

Captive commodities

“This route is like a fire”

Commodification, exploitation and missingness
of Ethiopian irregular migrants on the Eastern
Route to Yemen and Saudi Arabia



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A research report by Ravenstone Consult

March 2023

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Acknowledgements

Coordination and management: Ravenstone Consult www.ravenstoneconsult.org

Analysis and writing: Chris Horwood (Ravenstone Consult)

Field researchers: Alemgena Gebreyohannes and Mulye Girma

Reviewers: Ayla Bonfiglio (MMC East and South Africa), Bram Frouws (MMC Director), Jane Linekar (Head of research and 4Mi, MMC)

Image resource: Depositphotos

This report could not be compiled without the invaluable participation of returnee migrants, families of missing migrants and other Ethiopians who voluntarily shared their own painful experiences and perceptions with the researchers. Ravenstone releases these findings and this analysis in the hope that their participation contributes to positive and improved outcomes for future migrants and those who are still missing on the 'Eastern Route'.

The **Mixed Migration Centre (MMC)** generously supported this research work both financially and in their zeal to see it accomplished. Financially, the MMC supported the implementation of this utilising funding from the **Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs** and the **United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office**. However, the information, views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and Ravenstone Consult and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Mixed Migration Centre or any of the other donors supporting the development of this report. Responsibility for the content of this report lies entirely with Ravenstone Consult.

Foreword



by Mixed Migration Centre Director, Bram Frouws

More than ten years ago, the report '[Desperate Choices](#)' was published by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, the predecessor of the Mixed Migration Centre. The report focused on the conditions, risks and protection failure affecting Ethiopian migrants in Yemen and provided a deeply troubling account of their experiences.

Sadly, more than a decade later little has changed, despite multiple reports by MMC, Human Rights Watch, IOM and others. On the contrary, it has arguably gotten worse.

This important report by Ravenstone gives a voice to the Ethiopian migrants who are suffering unimaginable violence and abuse at every step of the way on their migration journeys from Ethiopia, via Somalia or Djibouti, to Yemen and often onwards to Saudi Arabia. It provides shocking testimony of the experiences of dozens of Ethiopians at the hands of smugglers and traffickers, but also state officials in Saudi Arabia, who deliberately shoot and kill migrants at their borders and detain them for months or years in horrible conditions.

No one can read this report and in particular the personal stories and quotes that speak of extreme violence, torture and sexual abuse that are interwoven throughout the whole report, and remain unmoved.

Yet assuming that's the case, where is the public outcry? What strong actions are taken to stop this tragedy? Why don't we read about this situation in the media every day? Have we stopped caring, and became numb in the face of yet more stories of abuse of migrants? Is this route simply too far away from the global north and because the final destination of this route is not Europe, we simply care less?

None of this should be acceptable. It is nothing short of a collective failure and shame that this situation continues as it is. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) — adopted by almost all member states — includes in its guiding principles that member states have an "overarching obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of all migrants, regardless of their migration status". The GCM includes the objectives to "respond to the needs of migrants who face situations of vulnerability, which may arise from the circumstances in which they travel or the conditions they face in countries of origin, transit and destination, by assisting them and protecting their human rights" and to "save lives and prevent migrant deaths and injuries".

After reading this report, one cannot come to any other conclusion than that we fail. We fail to implement the GCM and fail to live up to its standards and to our obligation to protect human rights. Sadly, it would be naïve to think this will be the last report detailing the unacceptable violence that takes place along the Eastern migration route out of the Horn of Africa. But if that is the case, we continue to fail.

As researchers, we need to remain neutral and distant observers. But perhaps, there are also moments where we simply cannot. Where our own findings affect us in such a way, that it almost becomes a moral obligation to speak up and cross the line from research to advocacy or activism. This is the effect this report has had on me personally. I strongly urge all to read this report, to share it, to bring it to the attention of anyone you think can make a difference wherever and whenever you can. It is our collective responsibility as an international community to do so and to act. We owe it to the thousands of Ethiopian migrants, who were simply looking for ways to improve their lives but fell victim to the greed and cruelty of other human beings.

Note on use of terminology

Smuggler: This study uses the term 'smuggler' to refer to all non-state persons involved in recruiting, facilitating, escorting, detaining, exploiting and abusing irregular migrants using the Eastern Route. It uses the Mixed Migration Centre's broad interpretation of the terms 'smuggler' and 'smuggling', 'one which encompasses various activities — paid for or otherwise compensated by refugees and migrants — that facilitate irregular migration. These include irregularly crossing international borders and internal checkpoints, as well as providing documents, transportation, and accommodation. This approach reflects refugees' and migrants' perceptions of smuggling and the facilitation of irregular movement.¹ While it is not always clear when abuses meet the threshold of trafficking on the trafficking-smuggling continuum, smugglers can be responsible for, or complicit in, the detention, abuse and exploitation of refugees and migrants in conditions that may be called 'aggravated smuggling' where a 'range of inhumane and degrading practices' take place.²

The Ethiopian interpreters assisting with this study's interviews with returnees, missing migrant families and other key informants (including government workers, community elders, religious leaders) often used the terms 'broker', 'smuggler' and 'trafficker' interchangeably, hence, their choice of term is retained where they appear in interview quotations throughout this report.

There are grounds to use a variety of terms to describe actors at different stages of the Eastern Route (recruiter, broker, smuggler, trafficker etc.). That being said, to accurately designate different terms would require deeper knowledge of the intent and culpability of individuals concerned, which is beyond the scope of this study. A discussion on the extent of trafficking, smuggling and precarious conditions occurring on the Eastern Route is presented in Section 6.

Exploitation: In this report the term exploitation refers to, 'the act of taking advantage of something or someone, in particular taking unjust advantage of another for one's own benefit (e.g., prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs).³

Commodification: Commodification or commoditisation refers to the transformation of people into objects of trade or commodities to be bought and sold.

Human trafficking: According to the Palermo Protocol, trafficking is defined as "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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs."⁴

1 Mixed Migration Centre (website) [MMC's Understanding And Use Of The Term Mixed Migration And Human Smuggling](#)

2 Save the Children (2022) [Tipping Points to Turning Points](#)

3 EAMR Glossary as quoted in Save the Children (2022) [Tipping Points to Turning Points](#)

4 General Assembly Resolution (2000) [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#)

Introduction and summary of findings

This study focuses on the protection experiences of Ethiopian nationals, travelling east out of Ethiopia via irregular overland journeys towards Saudi Arabia for labour employment. This so-called *Eastern Route* has been the major mixed migration route for Ethiopian irregular labour emigration for well over a decade. A limited number of Ethiopians also apply for asylum with UNHCR in Yemen but the vast majority travel on north to the Yemen/Saudi border.

The research objectives were:

1. to identify the scale and geography of disappearances of Ethiopian refugees and migrants who embark on the risky journey from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia, and
2. to carefully generate an understanding of the experiences of those who disappear while they are in captivity, and
3. to assess the impact of disappearances on affected refugees' and migrants' families and communities.

Two recent reports related to the themes of this study are the 2021 IOM report on the families of missing migrants, and the 2022 Save the Children report on child exploitation and trafficking.⁵ Both focus on Ethiopian migrants, but those using the Central Mediterranean Route. This report focuses on the Eastern Route and despite many similarities with findings from the above reports, argues that a strong case for *exceptionalism* can be made for this route.

Simply put, the Eastern Route out of Ethiopia is unique in its precarity for many, if not most, who travel it and in its entrenched human trafficking dynamics. The brutal methods established by smugglers to facilitate the irregular movement of refugees and migrants along the Eastern Route from Ethiopia to the Arabian Peninsula can be described as a criminal *industry* predicated on the *commodification* of human beings, and not infrequently leading to disappearances and death.

5 Mengiste, T. (2021) [Families of Missing Migrants in Ethiopia: Their Search for Answers, the Impacts of Loss and Recommendations for Improved Support](#). IOM. And, Save the Children (2022) [Tipping Points to Turning Points](#).

This report argues that:

- The Eastern Route is characterised by high levels of migrant *commodification* — probably unseen in any other multi-country route, globally.
- For at least ten years, no other route globally has seen such a consistently high volume of migrants being 'processed' by smugglers and others through it.
- This route is consistently characterised by high levels of brutality, abuse and exploitation, which at times cross the boundaries between smuggling and trafficking compared to other multi-country routes, globally.⁶
- As such, the criminality of smugglers managing this route is unambiguous and therefore it should be considered as distinct from routes in other parts of the world where those organising the movement (smugglers) may be considered benign facilitators or *passeurs* performing a service.
- The reasons why commodification and protection violations are so prominent along this route is that *extortion* is the primary business model for smugglers.⁷
- Taking a multi-year monthly average of approximately 8,300 migrants using the Eastern Route irregularly (excluding Covid years), the extortion business is estimated to be worth at least USD\$9 to USD\$13 million per month, or USD\$ 108 million to USD\$156 million per year. These sums accrue to gangs and their associates (and external bosses if they exist), living in the poorest countries in the world and extracted from some of the poorest communities in the world.
- Deaths and killings are a very real threat to Ethiopians in Saudi Arabia. Apart from the risks of dying of neglect and exhaustion while entering the country or being fired upon by Saudi border forces, they reportedly risk being violated or killed by employers, or can die from neglect while in state prisons awaiting deportation.
- Based on findings from the sample respondents, the prevailing characteristic of this route locates it closer to trafficking practices, and (without question) it is a route where *aggravated* smuggling typically occurs. At minimum, therefore, a mix of trafficking and smuggling practices exists, possibly more correctly described as 'human trafficking for ransom'. It should therefore be regarded as a mis-categorisation to describe the Eastern Route purely as a smuggling route.
- Inherent in this model of premeditated extortion are periods of detention, abduction, kidnapping and the sale and 'rental' of migrants, which are experienced as multiple periods of missingness from the point of view of the migrants' family and friends.
- Not only is temporary 'missingness' a characteristic of this route, but long-term missingness (disappearance) and death. All returnees interviewed for this research witnessed the death of other migrants and many witnessed direct murder.

6 Arguably, the abuse and violations against migrants, especially Sub-Saharan migrant, in Libya is comparable or even worse than those found on the Eastern Route, but these are protection conditions and issues within the country itself, and not practiced along a whole route.

7 Other routes may have a mix of financing models including extortion (e.g., the route out of Ethiopia along the Central Mediterranean Route, through Libya), but on the Eastern Route, extortion appears to be the sole financing model for migrants from the south and east of Ethiopia.

- The impact of missing and returnee migrants on families and communities can be multi-dimensional, inter-generational and debilitating. The impact is little understood and under-researched and warrants deeper analysis leading to greater targeted support.

Before looking at the findings (sections 3 to 5 inclusive) and discussion (section 6) related to the research data, the introduction will briefly establish the context (section 1) and describe the research methodology used (section 2). The findings sections are in three parts, looking first at the commodification and exploitation of migrants (section 3), and then missingness of Ethiopian migrants (section 4), ending with the analysis of the impact of missingness on families, communities and migrants themselves.

Map of the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula



01

Section 01: Context

The rise of the *Eastern Route*

The route through Somaliland and Puntland regions of Somalia, across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen has primarily been used by Somalis fleeing war and drought during the last thirty years or more. As the only country in the Arabian Peninsula which is a signatory to the Refugee Convention, Yemen has been a significant host country for Somali refugees, granting them *prima facie* refugee status since 1988, and for many years had hosted over a quarter of a million Somalis — making it the second largest host country for Somali refugees in the world.⁸ Since 2019, however, the number of Somali refugees in Yemen have been declining dramatically.

The relatively low number of Ethiopian refugees in Yemen (approximately 6,000) has remained stable for the last decade, but the important change in this mixed migratory route is that the number of Ethiopians — in absolute volume and proportion — using the route to enter Saudi Arabia has increased dramatically.⁹ Not only using the same routes and departure points pioneered by Somali refugees, but developing additional routes through various parts of Ethiopia and transiting through Djibouti and Somaliland.¹⁰

8 UNHCR (online) [Refugee Data Finder](#)

9 Mixed Migration Centre (2021). [Opportunities and Risks: Ethiopian women on the eastern mixed migration route between the Horn of Africa and Yemen.](#)

10 ACAPS (2021) [The Eastern Migration Route From Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia - risks and humanitarian needs.](#)

The notion of earning money in the short or medium term in order to then return to Ethiopia has dominated the last two decades' story of Ethiopians choosing Gulf countries (and the Middle East) as their destinations for regular and irregular migration. The intention is rarely to seek permanent settlement through migration, and many have practiced *circular migration* with repeated spells of time working abroad. The possibility of short to medium-term migration has contributed to the culture of migration, as people see the tangible fruits of other people's successful migration in their communities. The impact of any aspect of success in migration appears to have a disproportionate impact on communities giving hope to the enterprise and stimulating yet more people, especially young people, to consider the journey.

According to respondents for this study, news of 'success' such as a remittance payment, new construction or purchase or just a phone call from a relative employed in Saudi Arabia seems to spread around communities rapidly, and appears to override existing negative stories, failed attempts or even the grief of those mourning relatives that have perished in the attempt.

The scale

While the number of migrants traveling along the Eastern Route is still recovering from a significant pandemic-induced decline from early 2020, arrivals in Yemen in recent years have been high and rising.¹¹ In 2018 and 2019 arrivals in Yemen were estimated to have been almost 300,000 — representing a 15-year peak with a monthly average of approximately 12,500 people.¹² Ethiopians represent about 90 percent of the total, with a significant proportion being female (typically 15-20 percent), and many under the age of 18 years (13-15 percent in 2018/19).¹³ Over the last decade, the data suggest that the (irregular) movement of refugees and migrants from Ethiopia to Yemen has been approximately 100,000 people every year. Although this number is a small proportion of Ethiopia's fast-growing population (c.120 million), it represents an extraordinarily large and constant group of *clients* for human smugglers, traffickers and others who profit from their movement in a context of relative impunity. The new *Atlas of Impunity* shows that the Eastern Route is a corridor running through some of the worst countries in the world in terms of human rights impunity — in particular Yemen, but also Saudi Arabia (when compared to its economic status).¹⁴

As for the future, the underlying mixed migration drivers in Ethiopia continue unabated as the country suffers from an economic crisis and a lack of socioeconomic opportunities for the large working population, record-breaking drought¹⁵ and conflict and insecurity in parts of the country. A palpable aspirational 'culture of migration' accompanied by peer pressure or a fear of missing out on potential opportunity has also been identified in certain communities in Ethiopia as a distinct driver, but again normally within a context of

11 Border restrictions and other movement restrictions were implemented between Djibouti and Ethiopia and within both countries during the pandemic as well as in Yemen and Saudi Arabia, causing smuggling operations to be significantly reduced.

