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Tracing the ‘continuum of violence’ between Nigeria and Libya

How the movement of people
from Edo State fuels the Libyan
conflict economy

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Summary

- Despite being thousands of miles apart, Libya and Edo State in southern Nigeria are connected by a centuries-old route for trade and the movement of people. Since the outbreak of conflict in Libya in 2011, it has become a major route for human-smuggling and -trafficking. This research paper traces the movement of people along the route, demonstrating how the abuse against people moving has fuelled the conflict economy in Libya.
- Movement from Edo State is in significant part driven by an overwhelming presence in the state of structural violence,¹ which is particularly harmful to people who are economically excluded, and to women and girls.
- The violence people experience escalates along the route to Libya and culminates with people becoming part of an ‘abuse-for-profit’² system. For women and girls in particular, this interlinked violence may include structural exclusion in Edo State, sexual abuse at the hands of border personnel in Niger, and captivity and forced labour in Libyan detention centres.
- To study this dynamic transnational process, the paper applies a feminist approach of a ‘continuum of violence’. This approach connects different types of violence to show how conflict impacts, and is impacted by, less visible forms of violence, such as societal inequities or violence related to repressive political systems.
- The paper uses a qualitative systems analysis to illustrate how the political, economic and security processes that underpin the movement of people produce a ‘continuum’ that connects Edo State to the Libyan conflict.
- By identifying the causal loops and feedback mechanisms at work in this continuum, policymakers can identify strategic points at which to target interventions. Such an analysis creates new opportunities for international efforts aimed at conflict response. Reducing the level of structural violence in Edo State and the pressures behind human-smuggling and -trafficking could eventually contribute to addressing conflict in Libya.

¹ Both ‘structural violence’ and ‘direct violence’ are defined in Box 1 in the introduction.

² Al-Dayel, N., Anfinson, A. and Anfinson, G. (2023), ‘Captivity, Migration, and Power in Libya’, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 9(3), p. 281, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1908032>.

- To operationalize a policy approach that seeks to disrupt the continuum of violence manifested in the movement of people, four broad policy implications are presented in the concluding chapter:
 - First, the use of a wider 'conflict and violence' lens – instead of a narrower one focused on 'border and migration management' – will help conceptualize the question of the movement of people to Libya in a way that allows for productive responses.
 - Second, by expanding the stakeholders, sectors, and violences and deaths considered as part of a conflict, a feminist approach can unlock an expanded policy toolbox to mitigate the violences produced by the transnational movement of people.
 - Third, and in keeping with the above, the use of language that is inclusive, and that acknowledges the depth and breadth of exclusion and abuses suffered, is a necessary step towards developing effective solutions. Violence, exploitation and coercion were present in all of the journeys discussed by research participants. In the case of the movement of people to Libya, the violence people experience directly fuels the conflict. More attention to these realities is needed to address how they entrench the conflict economy.
 - Finally, policymakers should consider the expansion of safe and legal routes for migration from Edo State as a way of preventing people from becoming a resource to be exploited in the Libyan conflict economy.

01

Introduction

A systems analysis reveals a transnational ‘continuum of violence’ connecting Edo State to Libya’s conflict economy.

Libya has been beset by violent conflict since 2011 when popular uprisings sparked a civil war and led to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. Since 2011, two further major bouts of violent conflict occurred, in 2014 and 2019, while sporadic fighting and insecurity have become a defining feature of the post-Gaddafi landscape.

These events in Libya have been closely connected to developments occurring outside the country’s borders, including in Chad, Italy, Niger, Nigeria and Sudan. For this reason, this research paper focuses on the transnational dynamics that have fuelled conflict in Libya. In particular, the paper contends that the feminist approach of the ‘continuum of violence’ provides a productive lens through which to observe and understand the interactions between different forms of violence and conflict across borders.

Continuums of violence can be understood as connecting the ‘violence of everyday life, through the structural violence of economic systems that sustain inequalities and the repressive policing of dictatorial regimes, to the armed conflict of open warfare’ across borders.³ Such an approach shows the connections between eruptions of conflict and instances of violence, often happening across vast geographies, and demonstrates how causes and impacts of conflict are transnational.

To implement this approach, this paper produces a qualitative systems analysis to illustrate how the political, economic and security processes that underpin the movement of people produce a continuum of violence that connects Edo State to the Libyan conflict.

The systems analysis is used to show the connectivity between different types and extents of violence across extensive transnational geographies which together make up the continuum of violence. In particular, it will focus on how violence can cascade across borders to (re)produce violent conflict in Libya.

³ Giles, W. and Hyndman, J. (2004), ‘Introduction: Gender and Conflict in a Global Context’, in Giles, W. and Hyndman, J. (eds), *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, p. 19.

A systems analysis operates from the premise that conflict is best understood as a social system that contains adaptive structures and evolutionary mechanisms.⁴ These processes, identified by the qualitative systems analysis, are part of a vast web of social dynamics. For the purposes of this paper, the processes have been simplified as much as possible to allow for an analysis of areas where policy or programmatic interventions may be particularly effective. This analysis focuses on two types of connecting loops: causal loops which identify causal relationships between the key social, political, security and economic factors that shape the interaction between the movement of people and violence; and feedback cycles which show the interplay between the causal loops.

The paper's approach to analysing conflict settings builds on Ulrike Krause's work in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Krause identified connections between different experiences of violence, showing how gender-based and sexual violence experienced by both men and women, and carried out by armed groups, was tied to domestic violence in Ugandan refugee settlements.⁵

Box 1. Categories of violence within a continuum

A 'continuum of violence' considers the interconnectivity and causal relationship between structural violence and inequity, direct violence and conflict across geographies.⁶ *Structural violence* can be defined as 'indirect forms of harm exerted by social structures and institutions – enforced on both national and global levels, which carries negative consequences for the health and wellbeing of men and women'.⁷ This form of violence is less visible, making it hard to quantify, and is often expressed along the lines of inequity, including gendered, racialized and class-based exclusions. And while it impacts a range of metrics, such as quality of life, educational attainment and health, it is also directly related to killings, suicide and conflict.

'Structural violence, in fact, is by far the most lethal form of violence as well as the most potent cause of other forms of violence.'⁸ It is connected to *direct violence*, which is violence inflicted by one person on another, and includes killing, maiming and detention.⁹ Crucially, structural violence and direct violence co-create each other.¹⁰ These interconnections sit along a continuum and can (re)produce violent and armed conflict dynamics.

⁴ Gallo, G. (2012), 'Conflict Theory, Complexity and Systems Approach', *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 30(2), pp. 156–75, <https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.2132>.

⁵ Krause, U. (2015), 'A Continuum of Violence? Linking Sexual and Gender-based Violence During Conflict, Flight, and Encampment', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 34(4), pp. 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdv014>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gamlin, J. B. and Hawkes, S. J. (2018), 'Masculinities on the Continuum of Structural Violence: The Case of Mexico's Homicide Epidemic', *Social Politics*, 25(1), pp. 50–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxx010>.

⁸ Lee, B. X. (2019), *Violence: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Causes, Consequences, and Cures*, London: Wiley, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119240716>, p. 124.

⁹ Galtung, J. and Fischer, D. (2013), 'Cultural Violence', in Springer (2013), *Johan Galtung: Pioneer of Peace Research*, Berlin: Springer, p. 47, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-32481-9_4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The movement of people from Edo State to Libya

Edo State and Libya have been linked for centuries by a historical route along which people have moved and goods have been traded. The relationship between the two remains significant today, especially with regards to the movement of people. No other sub-Saharan African country has 'produced more irregular migrants than Nigeria',¹¹ and Edo State, a small state in southern Nigeria, has accounted for up to 70 per cent of the people moving in certain years.¹² The result was that nearly one person in every four households from Benin City, the capital of Edo State, attempted migration in 2017 alone.¹³

This movement comes in many different forms, but a significant element is related to the trafficking of women and girls. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated in 2016 that 80 per cent of Nigerian women and girls moving to Europe were trafficked – with almost all of them coming from Edo State.¹⁴ The UKAid-funded Stamping out Trafficking in Nigeria (SoTiN) programme reported that 91 per cent of women and 59 per cent of men in their interviews had indicated being trafficked.¹⁵

As people start their journey from Edo State, the nature of the violence they experience changes. The closer a person gets to Libya, the more the continuum begins to include substantial levels of direct violence, with people eventually being absorbed by Libya's conflict economy and becoming part of an 'abuse-for-profit' system.

Many of the people moving to Libya have the intention of continuing their travel to Europe. In fact, over the last 10 years, Libya has often been the most prominent departure point for the central Mediterranean route, which sees a high representation of Nigerian people moving. For instance, nearly 40 per cent of people crossing through the central Mediterranean route to Europe in September 2016 were Nigerian. This route is also one of the deadliest. According to IOM's Missing Migrants project, of the 29,214 people that have been estimated to have gone missing in the last 10 years, 23,032 or 79 per cent of people went missing on the central Mediterranean route.^{16,17}

¹¹ Beber, B. and Scacco, A. (2022), *The myth of the misinformed migrant?: Survey insights from Nigeria's irregular migration epicentre*, Essen: Leibniz-Institut für Wirtschaftsforschung, <https://poverty-action.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/The-myth-of-the-misinformed-migrant%3F-Survey-insights-from-Nigeria%27s-irregular-migration-epicenter.pdf>.

¹² Osauzo, T. (2020), '70 percent of Nigeria's migration comes from Edo – UNHCR', *The Sun*, 12 March 2020, <https://sunnewsonline.com/70-percent-of-nigerias-migration-comes-from-edo-unhcr>.

¹³ Beber and Scacco (2022), *The myth of the misinformed migrant?*

¹⁴ International Organization for Migration (2018) 'IOM Regional Director Visits Nigeria in Support of Moves Against Human Trafficking', 22 June 2018, <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-regional-director-visits-nigeria-support-moves-against-human-trafficking>.

¹⁵ Stamping out Trafficking in Nigeria (SoTiN) (2020), *How migration and trafficking from Edo State happens*, report, https://www.alignplatform.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/how_migration_and_trafficking_happens_research_final_report.pdf.

¹⁶ International Organization for Migration (undated), 'Missing Migrants: Recorded in the Mediterranean (since 2014)', <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean> (accessed 14 Mar. 2023).

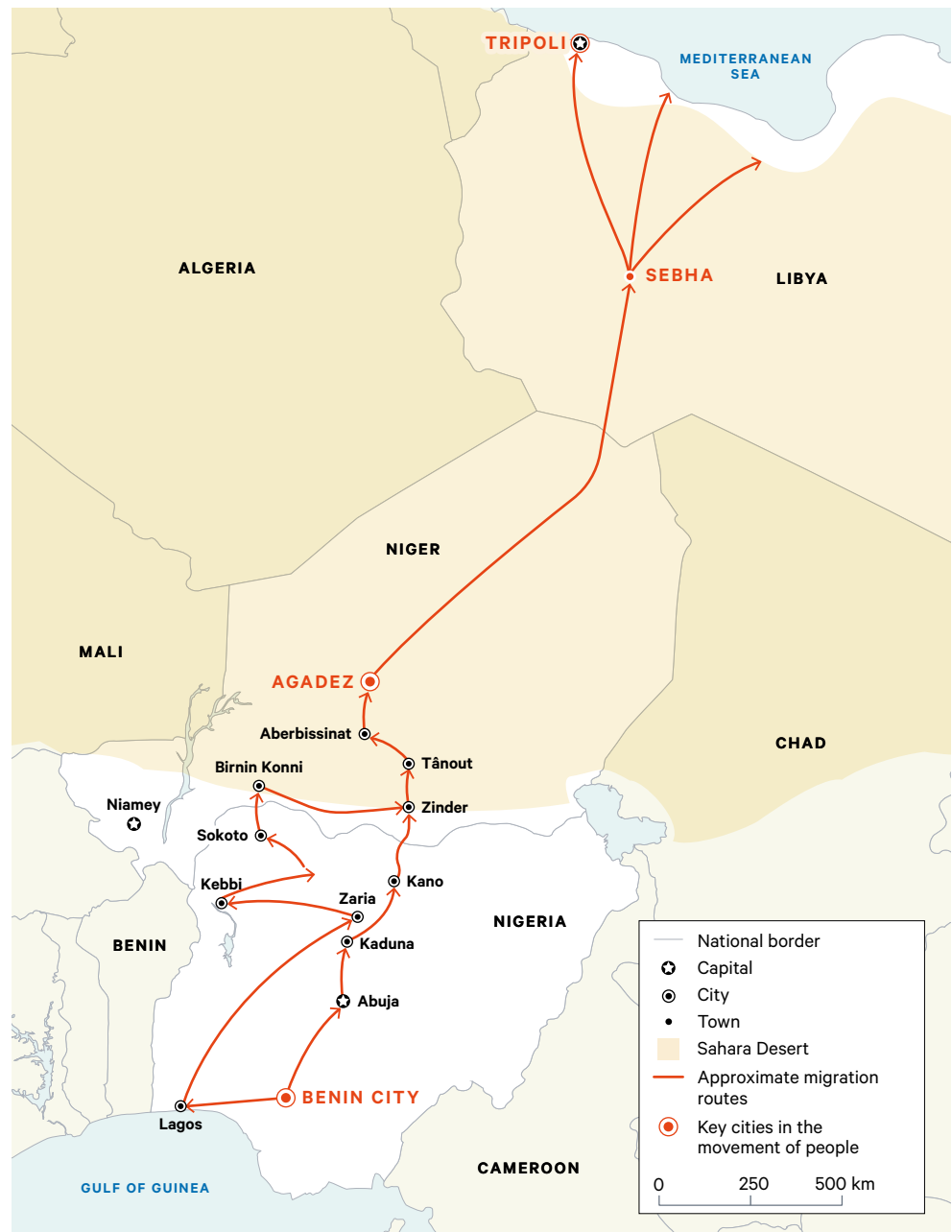
¹⁷ While beyond the scope of this research, the number of deaths on the route demonstrates how the continuum of violence continues beyond the Libyan conflict and is influenced by developments in Europe, such as its policies on migration.

