in some cases the flow of text has been slightly altered, while leaving the meaning of the quote intact and staying as close as possible to the authentic sentence.

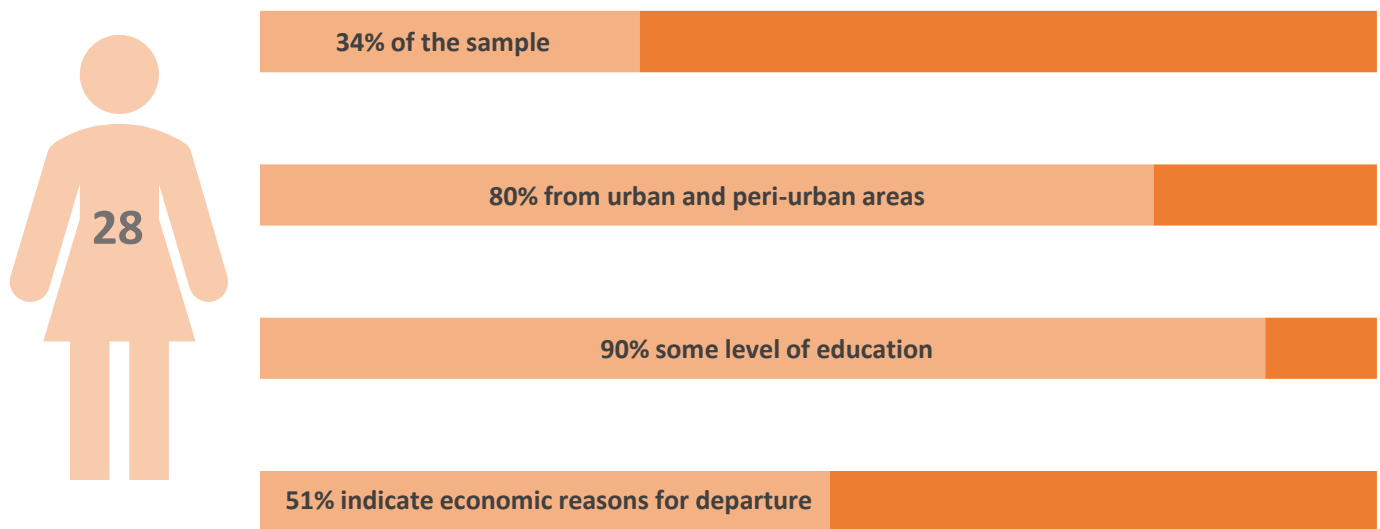
<sup>7</sup> Bredeloup, S. & Pliez, O. (2011). The Libyan migration corridor. Available at: <http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/16213/EUUS%20Immigration%20Systems%202011%20-%2003.pdf?sequence=1> (Accessed on 20 October 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Migration Policy Center (MPC) (2013). Libya – Migration Profile. Available at: [http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration\\_profiles/Libya.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration_profiles/Libya.pdf) (Accessed on 20 October 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Global Detention Project (2015). Immigration Detention in Libya. Available at: <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5567387e4.pdf> (Accessed on 20 October 2017).

## Access to the labour market: influence on migration trajectories

4Mi data shows that finding a job is the main aspiration for West African women travelling to Libya. Almost all the women interviewed declare their intention to seek employment abroad as one motivation to leave their country of origin. However, economic and protection factors are often intertwined and only 51% of the women interviewed by 4Mi report solely economic reasons for departing from their country of origin.<sup>10</sup>



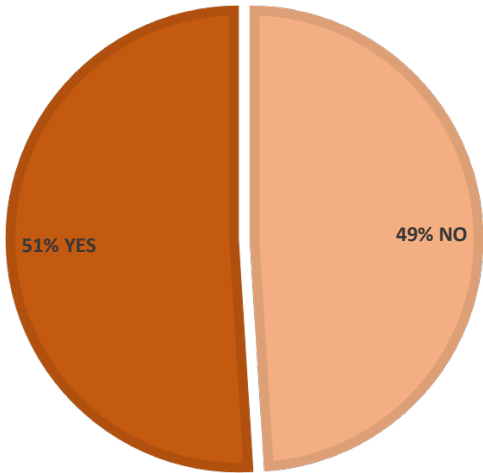
**Figure 1: The profile of migrant women interviewed by 4Mi in Libya**