12 IOM (2019). [Yemen — Flow Monitoring Points | Migrant Arrivals and Yemeni Returns From Saudi Arabia in 2019](#); and IOM (2018). [Flow Monitoring Points | 2018 Migrant Arrivals and Yemeni Returns from Saudi Arabia](#).

13 For women, *Ibid* (both) and IOM (2021) [Yemen — Flow Monitoring Points | Migrant Arrivals and Yemeni Returns in 2020](#); for children see Save the Children Ethiopia (2021) [Trends, Factors And Risks Of Unaccompanied Child Migration From Ethiopia Through Eastern Migration Routes](#).

14 Eurasia Group (2023) The [Atlas of Impunity](#)

15 Mixed Migration Centre (2023) [Quarterly Mixed Migration Update: Eastern and Southern Africa | Egypt and Yemen](#) Quarter 4 – 2022 And: MMC East and Southern Africa [Snapshot – November 2022 Climate-related drivers of mixed migration in East and the Horn of Africa](#)

poverty and perceived poverty of opportunities.¹⁶ Moreover, Saudi Arabia continues to offer higher wages and is able to absorb significant numbers of formal and informal workers. According to a 2021 ACAPS report on the Eastern Route, *'the number of migrants attempting the journey is likely to increase in the long term.'*¹⁷

The risks

Due to the geographical challenges along the Eastern Route — hot, inhospitable terrain and the Gulf of Aden or the Bab el Mandeb sea crossings — few, if any, refugees and migrants can make the journey to Saudi without smugglers. In addition to relying on smugglers and their vessels for sea crossings to Yemen, Ethiopian refugees and migrants often require smugglers to cross controlled borders (Djibouti, Yemen, Saudi), be shielded from criminal gangs and navigate a country at war (Yemen).

The risks Ethiopian refugees and migrants face along the Eastern Route are considerable and have been the subject of various reports and studies over the last decade or more.¹⁸ Reports of the high number of migrants that drowned crossing from the Horn of Africa to Yemen started to attract attention from the international community in 2008/9, but subsequent scrutiny revealed that for many migrants, abuses and violations characterised the whole journey.¹⁹ Risks continue despite some national and international efforts to address smuggling and trafficking. For its own part, the Ethiopian government has recognised the need for action and has various mass-media awareness programmes and a multi-ministry approach to mitigate irregular migration, assistance to returnees and prosecution of perpetrators. In 2023 the Ethiopian government is considering the ratification of a new all-encompassing Migration Policy.²⁰

Rights violations perpetrated against migrants along this route result in different degrees of missingness for periods of time, such as being held against their will by smugglers, being kidnapped and abducted for ransom by criminals, detained by state officials, sold between smugglers, forced into temporary or longer term 'marriage' with smugglers and subject to forced labour or sexual exploitation. Trafficking-like practices typify the route today, highlighting the limitations of international terminology (smuggling versus trafficking) to fully describe possibly hybrid situations occurring on this Eastern Route. The risks not only affect the migrants themselves but their families and communities can also suffer significantly in terms of their physical and mental health or from having to pay ransoms.²¹ Permanent missingness, where migrants are never heard of again for many years or have perished (normally confirmed by other migrants), also characterises this route. Despite the extent of research and commentary on the risks and conditions migrants face on this route, there has been a gap in terms of identifying missingness and attempting to explain what happens to those who go missing. This report seeks to offer some explanations in response to these knowledge gaps.

16 Adugna, G. (2019) [Migration patterns and emigrants' transnational activities: comparative findings from two migrant origin areas in Ethiopia](#). Comparative Migration Studies Also; Candid et al. (2016) [The "Migrant Hero": Culture of Migration and its Implication on Mate Selection among Hadiya Society, Southern Ethiopia](#)

17 ACAPS (2021) [The Eastern Migration Route From Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia - risks and humanitarian needs](#)

18 Human Rights Watch (2019) [Ethiopians Abused on Gulf Migration Route](#) Also; Meraki Labs (2019) [Protection Context For Migrants Passing Through Yemen A Baseline](#) Also; Human Rights Watch (2014) [Yemen's Torture Camps](#)

19 Also; Mixed Migration Centre (2012) [Desperate Choices - conditions, risks & protection failures affecting Ethiopian migrants in Yemen](#) And; Mixed Migration Centre (2013) [Migrant Smuggling in the Horn of Africa & Yemen: The political economy and protection risks](#) Also; Mixed Migration Centre (2017) [Weighing the Risks: Protection risks and human rights violations faced by migrants in and from East Africa](#). UNHCR (2009) [More than 50,000 people risked perilous Gulf of Aden crossing last year](#) Also; Human Rights Watch (2009) [Hostile Shores](#)

20 Walk Free Foundation (2019) [Ethiopia's new migration policy: A positive step but continued scrutiny needed](#)

21 IOM (2021) [IOM Calls for Action to Support Families of Missing Migrants](#)

02

Section 02: Methodology

The approach chosen for this report is to give the respondents, returnees, families of missing migrants, community representatives and other third parties a voice, resulting in the extensive use of quotes from interviews and discussions throughout this report. Where quotations have been used the English may have been modified and edited to improve comprehension.

It should be noted that although this research was primarily designed to elicit information about missingness, the in-depth interviews conducted exposed high-value and new information about commoditisation and exploitation. These unexpected and detailed findings have led to a final report with additional findings and claims.

Data and Sampling

To understand missingness and commodification along the Eastern Route three groups of respondents were targeted inside Ethiopia:

- 1. Returnees:** Someone who experienced being disappeared, detained or trafficked (and therefore experienced missingness), but who has since returned home.
- 2. Family:** Family members of someone who died or disappeared while migrating along the Eastern Route.

- 3. Key informants:** Someone who has valuable information such as an elder, community leader, priest, community worker or civil society worker and has knowledge of the risks along the route. This category also includes international organisation and NGO representatives.

104 people participated in this research. The core dataset for this study comprises 37 in-depth interviews, and eight focus group discussions (FGDs) (51 participants) were conducted with respondents from all three target groups in two administrative regions (SNNPR — the Southern Nations and Nationalities and People's Region and the East Hararghe Zone of the Oromia) in the east and southwest of Ethiopia during October and November 2022.

In addition, meetings were held with 16 representatives of relevant local and international agencies in Addis Ababa — two virtually to provide further context and triangulate emergent findings. The methodology also included use of secondary sources and existing primary data relevant to the Eastern Route and missing migrants to further corroborate findings.

Figure 1: Sample overview

Data gathering tool	Returnees	Family of missing or deceased migrants	Key informant (Third Party)	Totals
Focus Group Discussion	6	15	30	51
Key informant in-depth interview	25	7	5	37
Meetings with international agency & NGO representatives	—	—	16	16
Totals	31	22	51	104

Of the 31 returnees interviewed, seven were men and 18 were women, all of whom were 18 years of age and older. Of the 51 FGD participants in focus group meetings 33 were male and 18 were female. The majority of representatives of families who have gone missing or deceased migrants were female.

The selection of all participants and respondents for this study was non-random and purposive insofar that the researchers sought out and identified those who belonged to each of the three target groups and were 18 years of age and older. There was no attempt to select a representative sample as the aim of this research was explicitly to investigate the nature of missingness and exploitation related to Ethiopian refugees and migrants traveling along the Eastern Route; hence, an in-depth qualitative research design was the most appropriate.

Research site selection

This study was carried out in two administrative regions, namely the Southern Nations and Nationalities and People's Region (SNNPR) and the East Hararghe Zone of Oromia. These locations were chosen in

the knowledge that they experience out-migration (as do many parts of Ethiopia) and because they were locations that were not experiencing active conflict and instability, and therefore safe for the research team to access.²²

In the east, fieldwork was conducted in East Hararghe Zone of the Oromia, with a focus on Deder and Gorogutu woredas. In Deder, participants living in the nearby rural kebeles and woredas participated. In the case of Gorogutu woreda, there are two towns incorporated in the woreda i.e. Karamile and Boreda. Participants from those two rural towns and some who came from the rural kebeles in Boreda participated. 12 in-depth individual interviews were held in the east as well as 4 Focus Group Discussions (including 24 participants).

In the south, 25 in-depth individual interviews and 4 Focus Group Discussions (with 27 participants) were held in the Alaba, Sankura, Silte, Qibet and Worabe woredas of the SNNPR — the Southern Nations and Nationalities and People's Region.

Study limitations

The main limitation of this study is that the sample size for each target group is relatively small and drawn from just two regions of Ethiopia. By selecting the respondents purposively according to 'missingness' (as described above), the findings may be skewed towards more dramatic experiences of abuse and exploitation on the journey. That being said, many respondents reported that they were at all times in larger groups of migrants who were experiencing similar treatment or conditions, suggesting that the experiences of research participants were not unique. Moreover, this study reached a saturation point when analysing the main themes and findings arising from the data, indicating that while the sample may be limited, the findings are nevertheless robust. This is not to suggest that the findings here are automatically generalisable, but they may indicate the potential for the practices witnessed and experienced by returnees and families of missing migrants to be typical along the Eastern Route.

Some of the women interviewed for this study had travelled along the Eastern Route when they were teenagers (15-17 years of age) and had particularly abusive experiences, often involving multiple sexual assaults and 'transactional rape'. It is possible that the severity of their experiences was linked to their age and vulnerability and so it would be misleading to extrapolate from their experiences that all women on the move faced the same risks. Nevertheless, older female interviewees and many male interviewees also witnessed or experienced rape on the journey and all the experiences documented in this research align with other reports on the dangers along the Eastern Route, as cited elsewhere in this study.

Respondents in this study spoke extensively of human rights violations but, apart from reports of the actions of Saudi officials, they did not identify state officials as perpetrators. Other studies of violations include state officials as key perpetrators of violations against migrants on the move. The focus in this research on the relationship between smuggler and migrants and the focus on missingness may have created an unintended bias during interviews but the total absence of any mention of state actors

²² Unpublished data of the Ethiopia Migration Project confirms this as well as previous research conducted by the author with Save the Children; Save the Children Ethiopia (2021) [Trends, Factors And Risks Of Unaccompanied Child Migration From Ethiopia Through Eastern Migration Routes](#).

throughout the data is curious and needs to be cited as a limitation. This issue is further discussed in section 3.4.

Finally, it is possible that in different regions of Ethiopia smugglers operate differently. The experiences of respondents for this study illustrate conditions that pertain to those travelling from certain communities in the east and south of the country. Respondents claim that those refugees and migrants from Tigray, for example, are handled by Tigrayan smugglers and even use different routes. It is possible that some routes are less extortionate, especially if migrants pay the total smuggling fee up front.²³ Therefore, although migrants interviewed often said they saw many of those around them treated in the same way, they could be only referring to people from similar regions in Ethiopia.²⁴

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the research and the distress the subject caused many of the respondents (especially families of missing migrants and returnees), in-depth interviews were conducted privately and anonymously. All participants were voluntary and gave their informed consent that the information they gave could be used in the research output. They also understood their identity would be anonymised. While transcriptions of each interview and the focus group discussion have been stored, there is no record of the name, specific address or contact numbers of those who participated. The researchers had worked on sensitive ethnographic data gathering projects prior to this one and were trained to be sensitive and empathetic and prepared to halt the interview if at any point the interviewee wished to. Researchers reported that during many interviews the participants were moved to tears as they told their stories.

23 Mixed Migration Centre (2019) [What makes refugees and migrants vulnerable to detention in Libya? – A microlevel study of the determinants of detention.](#)

24 Interview with representatives of the Ethiopia Migration Programme, Addis Ababa. November 2022.

03

Section 03: Commodification and exploitation

An important finding is that where the interviewees made the journey themselves, they not only experienced commodification and exploitation, but witnessed it around them. As such, their testimonies are of value and shed light on the likelihood that these practises are typical and the norm along this route. Although the interviewees were purposefully selected because of particular events they experienced, they all travelled along the same route that thousands of fellow Ethiopians take each month — through Djibouti or Somaliland and Puntland into and through Yemen.

3.1 Deception and consent

Respondents spoke of smugglers making contact with them in various ways. Often smuggler recruiters casually made contact with them in their workplace or at a café or were peer returnees who told them all about the possibilities of migration. According to the Ethiopian Central Statistics Agency, most migrants recruited by smugglers are young with low educational attainment.²⁵ The majority of returnees interviewed for this study were still teenagers or just emerging from their teenage years when they travelled. They were also poorly educated and had limited experience, if any, of life outside of their community areas. These factors combine to increase their vulnerability to being deceived and believing what they are told by smugglers about high wages and guaranteed employment in the Gulf States.

25 Central Statistics Agency (CSA) [Ethiopia] (2021) [Labour Force and Migration Survey Key Findings](#). Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

"I was always wishing and dreaming of talking with my friends about our journey to Saudi Arabia. We talked about the travel to Saudi Arabia and the wealth we are going to obtain [there]. The person who promised my friend to take us for free up to Saudi Arabia was living in Addis Ababa. However, he didn't travel with us. He handed us over to another person who transported us to Jijiga and gave us to different traffickers [sic]. My friends and I were separated in Jijiga."²⁶

Deceit and coercion appear as ubiquitous conditions underpinning the irregular journeys of respondents from Ethiopia. Respondents explained that the pervasive culture of migration and migration success stories they were exposed to in their communities of origin in SPNNR and East Hararghe predispose many would-be migrants to believe recruiters' stories. The deception occurs when the migrant is typically told the journey will be fast and safe and the costs will be low or non-existent. Consent is a pre-requisite of smuggling and one of the defining differences with trafficking. Issues of deception raise some important questions around consent, or the lack of it, and the consensual agreements that Ethiopian migrants enter into, or don't, with their smugglers.

One interviewee described how she was persuaded by a smuggler-recruiter to migrate four years previously when she was 15 or 16 years old and based in Addis, having earlier fled her abusive husband. *"There was a man who used to come to the bakery shop every evening and tell me and my colleagues about traveling to Saudi. He was coming to us every day for a couple of weeks until we were convinced. He told us it would be far better to go to Saudi than work in that bakery. And, it is quite easy, and we don't need to have much money for that. He promised to take care of us and take care of anything that we needed to go there. He said any amount of money in our hand would be quite enough"²⁷*

[B]rokers are the key actors initiating illegal migration in our area.