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Many of the journeys start out as 'attempted migration'. However, the legality, formality, level of agency and motivation to travel, and the extent of exploitation across an entire journey can be hard to determine. The rates of trafficking described above, for example, show that many journeys clearly fall outside traditional policy understandings of migration, not least relevant because the terms 'migrant' and 'migration management' have taken on specific meanings in the European policy sphere. For these reasons, when broadly describing trends and practices, this paper will use the terms 'movement of people' and 'people moving', unless the specific nature of a journey (or part thereof) is known.

Figure 1. The routes of movement from Edo State in Nigeria to Tripoli in Libya



Source: Chatham House XCEPT research. (Map developed by James Okolie-Osemene, depicting a range of routes from Benin City.)

Box 2. Modes and systems of travel

There are a vast array of routes and approaches to travel. While the figure above outlines a number of routes between Edo State and Libya, via northern Nigeria and Niger, this geography is necessarily an oversimplification of the routes taken by people moving (Figure 1).

Journeys are rarely unidirectional. People may return – from any point along the route – and may travel multiple times, in multiple ways – including by becoming smugglers or traffickers themselves. The journey through Niger and Libya is often also a reflection of multiple payments made along the way, either by people paying in instalments, working at various stages of the journey, or by funds being requested from friends and family in Edo State.^{18,19}

The networks and operations working to smuggle and traffic people to and through Libya are complex and vary in levels of organization and sophistication. More diffuse practices are particularly common for journeys made by men, where the smuggling is organized by 'a collection of largely independent actors... [In these cases, t]here is no indication of a centralized accounting system (i.e. a 'kitty').'²⁰

Two returnees, interviewed in Nigeria, described their travel to Libya in 2023 and discussed the diffuse system that had governed their movement. As one noted:

I messaged [name removed; trafficker] in Benin here and he took me to Lagos. And he said he would meet an agent, that was the process. Each person introduced me to the next contact and that is how I got to Tripoli.²¹

More 'elaborate and organised'²² approaches are also common for smuggling and trafficking and, in particular, in the trafficking of women and girls. This more centralized system was also indicated by people living in Edo State.²³

About the paper

This research paper is divided into five further chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on Edo State in southern Nigeria, and explores how the people of that state become trapped into the movement of people to Libya. Chapter 3 considers the violence experienced by people moving through Nigeria and Niger, and how that violence increases the closer people are to Libya. Chapter 4 examines how the movement

¹⁸ Ohonba, A. and Agbontaen-Eghafona, K. (2019), 'Transnational Remittances from Human Trafficking and the Changing Socio-Economic Status of Women in Benin City, Edo State Nigeria', *Women's Studies*, 48(5), pp. 531–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2019.1632605>.

¹⁹ Al-Dayel, Anfinson and Anfinson (2023), 'Captivity, Migration, and Power in Libya'.

²⁰ Campana, P. (2015), 'The Structure of Human Trafficking: Lifting the Bonnet on a Nigerian Transnational Network', *British Journal of Criminology*, 56(1), pp. 68–86, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azv027>.

²¹ Remarks shared during an interview on 18 August 2023 by two men returnees, unemployed.

²² Vorrath, J. (2022), 'Peculiarity and persistence of a transregional flow: the evolution of human trafficking for sexual exploitation from Nigeria to Europe', in Brombacher, D., Maihold, G., Müller, M. and Vorrath, J. (eds) (2022), *Geopolitics of the Illicit. Linking the Global South and Europe*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 133–62, <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748935940>.

²³ Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a man working in farming.

of people is embedded in the Libyan conflict economy and how it fuels the violent conflict in Libya by financing it, manning it²⁴ and providing participants in the conflict for territorial control and authority. Chapter 5 builds on the previous three sections to extrapolate a model of the continuum of violence that connects the Libyan conflict to events in Edo State and vice versa. Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the paper by outlining a feminist and transnational approach to conflict-response policy and programming.

Methodology

The authors adopted a mixed-method approach to research, drawing on both new primary data – in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups – and existing secondary data – in the form of policy papers, academic literature and news sources.

Most interviews and focus groups were conducted in three locations in Edo State in August 2023: Benin City, Idogbo and Oza. Benin City is the main urban centre in Edo State and the location from which most journeys start. Idogbo is a suburban location that has particularly high rates of smuggling and trafficking of school-aged teenagers and young adults. Oza is a rural community included for consideration of rural–urban migration and the impact of this movement on agriculture, which is a major economic sector in Edo State. Focus groups and interviews were conducted with a range of participants, including farmers; teachers; businesspeople; community and youth leaders; representatives from non-governmental organizations; law enforcement officials; academics; journalists; a doctor; returnees; and family members of people who have reached Europe or who died on their journey.

Focus group participants and interviewees were identified through a snowballing approach that was mindful of inclusive representation of gender, age, occupation and levels of education. Most of the interviews and focus groups were conducted by two of the paper's authors, Leah de Haan and Dr Iro Aghedo, often together, and with the support of two local research assistants. This research was carried out in person and primarily in English, with Dr Aghedo translating local languages and dialects in real time when they were used by participants. Focus group meetings were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a structured thematic approach. The discussions focused on experiences with structural violence, with particular attention to variations due to social exclusion, and how these experiences related to the movement of people. Questions did not inquire into the identity of specific individuals involved in the movement of people or the locations from which people were trafficked or smuggled. Most of the data was collected through focus group discussions. Interviews were held with: (i) research participants who were unable to attend a focus group; (ii) specialists or experts with insights on a particular aspect of the research; or (iii) on topics of particular sensitivity.

²⁴ Referring to the enslavement and forced labour of men to be members of armed groups, the term 'manning' is chosen deliberately to signify that it is both only men experiencing this form of violence and that it is their masculinity that is being forcibly exploited. See, for example, Capasso, A. et al. (2022), 'Lessons from the field: Recommendations for gender-based violence prevention and treatment for displaced women in conflict-affected Ukraine', *The Lancet*, 17(100408), pp. 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2022.100408>.



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Semi-structured interviews with 16 Nigerian smugglers based in Libya were carried out with the support of the Mixed Migration Centre between November and December 2018, and provided a background understanding of the topics discussed. Of these, Tim Eaton interviewed three smugglers who felt comfortable to speak directly in a telephone conversation. These interviews were conducted in a more open and less structured format. In most cases, smugglers preferred to engage with the Mixed Migration Centre's Libya-based staff to answer questions set through an interview guide.

This research paper is one of three publications from the Human Smuggling and Trafficking through East and West Africa to Libya case study investigated by Chatham House for the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme. The case study seeks to understand how the outbreak of violent conflict in Libya has conditioned the movement of people from Nigeria to Libya via Niger between 2011 and 2023. The other two papers in this series focus on human-smuggling and -trafficking through the city of Agadez in Niger, and on the impact of human-smuggling and -trafficking on Libya's conflict economy.



02 Structural violence in Edo State and the movement of people

The expansion of smuggling and trafficking networks since 2011 has fed a vicious cycle in which structural violence in Edo State leads to, and is exacerbated by, conflict in Libya.

The movement of people to and through Libya from Edo State is not a new phenomenon. Following the route's entrenchment during colonialism and Nigeria's subsequent independence in 1960, the movement of people along it became primarily focused on the search for economic opportunities, particularly after two major shocks to Nigeria's economy. First, the decline in oil prices between 1983 and 1985, and second, the implementation of structural adjustment programmes (SAP) by the military dictatorship of Ibrahim Babangida (1985–93).^{25–27} As a result, Nigeria became a leading source, transit and destination country for human-smuggling and -trafficking towards the end of the 20th century.²⁸

²⁵ Arhin-Sam, K. (2019), *The political economy of migration governance in Nigeria*, report, Freiburg: Arnold-Bergstrasser-Institut, <https://www.arnold-bergstraesser.de/publications/political-economy-migration-governance-nigeria>.

²⁶ Osezua, C. O. (2016), 'Gender Issues in Human trafficking in Edo State', *African Sociological Review/Revue Africaine de Sociologie*, 20(1), pp. 36–66, <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ast/article/view/153928>.

²⁷ Ohonba and Agbontaen-Eghafona (2019), 'Transnational Remittances from Human Trafficking and the Changing Socio-Economic Status of Women in Benin City, Edo State Nigeria'.

²⁸ National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (2022), *National Action Plan on Human Trafficking in Nigeria: 2022 – 2026*, Abuja: NATIP, <https://naptip.gov.ng/naptip-national-action-plan-on-human-trafficking-in-nigeria-2022-2026>.

Another shock affecting movement along the route occurred in the aftermath of the 2011 Libyan civil war. The conflict led to a rapid increase in the movement of people from Edo State to and through Libya, and across the Mediterranean Sea to European countries. Though the exact nature of the increase is hard to determine, Frontex posits that the number of crossings through the central Mediterranean route to Europe rose from 4,450 in 2010 to 181,459 at its peak in 2016.²⁹

Experiences of structural violence

The movement of people from Edo State is – and has been since before 2011 – closely connected to the presence of structural violence there. Where conflict is involved in expanding the movement of people, it is violent conflict in Libya rather than in Edo State. In fact, there has been no armed conflict in Edo State for decades, and experiences of direct violence at the hands of armed groups and state forces have been relatively uncommon.³⁰

However, two key elements of structural violence in Edo State – economic exclusion and gender-based exclusion – demonstrate the link between Edo State, the movement of people and (subsequently) the Libyan conflict.

Economic exclusion

The form of structural violence most prominently discussed – in the focus groups was economic exclusion. Numerous examples were given which demonstrate how being economically excluded or experiencing exclusion along class lines leads to 'indirect forms of harm exerted by social structures and institutions'.³¹

Notably, only eight per cent of the Edo State population are multidimensionally poor³² – compared with, for instance, 45 per cent in Kano State in northern Nigeria.³³ But economic exclusion in Edo State relates to a wide range of deprivations, which include a lack of nutrition, high child mortality, limited education and reduced living standards.³⁴

²⁹ FRONTEX (undated), 'Migratory Routes', <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-routes/migratory-routes> (accessed 1 Dec. 2023).

³⁰ There have 443 deaths as a result of battles, violence against civilians and explosions/remote violence enacted by state forces, rebel forces, political militias and identity militias between 01 January 2020 and 24 November 2023, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). ACLED aggregates and reports on data on political violence and protest, including for the purposes of understanding conflict dynamics. See ACLED (undated), 'Home Page', <https://acleddata.com> (accessed 24 Nov. 2023).

³¹ Gamlin and Hawkes (2018), 'Masculinities on the Continuum of Structural Violence'.

³² A metric that conceives of poverty beyond simple monetary deprivation. See World Bank (2023), 'Multidimensional Poverty Measure', briefing, 19 December 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/brief/multidimensional-poverty-measure>.

³³ Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (2023), *Global MPI Country Briefing 2023: Nigeria (Sub-Saharan Africa)*, Oxford: University of Oxford, https://ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CB_NGA_2023.pdf.

³⁴ The distinction between rates and intensity of poverty may be confounded by the high rates of remittances that are received, which may alleviate some of the poverty experienced. See, for example, Ohonba and Agbontaen-Eghafona (2019), 'Transnational Remittances from Human Trafficking and the Changing Socio-Economic Status of Women in Benin City, Edo State Nigeria'.

