




# Living On The Edge

The everyday life of migrant women in Libya

4MI MAGHREB  
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**4M**   
Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative

## INTRODUCTION

This briefing paper looks at the daily life of migrant women in Libya. Based on data collected by the Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism (4Mi), in-depth interviews with migrants in Libya and Italy<sup>1</sup> and secondary sources, this report aims at increasing the understanding of the factors that primarily affect the everyday life of a migrant woman in Libya.

While some general figures on migration in Libya do exist, they often struggle to have solid foundations, as flows in and out of Libya – considered by Libyan authorities to be “poorly controlled and not well known”<sup>2</sup> before the crisis – have been increasingly challenging to monitor in the post-crisis security situation, especially when clandestine. In this context, migrant women appear even more difficult to access, as different travel arrangements and living conditions faced in the country make them less visible to observers.<sup>3</sup> Living conditions of migrant<sup>4</sup> women in Libya are therefore difficult to investigate.

This briefing paper addresses the need for a better understanding of these conditions by investigating how migrant women are perceived in the country and assessing their access to services and how their legal status influences this access. The data collected by 4Mi shows that the daily life and opportunities are not only shaped by legal status but also by personal attributes that influence the way a migrant woman is perceived by the Libyan communities. Women with irregular status risk abuses and dire living conditions in detention, but also a secluded life when not in detention. Their limited access to services is navigated through specific coping strategies that tend to increase their invisibility in the public sphere.

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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 situations faced by migrant women in the country.

2 European Commission (2004). Technical mission to Libya on illegal immigration. Page 5. Available at: <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2005/may/eu-report-libya-ill-imm.pdf> (Accessed on 2 November 2017).

3 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)

4 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.



## PERCEPTION OF MIGRANT WOMEN IN LIBYA

The clandestine nature of migrants' journeys in Libya is generally seen as the cause of their vulnerability to mistreatment:<sup>5</sup> migrants are imprisoned, pushed back or abused because of their irregular status. While interviews conducted for this report confirm that regular migrants generally face less challenges than their irregular peers, it has been suggested that “regularity and irregularity is often in the eye of the Libyan beholder”,<sup>6</sup> meaning that migrants' acceptance by both Libyan communities and authorities is influenced by other circumstances than their official status. In the specific case of women, a series of attributes seem to impact their living conditions in Libya.

### Race

Since the 2000s, Libya has seen waves of anti-immigrant violence targeting black Africans<sup>7</sup> and a recent report from IOM and UNICEF has confirmed that sub-Saharan migrants in Libya face increased xenophobia compared to nationals of other countries.<sup>8</sup> Hostilities towards black Africans have been linked to the perceptions that they might be criminals, spread diseases or being affiliated with the former regime, due to Gaddafi's alleged use of mercenary foreign fighters.<sup>9</sup> Sub-Saharan women, and West Africans in particular, face additional stigmatisation on the suspicion of being prostitutes.

*“What they think is that all of us immigrants are prostitutes. When you walk in the street groups of men will insult you and call you to have sex with them, because they think women come to Libya for that. They don't value women of other nationalities.”<sup>10</sup>*

34-year-old Nigerian woman living in Libya

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5 Amnesty International (2017). Libya's Dark Web of Collusion, Abuses Against Europe-Bound Refugees and Migrants. Page 7. Available at : <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde19/7561/2017/en/> (Accessed on 12 December 2017)

6 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. Page 73. 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: 2 November 2017).

7 Abul Hajj, S. (2013). Racism and revolution: the plight of black Africans in Libya. Available at: <https://www.equaltimes.org/racism-and-revolution-the-plight?lang=en#.Wf7t1bGZORs> (Accessed on 2 November 2017).

8 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2017). Harrowing Journeys. Children and youth on the move across the Mediterranean Sea, at risk of trafficking and exploitation. Available at: [https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Harrowing\\_Journeys\\_Children\\_and\\_youth\\_on\\_the\\_move\\_across\\_the\\_Mediterranean.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Harrowing_Journeys_Children_and_youth_on_the_move_across_the_Mediterranean.pdf) (Accessed on 2 November 2017).