There is a clear profile of the migrant women interviewed: with an average age of 28 years old, 80% originating from urban and peri-urban areas and 90% having completed at least primary education (with 84% of them having completed secondary education). 79% of them report to have had access to employment at a certain point before departing, mainly in the service industry, but to have left due to subsequent unemployment or low wages. Nigerians feature prominently among the migrant women interviewed by 4Mi. Almost all of them come from the Southern states of Nigeria, generally more developed and stable compared to the Northern states.

<sup>10</sup> Other reasons for departure include violence, general insecurity, lack of rights, lack of social services, poor governance, family reasons and personal reasons.

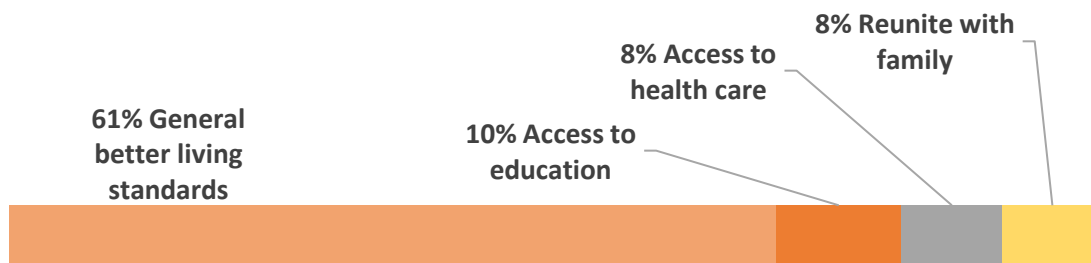
Taken together with the profile of the women interviewed, this seems to indicate that migration towards Libya might be more accessible for a distinct part of the population that is able to leave their areas in search for a job and has access to the substantial resources required for the trip.<sup>11</sup> 4Mi data shows that the average amount spent by women on their journey, including bribes and extortion, is 690 EUR. This amount does not take into account the remaining debt women may have contracted with their smuggler for the journey. Interviews show that the total amount paid for the journey can reach 3400 EUR. With only 26% of women interviewed reporting paying the travel upfront or paying the journey with their own savings, the socio-economic status of the family and the intention of the women to work at destination to repay their debt (see figure 4) seems to be a guarantee to the smuggling network.

Data collected among migrant women in Libya and Europe shows that their migration plan is not pre-defined at the time of departure and can be adapted several times across the journey based on resources and opportunities but also on difficulties and complications encountered during the journey. Women who regard Libya as a country of transit (49% of the 4Mi sample) might find themselves waiting for the organisation of the sea crossing for longer than expected, or being forced to work to pay the last leg of their journey. Some of these women might end up securing a stable employment and eventually decide to stay in Libya. 60% of women interviewed by 4Mi that indicated Libya as a possible final destination report that an increased chance to send remittances back home from Libya will act as a trigger factor in their decision.



**Figure 2: Is Libya your possible intended destination?**

<sup>11</sup> This does not exclude that they might leave general contexts of persecution and economic marginalization, or that they do not suffer abuses later on during their travel.



**Figure 3: Reasons for choosing the country of destination**

At the same time, insecurity, currency devaluation and challenges related to legal opportunities in finding a regular job might force others who intended to settle in Libya to reconsider their plan. Key informants from humanitarian organisations working in Sicily estimate that around 40% of the migrants arriving in Italy have travelled there as a secondary choice, after having been unable to work in Libya. This is confirmed by the testimonies of some migrant women, who report being unable to travel back to their countries of origin due to their irregular status in Libya.<sup>12</sup> Migrants arriving in Italy after the Mediterranean crossing with the intention to apply for a voluntary return to their countries of origin have been reported by legal officers of reception centers in Sicily and 4Mi interviewees.