This is illustrated, for instance, by examples related to access to infrastructure, basic amenities or services. Exclusion from critical infrastructure, for instance, includes the lack of access to clean drinking water:

They [the government] will say they will create community boreholes, but we don't have nothing like that anymore.³⁵

Access to energy is also limited: 'There is no light. Last Monday came the bill... so this month we pay, even when the light does not work,'³⁶ said one participant, with another adding, 'My salary is less than 200,000 Naira a month, you know what it means. If I spend 40,000 on fuel every week, times four that is 160,000 every month. I have children, they don't have any money.'³⁷

Respondents also expressed concerns around basic education and health services. Primary and secondary education in Edo State is expensive and many children do not have schoolbooks or even school shoes. There are too few qualified teachers, and teachers are both underpaid and often charged with feeding their poorer students. As a result, there is a lack of belief in education among certain groups, including young people who, even after (university) education, face unemployment and underemployment:

Around 10 or 11 am, when classes were going on, a very big car with an open roof enter[ed] the compound. And a boy was holding two bottles of drink, a student of that school... And the guy was telling them, you know 'I've just made some money', that he just fraudulently enriched himself. And students started shouting, 'See now, see school is nothing, look at this boy now'.³⁸

Similarly, affordable healthcare is often substandard and even the small fees are at times inaccessible to economically excluded populations. As one teacher from Idogbo stated:

Two years ago, I had an accident and the care cost me 3 million Naira... When I was in the hospital, I discovered that there are some people that, just because of 10,000 or 20,000 [Naira; equivalent of between \$6 and \$12], they die.³⁹

The lack of access to critical infrastructure and services has a detrimental impact on people's life expectancy and opportunities. In focus group discussions, participants consistently tied poor basic services to economic exclusion: 'When you are talking about those people who can cope, you are talking rich men'.⁴⁰

³⁵ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher.

³⁶ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a man working in academia.

³⁷ Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a man working in trading.

³⁸ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a man working in academia.

³⁹ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher.

⁴⁰ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher and a man working as a businessperson.

Box 3. Cycles of debt and poverty: The case of agriculture

The dynamics of structural violence are exemplified in the agriculture sector in Edo State.⁴¹ The lack of employment in and reduction of the agricultural sector has created a vicious cycle. Parents work on farms to try, often unsuccessfully, to afford decent education for their children. There is also a lack of education on agriculture, and no funding available to support young people to work in the sector. This cycle is also reinforced by the movement of people from Edo State:

My father is old. There is nobody to work for them... In this community, they don't use tractors. No, it is manual with simple farm tools. So that because of irregular migration, there are not enough youth in the community anymore to do the job.⁴²

A 2012 study identified a negative impact on food security in the state and that farmland was being sold off to fund trafficking – leading to a loss of agricultural land. The study contended that the trafficking of women corresponded to a 'reduction in farm output, decrease in farm income and shortage of food supply by the community'.⁴³

Gendered exclusion

Gendered exclusion was referenced less explicitly as an issue in focus group discussions but was often insinuated in participants' remarks. When discussing the high rates of trafficking of women and girls, for example, a man from Idogbo indicated that this was '[b]ecause the girls make more money... it is easier, they just open their legs'.⁴⁴ This remark was echoed by a man working as a teacher in Oza who stated that '[p]eople see it as a business, packing those girls for human-trafficking'.⁴⁵

A more general statement was made by an older farmer during the Oza focus group about the impact of women's dress:

They saw what [women] in Europe wear sometimes, see because of intensive sun, some women wear the bras and go to the beach and all that. You go to Benin now and that is what our girls wear... That brings problems, risk and health issues.⁴⁶

These statements are based on common patriarchal narratives underlying conceptualizations about women as commodities or property to be owned, as useful due to their sexual labour or as valued for their modesty. Osezua describes the specific manifestation of patriarchy in Benin culture, stating that:

Girls were generally perceived as less important to [boys] and are described as 'half current', depicting that it is with less virility of manhood that the [girl] is conceived, while the [boy] is the apt expression of man's sexual strength and prowess, thereby seen as 'full current'.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a man working in academia.

⁴² Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher.

⁴³ Adeleye and Okonkwo (2010), 'Ideal child gender preference in men's worldview and their knowledge of related maternal mortality indices in Ekiadolor, Southern Nigeria'.

⁴⁴ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a man working in academia.

⁴⁵ Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a man working as a teacher.

⁴⁶ Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a man working in farming.

⁴⁷ Osezua (2016), 'Gender Issues in Human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria'.

This gendered exclusion intersects with economic exclusion, related to access to basic amenities and economic opportunities. Education is the most prominent example. A study conducted in Ekpoma, a town in the centre of Edo State, indicated that 89.5 per cent of women preferred sons to daughters, and that this rationale was used to explain why men's education was prioritized over that of women.⁴⁸

With an educational deficit and assumptions made about the type of role women should play in society in terms of (unpaid) care work, employment opportunities were also limited. One consequence is that women are overrepresented in the informal sector – reflecting the global trend.⁴⁹ This trend is evident in the agricultural sector in Edo State, where women perform the majority of the informal labour associated with farming.⁵⁰ The economic insecurity that comes with working in informality is then further exacerbated by inheritance practices that favour men and further reduce opportunities for women to own property.⁵¹ Together, the structural gendered and economic inequity create the conditions for people to move.

Dynamics underlying structural violence in Edo State

Neither of these forms of structural violence, nor their expressions, are unique to Edo State. Class-based and gendered exclusion occurs globally and is often related to violence. But their specific manifestations in Edo State are closely related to social dynamics around the movement of people to Libya. These forms of structural violence are (re)produced by the movement of people and have embedded smuggling and trafficking practices within society in Edo State.

This paper illustrates the connections between the movement of people and structural violence in Edo State through a systems analysis, as described in the introduction, which identified six causal loops. Given the highly interconnected nature of social systems and the practices in question, the systems analysis in Figure 2 has been simplified as far as practicably possible. Loops 1–4 are discussed below and are connected in different ways to Loops 5 and 6.

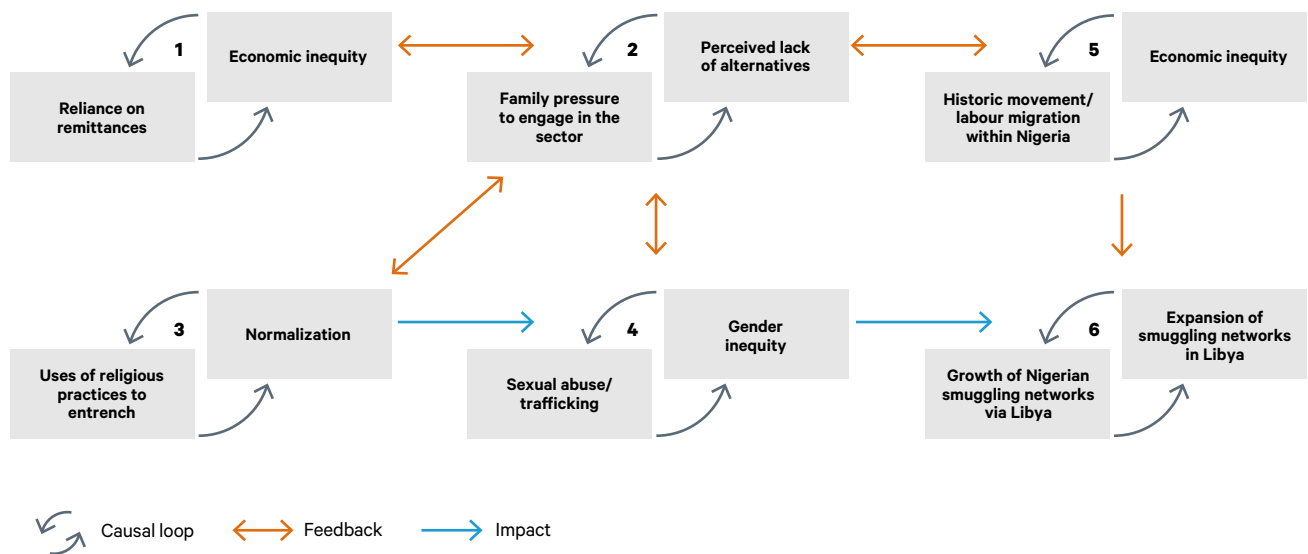
⁴⁸ Adeleye and Okonkwo (2010), 'Ideal child gender preference in men's worldview and their knowledge of related maternal mortality indices in Ekiadolor, Southern Nigeria'.

⁴⁹ Osezua (2016), 'Gender Issues in Human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria'.

⁵⁰ Ofuoku and Uzokwe (2012), 'Rural Dwellers' Perception of Human Trafficking and its Implication for Agricultural Production in Edo State, Nigeria'.

⁵¹ Braimah, T. (2013), 'Sex Trafficking in Edo State: Causes and Solutions', *Global Journal Of Human Social Science*, 13(3), pp. 17–29, <https://socialscieresearch.org/index.php/GJHSS/article/view/675>.

Figure 2. Connecting structural violence in Edo State with the movement of people via Libya



Source: Chatham House XCEPT research

Reliance on remittances and loans

Economic inequality in Edo State manifests itself in high levels of unemployment and under-employment, particularly among economically excluded young people.⁵² As a woman teacher described: ‘there are so many graduates out there with no job. You see them riding buses, they are bus drivers, and they are graduates’.⁵³ Among other effects, it has created a reliance on funding sources not related to employment or education, but to the movement of people over land, including primarily remittances and loans (See Loop 1 in Figure 2).

The effect of remittances in Edo State is significant, and the ability to remit money remains a core objective for people travelling to and through Libya. Remittances have allowed families to build homes, buy cars and access good-quality education and health services. As one focus group respondent put it:

You must access better health facilities. And when you get there, you cannot afford it. But we have people that are already there [in Europe] and... You just give them a call: ‘We need so so, mama is not well’, and they send you just a few dollars, a few pounds, a few whatever and you change it into our money, it becomes something.⁵⁴

In 2022, Nigeria received over \$20 billion in personal remittances, making it the largest recipient among sub-Saharan African countries and the eighth largest recipient globally.⁵⁵ A substantial amount goes to Edo State, where the flow of remittances has prompted an increase in commercial activities, boosted

⁵² National Bureau of Statistics (2020), *Labor Force Statistics: Unemployment and Underemployment Report: Abridged Labour Force Survey under Covid-19*, Abuja: National Bureau of Statistics, https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/pdfuploads/Q2_2020_Unemployment_Report.pdf.

⁵³ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher.

⁵⁴ Remarks shared during a focus group discussion in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher.

⁵⁵ World Bank (no date), ‘Personal remittances, received (current US\$) – Nigeria’, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT?locations=NG&most_recent_value_desc=true (accessed 1 Feb. 2024).

sales of real estate and affected the entire state economy. Banks in Benin City are designated as some of the busiest in Nigeria due to the entrenched reliance on remittances.^{56,57}

However, this reliance does not mean that remittances are always a successful approach. Monies from abroad are often irregular, arrive too late and/or are insufficient for most of those receiving them to live on.⁵⁸ The women and girls trafficked for the purposes of forced sex work are considered more likely to send regular remittances, but even this financial flow is uneven.⁵⁹ Remittances are less likely to be received from the men moving, as explained by one man returnee from Edo State while describing the unpaid labour in Libya.⁶⁰ But the limited alternative economic opportunities have resulted in a dependence on remittances in Edo State, thereby creating some acceptance of smuggling and trafficking as a source of revenue.

A related factor is that people leaving Edo State often take out loans to fund their movement. This can include loans from individuals, from banks or community-pooled loans. While banks and microfinance lenders do not officially grant loans for the purpose of migration, a LAPO (Lift Above Poverty Organization) microfinance bank project officer did indicate they know of instances where business owners have asked for loans to expand their business – only to give the money to their child to move over land to Libya.⁶¹ Alternatively, a smuggler 'gives an advance' on the final payment which the person moving agrees to pay back after they have found employment, as an interviewee explained:

He [the trafficker] said I should come up with 500,000 Naira, but I couldn't, but I could come up with half of the money. So, he said, you can borrow half.⁶²

As a result, families in Edo State can end up with loans they cannot pay – because their relative is held captive, extorted for further funds, unable to find work or has died. These debts cause many people in Edo State to lose their houses, businesses and land. Such losses not only entrench poverty but create debt bondage. As one focus group participant illustrated:

At the end of the month, I cannot afford the interest [of the loan]... and it can lead to debt bondage [through vicious cycles of trafficking:]... Sometimes you send your child. Your child may tell you, 'Mum, this problem is too high. I will sort it, let me try'.⁶³

⁵⁶ Ohonba and Agbontaen-Eghafona (2019), 'Transnational Remittances from Human Trafficking and the Changing Socio-Economic Status of Women in Benin City, Edo State Nigeria'; remarks shared during an interview on 18 August 2023 by two men returnees.

⁵⁷ Remarks shared during a focus group in Benin City on 16 August 2023 by man working as a development consultant.

⁵⁸ Ohonba and Agbontaen-Eghafona (2019), 'Transnational Remittances from Human Trafficking and the Changing Socio-Economic Status of Women in Benin City, Edo State Nigeria'.