9 Danish Refugee Council (2013). “We risk our lives for our daily bread”. Findings of the Danish Refugee Council study on mixed migration in Libya”. Available at: [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Danish%20Refugee%20Council%20Report%20-%20Risking%20our%20Lives\\_Mixed%20Migrants%20in%20Libya\\_Dec%202013.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Danish%20Refugee%20Council%20Report%20-%20Risking%20our%20Lives_Mixed%20Migrants%20in%20Libya_Dec%202013.pdf) (Accessed: 2 November 2017).

10 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.

According to those interviewed for the report, this perception is linked to the great number of migrant women forced into prostitution in Libya, due to human trafficking and practices of bonded labour. Reportedly, this stigmatisation not only fosters harassment from local men, but also actively hampers women’s search for employment and accommodation, forcing them to rely on middle-men and smugglers to settle once arrived in the country.

*“There is a lot of suspicion [for migrant women]. Some landlords refuse to rent their places to women, and those who do come and check every day to see that they hadn’t transformed it into a brothel.”*

28-year-old Eritrean woman living in Libya

### Language, Culture and Religion

Regardless of their nationality, migrant women interviewed by 4Mi reported the need to maintain a low profile and to blend in with the local population in order to reduce the risks faced in their public life. In their narratives, this primarily means speaking Arabic, dressing conservatively and wearing a Hijab. Christian migrants, who represent 70% of the women interviewed by 4Mi, adopt Muslim customs and practice their faith in private. Evidence indicates that integration is more common amongst Arab speakers and Muslim migrants, such as those from North Africa and Sudan. Women who speak little or no Arabic or who fail to adopt an appropriate dress code face increased risk of harassment and kidnapping for sexual abuse.

*“Muslim women already know how to dress and how to behave in the Libyan society, this is why it’s easier for them. [As a Christian] I try to stay out as little as possible, and not to interact much. I don’t know Arabic well, so I try to speak very little, so they cannot understand I’m a migrant.”*

29-year-old Nigerian woman living in Libya

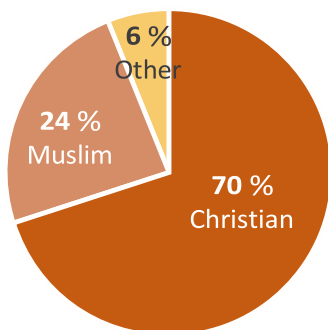
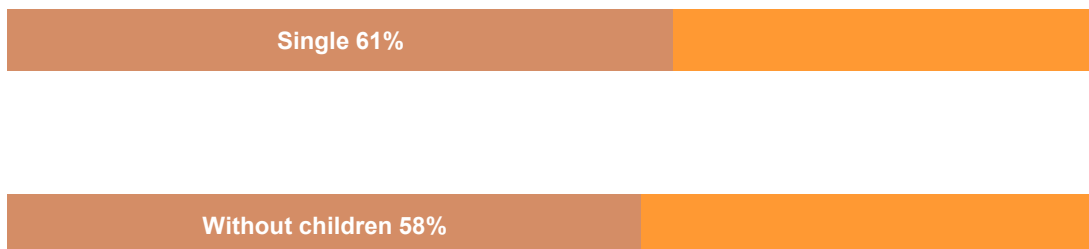


Figure 1: Religious background of women interviewed by 4Mi in Libya

## Civil Status

Women travelling to Libya to follow their previously migrated husband seem to be particularly advantaged compared to their single peers. Thanks to their status as married women and to the network of contacts already established by their husbands, they usually face less challenges in processing their paperwork, regularizing their position and finding a job. Nonetheless, married women who had a traditional wedding not accompanied by a civil wedding in their countries of origin, or those who fail to bring along the official documentation to prove their union, struggle to have their status recognized. 4Mi data shows that the majority of West African women who arrive in Libya – representing the largest group of migrant women in the country – are single (61%) and without children (58%). By being on their own, this specific group of women is particularly vulnerable to harassment and generally live more secluded than their married peers. This affects their access to services and their movements in the public sphere.