Respondents' accounts reveal that local smuggling recruiters or brokers are often closely involved in the persuasion of people to migrate and the transportation of would-be migrants from their home areas to towns (typically Addis, Harar, Jijiga or Dira Dawa) where they await onward movement. As per the note on terminology above, these will also be referred to as smugglers. As one focus group participant reported, *"[B]rokers are the key actors initiating illegal migration in our area. They are poisoning our children, badgering them about the fact that they are not able to attend school. They initiate them by telling them inspiring stories, such as the types of houses they are likely to buy after working in Saudi."²⁸* In a 2020 study of youth using the Eastern Route, 94 percent of those asked said that 'smugglers misled them about routes, length of journey, its cost, its conditions, conditions at destination and safety.'²⁹

²⁶ Interview M05

²⁷ Interview M14

²⁸ FGM 04

²⁹ Save the Children Ethiopia (2021) [Trends, Factors And Risks Of Unaccompanied Child Migration From Ethiopia Through Eastern Migration Routes](#)

However, returnees or those wanting to re-migrate can also be main instigators of recruitment, presumably profiting from finding new recruits by some arrangement with main local smugglers. One interviewee was 21 years old when he and two friends were convinced to migrate by a returnee. The returnee acted as if he would join them in the journey but at the last minute pulled out. *"This returnee provided us with the phone number of the "first broker" and then channelled us to him."*³⁰

Agents may recruit one person and promise them that their travel costs will be covered if they recruit another four or five friends to go. This is why in some cases it was common to hear of small groups of friends travelling together — one was ostensibly travelling for free but likely still faced the same extortionist experiences once outside Ethiopia, from which it appears few escape. Respondents explained that youths often travel in small groups along the Eastern Route but can become separated along the way and are rarely permitted to stay together for the whole journey. These separations often account for the lack of information on missingness of fellow migrants by returnees.

Gullible migrants

The initial recruiting smugglers do not charge migrants for their services and often only ask migrants to bring with them just the low local price of transportation to border towns of Ethiopia (for example, Jijiga, close to the border with Somaliland). They explain, vaguely it seems, that the cost of the journey to Saudi Arabia can be attended to later, or even when in Saudi. In one case, the person who approached the migrant in Ethiopia told him that 10,000 birr [\$192 USD] would be enough for the entire route, *"after I started his journey, I found that this was not the case"*.³¹ In many other cases (especially among females thinking of migrating), people are told no payment is needed. Furthermore, they are told not to inform their parents that they are leaving. This was commonly reported by returnees — *"they told us not to tell our families at first but that we could call later after we arrived."*³²

According to respondents, in some cases, a clandestine departure is planned by individuals or groups of friends, but in other cases the migrant's departure is entirely spontaneous, with people persuaded to join friends leaving with them mid-way through an errand or a household task — in these instances, extraordinarily, the migrants leave without money, plans or provisions and often without any idea of the geography or direction they will be taken on.

Elsewhere, migrants' gullibility (and malleability) is more understandable as smugglers masquerade as police officers such as at Jijiga bus station in Ethiopia, or in Yemen, when migrants disembark and are abandoned along the coast; *"a small group of men dressed in police uniforms approached us and persuaded us that they would show us the way (direction) to Saudi Arabia. These people were Yemeni abductors who collaborated with Ethiopian traffickers. They put us female migrants in groups of 10 and took us to the Ethiopian traffickers who had their detention camp near the Yemen-Saudi border."*³³ In another case, *"When we arrived in Yemen, the small boat driver sold 300 migrants to Yemeni traffickers*

30 Interview M23

31 Interview M18

32 Interview M34

33 Interview M07

*who were pretending to be policemen with pickup cars and it seemed they would take all us migrants to the government institution, but they were fake policemen. The traffickers took us to Mohammed's Meshware [sic]."*³⁴

A small group of men dressed in police uniforms approached us and persuaded us that they would show us the way (direction) to Saudi Arabia.

The naivety of would-be migrants who appear not to ask themselves how the smugglers will actually obtain payment for their services is striking. It can be speculated that those who are less naïve may decline to accept smugglers' offers, while those more naïve and gullible end up accepting solicitations from brokers and smugglers and embark on their high-risk journeys and are subsequently featured in studies such as this one. An alternative view is that assuming there is widespread public knowledge of the risks of the journey, including extortion as the payment mechanism, may do so with a degree of self-deception.³⁵ However this assumption may be false — a 2020 report suggests that knowledge of the risks on the Eastern Route are limited, and even where the risks are known or suspected they hardly act as a barrier.³⁶ We could speculate based on this information that only those who are particularly naïve have been recruited into abusive smuggling networks, and many more have not. However, the level of deception described by some interviewees suggests that it is not just a matter of naivety. There is evidence that few people know of the risks of the journey, and this lack of knowledge means more people are likely to accept the unrealistic offers of abusive smugglers. And also, that even those aware of the risks, or suspicious of them, still choose to go.

Those acting as recruiters of migrants for the smugglers must be aware of how the migration is organised and what the condition is with severe rights violations being commonplace. But nothing is mentioned to the would-be migrant. On the contrary, they are reportedly told the journey will be fast and safe and soon they themselves will be high-wage earners in Saudi Arabia.

34 Interview M01

35 Kuschminder, K. and Triandafyllidou, A. (2020), [Smuggling, Trafficking, and Extortion: New Conceptual and Policy Challenges on the Libyan Route to Europe](#). *Antipode*, 52: 206-226

36 IOM (2020) [The Desire to Thrive Regardless of Risk](#)

Freedoms curtailed and commodification from the start

Migrants interviewed frequently spoke of the fact that from the moment they arrived at the 'safe house' in Ethiopia, where they waited for onward transportation, they were under the control of new people and not the recruiting smuggler who had convinced them to migrate. In these houses, the migrants' freedoms are first curtailed and most do not regain their freedoms until they return to Ethiopia months or years later. As none of the migrants interviewed spoke of paying the recruiting agents any fee up front, it may be assumed that the agents received remuneration from those who took over control of the migrants from the 'safe house' onwards.

If migrants get themselves to Ethiopian border areas without smugglers, they soon fall in with those willing to take them onwards. Of over 2,000 Ethiopians interviewed by IOM in 2019 in Obock, Djibouti, 90 percent said they had used smugglers up to that point, with most engaging multiple smugglers (or 'brokers' as IOM refers to them).³⁷ From Obock to cross to Yemen, smugglers are a non-negotiable necessity.

Just within two or three days, they sell you to the next brokers.

Once migrants come under the aegis of smugglers, this is the first point of commodification where their freedom is restricted, and they are moved at the will of, and under the control of, their transporters. One male returnee explained that, *"just within two or three days, they sell you to the next brokers. They didn't even ask us for money. At Wujale [Ethio-Somaliland border], he sold and handed us over to a Somali broker and he returned."*³⁸ The informant made it clear that the first smuggler did not receive money from migrants, but instead received money from the Somali smuggler who bought the migrants from him.

It may be argued that from this point the characteristics of human trafficking become evident as consensual agreement and migrants' agency ends; the migrant's new status is that of being under the control of the smugglers and exploitation and coercion characterise their condition. As one woman described the change in smuggler behaviour as their condition from free agent to captive migrants occurred, *"As soon as we started our journey, the smugglers changed their behaviour. All ten of us friends began our journey from Jijiga using a pickup car that was covered with black plastic. The trafficker, who seemed to be our friend, started to warn us about not making any sound in the car, even if we were tired. When we talked among ourselves in the pickup car, the traffickers stopped the vehicle and warned us that if we made any sounds, bad things would happen to migrants' life and he showed us a pistol."*³⁹

One man interviewed explained how in Jijiga, once he freely agreed to go with a young Tigrayan smuggler to

37 IOM (2020) [The Desire to Thrive Regardless of the Risk: Risk Perception, Expectations and Migration Experiences of Young Ethiopians Migrating along the Eastern Route towards the Arabian Peninsula.](#)

38 Interview M14

39 Interview M06

cross the border he was sent to a compound outside the town with almost 300 other migrants waiting to depart. *"As the compound had guards, nobody could dare to escape. They didn't even allow us to use the toilet, nor they provided us with food and water. Just within two or three days, they sell you to the next brokers. They didn't even ask us for money."*⁴⁰ Here, by agreeing to go with one smuggler (whom he met at the Jijiga bus station and initially described as 'compassionate') the migrant effectively became a commodity to be forcibly kept and potentially sold on even while still within Ethiopia's borders. Across the borders their captivity is more explicit. One respondent described his experiences when held in a fenced compound by an Ethiopian smuggler in Yemen who had fully armed Yemeni guards; *"though we were suffering from hunger, we couldn't move out to beg for anything to eat. The guards were keeping us as a guard keeps a bank."*⁴¹

In Bossaso, one man spoke of how they were kept; *"when they [smugglers] drink and take other drugs, they tie the male migrants together by a chain, especially at night. They used to keep the female migrants to themselves in a separate shelter."*⁴²

I witnessed that two males got away, and one of them managed to escape but one was caught and brought back to the shelter. They beat him badly so that his legs and hands were broken.

Attempted escape was punished harshly. Sometime by death, sometimes by beatings; *"I witnessed that two males got away, and one of them managed to escape but one was caught and brought back to the shelter. They beat him badly so that his legs and hands were broken."*⁴³

Coercion: commodification's necessary companion

Control is characterised by coercion with violence or the threat of violence. The migrants are transported towards the Ethiopian border and once in the border zones and away from urban eyes, many interviewees told of smugglers bearing weapons and arms and forcing migrants to do precisely as they instruct. They reported forced marches, sleeping rough, abandonment, neglect in terms of providing no food or water, extortion, sexual assault and rape, as well as violence and murder. At no point were they free to leave or extract themselves and they were coerced by threats and violence throughout.

Although this level of coercion starts for many inside Ethiopia and along its border areas with Djibouti and Somaliland, it is the foretaste of the conditions persisting all along the rest of the route, perhaps peaking in Yemen where many migrants reported the worst conditions of coercion to exist. Put simply, all interviewees experienced conditions where coercion was the continual and unavoidable reality of their migratory journey

40 Interview M14

41 Interview M14

42 Interview M14

43 Interview M28

however long it took. In most cases, coercion also characterised their experiences in Saudi Arabia. One male respondent reported, *"the situation changes when one travels across the sea to Yemen, where there is an increased and inescapable risk of kidnapping, human trafficking, and disappearance of migrants."*⁴⁴

Coercion is the close companion of commodification. As further sections will illustrate, as commodities *owned* by whichever smuggling gang they are under at any time, Ethiopian migrants are often merely useful as sources of extortion, rent, labour or sexual and sadistic gratification. One migrant spoke of being held by a gang of *"armed bandits with uniforms, all working for Abdulgowi (the Yemeni criminal)[sic]. They had guns with magazines of bullets."*⁴⁵ Compliance, according to respondents, is ensured through brutal violence including murder, example-making punishments (including killings), rape and the continual threat of violence.

3.2 Exchange, sale and rent of migrants

Commodification of irregular migrants on the Eastern Route out of Ethiopia, is therefore made manifest by the practice of exchange, sale and rent of migrants. Whether migrants endure missingness or not during their journey, according to those interviewed, it appears that all are handled by many different smugglers / traffickers along the way.

Migrant-hunters

As mentioned, even within Ethiopia, migrants may be handed over to different smugglers before they even get to the borders. It is not clear if the different smuggler handlers are working within a network or are separate operators cooperating for mutual benefit. Both systems could be operating simultaneously, although according to respondents the transfer of money between different smuggling groups as migrants were transferred suggests they were working for different gangs. Certainly, after they leave Ethiopia, migrants are typically handed over to different people throughout their journey through Djibouti, Somaliland and Yemen as well as *within* Saudi Arabia.

In addition to the gangs handling migrants, there appear to be other individuals or groups who profit from finding or capturing migrants (perhaps those who attempt to travel without smugglers) and selling them to organised smugglers. One informant told of being instructed by their smuggler to hide because *"gangs were out there [in 'safe house' farms around Jijiga] to hunt for migrants so they may sell them to the brokers in Jijiga."* According to the informant, they were told by the guards to disappear from the farm and regroup later at night at a particular location, once they had evaded the migrant-hunters.⁴⁶

A male returnee detailed what happens when migrants arrive along the desolate shores that stretch along southern Yemen, *"the Yemeni traffickers who receive migrants at the seashore don't ask for any money. They hunt and collect as many migrants as possible, drive them to the Ethiopian brokers who have*

44 Interview M04

45 Interview M34

46 Interview M23

*detention centres there and then they sell the migrants to them. They don't even talk to us and they don't ask us for money."*⁴⁷ Another respondent spoke of the dangers of trying to move through Yemen alone, *"when they catch an Ethiopian migrant in the desert, they feel happy as if they got Riyal [Saudi currency] in cash."*⁴⁸

The Yemeni traffickers who receive migrants at the seashore don't ask for any money. They hunt and collect as many migrants as possible, drive them to the Ethiopian brokers who have detention centres...

It appears that smugglers rarely accompany migrants for long distances but instead the whole journey from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia is controlled by a number of independent or loosely affiliated smuggling groups that pass migrant groups on between each other. One woman who had migrated using the Eastern Route twice said, *"wherever a vehicle or truck we were traveling in stopped, there were brokers. They were selling us on to the next ones"*.⁴⁹ Another female returnee explained that *"one broker sells, receives money, and hands over the migrants to the next broker. We experienced this so many times."*⁵⁰

Captive migrants

As mentioned, the migrants interviewed did not have any control of who oversees their travel along different legs of the journey or the routes taken or the conditions they face. They were not free to leave their smuggler captors at any point and it appears from many testimonies that they are not even tolerated to ask questions. During some legs of the journey, they are not allowed to talk amongst themselves.

Selling and buying commonplace

Smugglers jealously guard their commodities from other smuggler groups and state officials in order to maximise finance extraction and/or sexual gratification from those they control. This includes potential to earn cash as they hand them over to other smugglers managing the next leg of the journey. One informant indicated that the selling and buying of migrants is common around the Ethio-Somaliland border. He indicated that deceiving, abducting, and selling of migrants is rampant between Tog Wajaale (Ethio-Somaliland border town) and Bossaso (Puntland). He said, *"everybody there is busy hunting migrants to sell them to the traffickers."*⁵¹ A female migrant said *"There are a number of traffickers involved. Some traffickers transport migrants from one location to another, hand over migrants and take their money. Other traffickers were waiting at various destinations such as Jijiga, Wuchale⁵², Bossaso, etc.) to receive*

47 Interview M14

48 Interview M14

49 Interview M24

50 Interview M10

51 Interview M04

52 Formally known as Tog Wajaale

migrants and pay for those who bring migrants to them."⁵³ Given the danger of being abducted and abused/sold by migrant-hunters some migrants may also see their smugglers as offering protection of sorts during particularly dangerous parts of the journey where they may be prey to 'migrant-hunters'.