⁵⁹ Focus group discussion in Idogbo, 17 August 2023; Ohonba and Agbontaen-Eghafona (2019), 'Transnational Remittances from Human Trafficking and the Changing Socio-Economic Status of Women in Benin City, Edo State Nigeria'.

⁶⁰ Remarks shared during an interview on 18 August 2023 by two men returnees, unemployed.

⁶¹ Remarks shared during an interview on 19 August 2023 by a LAPO officer.

⁶² Remarks shared during an interview on 18 August 2023 by two men returnees, unemployed.

⁶³ Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a man working as a teacher.

Recruitment practices

Structural violence in Edo State has also influenced the types of recruitment practices taking place for the purposes of smuggling and trafficking. Whether in organized or more diffuse networks, a man from Idogbo described how agents work throughout communities in Edo State:

The smugglers and traffickers don't just move from house to house recruiting people... they have people who bring people to their network. They bring people to them, refer people to them. They will now tell them what to do, how much is involved, and when they will travel. Such people are also all around the community.⁶⁴

These practices have led to smuggling and trafficking networks becoming embedded within communities, prompting the development of recruitment tactics which are specific to the conditions in Edo State. This embeddedness creates an initial level of trust in smugglers, traffickers and their agents among the population: 'There is always a connection, it is not a total stranger that comes. That element of initial trust is what is exploited.'⁶⁵

The familial pressure – highlighted in Loop 2 in Figure 2 – that is encouraging and, at times, arranging the smuggling or trafficking of their children is a complicated issue in Edo State. The trafficking of women and girls by their family often takes place in the knowledge that they will become sex workers. Often, families see no alternatives for making ends meet and are deeply conflicted in their attitudes to smuggling and trafficking, as one woman from Idogbo captured:

Some of our parents who hope to feed others [their children], they will have to send their... daughters outside [to Europe] for prostitution. Even though they don't like it, because who likes such a thing?⁶⁶

These internally contradictory priorities and attitudes at times also lead young people to plan and leave Edo State without their parents knowing, in an attempt to help their family.⁶⁷

In the context of familial pressure, another key influence that must be considered is the use of religion as a tool of coercion – as illustrated by Loop 3 in Figure 2. Though Edo State is a majority Christian region, African Traditional Religion (ATR) is widespread.⁶⁸ Mirroring findings from previous research on the subject,

⁶⁴ Remarks shared during focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a man working in academia.

⁶⁵ Remarks shared during an interview on 18 August 2023 with a project officer working at Idia Renaissance.

⁶⁶ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher.

⁶⁷ Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a man working as a teacher.

⁶⁸ The appropriation of religious practices for the purposes of smuggling and trafficking has been discussed at length elsewhere. See, for example, Vorrath (2022), 'Peculiarity and persistence of a transregional flow'; Carling, J. (2005), 'Trafficking in Women from Nigeria to Europe', Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trafficking-women-nigeria-europe>; and Simoni, V. (2013), '<I swear an oath>', Serments d'allégeances, coercitions et stratégies migratoires chez les femmes nigérianes de Benin City', in Lavaud-Legendre, B. (ed.) (2013), *Prostitution nigériane. Entre rêves de migration et réalités de la traite*, Paris: Karthala, pp. 33–60.

focus group respondents indicated ATR oaths are used to bind people to their journeys, and to ensure women and girls comply with both trafficking and forced sex work:^{69,70}

Ultimately, the ceremony becomes a core part of psychological control and intimidation once the girls and women start to question the arrangement or do not repay their debts... [it is used to] threaten 'under-performing' or 'unruly' victims with physical harm, madness or death.⁷¹

In early 2018, the Oba of Benin (the King of Benin and a cultural leader in Edo State) declared that trafficking for the purpose of sex work was forbidden, that all agreements made through a shrine were void, and that this practice should not be used for trafficking.⁷² While the Oba's declaration did reduce the practice (with many focus group respondents noting its significance), the impact was limited, as the Oba's word only carried weight in the part of Edo State that he oversees.⁷³

Certain recruitment schemes have in recent years become common, reflecting either dynamics in Edo State or responding to anti-smuggling and -trafficking initiatives.⁷⁴ For instance, in the 1990s and early 2000s, women were recruited by brothel-owners promising employment such as domestic work or hairdressing and providing both the flight tickets and sponsorship for visas.⁷⁵ As awareness of this recruitment tactic increased among affected communities, smugglers and traffickers responded by adjusting their schemes – including by shifting their attention to rural areas where the realities of travelling abroad and this particular tactic were less known.⁷⁶

Such shifts demonstrate the sophistication of recruiters and their operations, and their ability to adjust depending on a rural or urban setting, the gender of the person, and the type of work someone is hoping to engage in.

Sex work and sexual exploitation of minors

Gendered exclusion in Edo State is linked to the prevalence of sex work, sexual violence and forced sex work in Benin City. These dynamics are highlighted in Loop 4 in Figure 2. As in many countries, some women in Nigeria support themselves financially through sex work.⁷⁷ It is difficult to estimate the number of sex workers in Nigeria, but rough estimates based on data years apart would

⁶⁹ Remarks made during an interview on 18 August 2023 with a project officer working at Idia Renaissance; remarks shared during a focus group on 15 August 2023 by a man working as a teacher; Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a man working as a teacher.

⁷⁰ Simoni (2013), '<<I swear an oath>>'.

⁷¹ Vorrath (2022), 'Peculiarity and persistence of a transregional flow'.

⁷² Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I. and Derluyn, I. (2023), 'The Role of Juju Rituals in Human Trafficking of Nigerians: A Tool of Enslavement, But Also Escape', *SAGE Open*, 13(4), <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231210474>.

⁷³ Remarks shared during a focus group in Benin City on 16 August 2023 by a man working as a civil servant.

⁷⁴ Remarks made during an interview on 18 August 2023 with a project officer working at Idia Renaissance.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Braimah (2013), 'Sex Trafficking in Edo State'.

place it somewhere between 600,000 and 2 million.^{78,79} Benin City provides a clear illustration of this situation as, from the early evening and throughout the night, three key thoroughfares become centres of sex work.

The acceptance of sex work as an economic necessity has, however, not led to increased social acceptance or a reduction in exploitation, coercion or trafficking. During interviews and focus groups, examples were given of parents making girls as young as nine engage in forced sex work in Benin City:

In the evening, you will ... be seeing them, they will put on their short, short skirts. Somebody told me, they call it a 'hook-up'. He said, 'yes, just send me one hook-up'. And said, it is girls [not women] that are 'hook-ups' now. They will tell you this is the age range now: nine years, 10 years.⁸⁰

The discussion of forced sex work and the sexual exploitation of girls not only demonstrates how gendered structural violence in Benin City (re)produces direct violence to women and girls, but also how it is linked to trafficking. The stigma against people engaging in sex work creates a covert environment where sex work becomes interlinked with forced sex work and the sexual exploitation of minors. The hidden nature of these practices is then exploited to recruit and coerce many (forced) sex workers in Benin City into trafficking.

⁷⁸ Otutubikey Izugbara, C. (2005), 'Ashawo suppose shine her eyes': Female sex workers and sex work risks in Nigeria', *Health, Risk & Society*, 7(2), pp. 141–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698570500108685>.

⁷⁹ Onoja, A. et al. (2020), 'Baseline and Postintervention Assessment of Sexual Violence and Condom Use Among Female Sex Workers in a Semiurban African Community', *Social Health and Behavior*, 3(3), pp. 124–29, https://journals.lww.com/shbh/fulltext/2020/03030/baseline_and_postintervention_assessment_of_sexual.9.aspx.

⁸⁰ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher.

03

From structural to direct violence along the route to Libya

As people proceed along the route to Libya from Edo State, through Nigeria and Niger, they are subjected to increasing levels of direct violence.

The violence experienced by people during their movement to Libya has been well documented.⁸¹ All the journeys discussed by participants in focus groups and interviews included some component of exploitation, and were at some point characterized by instances of extreme violence. For some trafficked women and girls, beatings and sexual violence began as soon as the journey started. On other occasions, the direct violence and exploitation was introduced as people neared the border between Niger and Libya. In describing the violence experienced while moving, a juncture appears to occur once people approach and move through Agadez in northern Niger.

⁸¹ See, for example, The Migrant Project (undated), 'From Nigeria to Libya and Europe: the risks on the journey', <https://www.themigrantproject.org/nigeria/from-nigeria-to-libya-and-europe>; International Rescue Committee (2020), 'The human stories of the world's most dangerous migration route', article, 5 August 2020, <https://www.rescue.org/article/human-stories-worlds-most-dangerous-migration-route>; Accord (2019), 'The migrant crisis in Libya and the Nigeria experience', 24 June 2019, <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/the-migrant-crisis-in-libya-and-the-nigeria-experience>; BBC News (2017), 'A Nigerian's nightmare failed bid to migrate to Europe', 28 April 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-39731109>; Adeyinka, S., Lietaert, I. and Derluyn, I. (2023), 'It Happened in the Desert, in Libya and in Italy: Physical and Sexual Violence Experienced by Female Nigerian Victims of Trafficking in Italy', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(5), pp. 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20054309>.

The journeys from Agadez to Sebha, in southern Libya, are harrowing. They are characterized by thirst, malnutrition, beatings and death. The conditions and the violence all worsen once the journey across the Sahara Desert starts: 'Anyone who falls off the truck as they traverse the desert is either simply left or covered in sand before being abandoned.'⁸² The desert tracks to Libya are said to be littered with corpses.

The range of different routes and the inaccessibility of the Sahara make it hard to determine how many people have died there. Of the 602,000 people estimated by the former Nigerian permanent representative to the UN to have travelled from Nigeria in 2016, 27,000 are said to have died in the desert.⁸³ Many focus group participants were aware of the potential for violence and death as they moved to and through Libya, stating that the journey has a 50:50 chance of success: '[i]t is either, he succeeds or he dies'.⁸⁴ But these odds were deemed acceptable, or understandable, as to many the structural violence in Edo State means that people are 'already dead'.⁸⁵

Much of the violence that is experienced in Edo State is mirrored along the journey to Libya. In Agadez, people moving are hidden or held in compounds before travelling across the Sahara. The captivity, lack of appropriate living standards and the beatings by smugglers and traffickers often happen because people moving lack sufficient funds to pay them, thus linking the experiences to the economic inequity in Edo State.⁸⁶ This is also exemplified by the forced labour at gold-mining sites, with young men being coerced into working in unsafe conditions to raise funds to continue their journey.⁸⁷

The link to the structural gendered violence in Edo State, including the progression to increasingly include direct violence, is even more clear-cut and intersects with economic inequity with women and girls participating in (forced) sex work to raise the funds for travel.⁸⁸ While study participants used a range of descriptions – 'prostitution', 'commercial sex' or 'selling themselves' – the reality is far from consensual. Many cases include forced and repeated sexual violence, including gang rapes and beatings to force people to participate in sex work.⁸⁹ The rates of sexual assault, rape and forced sex work experienced along the journey also increase at the same juncture in Agadez.

⁸² Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a man working as a teacher.

⁸³ Idris, A. and Kebbi, B. (2017), '602,000 Nigerians migrated to Europe in 2016, says UN ex-envoy', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2017, <https://guardian.ng/news/602000-nigerians-migrated-to-europe-in-2016-says-un-ex-envoy>.

⁸⁴ Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a man working as a teacher.

⁸⁵ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idogbo on 17 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher.

⁸⁶ Molenaar, F., Tubiana, J. and Warin, C. (2018), *Caught in the middle: A human rights and peace-building approach to migration governance in the Sahel*, report, The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2018/caught-in-the-middle/1-migrants-journeys>.

⁸⁷ Tinti, P. (2024), *Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route: How armed conflict in Libya shapes the Agadez mobility economy*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136079>.

⁸⁸ The Migrant Project (undated), 'From Nigeria to Libya and Europe'.

⁸⁹ Remarks shared during an interview on 18 August 2023 by two men returnees, unemployed.

Some of the women and girls’ journeys stop or have extended pauses in Niger, with them falling into local sex-work networks with ‘a system in place where older Nigerian women “manage” a number of younger girls (often minors)’.^{90,91} Next to this, women and girls who are unable to pay bribes at checkpoints are reportedly coerced and raped by members of the Nigerien security forces:⁹²

We jumped on the Hilux that took us to Agadez and the desert. That was the first time they forced me to have sex, the guys at the desert checkpoint, it was very, very bad.⁹³

Indeed, of those interviewed between 2019 and 2023 as part of the Mixed Migration Centre’s 4Mi dataset, 22 per cent of Nigerian women and 34 per cent of Nigerian girls travelling through Niger reported being subjected to sexual assault – often at the hands of the police, military and border officials.⁹⁴ This violence is characterized by similar gendered exclusion, arising from the same patriarchal narratives valuing women based on their commodification and sexual labour. There are, however, changes as the gendered violence in Edo State is characterized more as structural through women and girls’ marginalization. Instead, both research participants and further research indicated that the closer to Libya they moved, the more direct violence occurred.⁹⁵

Crucially, interviews with people who had moved from Edo State over the last 10 years suggested that the level of violence has been increasing. It appears to have become increasingly embedded in the journeys of those smuggled and trafficked as the Libyan conflict impacted the movement.