**Figure 2: Profile of migrant women interviewed by 4Mi in Libya**

## **CLANDESTINE LIFE: WOMEN WITH IRREGULAR STATUS IN LIBYA**

Porous borders and collusion between militia and smugglers mean that migrants can still enter Libya, settle there and look for work. However, to regularize one's status is difficult. The multiplicity of governmental systems in the country and the general decrease of the State institutions' capacity following the 2011 Revolution have dispersed the Libyan national legal framework for migration among myriad actors.

*“The Iqama [residence permit] is very difficult to get. It's only possible for people with the right connections in the right places, and it is very expensive. Migrants are asked for 1000 to 1200 LYD [630 – 760 Euros]. And you cannot get it yourself, you need a facilitator to help with the process. There are also scammers, fake agents who promise to help you with the Iqama, then they collect your money and disappear.”*

31-year-old Sudanese woman living in Libya

Failure to obtain a legal status creates specific challenges and protection risks<sup>11</sup> for women in Libya, whether free or in detention, as detailed below.

### **Free, Yet Secluded**

Widespread racial discrimination and authorities' responses to migration put irregular migrant women at risk when they access the public sphere; Risks range from being harassed by the local community to kidnapping and imprisonment. While men seem more able to navigate such risks and or able for to wait at roundabouts in urban areas in order to find work, women tend to rely heavily on middle-men to access services and are not able to move about freely and safely in cities. The middle-men and contacts used by the women can include trusted members of the community, such as neighbours or taxi drivers, other migrants and smugglers. The middle-men are routinely used for a variety of errands, ranging from money transfer to finding a job.<sup>12</sup>

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11 The key protection risks faced by migrant women in Libya are the subject of a separate forthcoming 4Mi report: *Fraught with risk. Protection concerns of women and girls journeying from West Africa to Libya.*

12 4Mi (forthcoming). *Invisible Labour. Women's labour migration to Libya.*

## Consumption

Access to shops and markets varies greatly depending on the location. While some women can access shops and markets, provided that they maintain a low profile and speak Arabic, others report facing discrimination and kidnapping when shopping without a trusted male contact. Specific goods, such as sim cards, cannot be bought without national identification documents, and are therefore bought through smugglers or at a higher price (70 LYD, around 45 Euros, instead of 10 LYD with authorised dealers) on the black market. The reduced access reported by interviewees to shops and markets for the non-Arabic speaker groups of migrant women highlights their difficulty to access consumption goods on their own. This points to an increased dependency and vulnerability of the group.

## Health Care

33% of the women interviewed by 4Mi indicate medical assistance as the type of assistance that would have helped them the most during their migration journey. This percentage indicates that many women arrive in Libya with health care needs. According to both migrant women and key informants interviewed for this study, Libyan public hospitals do not admit irregular migrants. OHCHR has documented how, amidst the severe challenges faced by the health sector in Libya, some hospitals do indeed refuse to treat regular and irregular migrants, citing a lack of payment and fear of infectious diseases.<sup>13</sup> When private clinics are accessible, women report longer waiting time than Libyan patients, or to be charged more for the same medical treatments. A REACH assessment made in November 2017 found that almost 60% of migrants in need of medical care interviewed indicate the practice of not accepting migrants in public medical facilities as a main barrier to access healthcare.<sup>14</sup> Some women, instead, rely on over-the-counter drugs at local pharmacies, due to the fear of being denounced to local authorities by the medical staff.

*“I cannot go to the hospital or see a doctor, they won’t cure me, and they will call the police to have me arrested. When I’m sick I never have go for a medical checkup.*

*I just send someone to buy me medicines.”*

26-year-old Nigerian woman living in Libya

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13 United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2016). “Detained and dehumanized”. Report on human rights abuses against migrants in Libya. Available at: [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetailedAndDehumanised\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/LY/DetailedAndDehumanised_en.pdf) (Accessed on 2 November 2017).

14 REACH (forthcoming). Refugees and Migrants’ Access to Resources. Housing and Healthcare in Libya: Key challenges and Coping Mechanisms.



**Figure 3: Assistance’s need during the migration journey**

## Education

In 2007, the Government of Libya decided that foreign children regularly residing in the country, including children with a foreign father and a Libyan mother, could not have access to free public services such as public schools<sup>15</sup>, a measure that marked the move of many foreign children to private structures. Children of irregular migrants are however banned from attending both public and private schools and are often homeschooled by their mothers. Interviews with women without regular status residing in Libya with their children show that learning sessions are often provided by groups of mothers to children of different ages. Challenges include the lack of schooling materials and any official accreditation that would allow children to continue their educational path elsewhere.