One woman recounted that when she was 16 years old, in the first 4 days of their journey, after leaving Addis and still within Ethiopia, she and her co-migrants were *"sold three times before we arrived in Djibouti."*⁵⁴ Adolescent female migrants are considered valuable commodities, not only because of the sexual abuse opportunities they afford to smugglers, but also their labour and sexual extortion potential i.e. the possibility of 'renting' them out for forced prostitution in Yemen.

In particular, those returnees from the SNNPR region interviewed for this study spoke of regularly witnessing money transacting between smugglers as groups of migrants were exchanged from one smuggling group to another. A marketplace scenario is conjured by one respondent who described the scene at Las Anod⁵⁵ (Somaliland), *"there were the agents of the main trafficker and there was many of us, more than 80, all grouped along ethnic lines. Here and there, you find the agents sitting in plastic shelters transacting migrants"*.⁵⁶ A participant in a focus group discussion told the study that, *"this illegal migration shall be renamed as slave trade. The modern form of a slave trade has remerged."*⁵⁷

*"This illegal migration shall be renamed as slave trade.
The modern form of a slave trade has remerged."*

And it was not only about the monetary value. As one young female reported, *"the major problems concerning the traffickers were all of them expect something different from migrants when migrants sold from one trafficker to another trafficker. Some traffickers needed money, whereas others required sexual intercourse. When I arrived at sea to be loaded into a boat, one trafficker sold me to another at Bossaso. One trafficker would sell you to another trafficker, and this was common. The other traffickers would take you and sleep with you to do sexual intercourse for the first one or two weeks and then transfer you to other traffickers."*⁵⁸ A more explicit description of commodification would be hard to find.

Recouping capital costs

Smugglers apparently recoup their costs from these transactions through extortion — a practice previously documented in the exchange, sale and subsequent extortion of Eritrean migrants in Egypt. There, migrants were sold along the line of smugglers from Sudan to the Israeli border in the Sinai for increasingly large

53 Interview M05

54 Interview M12

55 Often referred to as Laysaano.

56 Interview M23

57 FGM 03

58 Interview M05

sums, culminating in notorious torture camps in the Sinai desert where 'costs' were recouped through brutal extortion of tens of thousands of dollars — mainly from the Eritrean diaspora communities, but also from victims' relatives remaining in Eritrea.⁵⁹ Researchers who focused on the plight of Eritreans in the Sinai have tracked the development and revival of what they call 'human trafficking for ransom' in Libya, where Eritreans are targeted.⁶⁰ The equally notorious *torture camps* of Yemen operated for the same purposes, but the victims were Ethiopian.⁶¹ Testimony from those interviewed suggest such torture camps exist in different locations inside Yemen and especially in areas close to the coast (south) and also the Saudi border (north). As the next section will illustrate, extortion continues to be the key element in the smugglers' business model.

Valuable assets

Migrants interviewed from East Hararghe Zone for this study, while reporting extensive abuse did not speak of witnessing financial transactions between smuggler groups along their journey. Instead, those moving from eastern Ethiopia (East Hararghe) mentioned that not only were the initial recruiting smugglers from their local area, but those who controlled them in subsequent legs of their journey (including in Yemen) were almost always from East Hararghe, suggesting a stronger cross-border network. If a stronger network exists from this area of Ethiopia, this could explain why money was not visibly transferred as migrants are handed over, because they are moving *within* a larger organisation, unlike those from SNNPR who first move to Addis and then use multiple smugglers to make their journey. If this is the case, it may be assumed that profits from extortion and other income are shared between smugglers using alternative, less visible, arrangements.

Once sold and handed over to the next broker, you are the property or an expensive commodity of the broker. You are like cash kept at home or in banks.

Migrants are not only commodities but also valuable assets, therefore, that yield profit for their temporary 'owners' through violent extortion, labour exploitation, sexual exploitation, or temporary rental of migrants to others (normally young women for sexual exploitation) before being allowed to continue their journey. ***"Once sold and handed over to the next broker, you are the property or an expensive commodity of the broker. You are like cash kept at home or in banks."***⁶² A male migrant who was held for three months at Bossaso said, ***"regarding the intention of brokers, they want to make money by selling you. No commodity is sold as swiftly as humans. Humans are sold speedily. That is why the brokers are extremely happy when a migrant comes their way."***⁶³ Calculating how valuable the commoditisation of migrants is along this route is attempted below.

59 Van Reisen, M. & Rijken, C. (2015) [Sinai Trafficking: Origin and Definition of a New Form of Human Trafficking](#)

60 Van Reisen, M., Mawere, M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (2023). [Enslaved, Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya.](#)

61 Human Rights Watch (2014) [Yemen's Torture Camps: Abuse of Migrants by Human Traffickers in a Climate of Impunity](#)

62 Interview M14

63 Interview M14

3.3 Systematic financial extraction

The reality behind the innocuous-sounding 'pay-as-you-go model' of financing irregular migration is, in fact, a systematic financial extraction mechanism of extortion on an industrial scale. Recall the numbers involved — on average over 8,300 per month (100,000 per year) or significantly more in recent pre-Covid years, representing over 275 people every day of the week throughout the year. The endless demand by Ethiopians to travel irregularly into Saudi Arabia means smugglers, traffickers and criminal gangs can utilise the most brutal treatment to extract the maximum financial benefit without fear that demand will fall. Smugglers are also careless with lives knowing every migrant, while being a valuable asset, is simultaneously almost immediately replaceable. Operating in remote, lawless (and/or corrupt) locations with extensive impunity gives smugglers a sense of immense power over migrants and permits them to commit the most egregious violations.

The only 'rule' they appear to adhere to is that when migrants' families pay the sums demanded they are released or handed over to other smugglers, normally immediately, unless they are women being sexually abused by the smugglers. In these cases, described in more detail below, the release can be delayed.

Money, mobile phones and any other valuables carried by migrants themselves do not last long as smugglers regularly rob migrants, often just before handing them over to other smugglers. Certainly, according to respondents, by the time migrants arrive in Yemen they have little more than the clothes they are wearing. These gains by smugglers and others could be regarded as *perks* compared to the financial extraction that is both systematic, regular and achieved by holding migrants to ransom at different points of the journey. This is of course an entrenched practice that has been reported for over a decade in Yemen, but which has likely become more systematic and organised.⁶⁴

Intimidation and threats

In addition to the hardships of the journey in term of physical welfare neglect (lack of potable water, food, shelter, sanitation, medical assistance as well as congestion and risk of suffocation) the smugglers create a context of rough handling, violent threats and intimidation with the aim of facilitating electronic/phone-based money transfers.

Although the rough treatment is continuous, there are particular points in the journey where violations are stepped up and become severe and sustained until money is paid. Migrants repeatedly claimed that they cannot move forward in their journey unless the sums demanded are paid. According to one returnee who echoed what many reported, **"paying the traffickers money is the only mechanism to be freed from kidnapping and detention."**⁶⁵ Delays in payment is a key factor in missingness during the journey where in some cases migrants are held and are stranded for weeks and months until the smugglers' demands are satisfied. As outlined in more detail below, while the extortion occurs, beatings, rape, torture and killings are the means used to punish those whose relatives cannot make or delay the payments.

64 Mixed Migration Centre (2012) [Desperate Choices - conditions, risks & protection failures affecting Ethiopian migrants in Yemen](#)

65 Interview M10

One female returnee who travelled when she was 20 years old was fortunate to have fast-paying relatives but explained that, *"ot everyone received the same treatment. Treatment mostly depends on the families' capacity to timely pay money to the traffickers at each point of the route. Those whose family pays the traffickers money on time experience relatively few problems i.e., at least they are freed from the detention centres rapidly. Though all equally suffer from foot travel, congestion, hunger, thirst, fear, abduction, beating, battering, intimidation, etc., the problems experienced by males and females have some differences. Males experience the worst forms of physical abuse (mainly beating, and battering, shooting on the head and foot); females experience all forms of sexual abuse, including repeated rapes."*⁶⁶ These observations were echoed by many additional respondents. No one offered an alternative narrative or description of the smugglers' modus operandi.

Males experience the worst forms of physical abuse (mainly beating, and battering, shooting on the head and foot); females experience all forms of sexual abuse, including repeated rapes.

Communication as the key to extortion

Communication with family members is normally made with smugglers' phones as few if any migrants have any possessions after commencing the journey, and besides, migrants with phones could be a security risk for the smugglers. Communication through mobile phones is the key to the extortion process as is mobile banking when payments are made — also effected through the phone, by people in Ethiopia without a traditional bank account or internet access.

The following testimony was repeated by many interviewees; *"the trafficker told me to call my mother, and I did that. During the phone conversation the traffickers took the phone from me and started to talk to my mother. If my mother didn't send the money, he promised to kill me and take a photo of my dead body and send it through phone (i.e., Telegram or Facebook). Besides, he told my mother that he would remove my eyes and would take pictures and send them to my mother. Moreover, he also told her that he would cut my legs and send my mother the pictures of that. My mother sold two oxen and one dairy cow to send him the 40, 000 birrs [\$800 USD] he was asking for."*⁶⁷

Another young migrant returnee said she *"hated the phone call time because the trafficker beat her so that she could cry, and her family listened to that."* The smugglers also told her family that if they didn't send the money, they would remove her kidney and take photos and send them to her family. He also warned that if they didn't pay they would hand her over to men *"so that she will be raped."*⁶⁸

66 Interview M10

67 Interview M05 discussing events in Bossaso, Puntland.

68 Interview M06

Some families could not or would not talk to the smugglers, which only increased the risks to the migrants; *"the families of many migrants don't answer phone calls; in such cases, the mistreatment the migrants are subjected to is the worst."*⁶⁹

Whether migrants are released or sold to another smuggler for onward movement and/or the next stage of extortion their ordeals are never over; *"sometimes they receive money and throw you away [release you]. Then, another Yemeni broker catches you and sells to another Ethiopian broker, and, once again you are subjected to the worst torture."*⁷⁰

Multiple points of extortion

According to respondents' testimonies concerning their own experiences and those they were held with, a clear pattern emerges where money is demanded at least three or four times during the journey. Typically, migrants are held for extortion at the following locations:

- On the Ethiopian side of Ethiopia's border with Djibouti or Somaliland (less common), or just over the border (more common — around Tog Wajaale).
- Inside Somaliland (Hargeisa, or more commonly Las Anod), or if using the Djibouti route at Tadjoura (Djibouti).⁷¹
- At Bossaso (autonomous Puntland state/Bari province of northern Somalia) before the sea crossing.
- In Yemen (often informal and undisclosed locations close to the southern coast) on arrival.
- In Yemen (close to the Saudi border, often around Harad).
- Inside Saudi Arabia (often in Jizan or areas close to southern Saudi Arabia).

Repeatedly, interviewees mentioned extortion occurring in Saudi Arabia itself — an aspect of this route that is rarely if ever mentioned in other studies. A young woman who was held for one week in Jizan recounted that *"in Jizan, two traffickers who spoke Arabic beat migrants like cattle, insulted migrants using bad and dirty words, and forced migrants' families to send money using whatever means they had."*⁷²

Typically, sums demanded are expressed by smugglers and migrant returnee respondents in Ethiopian Birr (ETB) except when the migrant is approaching Saudi Arabia when amounts are expressed in Saudi Riyal (SAR). Respondents and relatives of missing or returnee migrants often spoke of the specific sums paid to smugglers offering clues of an emerging pattern and the general levels demanded. It is clear from the interviews that the financial demands were applied to every migrant, not just those interviewed but the tens and hundreds of others around them at these locations.

69 Interview M10

70 Interview M14

71 Insecurity in Las Anod in early 2023 led to the mass displacement of Somalis. Presumably, these events will disrupt the smuggling nodes there which will likely move to other parts of Somaliland/Puntland. See; UNHCR (2023) [Tens of thousands arrive in Ethiopia, fleeing recent clashes in Somalia](#)

72 Interview M06

- The first payment is often between 8-10,000 ETB [c.\$150-200 USD]
- The second payment is typically 15,000 ETB [c.\$300 USD]
- The third payment also often 15,000 ETB [c.\$300 USD]
- The fourth payment is the most variable but typically ranges between 15,000 and 40,000 ETB [c.\$300-\$800 USD]⁷³

The sums demanded vary and can depend on whether a migrant admits to having relatives or friends already working in Saudi Arabia or whether they only have relatives in Ethiopia. Higher amounts appear to be demanded of those with Saudi connections and in some cases at finance extraction points migrants were separated into those who had Saudi connections and those that did not; *"the brokers [in Yemen] immediately segregated the migrants who had relatives in Saudi Arabia from the others and instructed us to call our Saudi relatives instead of our Ethiopian families so they could transfer them Riyal right away."*⁷⁴

There is a further level of extraction of payment that occurs with many women who find work in Saudi Arabia whereby the salary is deceitfully paid to the smuggler who brought them into Saudi Arabia and often found them work. These cases are described in more detail below as evidence of *labour exploitation*.

Sied Mohamed [sic] alone has more than 20-30 rented houses in Bossaso town, where thousands of migrants are kept until they pay money to the traffickers. He also owns cars and boats by which he transports the migrants to the seashore and Yemen, respectively.

Operating at scale

Returnees often reported sizable numbers of migrants on the move together along different legs of the journey, for example, hundreds in trucks moving together off-road through Somaliland to Las Anod, or when crossing the sea in highly congested boats. But the points where the largest groups were seen were at the extortion locations; *Sied Mohamed [sic] alone has more than 20-30 rented houses in Bossaso town, where thousands of migrants are kept until they pay money to the traffickers. He also owns cars and boats by which he transports the migrants to the seashore and Yemen, respectively.*⁷⁵ Another reported that *"around 500-1000 migrants arrived at Bossaso, where Addisu [sic] was the boss for everyone."*⁷⁶ In Yemen, a male respondent claimed he saw more than 3000 migrants that 'belonged' to several Ethiopian smugglers at a town called Ataq.⁷⁷ Meanwhile in Djibouti, a female respondent reported that, *"hundreds were held captive in Djibouti detention places and were subjected to hunger, thirst, and beating and*

⁷³ Using various interviews including M17 and M23

⁷⁴ Interview M07

⁷⁵ Interview M04

⁷⁶ Interview M18

⁷⁷ Interview M23

*forced to give phone calls to their respective families to tell them to deposit money to the bank account of the third trafficker."*⁷⁸

A conservative estimate of typical levels of revenue for smugglers can be calculated from the findings of this research. If the estimates cited above are used, then each migrant can be worth something between USD\$1,050 to USD\$1,600 to smuggling groups along the Eastern Route. This does not include any value accrued through robbery of migrant possessions, rent gained from forcing some girls to be prostitutes in Yemen or manual work in Bossaso etc. (see below) or the significant value obtained through long term labour exploitation of migrants (trafficking) in Saudi Arabia.