Another key influencing factor was the passing of Niger’s Law 2015-36, often called ‘Law 36’.^{96,97} Passed in 2015, the law criminalized the movement of people from Agadez to the Libyan border, despite going against the rights of ECOWAS citizens to travel visa-free throughout member states’ territory.⁹⁸ As a result, the compounds where people moving were held changed frequently to avoid detection from the authorities.⁹⁹ It resulted in worsening food security, water access and sanitation, and reduced access to healthcare leaving many conditions untreated. The number of deaths also increased, as detailed in another Chatham House XCEPT research paper on Agadez’s mobility economy.^{100,101}

⁹⁰ Molenaar, Tubiana and Warin (2018), *Caught in the Middle*.

⁹¹ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (2018), ‘End of mission statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Felipe Gonzáles Morales, on his visit to Niger (1–8 October 2018)’, statement, 8 October 2018, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2018/10/end-mission-statement-un-special-rapporteur-human-rights-migrants-felipe>.

⁹² Molenaar, Tubiana and Warin (2018), *Caught in the Middle*.

⁹³ Adeyinka, Lietaert and Derluyn (2023), ‘It Happened in the Desert, in Libya and in Italy’.

⁹⁴ Mixed Migration Centre (no date), ‘4Mi Interactive: Data direct from migrants’, <https://mixedmigration.org/4mi/4mi-interactive/data-on-mixed-migration> (accessed 1 Feb. 2024).

⁹⁵ Molenaar, Tubiana and Warin (2018), *Caught in the Middle*, ch. 1.

⁹⁶ UNHCR/Refworld (2015), ‘Niger: Loi No. 2015-36 du 26 mai 2015 relative au Trafic Illicite de Migrants [Niger]’, 26 May 2015, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/60a505e24.html> (accessed 15 Dec. 2023).

⁹⁷ Brachet (2018), ‘Manufacturing smugglers’.

⁹⁸ For more detail, see Tinti (2024), *Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route*.

⁹⁹ Molenaar, Tubiana and Warin (2018), *Caught in the Middle*.

¹⁰⁰ Tinti (2024), *Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route*

¹⁰¹ Interview in Agadez, Niger, November 2022.

04 'Abuse-for-profit' in the Libyan conflict economy

Systematic exploitation of people moving has become a defining feature of Libya's post-2011 conflict economy.

Following the movement through Nigeria and Niger and its associated violences, people enter Libya. Since 2011, Libya has experienced three nationwide outbreaks of violent conflict and many episodes of localized fighting. A nationwide ceasefire has largely held since 2020, but has been punctuated by sporadic armed confrontations between a range of rival groups.¹⁰² According to ACLED data, conflict in Libya directly caused nearly 23,500 deaths between January 2011 and December 2023.¹⁰³ While the violence at the time of the initial eruption of the conflict was related to the popular uprising against Muammar Gaddafi, the situation evolved into a quest for territory, power and the resources associated with both.¹⁰⁴

Against this backdrop, Figure 3 – drawn from a Chatham House analysis¹⁰⁵ – identifies six causal loops that, together, shape the relationship between the human-smuggling and -trafficking sector, which governs much of the movement

¹⁰² Reuters via Voice of America (2023), 'Dozens Dead in Worst Violence This Year Between Libyan Factions', 15 August 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/tripoli-clashes-widen-in-worst-fighting-this-year-/7225820.html>.

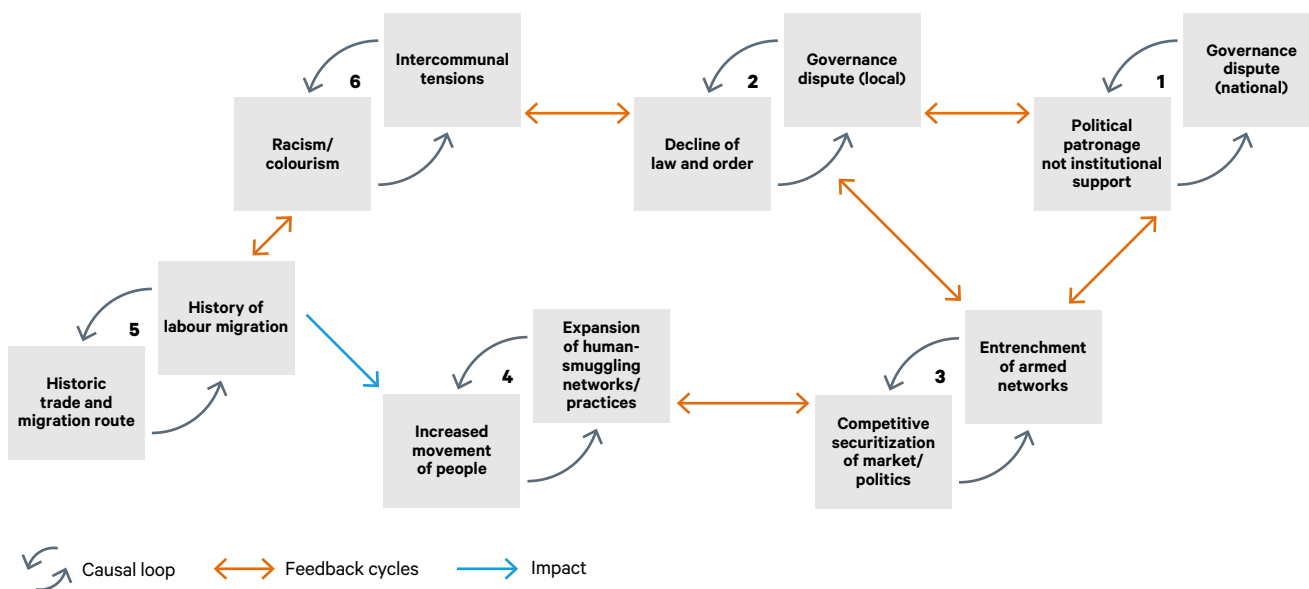
¹⁰³ ACLED collates data on fatalities from three distinct categories of 'disorder': demonstrations; political violence; and strategic developments. For more information, see ACLED (2024), 'ACLED Codebook, 2024', www.acleddata.com (accessed 3 May 2024).

¹⁰⁴ Eaton, T. (2018), *Libya's War Economy: Predation, Profiteering and State Weakness*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://chathamhouse.soutron.net/Portal/Public/en-GB/RecordView/Index/172588>.

¹⁰⁵ A forthcoming Chatham House paper will present a more detailed systems analysis of the development of migrant-smuggling and trafficking-in-persons in Libya since 2010.

of people in Libya, and an endemic conflict economy. Given the multifaceted nature of social systems and the practices in question, this systems analysis is presented for illustrative purposes, and has been simplified as far as practicably possible.

Figure 3. How the exploitation of people moving fuels conflict



Source: Chatham House XCEPT research

Bouts of violent conflict in Libya are representative of a struggle for power among a wide range of social groups and an increasingly entrenched elite.^{106,107} As Loops 1 and 2 in Figure 3 illustrate, disputes over legitimacy, both local and national, over the ownership of territory, and over the system of governance remain unresolved. These two loops have the joint effect of driving the fragmentation of the Libyan security sector.

Following the collapse of Gaddafi’s security apparatus in 2011, the Libyan security sector became a site of open competition, with local groups – some based on kinship and others on locality – developing their own armed factions (Loop 3). While the role of armed groups is much criticized,¹⁰⁸ local communities continue to see the existence of ‘their’ own armed groups as necessary for protection.

This proliferation of armed groups has led to an entrenchment of their interests in political and economic life (Loop 3). These groups have increasingly become direct participants in economic activity. This creates a feedback loop with the governance crises at local and national level (Loops 1 and 2), making a transition to coherent national governance a more distant prospect.

¹⁰⁶ Lacher, W. (2023), ‘Libya’s New Order’, New Left Review blog, 26 January 2023, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/libyas-new-order>.

¹⁰⁷ The Sentry (2023), *Libya’s Kleptocratic Boom*, report, <https://thesentry.org/reports/libyas-kleptocratic-boom>.

¹⁰⁸ There are many such examples. ‘Militias’ have been cited as a key cause of political instability: see, for example, Badi, E. (2022), ‘Armed Groups No Longer: Libya’s Competitive Political Militias’, Milan: Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 6 July 2022, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/armed-groups-no-longer-libyas-competitive-political-militias-35656>. Militias have also been criticized for being responsible for widespread human rights abuses: see, for example, Amnesty International (2017), ‘Libya’s Violent Militias’, 16 February 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/libyas-violent-militias>.

Conflicts between rival armed factions over economic interests have become an enduring feature in Libya.¹⁰⁹ Examples range from battles over strategic transport routes to the capture of economically valuable infrastructure and competition for indirect influence over state institutions.

In this context, the illicit economy has boomed in post-2011 Libya, with human-smuggling and -trafficking one of its principal components (Loop 4). The movement of people along the route from Nigeria is not new.^{110,111} Over the past fifty years, the route has been used as a way to find employment opportunities in North Africa or Europe, including the circular movement of agricultural workers and, subsequently, (forced) sex workers to Italy (Loop 5).^{112,113}

The pre-existing infrastructure and connections were scaled up significantly after 2011 to accommodate the increase in people moving. However, the historical legacies of discrimination – reflecting a combination of racism, colourism and associations of 'foreigners' with the former Gaddafi regime – combined with local disputes over land ownership and governance, have created a hostile environment for foreign nationals in Libya, and laid the ground for systematic abuses (Loop 6). Many sub-Saharan African people experience racist abuse and exclusion in Libyan towns and cities due to the colour of their skin.¹¹⁴

The product of this system is the systematic exploitation of, and violence against, people moving as a defining feature of post-2011 Libya's illicit marketplace and an important source of revenue.¹¹⁵ Chatham House research estimated that human-smuggling and -trafficking generated \$978 million in revenues in Libya at the height of the movement of people in 2016.¹¹⁶

Border externalization and 'abuse-for-profit'

European border externalization policies have resulted in the development of a 'migration management' approach that has delegated management of migration to a network of interlinked private and public actors in Libya.¹¹⁷ The clampdown on people moving towards Europe created a funding stream for the (often violent) disruption of smuggling activities. It provided Libyan security actors with the incentive to clamp down on those activities in return for financial

¹⁰⁹ Lacher (2023), 'Libya's New Order'.

¹¹⁰ Remarks made during an interview on 18 August 2023 with a project officer working at Idia Renaissance.

¹¹¹ Ellis, S. (2016), *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, p. 16–17.

¹¹² Carling (2005), 'Trafficking in Women from Nigeria to Europe'.

¹¹³ Federal Migration Centre (MYRIA) (2018), *Trafficking and smuggling of human beings: Minors at major risk*, annual report, Brussels: Federal Migration Centre, p. 62, <https://www.myria.be/files/RATEH-EN-2018-DEF.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ Amnesty International (2020) 'Libya: New evidence shows refugees and migrants trapped in horrific cycle of abuses', press release, 24 September 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/libya-new-evidence-shows-refugees-and-migrants-trapped-in-horrific-cycle-of-abuses>.