*“There’s no freedom, no job, no life. But we cannot go to the airport or take a bus and go home. We are stuck in between: we cannot stay here and we cannot go back. This is why many decide to go to Europe, out of lack of options”.*

28-year-old Nigerian woman living in Libya

4Mi interviews with migrants also point out how Libya’s currency exchange rate fluctuation and liquidity crisis might force some workers to reconsider their stay. As a consequence of the severe cash shortage, an increasing number of people have to rely on the black market and the service of ‘agents’ both to access and transfer cash, limiting migrants’ capacity to remit. Reported options are always expensive, irregular hawala systems<sup>13</sup> may collect up to 20% of the amount transferred, and exchange rates on the black market are usually seven times higher than the official ones.

<sup>12</sup> 4Mi (forthcoming). *Fraught with risk. Protection concerns of women and girls journeying from West Africa to Libya.*

<sup>13</sup> Traditional system of transferring money used in Arab countries and commonly used in Libya. Money is paid to an agent who then instructs an associate in the relevant country or area to pay the final recipient.

The impact of these factors on earnings and remittances, especially for irregular migrants who cannot rely on official bank accounts and transfers, acts as an important push factor to continue the migration journey and have the prospect to access a hard currency paid work in Europe.

## **Working conditions in Libya**

Despite the difficulties on the ground, Libya still represents an economic destination for women from sub-Saharan African countries. Higher wages and the demand for low-skilled labour is particularly attractive. Typically, women are hired as domestic workers or cleaners in hospitals and offices. According to a 2015 World Bank study, firms in Libya report that Libyan workers will often not accept hard manual labour or low-skilled occupations.<sup>14</sup> There exists, therefore, a demand for foreign workers. In-depth interviews with migrant women indicate that the estimated monthly salary varies between 600 and 800 LYD (375 to 500 EUR based on the official exchange rate, 80-100 EUR based on the black-market rate), depending on the weekly working hours. For comparison, the minimum wage in Nigeria is set at 18000 Naira (43 EUR)<sup>15</sup>.

Interviews reveal that in most cases recruitment is facilitated by the diaspora network in Libya. Previously arrived migrants who have developed family or business links with the Libyan society are of particular support. Middlemen also exist to connect newly-arrived women to Libyan families. Working outside of the legal framework, these “middlemen” or “madams” provide language interpretation and handle the negotiations between the two parties. A contract is usually established for an initial 3-months’ probation period. In addition, employers may request medical check-up to verify that the person is not infected by transmissible blood diseases (HIV, Hepatitis) before the start of the employment.

Women interviewed report far from optimal working conditions. While a small number of women manage to find acceptable working conditions and decent employers, many seem to suffer mistreatment and a general disrespect of initial agreed conditions: long shifts, refusal to grant days off and irregular salary payment postponed for an indefinite period of time. The absence of legal protection for irregular migrants makes these women particularly vulnerable to abuse or forced labour.

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14 World Bank (2016). Labor Market Dynamics in Libya, Reintegration for Recovery. Page 52. Available at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/967931468189558835/pdf/97478-PUB-PUBLIC-Box-382159B-9781464805660.pdf> (Accessed on 20 November 2017)

15 ILO (2017). Working Conditions Laws Database. Available at: <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/travail/travmain.home> (Accessed on 20 November 2017)

With no existing system to report such abuses, women interviewed by 4Mi report that their irregular status is used as blackmail by the employer. Women may find themselves detained after having been reported by their employers and expelled to the street from their working and living place as a domestic worker.

*“Human right violation is an understatement to what I experienced as a helper in a Libyan house. I was beaten and harassed every day. When I reported the situation to my agent she told me that I had to endure it until the termination of my three months contract.”*

25-year-old Nigerian woman living in Libya

The vulnerability of these women to forced labour is high. One woman out of ten who report human rights violations during their journey to 4Mi report forced labour and forced prostitution. 4Mi interviews in Libya show that fraudulent recruitment practices are actively used to force migrant women into prostitution. Women and girls are approached in their country of origin with the promise of a stable job in Europe, smuggled into Libya and then forced into the sex trade.