Taking a multi-year monthly average of approximately **8,300** migrants using the Eastern Route irregularly (excluding Covid years), the extortion business must be worth at least **USD\$9 to USD\$13 million per month, or USD\$ 108 million to USD\$156 million per year**. These sums accrue to gangs and their associates (and external bosses if they exist), living in some of the poorest countries in the world and extracted from some of the poorest communities in the world.

3.4 Rights violations including sexual assault

All of those interviewed confirmed what other studies have shown — that during the whole of the journey minimal attention is given by smugglers to migrant welfare in terms of shelter, health, food and water.⁷⁹ The suffering due to thirst, hunger, illness, exposure, abandonment and suffocation is significant and frequently leads to fatalities. These conditions were mentioned by all of those interviewed as the prevailing conditions which no one escaped travelling the Eastern Route, not least because the journey traverses some of the harshest, hottest, and most remote terrains. Parts of the journey are made by foot, especially entry into Saudi Arabia, during which many fatalities occur (see below).

Unusually high levels of violence

However, separate from these conditions which are themselves rights violations, migrants face extraordinary levels of violence along the Eastern Route. The volume and severity of violations consistently reported along this route earns it a unique place among the world's migratory routes. For this study, almost all of those interviewed reported having witnessed or experienced rights violations including sexual assault. It should be noted that interviewees were not selected because of rights violations other than spending periods of their journey being detained or 'missing' and yet all reported severe rights violations.

Most reported having experienced violations against themselves, identifying places where they occurred and the specific damage they caused but also claimed to having witnessed violations to those around them, often numbering hundreds of people and illustrating how widespread and commonplace violations are.

For men, the majority of violations (beatings, hangings, shootings, plastic burning) are closely associated

⁷⁸ Interview M12

⁷⁹ One example of many, Human Rights Watch (2019) [Ethiopians Abused on Gulf Migration Route](#)

with either non-payment of extortion/ransom demands, complaining about conditions or trying to protect women from sexual assault.

A man who was held for eight months in Yemen due to non-payment said, *"they used plastic water containers with fire to burn their body (i.e., the back of their body because other people couldn't easily see them) and hung them on the tree using rope to tie them on their thumb-finger, leaving the whole day like that and bouncing their body against the wall."*⁸⁰

Another respondent spoke of the treatment in Djibouti; *"smugglers in Tadjoura are interested in women migrants for sexual abuse. If the migrant woman was with a man who was her relative/friend, and if he tried to protect her, then the smugglers started to beat the men trying to protect the women. Some of the men were taken by the trafficker and not returned."*⁸¹

A female migrant who was 20 when she travelled was held for 15 days in Bossaso and witnessed many abuses also echoed by many other interviewees; *"the men migrants were abused physically. The trafficker took the men migrants' clothes off. Then they beat them with sticks and burn plastic Highlands [water bottle trademark] on the naked back part of their body. Men migrants were also suspended on the tree using ropes tied to their hands or legs. Several men migrants died during the terrible punishment done by traffickers and were thrown to a nearby place. Also, I saw men migrants were thrown to sea when they were making sounds in the boat."*⁸²

Men migrants were also suspended on the tree using ropes tied to their hands or legs. Several men migrants died during the terrible punishment done by traffickers and were thrown to a nearby place. Also, I saw men migrants were thrown to sea when they were making sounds in the boat.

The 2021 UNODC study of gendered violence against migrants, found that men and women were deliberately separated, *'in many instances, smuggled men and women were intentionally separated in order to exercise different types of violence upon them; while men would suffer severe forms of physical violence including torture practices, women would primarily be targeted for sexual torture.'*⁸³ Various respondents in this research also mentioned separation at different points of the journey — sometimes separating men and women, and sometimes between people who started the journey together. This partly accounts for people not knowing what happened to those fellow migrants who they met, and the many unanswered questions raised by some people's continued missingness months or years after they were 'last seen'.

80 Interview M01

81 Interview M08

82 Interview M05

83 UNODC (2021) [Abused and neglected - A gender perspective on aggravated migrant smuggling and response](#)

The frequency of rape

For women the majority of violations experienced were beatings and rough handling due to non-payment of ransom demands, but additionally they were frequently raped for the sexual gratification of smugglers and other gang members or those the smugglers rented them out to along the journey. Overall, the violence and conditions facing women and girls is highly gendered on the Eastern Route.⁸⁴ A recent publication documenting in detail the violations facing migrants in Libya spoke of widespread rape of detained male migrants, especially young ones, by Libyans.⁸⁵ Many informants also report sadistic tortures by Libyan guards and 'traffickers' involving male genitalia, castration and dismemberment. Male rape and torture of genitals appears not to be a characteristic of the Eastern Route — no respondent in this or other studies has mentioned it as a practice, or even as something they heard of on this route.

In addition to witnessing rape, many of the females interviewed, especially those who travelled as teenagers, spoke openly of being raped — sometimes on multiple occasions,

"The guards of the detention place [in Djibouti] picked my fellow female migrant and me at night and raped us side by side for long hours. They were even alternating between my fellow migrant and me." So reported a woman who migrated as a teenager (15/16 years old) adding that she heard that many of the females who arrived before them were also subject to repeated rapes.⁸⁶

*"In Las Anod, some Somali-looking men took me and another girl to a forest and raped us there in a group."*⁸⁷ In this case, the girl was also 15 or 16 years old when she travelled. Other testimonies indicate that Ethiopian smugglers allow certain Somali men to 'use' female migrants to avoid problems operating in Somaliland or Puntland. In a similar case, a woman said that she was gang-raped by Somali 'bandits' in some hills near Bossaso. *The brokers were in full compliance with the bandits. They raped us all through the night and told us to leave in the morning because we were in pain but we couldn't and slept in the mountain forest until the brokers [who had given them to the bandits] found us."*⁸⁸ She said she took three months to 'heal' after that night of rape, all the while living in the direst conditions.

"The Yemeni detention had another objective, namely, sexually abusing the female migrants. If the relatives of female migrants don't provide money, they consider they have a legitimate excuse to take advantage of the female migrants and do whatever they want," said one respondent who travelled when she was 17 years old.⁸⁹

Many testimonies were detailed and specific. For example, a woman who was just 15 years old when she travelled and was held for six months in Yemen reported that, *we travelled a long distance by vehicle and then were brought to the detention warehouse, which was characterised by hunger, thirst, congestion,*

84 European Commission (2022) [Yemen: women migrants' tragic odyssey](#) And; IOM (2020) [Gendered Patterns Of Women And Girls' Migration Along The Eastern Corridor](#). Regional Data Hub

85 Van Reisen, M., Mawere, M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (2023). [Enslaved, Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya](#).

86 Interview M12

87 Interview M28

88 Interview M28

89 Interview M07

*and physical abuse, among other things. More than 50 male and female migrants were kidnapped and detained with me around the Yemeni-Saudi border. While rape, pregnancy, and abortion were the major mistreatments I and my fellow female migrants experienced in the Yemeni detention centre, beating and battering, and sprinkling burning plastic bottles on the bodies were the major tortures the male migrants commonly experienced. Thus, while sexual and psychological abuse is common for female migrants, physical abuse was typical for males."*⁹⁰

Some interviewees spoke of the prevalence of pregnancy, forced abortion, death of babies and even being given 'injections' against pregnancy. One stated that many of her fellow female migrants in the "Yemen detention warehouse" were pregnant from rape by smugglers.⁹¹ Another spoke of frequently seeing the smugglers selecting one victim at a time for rape and how pregnancies were common. *They offer medication to female migrants who become pregnant,"* she claimed — presumably to induce abortion or miscarriage. *"That's why I begged my relatives in Saudi to provide the money to the traffickers so I could avoid being raped and become pregnant."*⁹²

In the case of female migrants, however, they may not be free even when they have paid the money if they need them for sexual abuse. In such cases, they may keep the woman they prefer for a longer period.

Again, from another returnee, *around the Yemen-Saudi border, in the treatment of female migrants, raping, impregnation, and forced abortion are the major mistreatments. In the case of female migrants, however, they may not be free even when they have paid the money if they need them for sexual abuse. In such cases, they may keep the woman they prefer for a longer period."*⁹³ This final point, about abused females (normally teenage and 'beautiful') being confined as their abuse continued for some time after ransom payment is made, was reported by various interviewees. One said, *"females can't escape this thing [sexual abuse/rape] even if they pay the money demanded by the traffickers. This is unavoidable, especially for beautiful female migrants"*.⁹⁴

A young man who was held three months in Bossaso spoke of the shameless impunity that the smugglers flaunted; *"they used to pick beautiful female migrants and rape them a few meters away. They used to commit it in front of us. They had Kalashnikov, and you couldn't even save your wife from being raped. Especially, beautiful female migrants can't escape it. Those female migrants who attempt to refuse are beaten and battered harshly"*.⁹⁵

"If they get beautiful girls, they rape," reported a returnee who herself had been forced to traffic drugs

90 Interview M03

91 Interview M03

92 Interview M07

93 Interview M04

94 Interview M12

95 Interview M14

in Yemen for two years. *"I knew a Muslim girl, from Soka, near Deder area, they raped and killed her. She was about 19 or 20 years. I do not know how many days she lived with them and how many people raped her, but I saw the injuries to her sexual organs. We took her to a health care centre for medical support but she did not survive."*⁹⁶

Violations as part of commodification

It is important to see these violations as part of the commodification and exploitation of migrants — both in terms of using females as sexual objects and also the dehumanising violence towards all migrants with the specific aim of extracting profit. Money is the object, and violence and intimidation are the means to achieve that object. Meanwhile, sexual assault appears to be merely a *perk*, an opportunity or an indulgence of smugglers' and others' position of power. As we shall see below, some smugglers combine sexual gratification with exploitation by prostituting 'their' captive female migrants to paying clients, or by 'marrying' them and obtaining their salaries once they work in Saudi Arabia.

Ethiopian on Ethiopian abuse

An important observation made by many of those interviewed is the level of involvement by Ethiopians criminals. Respondents were explicit that they were primarily under the aegis of Ethiopian smugglers starting in Ethiopia, then throughout the transit countries and often also inside Saudi Arabia. As one returnee stated, *"all in all, what I witnessed was that migration through this route is a condition whereby an Ethiopian is betrayed and abused by his/her fellow Ethiopian."*⁹⁷

What I witnessed was that migration through this route is a condition whereby an Ethiopian is betrayed and abused by his/her fellow Ethiopian.

Even in Yemen, where migrants had some interaction with Yemeni gangs, and in Saudi Arabia where some Saudis also abused them, there was a dominant experience of being controlled, detained, extorted and abused by fellow Ethiopians. Ransom demands were paid into Ethiopian bank accounts. Presumably, local authorities and/or other criminals in transit countries were paid off for tolerating and/or colluding with Ethiopian gangs. One returnee spoke of Yemeni guards around the Ethiopian-run detention centre/compound where they were held.

Respondents were also clear that there were ethnic divisions between smuggler gangs. Specific routes within Yemen were used by different ethnic groups, and at major smuggling hubs specific Ethiopians who spoke the language of their victims would handle the extortion in terms of the phone calls and torture. These divisions between, say, Tigrayans, Oromo and Amhara migrants and smugglers were maintained

96 Interview M30

97 Interview M04

right up to and into Saudi Arabia. Where migrants witnessed or got caught up in intergang shoot outs, the fighting gangs were normally of different and competing ethnicities.

Where are the other additional perpetrators?

In most analyses of rights violations against migrants, state officials such as police, military, border guards and prison officials typically feature as perpetrators alongside criminal gangs and smugglers. The Mixed Migration Centre's 4Mi data suggests that more than half (60 percent) of Ethiopians interviewed in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia point to military/police as the most common perpetrators of a range of violations. Also, a 2020 Save the Children study of Ethiopian youth using the eastern route have similar statistics suggesting smugglers are major perpetrators (especially for sexual abuse against girls) but by no means the only perpetrators — state officials were also active in a range of violations against them.⁹⁸

But in this study, none of those interviewed spoke of state officials detaining or harming them outside of Saudi Arabia. These differences may point to limitations in the research methodology and implementation, where the researchers here focused so much on the 'captivity' of migrants under smugglers, and their 'missingness' that additional violations perpetrated by state officials were not captured. Perhaps, those held most closely by smugglers on the Eastern Route do not even get the opportunity to be violated by state officials as they are protected, transported and held apart. Meanwhile, those interviewed by 4Mi are, by virtue of being available for interview, not held closely and therefore are more exposed to state official violations as they make their journey without smugglers' protection, or with only occasional protection. Such protection is typically bought by smugglers who pay bribes and/or share their profits with state officials where they have to. To avoid bribe payments, smugglers also practice evasion of state officials and hold and move migrants clandestinely. Just as this study may have its biases and limitations, so may 4Mi and other data bases in terms of their sample group, implementation of survey questions and subsequent findings.

3.5 Fatalities and witnessed deaths and murder

A consequence of callous objectification and commodification of Ethiopian migrants on the eastern migratory route is death. Migrant death is the ultimate condition of missingness which is neither uncommon on this route nor is it adequately recognised or recorded. All returnees interviewed for this research witnessed the death of other migrants and many witnessed direct murder or indirect killing.

As commodities, migrants are simultaneously valuable as income-generating assets but also expendable due to the continual supply of migrants starting the journey on the Eastern Route. Migrants' value to smugglers and others as sources of finance and/or sexual gratification means once these uses have been achieved, or if the migrants cannot provide these values, they are no longer of use to the smugglers. The commodification of migrants is therefore a highly dangerous condition for them, as they are useful to smugglers only as long as they have value. Those who are unable to pay ransom demands are especially

98 Save the Children Ethiopia (2021) [Trends, Factors And Risks Of Unaccompanied Child Migration From Ethiopia Through Eastern Migration Routes](#)

vulnerable. As two women who made the journey as teenagers observed, *"If you have no money, then they would kill you."*⁹⁹

A topography of deaths

In the course of this research, returnees specifically spoke of migrants perishing from illnesses, disease, hunger and thirst, vehicle accidents, deliberate drowning, torture and beatings, the effects of gang raping, shootings by smugglers, shootings by border guards (Saudi Arabia), caught in crossfire between fighting smugglers and neglect while in state prison (Saudi Arabia). These types of fatalities are regrettably familiar to those monitoring the Eastern Route and almost identical to analyses conducted approximately a decade earlier.¹⁰⁰

Insofar as smugglers take complete control of migrants during the journey, they have to be responsible for their welfare and therefore also culpable when they die. All of those interviewed describe the hardships of travelling through hot and arid landscapes in congested vehicles or boats and being forced to walk for days by foot over shelter-less mountains and deserts. All speak of the lack of potable water, minimal food, high incidence of diarrhoea and other illnesses, and over-heated shelters they are forced into when detained. Returnees speak of being forced to drink contaminated water, their own urine and seawater. These conditions start while they are still inside Ethiopia and continue into Saudi Arabia, if they make it. A young man reported that *"The suffering in the route is as it is. What is worse is that Yemen and Saudi are at war. Many migrants die on the border of Yemen and Saudi Arabia."*¹⁰¹ Most die of exhaustion but others are reportedly killed by border guards. One witness said he saw the bodies of *"more than 20 migrants killed by Saudi Merkez (border guards). They were killed when they travelled down to the river [at the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia]. We witnessed and counted their graves. Very shallow and small graves."*¹⁰²

Those who have been beaten for an extended period or gang-raped cannot manage to climb up that mountain. They can't. When people lag behind the broker just leaves them.