*“I have a son but I cannot send him to school, or to the hospital, nor anywhere. If I let him out alone he will be kidnapped because he’s a foreigner. He stays at home all day, and I try to teach him with other mothers in the evenings. There are many [migrant] women with children here, but we live hidden.”*

29-year-old Nigerian woman living in Libya

<sup>15</sup> Perrin, D. (2011). Immigration and Citizenship Law in the Maghreb: turning Aliens into Citizens. Available at: [http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/18054/RSCAS\\_2011\\_40.corr.pdf?sequence=3](http://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/18054/RSCAS_2011_40.corr.pdf?sequence=3) (Accessed on 2 November 2017).



## WOMEN IN DETENTION

Women who travel to Libya irregularly face the risk of detention, either in official detention centers or in detention centers run by militias and armed groups. Connection houses<sup>16</sup> can turn into a detention setting when women are held against their will.

Detention conditions in Libya are a source of deep concern for the international community.<sup>17</sup> Reports from OHCHR<sup>18</sup>, HRW<sup>19</sup> and UNHCR<sup>20</sup> among others, have pointed to severe physical and verbal mistreatment, sexual abuse, extortion and torture routinely occurring in migrants' prisons. In these reports, women and girls appear to usually be confined in a separate part of the building and to be extremely vulnerable to sexual and physical violence perpetrated by the predominantly male guards. A 2016 UNICEF survey among women and children in detention has further revealed that menstruating women are unable to access sanitary pads and that pregnant women are commonly forced to give birth in prison without medical assistance.

Interviews with migrant women in Libya and Italy have revealed that forced labour is a common practice in detention centers: while male detainees are used in construction works and agriculture, women are used to prepare meals and can also be forced into prostitution.

*“I migrated to Libya with my small daughter and my little sister. The trafficker held us three months in a connection house, where I was forced to work as a prostitute (...) I could not communicate with anyone as I did not speak Arabic and they treated us like animals. I had no money left, but after some months of work I paid our way out and we were brought to the shore and pushed on the boat by the guards.”*

26-year-old Ivorian woman, interviewed in Italy

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16 Houses managed by smugglers where migrants are held before the next stretch of the journey or until they repay their debt. The houses are also in parallel commonly used for a large range of illegal activities.

17 Global Detention Project (2015). Libya Immigration Detention Profile. Available at: <https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/africa/libya> (Accessed on 2 November 2017).

18 OHCHR (2016), “Detained and dehumanized”.

19 Human Rights Watch (HRW). (2014). Libya: Whipped, Beaten, and Hung from Trees. Available at: [www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/22/libya-whipped-beaten-and-hung-trees](http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/06/22/libya-whipped-beaten-and-hung-trees) (Accessed on 2 November 2017).

20 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2014). External update – May 2014 UNHCR LIBYA.” Available at: [www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search) (Accessed on 2 November 2017).

While imprisonment in unofficial centers usually happens through the abduction of women from armed militia or traffickers, interviews reveal that official arrests often occur when irregular migrants are outed to the authorities by members of the host community. This practice, where taxi drivers, staff at public hospitals or groups of local people either report or actively bring the migrants to detention centers, forces those living without regular status to live in fear and maintain a secluded life. Women interviewed by 4Mi report smaller detention incidents than men (5% against 13% for men), however these percentages may also indicate that women face higher challenges to be released from detention centers.

### **ACCESS TO INVISIBLE WOMEN IN NEED**

The data collected for this specific report confirms previous conclusions of 4Mi on the invisibility and difficulty to access migrant women in Libya. Whether ‘invisibility’ is used as a coping and protection mechanism or is enforced on them, migrant women rely heavily on the assistance of male kin and middle-men in order to gain access to basic services and consumption goods. Single, non-Arabic, non-Muslim women are particularly dependent as they are less able to blend in with the local population.

While evidence increases on the needs of migrant women in Libya, a question remains: How can protection programming gain access to the invisible population in need?