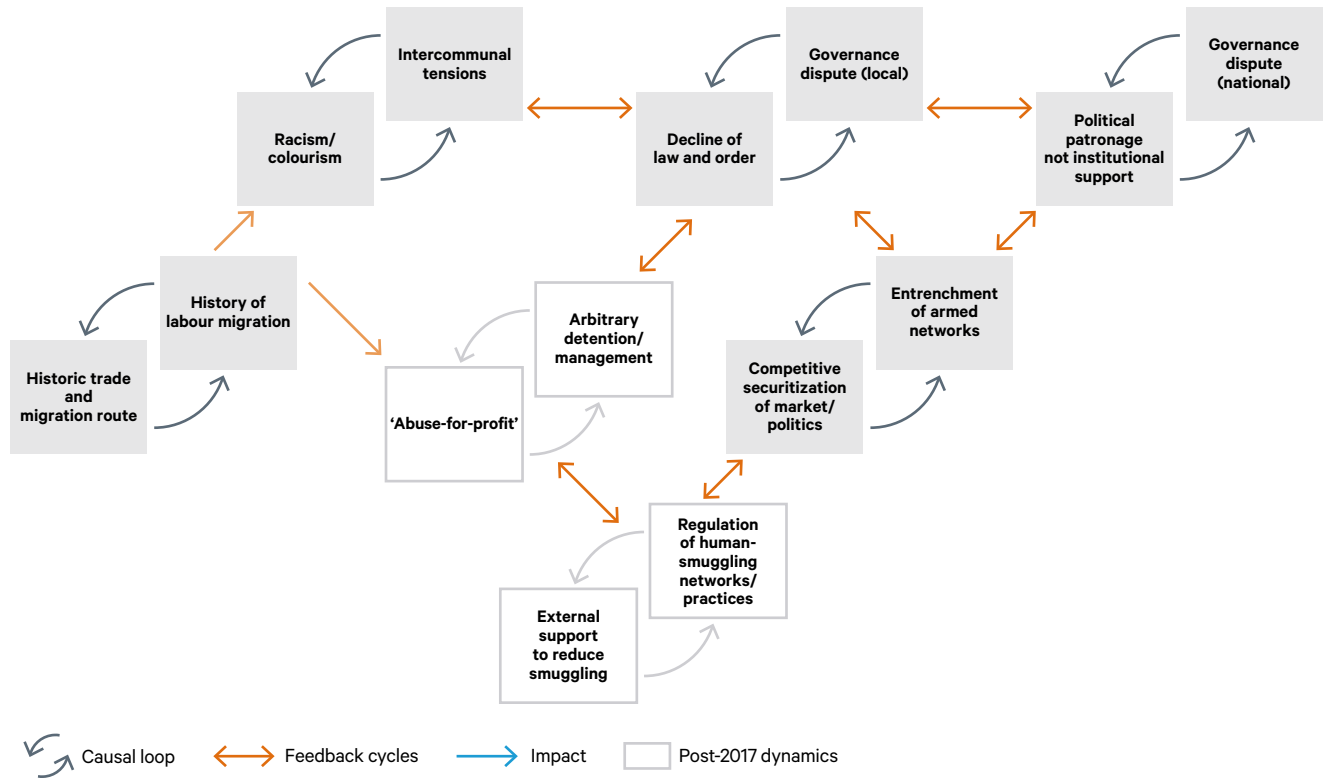
¹¹⁵ Micallef, M. (2017), *The Human Conveyor Belt: trends in human trafficking and smuggling in post-revolution Libya*, research report, Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/report-the-human-conveyor-belt-trends-in-human-trafficking-and-smuggling-in-post-revolution-libya>.

¹¹⁶ Eaton (2018), *Libya's War Economy*.

¹¹⁷ Pacciardi, A. and Berndtsson, J. (2022), 'EU border externalisation and security outsourcing: exploring the migration industry in Libya', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(17), pp. 4010–28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2061930>.

and political support from Europe via the Libyan state.¹¹⁸ These shifts thus reconditioned the functioning of the human-smuggling and -trafficking sector, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4. How external intervention 'regulated' human-smuggling and -trafficking practices



Source: Chatham House XCEPT research

The lure of income from the sector lingers, and security actors have been found to be playing both sides by facilitating the movement of people as well as, at times, closing down smuggling and trafficking activities. A sprawling set of security actors that largely operate outside of the legal framework of the Libyan state therefore now plays a dual role as both enforcer of the state's anti-migration policies and participant in the subversion of those policies. This duality has determined the 'regulation' of the sector, as Loop 7 shows above.¹¹⁹

The result is a vicious cycle in which both people's movement and the restricting of this movement have become profitable industries for armed groups competing and cooperating in Libya's conflict economy. These dynamics have enabled what has been referred to as a system of 'abuse-for-profit'¹²⁰ or a 'trafficking–detention–extortion complex',¹²¹ which is intimately tied to patterns of detention and

¹¹⁸ Michael, M., Hinnant, L. and Brito, R. (2019), 'Making misery pay: Libya militias take EU funds for migrants', Associated Press, 31 December 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-tripoli-ap-top-news-international-news-immigration-9d9e8d668ae4b73a336a636a86bdf27f>.

¹¹⁹ Yousef, L. and Eaton, T. (2023), 'The dual face of migrant smuggling in Libya', *The New Arab*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/dual-face-migrant-smuggling-libya>.

¹²⁰ Al-Dayel, Anfinson and Anfinson (2023), 'Captivity, Migration, and Power in Libya'.

¹²¹ Kirby, P. (2020), 'Sexual violence in the border zone: the EU, the Women, Peace and Security agenda and carceral humanitarianism in Libya', *International Affairs*, 96(5), p. 1219, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa097>.

exploitation (Loop 8). Put simply, the mistreatment of people moving has become systematized to fund Libya’s conflict economy by generating revenues through exploitation and abuse.¹²²

The extraction of funds through mistreatment takes a number of different forms. Armed groups affiliated with the Libyan state gain access to public funds via the administration and management of detention centres where people moving are held captive and imprisoned.¹²³ Such access has turned the imprisonment of people into an industry that directly funds violent conflict. The potential for profit has also led to further violent exploitation of the people confined.¹²⁴

This violence, enacted beyond the captivity and including beatings, starvation, and sexual assault and rape, is central to three other funding mechanisms. First, further funds are raised through the extortion of detainees and their relatives. Beatings are used to extort ransom payments from family members in Edo State, Europe or elsewhere along the routes of movement. The nature of the extortion approaches was detailed by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights:

Many persons interviewed who had been detained or otherwise deprived of their liberty stated that they were requested to call family members to ask them to transfer money to secure their release. According to a man who was detained in [Sebha], ‘they came to us every day. They would beat those who would not make the call’.¹²⁵

Second, violence is used to facilitate and exact compliance during ‘the “renting out” of detainees’¹²⁶ for the purposes of forced labour – for instance, on farms and construction sites. As one returnee described:

They forced us on the farm, we were not being paid... I would say that just 30 per cent [of the men] work and get paid, but most of the times when you get employed by the Libyans, they don’t pay you and they put you [in captivity] there.¹²⁷

Finally, sexual slavery has become a defining feature of the exploitation of people moving through Libya.¹²⁸ The women returnees interviewed as part of this research all highlighted confinement to ‘connection houses’ used for forced sex work, while the practice of trafficking women and girls for the purposes of (forced) sex work permeated all discussions.¹²⁹ In many cases, men and women are transported separately, which facilitates such practices.¹³⁰

¹²² Kirby (2020), ‘Sexual violence in the border zone’.

¹²³ Ibid. In Libya, there are four types of detention centres, three of which are official due to their affiliation with government ministries and including one that part of the Ministry of Interior’s Department for Combatting Illegal Migrants (DCIM) responsible for migrant detention. The fourth type is informal and also designed to detain migrants. For both the formal and informal migrant detention centres, it has been difficult to determine numbers, partly because they move around, close and reopen frequently.

¹²⁴ As the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) unequivocally stated in a recent report: ‘It is beyond question that significant revenue arising from the widescale exploitation of vulnerable irregular migrants incentivized the continuation of the violations documented.’ See UN Human Rights Council (2023), *Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya* [Advanced Edited Version], report, Geneva: Office of the United Nations Human Rights Council, <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/report-independent-fact-finding-mission-libya-ahrc5283-advanced-edited-version-enar>.

¹²⁵ See UN Human Rights Council (2016), *Investigation by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on Libya: detailed findings*, Geneva: Office of the United Nations Human Rights Council, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/LY/A_HRC_31_CRP_3.pdf.

¹²⁶ Al-Dayel, Anfinson and Anfinson (2023), ‘Captivity, Migration, and Power in Libya’.

¹²⁷ Remarks shared during an interview on 18 August 2023 by two men returnees, unemployed.

¹²⁸ The UNHRC determined that sexual exploitation had occurred in, at least, Bani Walid and Sabratha detention centres as a mechanism to raise funds. See UN Human Rights Council (2023), *Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya* [Advanced Edited Version], agenda item 10.

¹²⁹ Remarks shared during various interviews on 19 August 2023 with women returnees.

¹³⁰ Remarks shared during an interview with a man Nigerian smuggler, Sebha, November 2018.

Though experiences of men being exploited through forced labour, torture and imprisonment are more commonly documented, further research has shown that 'rape and sexual violence against both men and women' have been endemic in the treatment of Nigerian people moving to Libya.¹³¹ Men returnees interviewed also highlighted experiences of sexual assault and rape: 'They harass the girls, they harass the boys, they sleep with the boys'.¹³²

When combined with increasingly hostile European measures to clamp down on crossings of the Mediterranean from Libya, these complex internal dynamics in Libya help to explain why there has been a reduction – but not a collapse – in the numbers of people able to reach Europe. Most research participants in Edo State, including returnees, indicated that their ultimate objective when moving from Edo State was to cross the Mediterranean and reach Europe. However, over the last decade, as the conflict in Libya has continued, fewer people have successfully reached Italy.¹³³ People are stopped while travelling through Libya, held captive in detention centres, deported, or, if they are able to start their journey across the Mediterranean, are sent back to Libya. In 2018, 49 per cent of the people attempting to cross the Mediterranean were returned by either the coastguard or smugglers.¹³⁴

Nigerians as participants and victims in Libya's conflict economy

The number of Nigerians, and particularly those from Edo State, who are part of this 'abuse-for-profit' system is hard to determine. In 2017, 'IOM [estimated] that as many as 100,000 Nigerian migrants were stranded in Libyan prisons awaiting repatriation'.¹³⁵ In this same year, IOM reported that 'of the 119,000 migrants who arrived in Italy, 18,185 were Nigerian, 5,425 of whom were women',¹³⁶ and that 4,316 Nigerians were returned by international organizations from Libya, 4,000 of whom came from Edo State.¹³⁷

IOM estimates that approximately 80 per cent of Nigerian women and girls arriving in Europe were subject to human trafficking and 94 per cent were from Edo State.^{138, 139} These estimates mirror earlier figures from 2001 indicating that '[a]pproximately 95 per cent of the Nigerian women trafficked to Italy

¹³¹ Kirby (2020), 'Sexual violence in the border zone', p. 1218.

¹³² Remarks shared during an interview on 18 August 2023 by two men returnees, unemployed.

¹³³ Elbagir, N., Razek, R., Platt, A. and Jones, B. (2017), 'People for sale: Where lives are auctioned for \$400', CNN World, 15 November 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/14/africa/libya-migrant-auctions/index.html>.

¹³⁴ Missing Migrants Project (undated), 'Migration Within The Mediterranean', <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean> (accessed 1 Feb. 2024).

¹³⁵ Beber and Scacco (2022), *The myth of the misinformed migrant?*.

¹³⁶ International Organization for Migration (2019), 'Voodoo Curses' Keep Victims of Trafficking Under Bondage', 19 March 2019, <https://www.iom.int/news/voodoo-curses-keep-victims-trafficking-under-bondage>.

¹³⁷ U.S. Department of State (2019), '2019 Trafficking in Persons Report: Nigeria', report, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-trafficking-in-persons-report-2/nigeria>.

¹³⁸ International Organization for Migration (2017), 'UN Migration Agency Issues Report on Arrivals of Sexually Exploited Migrants, Chiefly from Nigeria', press release, 21 July 2017, <https://www.iom.int/news/un-migration-agency-issues-report-arrivals-sexually-exploited-migrants-chiefly-nigeria>.

¹³⁹ International Organization for Migration (2019), 'Voodoo Curses' Keep Victims of Trafficking Under Bondage'.

for the purpose of prostitution come from Benin City in Edo State'.¹⁴⁰ Focus group respondents also indicated that while 'irregular migration' had reduced, human-trafficking had not, suggesting that traffickers have found new ways of circumventing authorities and that potentially more people are remaining in Libya. This may explain why the reported number of Nigerians crossing from Libya to Europe dropped to just 0.8 per cent of all people crossing in 2022.¹⁴¹

While the movement of people predominantly flows from Edo State to Libya, there are also connections that go back the other way. These connections are mainly to manage the movement of people. This entails people from Edo State acting as participants in Libya's conflict economy, illustrating the connections between exploitation in both locations. Comparatively little attention has thus far been paid to non-Libyan smugglers operating in Libya. Nigerians are believed to make up a significant proportion of these non-Libyan smugglers,¹⁴² and, by their own accounts, they do much of the work in getting people from Edo State to Libya and beyond.