Many respondents spoke of injuries and weakening health as a result of beatings and rape which, compounded with disease, thirst and hunger, make it more likely that they perish along the way. Smugglers reportedly regularly abandon weak or beaten migrants along the route, their remains lying unburied to be subsequently witnessed by others; *"we witnessed the bodies of Ethiopians here and there. It was around the mountainous border area [with Saudi Arabia]. We witnessed many migrants who passed away where they used stones as a pillow. We witnessed it shining when the sunshine reflected off the fluid that flowed*

99 Interview M27

100 IOM (2014) [Fatal Journeys: Tracking Lives Lost during Migration \(Chapter 5\)](#) Also: MMC (2012) [Desperate choices: conditions, risks & protection failure affecting Ethiopian migrants in Yemen](#).

101 Interview M23

102 Interview M23

*from the bodies. We counted more than ten bodies. Those who have been beaten for an extended period or gang-raped cannot manage to climb up that mountain. They can't. When people lag behind the broker just leaves them."*¹⁰³

These findings are dramatically corroborated by a communique in October 2022 between four UN Special Rapporteurs and the Saudi government concerning border deaths and abuse.¹⁰⁴ Reportedly, between 1 January and 30 April 2022, in 16 separate incidents and in pursuit of a policy of excessive use of firearm force to stop and deter migrants from crossing the Saudi-Yemeni border, Saudi security forces killed approximately 430 migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, and injured an estimated 650.

The report detailed how Saudi security forces use sniper attacks of migrants in small groups, mortars or shelling of migrants in larger groups and shooting of migrants caught in Saudi territory. The attacks occurred along the migration route between Al Jawf and Sa'dah in Yemen and in the adjacent border area within Saudi Arabia Jizan province and reportedly, 30 percent of the victims were women, and 7 percent were children. In the same area there is, allegedly, a clandestine, make-shift cemetery containing an estimated 10,000 migrant bodies.¹⁰⁵

One NGO interviewed for this study also spoke of assisting a teenage girl flown back to Ethiopia after surviving a Saudi mortar attack on the group of migrants she was travelling with. Others in the group, including the smugglers, died from their injuries.

The conclusion of the UN letter gives additional weight to the statements of informants of this research who also suggest these practices have been occurring over recent years and are not a one-off or short-lived phenomenon along the Yemen-Saudi border: *'these events appear to occur as part of a series of gross human rights violations against migrants, including torture, arbitrary detention, trafficking in person, and sexual abuse.'*¹⁰⁶

Witnessing migrants' deaths

Such scenes were not restricted to remote areas. One woman spoke of witnessing deaths in Djibouti; *"Tadjoura is a bad place because many bad things happened to men and women migrants. Women were raped and physically beaten. Besides, many people died in Tadjoura, and I saw their dead bodies and clothes outside when I went to the restroom. There was a bad smell of dead people in Tadjoura."*¹⁰⁷

Another young woman said that in Yemen she witnessed the bodies of migrants in several places; *"they were not buried. We saw the heads and legs of the dead migrants here and there. They were so many".*¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Interview M14

¹⁰⁴ Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants; the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children; the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls See: [this link](#)

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Interview M08

¹⁰⁸ Interview M12

The migrants' captors are also directly responsible for the murder of an unknown number of migrants. Many respondents spoke of having witnessed brutal violence that led to deaths, particularly of those who are unable to pay ransoms. *"In Yemen,"* one witness reported, *"the trafficker severely beat men migrants, and when they die they would take their body to a nearby place that seems to be a dead body collection place, and I saw the legs and hands of these dead people. Their bodies were dry like wood."*¹⁰⁹

...when they die they would take their body to a nearby place that seems to be a dead body collection place, and I saw the legs and hands of these dead people. Their bodies were dry like wood.

One woman who made the journey when she was 20 years old said she saw, *"many bodies of women and men dead on the road. I also saw the women raped and die on the road. During night travel, there were bad smells, and we asked the traffickers where the smell was coming from out of curiosity. One of the migrants from Addis Ababa had an outdoor flashlight and showed us using his flashlight; the bad smells were from the dead bodies of migrants. The women were also raped and killed by gangs on the side of the road."*¹¹⁰

In many cases, such as those above, migrants do not know the cause of death but are often witnesses to unburied or partially buried bodies of fellow migrants. A young woman reported seeing *"some women's and men's bodies floating on the water before being loaded to the boat near the sea to travel to Yemen."*¹¹¹ The impact of witnessing so many deaths, violence and abuse over a sustained period is hard to assess and doubtlessly affects people in different ways. This will be considered in more detail in Section 3.3 below.

Key informant third party interviewees and participants in focus group discussions spoke of numerous cases in the community where family members were either known to have died or were presumed to be dead. A mother speaking about the death of her 17-year-old son said she heard from other returnees that *"deaths are very common, especially in Djibouti, mainly due to thirst, hunger, and illnesses such as diarrhoea."*¹¹² She heard from them that during the journey, her son was so sick with diarrhoea that he couldn't take in food and later passed away. A woman recalling her journey where she got pregnant from rape also said, *"there is serious diarrhoea which was the cause of death for many."*¹¹³

A government employee working with migration cases in Ethiopia told this study that a returnee had witnessed a female who was under 18 years old who was gang raped and unable to walk after the incident. The smugglers shot her, and the fellow migrants who witnessed it were unable to do anything and had to continue on their way.¹¹⁴

109 Interview M09

110 Interview M08

111 Interview M06

112 Interview M21

113 Interview M28

114 Interview M36

Men can also be severely beaten or killed for trying to protect women and teenage girls from rape. A female returnee said that when her migrating husband was being held in Bossaso, he tried to protect an Ethiopian woman from rape. The beating the smugglers gave him caused him permanent heart damage which later led to his death, she said.¹¹⁵ Another woman told of a situation where *"some male migrants tried to help or protect women from the trafficker."* She said she remembered, *"the migrant young man named Abdi who was trying to protect me from traffickers' sexual abuse. Hawariya [sic], the trafficker, killed Abdi on one of the days when he was trying to protect me in the forest between Jijiga and Djibouti. They left his body on the road."*¹¹⁶

Deaths in Saudi Arabia

Often neglected from accounts of the Eastern Route is that for many Ethiopians violations do not end when they enter Saudi Arabia. A new set of conditions and violations affect them — some of which are similar to those they endure during the journey, and others that are particular to Saudi Arabia. However, deaths and killings are a very real threat to Ethiopians in Saudi Arabia. Apart from the risks of dying of neglect and exhaustion while entering the country or being fired upon by Saudi border forces, they reportedly risk being violated or killed by employers, or die from neglect in state prisons.

...there are many that get killed brutally after serving the Arabs' freely for some years. When they are asked to pay salary, some Arabs delay it as much as they can by giving excuse, and someday they get rid of the workers brutally.

A young woman who worked for three years in Saudi Arabia claimed that *"there are many that get killed brutally after serving the Arabs' freely for some years. When they are asked to pay salary, some Arabs delay it as much as they can by giving excuse, and someday they get rid of the workers brutally."*¹¹⁷

A recent returnee from Saudi Arabia offered a chilling description of deaths in prisons there. He spent 15 months in prison before being deported. *"There were many fellow Ethiopians who died during the journey as well in prisons in Saudi. But, nobody tells their family about the fact that they died. In Saudi prisons (such as Al-Kharj), the bodies of the dead stayed with the prisoners for more than 48 hours. Then, they just pick them up and throw them away as garbage. More than 100 died in the prison where I have been."*¹¹⁸

A high number of respondents mentioned the hardships of prison life in Saudi Arabia and the lack of food, bedding or medical support. Considering that many irregular migrant workers who are imprisoned find themselves pregnant from rape during the journey and/or from sexual abuse from employers in Saudi Arabia, the lack of medical support can be critical. A woman in her mid-20s reported that, *"while we were*

115 Interview M08

116 Interview M09

117 Interview M30

118 Interview M14

*in jail; my baby [fathered by her smuggler 'husband'] got very sick. He suffered for two weeks and finally passed away on the 15th day. While my baby was sick, I told them [jail guards] he is very sick and asked them to give me medicine. They told me that there won't be any problem, there is a refrigerator to keep his body when he dies."*¹¹⁹

It seems that over time many irregular migrants are eventually found by police, imprisoned and deported to Ethiopia. For some, they are caught almost immediately and for others they may get deported after some years of work in Saudi Arabia. Equally, in terms of imprisonment, some are detained for a few days while others are held for many months or even years before deportation; *'n Saudi Arabia, migrants repeatedly have their human rights violated. They are routinely placed in detention centres indefinitely.'*¹²⁰ Amnesty International issued damning reports on Ethiopians in Saudi jails in 2020 and 2022 which reinforce the testimonies of those interviewed.¹²¹

In terms of becoming or remaining missing, the period migrants spend in Saudi Arabia is an essential part of the story of the Eastern Route. This will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.2 below.

3.6 Labour and sexual exploitation

As commodities to generate income for smugglers, some migrants are not only systematically held to ransom through extortion, but they also experience labour and sexual exploitation. Again, this aspect of the eastern migratory route is rarely, if ever, cited or identified correctly as modern slavery through trafficking. As previous sections of the report have illustrated, the sexual abuse of female migrants by smugglers and their associates (for sexual gratification) is ubiquitous, but here the issue of exploitation is examined.

A topography of exploitation

During the research for this study, returnees spoke of various ways in which they were exploited:

- Smugglers rented out female migrants for sexual exploitation by 'clients' for specific periods of time, whereupon the migrant returns to being controlled by the smugglers.
- Some female migrants were forced to become smugglers' 'wives', to live with them, move with them, make food and serve their 'husbands' who normally had various other 'wives' at the same time.
- Smugglers forced some migrants to work in construction (males) or homes or hotels (females) for indefinite but normally limited periods of time during their journey — the smugglers took all the salary earned.
- Smugglers forced some migrants to work as 'mules' transporting drugs and guns within Yemen without letting them continue their journey.

119 Interview M30

120 Adugna, G (2022) [Half a million Ethiopian migrants have been deported from Saudi Arabia in 5 years - what they go through](#). The Conversation

121 Amnesty International (2020) ["This Is Worse Than Covid-19" Ethiopians Abandoned And Abused In Saudi Prisons](#) And; Amnesty International (2022) ["It's Like We Are Not Human" Forced Returns, Abhorrent Detention Conditions Of Ethiopian Migrants In Saudi Arabia](#).

- Smugglers forced male and female migrants to work unpaid for them for indefinite periods of time doing menial household or compound tasks such as cleaning, washing, cooking, serving etc.
- Smugglers and brokers locate work opportunities for female migrants in Saudi Arabia but through deception obtain the migrant worker's salary for many months or longer.
- Saudi employers exploit migrant workers through excessive work hours, deprivation of freedoms (including communication with the outside world) and sexual assault.
- Saudi employers deceive, trick or simply refuse to pay irregular migrant workers their salaries, sometimes for years.

Smugglers taking 'wives'

On the Eastern Route, smugglers take female migrants as 'wives' if they wish to. It appears to be a way of temporarily 'owning' a desirable female and preventing other men from using the women or girls sexually. There does not appear to be any ceremony or event to seal the 'marriages' which appear to be dissolved as easily as they are created by the men involved. Men just force the women to agree and from then they are regarded as the smuggler's wife: ***"There were women that were held like wives to the brokers. However, when they get pregnant, they throw them out on the streets."***¹²²

"There were women that were held like wives to the brokers. However, when they get pregnant, they throw them out on the streets."

However undesirable, for some women and girls, being a 'wife' can offer a degree of protection from other predatory/sexually abusive smugglers. It is also a form of escape from undesirable forced labour (drug smuggling) and/or release from being indefinitely held in Yemen for sexual purposes and facilitate potential entry to Saudi Arabia itself. According to a recent UNODC report on gendered-aggravated migrant smuggling, this arrangement would fall under their definition of 'transactional rape' and transactional sex.¹²³ Consider these quotes:

"Thus, after staying all that time [two years], the only option I had was to get married to one of them and get out of this job [forced drug and gun smuggling within Yemen]. That was the only way out. I met with one of them, and he asked to marry me. And without any hesitation, I told him that I loved him. It was a must for me to say that to him. Then after, we got married and he helped me cross the border and helped me enter to Saudi."¹²⁴

This interviewee also said, ***"it is mandatory that you marry if one of them likes you. I know of women who were forced to marry brokers. I knew a woman who got married to a broker after five months staying***

¹²² Interview M27

¹²³ As quoted in UNODC (2021) op cit. (pages 5 & 96) 'The exchange of money, employment, goods or services for sex, including sexual favours, other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour' from the [UN Conduct Glossary](#).

¹²⁴ Interview M30

*in Yemen and was then able to enter Saudi. She agreed to marry him fast. That is how women cross the border."*¹²⁵ She further explained that when a smuggler takes a 'wife' and plans to travel with her, either he pays money to the other brokers in this business, or he will give them another woman as a replacement. *"And after taking women in marriage, there are brokers that will get the women hired in Saudi and collect all their salary instead of them. And there are other brokers that will rape the women while they were on their journey to Saudi, and when they get pregnant, they leave them behind."*¹²⁶

Some returnees told of the smuggler bosses in Bassaso having multiple wives, each confined to separate 'compartments' in their tents and regularly replaced by new 'wives' and all guarded by very young male migrants ('soldiers') working for the boss.¹²⁷ Effectively, a forced harem of sexual exploitation.