*“When I met my smuggler, she told me that she needed someone to help her in a supermarket in Europe. I was doubting her and took her to my parents. She convinced them with her lies. My parents were happy of the prospect of having a daughter in Europe. I arrived in Libya, not in Europe, and I now work in a brothel, not in a supermarket.”*

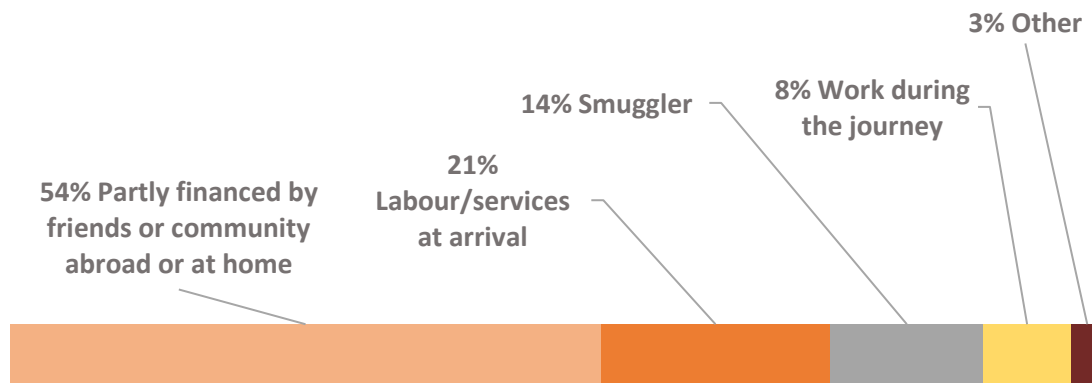
28-year-old Nigerian woman living in Libya

In similar cases, women are forced to contract a debt for the unexpected costs of the journey while on route. This debt adds an extra layer of vulnerability when seeking a job. As reported by 4Mi in September 2017, women are highly dependent on their smuggler with 86% of women interviewed traveling with one single smuggler.<sup>16</sup> More than one woman out of ten interviewed by 4Mi reported that their travel expenses had been paid by their smuggler, while an additional 21% said that they intend to cover their travel costs through labour. In addition, 55% of women interviewed report having been intentionally misled by their smuggler. Humanitarian organisations working with migrants in Libya report that women are at high risk of forced prostitution when they develop a debt bondage. However, despite the high number of abuses and the low salaries, 4Mi interviews show the capacity of some women to repay their debt and continue to search for employment in Libya.

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16 4Mi (2017). Hidden Figures. Women on the Move in Libya. Available at: [http://www.westafrica.regionalmms.org/publications/Hidden%20figures\\_Women%20on%20the%20move%20in%20Libya.pdf](http://www.westafrica.regionalmms.org/publications/Hidden%20figures_Women%20on%20the%20move%20in%20Libya.pdf) (Accessed on 2 November 2017)





**Figure 4: Financing of the journey**

*“Before she [the smuggler] brought me to this country she told me I would be working in her shop. Once here she forced me into prostitution. She arranged a man to rape me so I had to do what she wanted. After having balanced my debt with her I went to see a doctor for a health check-up and started looking for a job.*

*I am now working as a cleaner in a hospital.”*

27-year-old Nigerian woman living in Libya

## **Conclusion**

Despite little visibility in recent research, search for employment and the aspiration to send remittances back home highly impact women’s migration to Libya. The profile of migrant women and their reasons for moving highlight their role as active workforce in their communities of origin, transit and destination. At the same time, specific challenges and working contexts affect their movement. Women workers and their role as economic actors needs to be recognized in order to ensure that they are fully protected from forced labour and abuses during their regularised or undeclared work in Libya.