Crucially, the distinction between people on the move and 'smugglers' is not as clear-cut as might be assumed. For example, among a group of 16 Libya-based Nigerians engaged in smuggling interviewed by the Mixed Migration Centre and Chatham House in 2018, all were or had been part of smuggling practices when they moved themselves. Others reported engaging in the sector as a means of funding their own travel, which they were still seeking to continue.¹⁴³

Nigerians present in Libya prior to 2011 – including those from Edo State – were well placed to enter the expanding smuggling business, owing to their connections in Libya and in their country of origin. But some Nigerians engaged in the smuggling sector noted that they had been compelled to enter the smuggling and trafficking business because their previous livelihoods had collapsed following the overthrow of Gaddafi and the economic catastrophe that ensued. One well-established smuggler, who claimed to have been in Libya since 2002, said he was no longer able to send money back to his family in Nigeria following the collapse of the local economy in Sebha:

When the government collapsed, let me be honest, I won't lie to you, that my handwork [as an interior designer] collapsed... by pressure of things, my family, we suffer... I find it much difficult, so I have to join what is happening, what is in vogue, which is the transportation business.¹⁴⁴

Nigerians engaged in the smuggling sector use connections in Edo State, their common language skills and cultural affinity to recruit people, and are also believed to use these connections to exploit those on the move and their families,

¹⁴⁰ Aronowitz, A. (2001), 'Smuggling and Trafficking in Human Beings: the phenomenon, the markets that drive it and the organizations that promote it', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, 9(2), pp. 163–95, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1011253129328>.

¹⁴¹ Frontex (2022), 'Migratory Map', <https://www.frontex.europa.eu/what-we-do/monitoring-and-risk-analysis/migratory-map>.

¹⁴² 98 of the 202 smugglers known to be operating in Libya by the Mixed Migration Centre in 2018 were Nigerian. The next most common nationality was Ethiopian.

¹⁴³ Remarks made by Nigerian smugglers during interview, November–December 2018.

¹⁴⁴ Remarks shared during an interview with a man Nigerian smuggler, Sebha, November 2018.

such as through the demand for ransoms. By leveraging their property ownership and territorial control, their Libyan counterparts skim off much of the non-Libyans' earnings via rents or informal taxation.

Those interviewed acknowledged that such abuses took place, but often denied any personal involvement or gave justifications, such as 'clients' being unable to pay their debts.¹⁴⁵ Nonetheless, abuses were noted by smugglers interviewed:

So they put them in the place that we call 'ta'anka' [a detention centre] here, so they ta'anka them to beat them to control more money.¹⁴⁶

Interviewees also described managing activities that appear to entail trafficking. One Nigerian established in the smuggling business reported a 'hire purchase' model for Nigerian women operating as domestic workers in Libya. Under this scheme, the women were described as receiving payment for their roles once their travel fee was paid off.¹⁴⁷ But it was clear that these women would have had little recourse if their 'employers' continued to withhold payment after this point.

Nigerians engaged in the sector stated bluntly that they had little control over much of the activity they were involved in, noting that they had little recourse if a rival Libyan armed group intercepted their convoy or if the people in that convoy ended up in detention.¹⁴⁸ In some cases, however, the interviewees claimed to hold direct relationships with Libyan police and detention centre officials that they could leverage.¹⁴⁹ These relationships reportedly included state authorities arresting Nigerians moving and releasing them into the custody of smugglers. Travellers also reported that smugglers would tip off the authorities about sea crossings, so that people moving would be intercepted at sea and prompted to try to cross – and pay – again at a later date:¹⁵⁰

The police are also engaged in the activities... by arresting the [women] and selling them to smugglers... I was confined in their custody [in Tripoli] for some days before one of them took me out and drove me to one smuggler and handed me over.¹⁵¹

These dynamics show the difficulty in distinguishing between Nigerian smugglers, traffickers and those being exploited by the 'abuse-for-profit' system – with far-reaching implications for policy. Together, these elements show the extent of abuses experienced by people travelling through Libya, the different mechanisms used to generate funds and the centrality of this transnational movement of people to the conflict economy.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Remarks shared during an interview with a man Nigerian smuggler, Sebha, November 2018.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Remarks shared during an interview with a man Nigerian smuggler, Libya, November–December 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Remarks shared during an interview with a man Nigerian smuggler, Tripoli, December 2018.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Interview with a woman Nigerian smuggler, Sebha, November 2018.

¹⁵² Eaton (2018), *Libya's War Economy*.

05

Tracing the 'continuum of violence'

The experiences of violence that underpin various stages along the route from Edo State form a 'continuum'. Examining this continuum reveals the connection between the different types of violence but also, crucially, how they fuel the Libyan conflict.

The conflict and violence detailed in Libya and Edo State, and along the route between them, share characteristics and are based on interconnected social dynamics. It is possible to discern a 'continuum of violence' that moves between the two countries, and in which conflict and violence (re)produce each other (Figure 5). Viewed through this lens, the gendered and economic structural violence in Edo State becomes interconnected with the movement of people and, subsequently, the 'abuse-for-profit' system in Libya. This system has, in turn, helped to perpetuate violent conflict in that country and frustrated efforts to resolve Libya's governance crisis.

First, the violence enacted in Libya against people originating from Edo State relies on economic exclusion to fuel the conflict economy. In Edo State, economic inequity can be seen in the reliance on loans and remittances, as well as in the family attitudes to the trafficking of women and girls due to the lack of economic alternatives.

This economic exclusion continues during the journey from Edo State, with people moving being hidden or forcibly held in compounds. Captivity, a lack of appropriate living standards and beatings by smugglers and traffickers often occur because the people moving lack sufficient funds to pay their captors – a result of the economic inequity in Edo State.¹⁵³ This inequity is also exemplified by forced

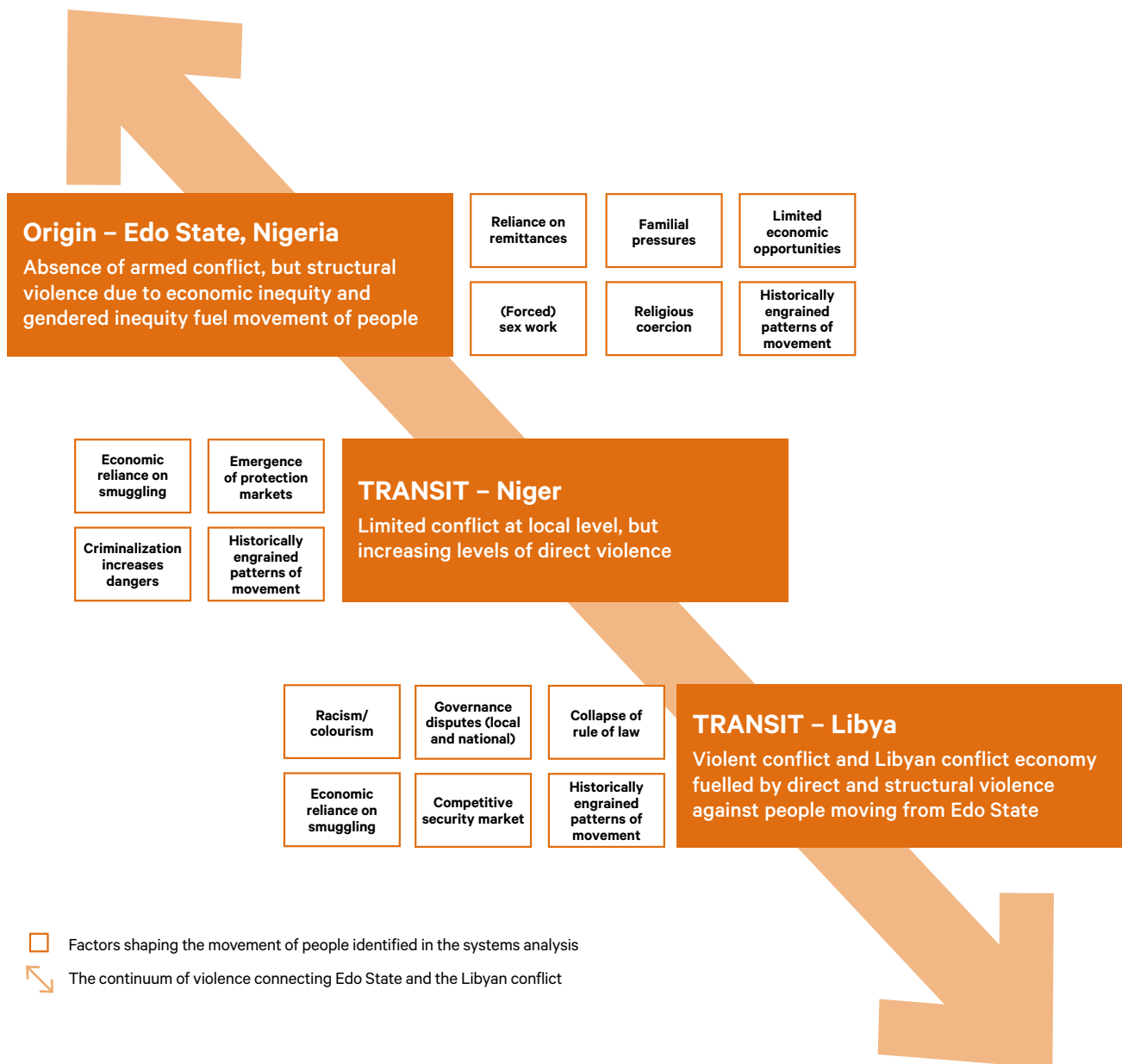
¹⁵³ Molenaar, Tubiana and Warin (2018), *Caught in the Middle*.

Tracing the 'continuum of violence' between Nigeria and Libya

How the movement of people from Edo State fuels the Libyan conflict economy

labour at gold-mining sites, where young men from Nigeria can be coerced into working in unsafe conditions to raise funds to continue their journey.¹⁵⁴ Then, in Libya, this economic exclusion is demonstrated by the captivity and enslavement of people with limited economic opportunities and, therefore, limited ability to purchase – or otherwise secure – their freedom. It results in forced labour on farms, construction sites and as part of armed groups. The entire cycle of economic inequity becomes further exacerbated when violence against those who have travelled to Libya is used to extort their families back in Edo State. Those families likely to need the remittances from labour abroad most are instead pushed further into debt.

Figure 5. The 'continuum of violence' between Edo State and Libya



Source: Chatham House XCEPT research

¹⁵⁴ Tinti (2024), *Tackling the Niger–Libya migration route*.

Second, the violence against people from Edo State in Libya, and the conflict economy it fuels, also rely on gendered exclusion. The prevalence of (forced) sex work, sexual violence and sexual exploitation of minors in Edo State has created an environment conducive to the exploitation and trafficking of women. These gendered dynamics continue along the journey to Libya in the form of both (forced) sex work and sexual abuse at the hands of security and border personnel. In Libya, this cycle continues through both the sexual slavery described by many of the returnees and the sexual abuse of women and girls (and of men and boys) used as a way of extorting funds or obtaining compliance with forced labour. These processes not only span across borders, with women and girls often experiencing all of these dynamics in each of the locations as they move. They are also related to historical antecedents, as people moving from Edo State to Italy increasingly became part of the sex industry there, creating a pattern along the route of movement and a knowledge of the practice in Edo State.^{155, 156}

Both the underlying gendered and economic dynamics are therefore transnational and part of the 'abuse-for-profit' practices in Libya, creating the conditions for the exploitation of people to generate revenues.¹⁵⁷ These dynamics are cyclical, rather than linear or unidirectional. This cyclical nature is demonstrated in the way the continuum of violence spans both time and place. For instance, the physical impacts of the sexual violence experienced both during the movement and in Libya directly affect returnees in Edo State. A gynaecologist in Benin City indicated that women and girls often return with gynaecological health issues.¹⁵⁸ These issues can be linked to reports in Libya of women and girls' 'abuse and rape by guards, leading in some cases to pregnancy and death from forced abortion'.¹⁵⁹

The result is that a growing subsection of women returning to Edo State are unable to have children, have significant gynaecological health issues or are undergoing early menopause due to the removal of their uterus. Health concerns such as these do not just impact a society in the short term, but demonstrate how a continuum of violence taking place across vast geographical distances can have multigenerational impacts.

In many respects, constant reproduction is the crux of the continuum of violence linking Edo State and Libya. Over the past decade, secondary research and interviewees have indicated that the level of violence and coercion has increased along the route of movement alongside the growing violence in Libya. This increase does not mean that the Libyan conflict was the sole catalyst for the continuum, nor that existing violence in the movement process caused the Libyan conflict. However, pre-existing structural and direct violence, in Libya and transnationally connected to other geographies, have become a vector of the Libyan conflict economy.

¹⁵⁵ Carling (2005), 'Trafficking in Women from Nigeria to Europe'.

¹⁵⁶ Federal Migration Centre (MYRIA) (2018), *Trafficking and smuggling of human beings*.

¹⁵⁷ Al-Dayel, Anfinson and Anfinson (2023), 'Captivity, Migration, and Power in Libya'.

¹⁵⁸ Remarks shared during an interview with a gynaecologist in Benin City.

¹⁵⁹ Kirby (2020), 'Sexual violence in the border zone', p. 1218.

06

Policy implications

Disrupting the ‘continuum of violence’ linking the movement of people to the Libyan conflict economy will require both a transnational approach and policy tools beyond those traditionally associated with conflict response.