Refusing to be married is extremely dangerous for female migrants. As one returnee explained, *"Once, Ethiopian Oromo smugglers threatened to kill me with pistol because I refused to marry one of them. I know 6/7 women who were killed because they have tried to escape marriage. All of them were adolescents."*¹²⁸

Two women who travelled together when they were teenagers reported that smugglers *"shot down with a gun and killed a woman who was from East Hararghe right in front of our faces when she refused to be a wife. This woman arrived there before us. And she refused them saying: 'I didn't come here to be a wife, I came searching for a job,' then they dragged her out and killed her. We witnessed the killing. For there is no law there, there is nothing you could do about it."*¹²⁹

Sexual exploitation through forced prostitution

Forced prostitution on the Eastern Route exemplifies the commoditisation of female migrants through sexual exploitation combined with income generation. *"There are the Yemeni people that ask the brokers to bring the beautiful woman they liked from among the migrants they held."*¹³⁰ Smugglers would send photos by mobile phone to Yemeni men for them to select which ones they wanted or to obtain new ones. According to one male witness, the smugglers would *"receive money from outsiders and let them rape the female migrants. The outsiders pay money for the brokers to pick up female migrants from where they are holding them, and they do whatever they want with her and bring her back. While some bring them back the next day, others return them after a couple of days. That is how the brokers make money."*¹³¹

There are the Yemeni people that ask the brokers to bring the beautiful woman they liked from among the migrants they held.

125 Interview M30

126 Interview M30

127 Interview M28

128 Interview M31

129 Interview M27

130 Interview M30

131 Interview M14

The frequency of these accounts offers veracity to the prevalence of the practice. Another interviewee who made the journey when she was 15 or 16 years old was held in Yemen for one month. She detailed how smugglers would rent female migrants to rich men in Yemen who came to the Ethiopian smuggling groups seeking this service. She said the smugglers would rent the female migrants to rich men who may want to use them for one day or for an extended period of time.¹³² She herself was given out for a whole month to a wealthy Yemeni man. *"I was made to spend the whole month with him. I was sold to him for sexual purposes. He would come on a daily basis, anytime, and rape me. I couldn't escape, as there were guards. After a month, I was replaced by another new female migrant."* The guards who were Ethiopian would also rape her when the man was away — they warned her not to tell him.¹³³ According to another female respondent, many women became pregnant through forced prostitution in this manner.¹³⁴

"I was made to spend the whole month with him. I was sold to him for sexual purposes. He would come on a daily basis, anytime, and rape me."

Labour exploitation during the journey

Some returnees described how they were exploited by smugglers for their labour in various ways during the journey. One woman held in Hargeisa by her smuggler for non-payment of a ransom demand, was forced to work for eight months as a domestic worker before allowing her to move on.¹³⁵ Another said that she and other males and female fellow migrants were forced to work at construction sites for some weeks, and it was the smuggler who collected the wage.¹³⁶

In Rada'a, Yemen, a man agreed to work in Khat fields. *"For the first two years of labour I only got paid for the last three months. When I asked for the rest of the payment, he just got out a gun on me and threatened me. Then I ran away and disappeared from them without their permission. There were assigned militant guards to watch over us so if they had known, they would have shot me."*¹³⁷

In Bossaso, one migrant who was unable to pay the ransom demand was held captive for three months and forced to work for the head smuggler called Addisu [sic], cleaning his and other smugglers' clothes. He claimed he was one of 28 'servants' and guards under Addisu at that time.¹³⁸

In some locations, when female migrants were not being sexually abused or harassed for ransom payments, they worked for the smugglers by cooking, cleaning and serving Khat ceremonies and

132 Interview M12

133 Interview M12

134 Interview M30

135 Interview M30

136 Interview M03

137 Interview M33

138 Interview M18

ministering to their needs.¹³⁹ *"They consider migrants as their property. They force female migrants to prepare food,"* a male returnee explained.¹⁴⁰

Commoditisation, exploitation and missingness in Saudi Arabia

Typically, studies concerned with migratory routes do not include the work experience of migrants in their destination country. However, the findings of this research suggest strongly that some mention of their experience in Saudi Arabia is important if the full story of commoditisation, exploitation and missingness that characterises the Eastern Route is to be understood. Furthermore, from the migrants' perspective, separating their experiences before and after crossing the Yemen-Saudi border is an arbitrary division when violations and abuse continue to accompany them across borders without pause. Here we include aspects of the Saudi experience because:

- Migrants, especially females, may continue to be abused, controlled and exploited by smugglers after entering Saudi Arabia.
- While inside the country, migrants may be held against their will and extorted for money from their relatives in Ethiopia and/or Saudi Arabia (previously discussed in section 1.3).
- During their employment, migrants may be sexually abused, endure cruel workloads/work schedules and experience partial or non-payment for their work.
- During their employment, they may not have contact with relatives who experience these periods of time as missingness with no idea of where their relatives are or what they are doing (discussed in more detail below).
- If caught by the police, migrants may endure indefinite periods in Saudi prisons before deportation — normally they are held *incommunicado* ('missing') and separated from all their possessions, other family members and money earned/saved.

As the above list indicates, there are clear trafficking-like aspects to the conditions of Ethiopian irregular workers in Saudi Arabia. Through some of these practices, migrants experience *incommunicado* 'missingness' for long periods when being held by their smuggler captors, harsh or neglectful employers and/or the Saudi state. These experiences were frequently mentioned by respondents interviewed and confirmed by focus group discussions with family members and community leaders as well as agencies working with returnees.

Continued smuggler exploitation in Saudi Arabia

Female respondents frequently mentioned that the smugglers that took them over the border from Yemen into Saudi Arabia would also try to organise work for them. In some cases, as mentioned, the men were

¹³⁹ Interview M06

¹⁴⁰ Interview M14

their 'husbands' from forced marriage or marriages of convenience for the women or girls to escape the Yemen-based gangs. It was frequently reported that these men would mislead the employers of the female migrants by claiming they were husbands or brothers and end up receiving the full salary for many months. *"I was not paid during my stay as house servant in Saudi Arabia. When I asked them to give my salary after three 'months of my stay, they told me that 'the brokers are collecting it.' When I ask the smugglers, they responded 'we are sending your money to your parents.'"* In this case, she worked for seven months without pay. The smugglers who found the job claimed four months' pay as the recruitment 'fee' and then took the remaining three months by pretending to be sending it to her family. After seven months, she was sacked because she was pregnant from earlier rape, although her employer threatened her and accused her of having had sexual relations with her (the employer's) husband.¹⁴¹

When I asked them to give my salary after three 'months of my stay, they told me that 'the brokers are collecting it.'

Two teenage girls who travelled together said *"it was the smuggler that sent us to Saudi who had been collecting the salary for the service we had been giving as domestic workers."* One of them explained that during three months of work she had not received any pay after enduring heavy work schedules. In the end, she left the household because in addition the husband sexually abused her during the day after the wife left for work.¹⁴² In another case where the woman had married the smuggler to get out of Yemen by travelling with him; *"they [her Saudi employers] thought that they were paying to my 'brother', and that he was helping me to keep the money for me. He [her husband] fooled them telling them that I had no place to save money and he will be doing it for me. My 'husband' collected my salary for five months."*¹⁴³

Here we see smugglers not only benefiting from multiple extortion along the whole journey into Saudi Arabia, but then further benefiting from effectively trafficking the migrants into work situations. Meanwhile the girl(s) experience labour and sexual exploitation. It's not clear what the arrangement is between the smuggler and the employer — in some cases, the employer may collude with the smuggler for personal gain (including sexual expectations) or cheaper costs.

Partial or whole non-payment for work

The level of labour exploitation experienced by the majority of those interviewed was striking. Beyond the hard conditions and heavy workloads, many reported not receiving payment. The experiences of those interviewed, as well as those they knew of, added up to a picture where irregular migrants appear highly vulnerable to labour exploitation by unscrupulous employers, who may additionally inflict sexual abuse. Consider the following testimonies:

One respondent claimed she personally knows about 30 people who had such an experience, *"they were*

¹⁴¹ Interview M28

¹⁴² Interview M27

¹⁴³ Interview M30

*made to work for others without salary or someone took their money. I heard of many beautiful girls who were abducted in our journey. I know a girl who worked for seven years without payment in Jizan. There are many who have had such experience and you cannot know the number."*¹⁴⁴

Again, another respondent reported, *"I know a woman from this area [southeast Ethiopia], who had been working in Riyadh for a household for two years without any payment. And she had been experiencing physical violence and sexual abuse and she was sick. She escaped from them one day when she found the doors left open."*¹⁴⁵

One migrant worked as a domestic worker for a family but needed medicines. *"I was doing every domestic task except preparing food. However, that family denied me my salary, claiming they spent money on my medication. They required me to freely serve them for one year in return for the money they spent on my medication."*¹⁴⁶

It should be remembered that respondents were not selected for interview for this study on the grounds of having experienced labour exploitation, and yet many reported partial or total non-payment of salary once working in Saudi Arabia. In most cases, respondents, especially females, were eventually deported back to Ethiopia without any possessions or assets, having not been paid for their work, having faced repeated sexual assault and violence themselves and having witnessed severe rights violations. As will be illustrated below, the degree to which they are 'missing' during the time outside of Ethiopia is considerable and the impact on themselves and their families is significant.

144 Interview M31

145 Interview M30

146 Interview M03



Section 04:

Missing migrants and missingness of Ethiopian refugees and migrants on the Eastern Route

*"There are many migrants that disappear on their journey to Saudi — those who died and also those who got lost. There are families of migrants that are lost and still don't know where their children are."*¹⁴⁷ (a female returnee from East Harage)

The concept of missing migrants has been framed by the perspective of those to whom the migrant is missing. Of course, from the migrants' perspective, unless they have died, they are not missing but somewhere where they are unable or uninclined to communicate with those who consider them missed. Even in death, it could be argued that if the body of the dead migrant is identified and located or the location of death can be verified by witnesses, he or she is no longer 'missing'.

There is a rising interest in missing migrants as an aspect of the irregular migration phenomenon in terms of migrants that perish or disappear during their journeys and the impact their missingness has on families

147 Interview M31

and communities.¹⁴⁸ However, there has been little attention paid to the processes that cause periods of missingness and/or permanent missingness affecting irregular migrants and their families. The findings of this research reveal important details concerning missingness of irregular migrants all along the Eastern Route as well as missingness inside Saudi Arabia itself.

This research expands the migration experience of the Eastern Route beyond the cross-border movement from Ethiopia to Saudi Arabia to include employment in Saudi Arabia and imprisonment by Saudi police before deportation. Significant periods of missingness occur during this employment and imprisonment and need to be understood as critical to the migrant's family and community's experience of the migrants missingness.

A topography of forced delay

As we have seen in this section, the typical migration experience along the Eastern Route for many migrants is characterised by non-movement more than movement. Forced delay or detention characterises the journey which often ends with lengthy periods in prison. A topography of forced delay could include:

- **Waiting:** Normally hidden from sight in houses, compounds, 'forests' and remote areas, migrants spend days or weeks waiting to move on. The hold-up could be that smugglers are waiting for more migrants to amass (for buses, trucks or boats), better weather in the case of sea crossings, or for the optimal time to move — to avoid police or attempted state intervention in their activities.
- **Extortion and payment:** Even for those migrants who can pay or have families that pay ransom demands rapidly, the transactions take some days and there are at least three or four extortion points along the journey. Those who cannot pay or whose families are slow to raise the sums demanded face potentially long periods of detention (with abuse/punishment) lasting weeks and months. If this is repeated at different points along the journey, migrants can take many months to reach Saudi Arabia.
- **Mode of transport and route taken:** The degree to which migrants used vehicles as opposed to moving by foot, and the length of the boat journey to Yemen depended on which smuggling route was used and which smuggling gang the migrants are handed over to at different points of the journey. Poorer migrants have no choice, but there is some evidence that richer migrants can get less abusive and faster transportation. If more of the journey is made by foot, the hardships and risk of death seem to be significantly higher and the journey can be slower.
- **Labour/sexual exploitation:** If the smuggler uses a migrant for sexual or labour exploitation this may delay their onward movement by some weeks or many months depending on the case. One woman interviewed was forced to traffic drugs and guns for two years in Yemen before being allowed to move on only when she 'married' a smuggler going into Saudi Arabia.¹⁴⁹ Others were sold to Yemeni men in forced prostitution for weeks or months. It appears females were more likely to experience these forced delays than males.

148 For example; ICRC (2022) [Counting The Dead How Registered Deaths Of Migrants In The Southern European Sea Border Provide Only A Glimpse Of The Issue](#) Also; The [IOM Missing Migrant Project](#). The [ICRC Missing Migrants](#) website Also; Black, J. and Z. Sigman, 2022. [50,000 lives lost during migration: analysis of Missing Migrants Project data 2014–2022](#). IOM GMDAC Also; Mengiste, T. (2021) [Families of Missing Migrants in Ethiopia: Their Search for Answers, the Impacts of Loss and Recommendations for Improved Support](#). IOM And; Horwood, C (2022) [Raising the bar: New international instruments, scientific disciplines, and practice related to missing migrants](#). Mixed Migration Review.

149 Interview M30

- **Employment:** Once migrants find work, they clearly stop migratory movement as they have achieved their objective of finding work in Saudi Arabia. But, as described above, the conditions may be very uncertain and abusive. Employment can therefore also be a form of detention as migrants are forced to work long hours, often without external communication, restricted freedoms and sometimes facing abuse while having no certainty if they will be paid. Female migrants normally work in households while men work outside in menial jobs such as herding or other farm work, but both often face similar captive-like conditions.
- **Imprisonment:** A large proportion of those interviewed for this study were at some point caught by Saudi police and imprisoned as irregular migrants in reportedly dire conditions. Their detention resulted in deportation to Addis and would last from a few days to more than a year. Normally, prisoners have no access to telephones and unless someone released informed the family of another inmate there would be little chance of an imprisoned migrants' family knowing they are in a Saudi jail.
- **Death:** In the context of missingness, death is included here as the ultimate condition of forced delay and brings us back to the common use of the term, *missing migrant*. Not only does the missing migrant never return home to Ethiopia, but their remains are 'detained' in a foreign country and often in an undignified and careless manner having not received a dignified burial or even formal recognition. The governments of the countries concerned make no effort to register, identify or repatriate bodies of migrants who perish, neither do they make any effort to identify and prosecute perpetrators.

It should be remembered that interviewees for this study were purposively selected because they had at some point been held, detained or delayed along their journey and therefore these findings should be expected. However, the respondents spoke about these conditions as if they were faced by many of the migrants with them. Additionally, many migrants appear to have faced all the above forced delays and experiences. Most, especially those caught by Saudi police soon after their arrival, therefore had a highly unsuccessful migratory experience in terms of further impoverishing themselves and their families and the abuse they experienced and witnessed. These impacts will be discussed below.