This paper has shown how structural violence in Edo State relates to structural and direct violence along the movement of people, and how both connect to and fuel the Libyan conflict. A continuum of violence lens therefore makes clear the significant role that the movement of people has not only in fuelling the Libyan conflict economy that has engulfed Libya for over a decade, but also in the vicious cycles of violence in Edo State.

Consequently, the paper argues that a systematic and transnational approach to conflict response must be developed to sustainably tackle the interconnected violences observed. Such an approach must consist of interventions in multiple geographies, and will require policymakers to consider how their policies on a range of issues – from development to different forms of capacity-building and conflict response – relate to one another.

This paper shows such an approach in action. In the context of the Libyan conflict, the amount of violence related to the movement of people and its close connection to the conflict economy make this transnational flow particularly relevant. Based on the analysis conducted in this paper, four overarching policy priorities are proposed below. First, the policy tools used to mitigate the violences produced in the movement of people from Edo State to Libya should be expanded beyond only those associated with law enforcement, such as sanctions or border closures. Second, and connected, there is a need to take a wider view of who should be considered a stakeholder in conflict reduction and prevention. Third, and in keeping with the previous two priorities, policymakers need to emphasize people’s experiences of violence and conflict. Fourth, and finally, policymakers must consider how other policy and programmatic interventions impact conflict – in the case of Libya, primarily border and migration management.

Drawing on this paper's systems analyses, each of the following broad recommendations includes a specific potential intervention identified along the transnational movement of people to illustrate how the approach might be implemented.

Viewing the movement of people through an expansive transnational conflict lens

The movement of people to Libya from Nigeria is underpinned by conflict and violence. For policymakers, this movement must therefore be considered through a conflict lens that includes the full range of violences and deaths discussed in this paper. A wider 'conflict and violence' lens – instead of a narrower one focused on 'border and migration management' – will help conceptualize the question of the movement of people to Libya in a way that allows for productive responses.

Existing policy approaches have viewed conflict resolution in a limited fashion. For example, stabilization policies to date have prioritized the division of state resources between rival elites – almost exclusively men – as a means of securing peace in Libya and have, therefore, had the effect of entrenching the same conflict dynamics which make people a conflict resource.¹⁶⁰

Such approaches have had the effect of limiting the people, sectors or deaths considered *relevant* to resolving conflict. This provides a means of making conflict analysis more manageable for policymakers. However, such an approach risks missing the expansive nature of the conflict and, resultantly, ignores the second-order effects of conflict – for instance, human-smuggling and trafficking-in-persons. The continuum of violence perspective highlights the need for inclusive peacebuilding concepts, which are a staple of feminist approaches to conflict.¹⁶¹ Inclusive peacebuilding emphasizes the need to expand assumptions about which stakeholders are relevant to conflict and its resolution. Inclusive approaches further highlight the need to expand our understanding of which violences and deaths are related to or a result of conflict – not limited to battlefield deaths – and which sectors of the economy should be considered part of a conflict.¹⁶²

Addressing violent conflict in Libya, but also violence along the movement of people and in Edo State, will require international donor countries to aim for more than just stabilization. It will require reassessing who is considered a stakeholder to identify a broader range of relevant actors; working towards democratization of access to resources; and adopting a human rights-based approach that considers people's needs and addresses a wider range of violences and abuses.

¹⁶⁰ Mansour, R., Eaton, T. and Khatib, L. (2023), *Rethinking political settlements in the Middle East and North Africa: How trading accountability for stability benefits elites and fails populations*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135652>.

¹⁶¹ Inclusive peacebuilding is emphasized in the 'participation' pillar of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, on women, peace, and security. See United Nations Peacemaker (2000), 'S/RES/1325. Security Council Resolution on women and peace and security', October 2000, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/105>.

¹⁶² de Haan, L. J. A. (2024, forthcoming), 'A continuum of violence approach for transnational conflict response', *Global Policy*.

Unlocking additional policy tools

By expanding the stakeholders, sectors, violences and deaths considered as part of a conflict, a feminist approach unlocks an expanded policy toolbox to mitigate the violences produced by the transnational movement of people. Sanctions, border closures and kinetic attacks, for example, are traditional tools to address conflict and deal with conflict actors. Instead, many other tools that could effectively address conflict would traditionally be considered part of development programmes.

Such tools need to be implemented transnationally in response to conflicts or, where they are already implemented to respond to conflict, be considered part of a transnational approach. For instance, programmatic interventions aimed at reducing structural violence in Edo State could make people less likely to become vulnerable to human-smuggling and -trafficking recruitment. Such outcomes would undermine the 'trafficking–detention–extortion complex'¹⁶³ by reducing the source of people most likely to become its victims.

One way to address both the economic/class-based and gender-based inequity and related structural violence may be through the agricultural sector in Edo State, building on existing initiatives. Many of the focus group respondents indicated the importance of agriculture to the state's economy, as well as the current difficulties faced by farmers and the sector at large in Nigeria. These difficulties have also been linked to concerns about food prices, increased food insecurity and the loss of agricultural land.¹⁶⁴ Therefore, support for the agricultural sector could help redress some economic inequities by creating sustainable opportunities for employment. As much of the labour in the sector is performed by women, additional support could also address gender-based inequity by both opening up economic opportunities and giving women greater autonomy over decision-making on topics such as migration and sex work.^{165, 166}

The federal government of Nigeria and the Edo State government have committed to fostering agricultural development in recent years. Opportunities are already available for international programming to play a bigger role in such initiatives, and existing initiatives can be expanded. For example, in 2020, the FCDO-funded SoSiN programme proposed expanding the Lagos Agripreneurship Programme operating in Lagos State to cover Edo State.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, a senior figure in Edo State's Ministry of Agriculture highlighted the ongoing and 'sustainable'¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ Kirby (2020), 'Sexual violence in the border zone', p. 1219.

¹⁶⁴ Remarks shared during a focus group in Idofo on 17 August 2023 by a woman working as a teacher.

¹⁶⁵ Ofuoku and Uzokwe (2012), 'Rural Dwellers' Perception of Human Trafficking and its Implication for Agricultural Production in Edo State, Nigeria'.

¹⁶⁶ Ohonba and Agbontaen-Eghafona (2019), 'Transnational Remittances from Human Trafficking and the Changing Socio-Economic Status of Women in Benin City, Edo State Nigeria'.

¹⁶⁷ This programme was initially named 'AGRIC Yes'. See Itad (2020), *SoSiN Programme and Evaluation*.

¹⁶⁸ Okoro, C. (2022), 'Edo seeks collaborative investment in oil palm production', *BusinessDay*, 14 June 2022, <https://businessday.ng/agriculture/article/edo-seeks-collaborative-investment-in-oil-palm-production>.

Edo State Oil Palm Programme, which has used degraded forests to expand palm oil and cassava production in the state:

It currently employs 1,900 Edo [people], especially the youth and women... has been supported by the World Bank... [and] has also yielded billions of Naira in revenues for the State as well as the generation of electricity for communities where the programme operates.¹⁶⁹

Though the state ministry representative expressed a clear preference for domestic funding for such programmes, they stressed the importance of, and opportunity for, international funding that builds on the World Bank's limited support.¹⁷⁰

Reflecting experiences of conflict and violence in policy terminology

The use of language that is inclusive and acknowledges the depth and breadth of exclusion and abuses suffered is a necessary step in developing effective solutions. Such an approach requires an acknowledgement of the tensions between international 'border and migration management' approaches and peacebuilding approaches in Libya. For instance, important questions remain over how distinctions are drawn between funding humanitarian provision and financing the detention centres themselves.^{171,172}

In all of the journeys discussed by research participants, violence, exploitation and coercion were present. Interviewees spoke about forced labour, starvation, imprisonment, forced sex work, sexual assault and rape. Currently, policy and programming work to address this coercion and exploitation as part of certain journeys but not others. Instead, many journeys are statically characterized only as 'migration'. However, all these experiences are abusive and exploitative, making a 'border and migration management' approach ill-suited and potentially violent. It risks underestimating the far-reaching nature of the exploitation and, as a result, further perpetuating existing exclusions and conflict – particularly in the context of Libya where one fuels the other.

The centrality of the violence is increasingly acknowledged by policymakers. For instance, in statements at the UN Security Council meeting on international peace and security, the UK deputy political coordinator linked migration, human-smuggling and exploitation when discussing the treatment of people moving through Libya.¹⁷³ Such acknowledgment can and must be translated

¹⁶⁹ Remarks shared during an interview with senior official of planning, research and statistics in Edo State's Ministry of Agriculture, Benin City, 22 April 2024.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Freedom United (2018), 'Asylum Seeker Sues UK for Funding Libyan Detention Centers', 20 December 2018, <https://www.freedomunited.org/news/asylum-seeker-sues-uk-for-funding-libyan-detention-centers>.

¹⁷² The EU has 'sent more than €327.9 million to Libya, with an additional €41 million approved in early December [2019], largely funnelled through UN agencies'. See Michael, Hinnat and Brito (2019), 'Making Misery Pay'.

¹⁷³ See UK Government (2023), 'The UK calls for political solutions to end the exploitation and abuse of migrants and refugees in Libya: UK statement at the UN Security Council, Speech, Thomas Phipps, UK Deputy Political Coordinator, UN Security Council, New York', 28 September 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-uk-calls-for-political-solutions-to-end-the-exploitation-and-abuse-of-migrants-and-refugees-in-libya-uk-statement-at-the-un-security-council>.

into action by, for instance, extending programming such as the UK's Modern Slavery Fund and Modern Slavery Innovation Fund to Libya and Niger – as many of the experiences at some or all points along the journeys would constitute human-trafficking.¹⁷⁴

Creating more safe and legal routes

The high threshold for legal migration to Europe – in terms of available funds, application process and accessible processing sites and many countries' restrictive migratory management approaches – means that safe, legal routes are inaccessible to many people in Edo State. The creation of further safe and legal avenues for movement would sever some of the connections between Edo State and the Libyan conflict economy.

Currently, awareness campaigns and organizations are educating people on the ways in which safe, legal migration can be accessed. For example, Nigeria's Ministry of Labour and Employment, in collaboration with IOM, has set up migrant resource centres in Benin City (as well as in Abuja and Lagos). While a key part of these centres' role is to provide information to returnees, they are also set up to educate those intending to move on how to do so safely. Supporting and growing these functions would help reduce human-smuggling and -trafficking by making it clear that safe routes may be more accessible than people may think.¹⁷⁵ A focus group respondent also suggested that lower visa fees would help make such routes more accessible and stressed that refunding visa fees to applicants in cases where a visa is denied for reasons beyond the applicant's control would also help reduce financial barriers to safe migration.¹⁷⁶

Improving the accessibility of routes other than those over land must be a part of any efforts to disrupt the continuum of violence. Such a policy does, as it stands, appear contrary to many European countries' current approaches to borders and migration.¹⁷⁷ However, the provision of safe alternative routes is – in both practical and ethical terms – an effective and sustainable solution, given the benefits for those countries in gaining access to a larger labour force, reducing human-smuggling and -trafficking and the associated required response in terms of social and health care, administrative burdens and policing responses, as well as upholding international human rights law.

¹⁷⁴ The section of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children defining human trafficking states: "...“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, 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, for the purpose of exploitation..." See Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2000), 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational organized Crime', 15 November 2000, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

¹⁷⁵ Remarks made during an interview on 18 August 2023 with a project officer working at Idia Renaissance.

¹⁷⁶ Remarks shared during a focus group in Oza on 15 August 2023 by a man working as a teacher.

¹⁷⁷ Olakpe, O. (2020), *The Evolution of EU-Africa Migration Partnerships: Lessons in Transnational Migration Governance*, working paper, Toronto: Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement and Ryerson University, https://www.torontomu.ca/content/dam/centre-for-immigration-and-settlement/tmcis/publications/workingpapers/2020_13_Olakpe_Oreva_The_Evolution_of_EU_Africa_Migration_Partnerships_Lessons_in_Transnational_Migration_Governance.pdf.

There is also space for specific targeted approaches that combine existing relationships and priorities. A specific example could be a review of the UK's seasonal worker visa scheme, especially given the importance of the agricultural sector to Edo State and the existing skills of the population. There is also an opportunity to link this transnationally to the proposed mechanism for supporting the agricultural sector in Edo State – by making capacity-building and access to funds part of temporary visa programmes. Such a scheme would make safe and legal migration more accessible to Nigerians with experience in the agriculture sector, who might be considered low-skilled workers but would be particularly well placed to support the UK's agricultural sector.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁸ Hague, P. (2023), 'Briefing: the Seasonal Worker visa', article, Free Movement, 16 June 2023, <https://freemovement.org.uk/seasonal-worker-visa>.

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Cover image: A Nigerian couple who returned from Libya after being stranded there for several months on their way to Europe, at home in Benin City, 27 June 2019.
Photo credit: Copyright © Fati Abubakar/AFP/Getty Images

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