Restricted phone communication

Communication through mobile telephone is the sole means of contact used between families and migrants (and smugglers and migrants' families), so missingness is normally expressed by families in terms of the frequency of telephone contact, rather than the time migrants are away from home. As mentioned, most irregular migrants are under the strict control of smugglers and employers during their migration experience. According to findings, migrants' use of phones is often infrequent as their use is restricted, disabled or not viable for a number of reasons including:

- Migrants' phones have been stolen, lost or damaged along with any cash to replace/repair them.
- Migrants may not own phones to begin with.
- Smugglers allow migrants to use their own phones primarily to facilitate/enforce ransom negotiations and payment.

- Migrants are often in remote areas with little or no coverage.
- Migrants have their freedom restricted and also cannot use phones of a third party or phone shop etc.
- Smugglers can destroy migrants' sim cards.
- Smugglers deliberately prevent migrants from communicating, enforcing what some call digital vacuums or digital 'black holes'¹⁵⁰.
- Employers in Saudi Arabia can restrict phone possession and use and also restrict freedom to leave their workplace to find phones elsewhere.
- Migrants may forget phone numbers of key contacts and have no means of recalling them.
- Migrants cannot face contacting their relatives (for fear, shame or guilt in having left home clandestinely, having cost their families so much through ransoms, shock of their situation, hopelessness, mental health etc.).

Incommunicado/missing through silence

Returnees who experienced forced delays and, more relevantly, forced periods of non-communication, were often very specific about how long they had no communication with their families. Families of missing or deceased migrants, talking in focus group discussions, also had clear recollections of the periods of time when they lost or re-gained contact with their family members. For most, there was virtually no contact throughout the migrant's journey and when there was contact it was extremely traumatic and involved threats from smugglers.

For many families, after their relative (normally son or daughter) disappeared for some days causing considerable alarm, the first contact they had was at the first instance of extortion. This first point may be at Ethiopia's border areas (e.g., east of Jijiga) or just inside Somaliland (often Tog Wajaale). Often, the call is made on smugglers' phones and smugglers themselves speak to the family threateningly while the migrant is being audibly abused close by. Even if relatives pay and the migrant is taken on along the journey, they again may only hear from them at the second point of extortion such as in Las Anod (Somalia) or Tadjoura (Djibouti) or Bossaso (Somalia). Many spoke about the stress and uncertainty of not hearing whether migrant relatives had been allowed to move on after each ransom payment, or whether the torture had stopped. In one case, a mother explained that after she transferred 7500 Birr [c. USD\$150] first, and 8000 Birr [USD\$160] a week later, *"then he disappeared."* She didn't receive a phone call for more than a month, and after that, she heard that he had already passed away in Djibouti. *"After a 35-day-long disappearance, I was told that my son had died."*¹⁵¹

As migrants went through the ordeal of forced delays according to the topography above, the relatives of the migrant often heard nothing at all. Sometimes for days, but often for weeks or months. In one case, the informant was detained for three months in Bossaso at the detention centre of a smuggler. He had

150 Van Reisen, M., Mawere, M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (2023). [Enslaved, Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya](#).

151 Interview M21

communication with his family only for the first two weeks. When the smugglers realised that nobody could deposit money on the victim's behalf, they stopped phone calls. He was then cut off from his family for about two and a half months.¹⁵² Again, a returnee recalled, he had not communicated with his family during his first 3.5 months' employment with a Saudi farmer or during his 25 days journey by foot when he left this job. *"Thus, I was cut off from my family for about four months."*¹⁵³ A young woman said, *"after we entered Saudi, we did not have mobile phones. I worked in Saudi for three months. In those months, I didn't speak to my family — I couldn't even tell them I have arrived in Saudi."*¹⁵⁴

A female returnee said that upon her *"arrival at the Yemeni seashore and taken to a trafficker in Yemen, I was detained for more than a month and subjected to sexual exploitation during the detention. I didn't have any communication with my family during the detention. Though I begged them to allow me to give a phone call to my family, they refused."*¹⁵⁵

... his parents died due to the sadness of his disappearance.

One female returnee told of an Ethiopian she knew who had been forcibly married to a smuggler in Saudi Arabia. Her 'husband' had destroyed her sim card and *"she had no contact with her family. She has stayed there for about three or four years without having any contact with her family members."*¹⁵⁶ In another case, a male migrant left Ethiopia roughly five years before the interview with his brother. Two months after leaving, his brother made just one phone call to his family, and then he disappeared. His family learned of his passing one year later.¹⁵⁷ Another respondent told of two male migrants he knew of; the first had been 'lost' for six years and the family has never heard from him, while the second one disappeared 20 years earlier. He called his family once at the start and *"his parents died due to the sadness of his disappearance."*¹⁵⁸

Finally, a moving account from a female returnee who went to Saudi Arabia as a teenager; *"I wasn't able to talk to my mom in the first year and six months that I stayed in Saudi. There was no network at the place I first got employed (Kemismshet), and the first time I called my mom, she only asked if I am alive and we cried for a long time."*¹⁵⁹

These quotes illustrate the range of situations where telephone silence between migrants and their family members exists. The silence can last days or years, and the missingness or disappearance is not only the perception of those in Ethiopia or in Saudi Arabia concerned about the welfare of the migrant, but no doubt also adds to the migrants' sense of isolation.

152 Interview M14

153 Interview M23

154 Interview M27

155 Interview M12

156 Interview M28

157 Interview M19

158 Interview M33

159 Interview M29

Although friends often start out their migratory journey together, they are normally soon separated by events and circumstances and probably deliberately — the last thing a smuggler wants is organised and loyal groups of migrants. Asking migrants about the whereabouts of fellow migrants that were separated from them at some point in their journey will offer few clues as to the final outcome. Especially if migrants are asked while still on their journey. It may also lead to unverifiable claims or hypotheses. As mentioned, those that are missing are always *somewhere*, often living in restricted and undesirable conditions that will be revealed later, if and when they return to Ethiopia, or when and if they establish a normal line of communication again from their destination. Only then can the full picture be known.

In the case of deaths, the full picture may never be known if there are no witnesses or no witnesses who can one day relate events to the family or friends of the perished migrants. Almost all who were interviewed claimed to have witnessed killings or bodies of dead migrants — how many of these cases were ever reported to the families of those dead? Focus group discussions and interviews with families of missing migrants indicated that while some families did receive confirmation of the death of their missing relative, many others did not.

The toughest road of grief is travelled by relatives of missing migrants of whom no news is ever heard. They are forever suspended in unresolved and 'ambiguous' loss. As mentioned, numerous unresolved cases were mentioned during this research by returnees, families of disappeared migrants, community leaders and government representatives and NGOs who work with migrants. The various forms of forced delay can all take place on the spectrum between temporary and permanent missingness. Even death, which can be temporary missingness until the point of identification or news of deaths is brought to family members, or permanent, if someone died but relatives never find out or know for sure.

A woman from East Hararghe who worked in Saudi Arabia for over three years without being paid reported that she knew of four women who migrated from her home area. ***"They called to their families when they got caught/detained by Saudi police as they crossed the Yemen-Saudi border. It is a year and half ago but nothing has been heard afterwards. No one here knows if they are alive or dead."***¹⁶⁰

It's been five years since their daughters left for Saudi but their whereabouts is not known.

Also, a young female returnee with especially disturbing migration experiences spoke of the pain of being visited by the mothers of two other girls who migrated from their community at the same time as the respondent. ***"They asked me the whereabouts of their daughters after I came back from Saudi Arabia. They were sobbing and were distressed but I had no answer, and I couldn't tell them the truth of my journey and what I have experienced because if I told them the story, they could think that their children were dead. It's been five years since their daughters left for Saudi but their whereabouts is not known."***¹⁶¹

160 Interview M32

161 Interview M28

It is not only the silence that causes distress but the absence of knowledge concerning the events or whereabouts of loved ones. Families of missing migrants not only spoke of their own lack of knowledge but often of other families they knew in similar predicaments. One said she knew two other families in her vicinity that don't know about the whereabouts of their children who were migrating to Saudi Arabia.¹⁶² A community leader said he knew of *"five families in Kibet whose daughters and sons disappeared on the way to Saudi Arabia through Yemen, and they hadn't heard what happened to them."*¹⁶³

Although the in-depth interviews with returnees indicated that missingness was common throughout the last decade, interviews with community leaders, government representatives, international NGOs and families of missing migrants illustrate that the phenomenon continues today.

162 Interview M20

163 Interview M11

05

Section 05: Impact of missingness and commodification on returnees, families and communities

The impacts of commodification, exploitation and missingness on migrants themselves, their families and their communities has been a somewhat neglected area of migration studies. But it is a neglect that recently appears to have been recognised, and steps are being taken to rectify it by agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross and IOM and others including some government departments.¹⁶⁴

An accompanying concern related to missing migrants has been the absence of documentation and identification of migrants that perish or efforts to offer the dead and their families' some dignity and closure.¹⁶⁵ In 2018, dozens of organisations committed themselves to action through the Mytilini

¹⁶⁴ Mengiste, T. (2021) [Families of Missing Migrants in Ethiopia: Their Search for Answers, the Impacts of Loss and Recommendations for Improved Support](#). IOM Also; Robin C. Reineke (2022) [Forensic citizenship among families of missing migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border](#), Citizenship Studies, 26:1, 21-37 Also; ICRC (2014) [Living With Absence Helping The Families Of The Missing](#) and ICRS's current [No Trace of You](#) campaign. Etc.

¹⁶⁵ For example, the (2019) [Guiding Principles for the Search for Disappeared Persons](#), which are based on the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance and other relevant international instruments. Also; Doyle, K. (2021) [Unidentified Human Remains and Missing Persons: a Global Challenge](#) in The ISHI Report, published by the International Symposium on Human Identification. Also; Robins, S. (2019) [Analysis of Best Practices on the Identification of Missing Migrants: Implications Also](#); Citroni, G. (2019) [Clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing migrants: Exchanging information along migratory routes](#). ICRC.

Declaration for the Dignified Treatment of all Missing and Deceased Persons and their Families as a Consequence of Migrant Journeys.¹⁶⁶

According to conservative estimates from IOM's Missing Migrants Project, over 50,000 migrants have perished worldwide between 2014-2022.¹⁶⁷ Many more times that number will be impacted by these migrants' deaths or missingness. In addition, IOM can only confirm the low number of 867 Ethiopian migration fatalities between 2014 and 2022 (along all migration routes globally) illustrating the difficulty of obtaining data. Meanwhile, a household survey conducted by the Ethiopian Central Statistics Agency in 2021 estimated that more than 51,000 Ethiopian nationals are missing migrants, 16.5 percent of whom (an estimated 8,430 individuals) were known by their families to be dead.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, they estimated that 16 percent (8,160) of the total number of missing migrants were on their way to Saudi Arabia at the time of survey (2021).¹⁶⁹ This is the first attempt to estimate the number of missing Ethiopian migrants, and illustrates the potential scale of families affected.

The findings of this research add to the growing evidence of impacts of rights violations and missingness with multiple testimony from returnees, families of missing migrants and third-party observers. Sometimes, this testimony is explicit and direct, but in other cases clues are found in comments or claims made almost in passing, but which point to the considerable impact on people's lives.

5.1 Mental health of returnees and families

The impact of migration on the mental health of migrants, especially returning women and girls, has been noted in previous research.¹⁷⁰ Interventions by government departments, International NGOs and local organisations working with returnees often include psychosocial therapeutic assistance and/or referral, although there is little evidence that the reach is extensive amongst those affected.

They feel ashamed due to their endeavours being in vain. They are suffering from hopelessness and loneliness.

A key informant observer in the Qibet community in the SNNPR administrative region said that hopelessness and isolation from the community due to the psychological and moral impact of the unsuccessful migration and the sufferings during the journey are widely observable. *"We have several returnees here and there who have isolated themselves and who don't associate with the community. They don't have confidence or interest in social life. They isolate themselves. They feel ashamed due to their endeavours being in vain. They are suffering from hopelessness and loneliness. This, in*

166 Last Rights (2018) [The Mytilini Declaration](#). Last Rights is a project of Methoria, a UK charity.

167 Black, J. and Z. Sigman, 2022. [50,000 lives lost during migration: analysis of Missing Migrants Project data 2014-2022](#). IOM GMDAC

168 Ibid (page 8) and Central Statistics Agency (CSA) [Ethiopia] (2021) [Labour Force and Migration Survey Key Findings](#). Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

169 Central Statistics Agency (CSA) [Ethiopia] (2021) op cit. (page 18)

170 Tilahun M, Workicho A, Angaw DA. (2020) [Common mental disorders and its associated factors and mental health care services for Ethiopian labour migrants returned from Middle East countries in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia](#). BMC Health Serv Res. Also: Zeleke W, Minaye A, Kygana G. [Mental health and somatic distress among Ethiopian migrant returnees from the Middle East](#). Int J Ment Health Psychiatry. 2015;1:2

*turn, is exposing them to mental illnesses".*¹⁷¹ Generally, the issue of disorientation, disappointment, discrimination and hardship for returnees is very real and evidently affects men differently from women.¹⁷²

Shame and failure

One respondent talked about how she regrets not being able to reimburse her mother for the money her journey cost and the debt she was in as a result, *"I migrated there to change the living situation of my mother and my siblings, but I became a burden to her."*¹⁷³ This sense of shame was frequently mentioned by respondents. The 'stigma of failure' and 'internalised shame' are concepts familiar to those working with returnees.¹⁷⁴

The sense of shame and failure has various facets and is exacerbated by the fact that there are always those in returnees' communities that make it to Saudi Arabia and generate income. Who knows what they went through to get there or what conditions they are living in in Saudi, but they are generating income for the family. The evidence is apparent through remittances, houses built, shops opened and vehicles purchased.

Not only a sense of failure, but the violations experienced and witnessed not to mention the lengthy experience in Saudi prisons must for many haunt them as denigrating, humiliating and disempowering memories. Clearly for females the almost inescapable reality of rape, often multiple, both during the journey and possibly in Saudi Arabia, adds a deep level of shame in a conservative Ethiopian culture and in close-knit rural communities. Returning with infants can only make things more complicated; *"I am ashamed of giving birth and I do not want to speak to people. I am not living with my mother. I live here with my two-year-old son. I work whatever job I get here to earn money. I am in quarrel with my brothers. I am not happy by now."*¹⁷⁵

"I want to be alone. I wish I could forget what I experienced. Even I wish I could die. The problem is I cannot forget it. I experienced so many problems."

A female respondent, while listing a range of examples of unfortunate returnee outcomes, mentioned that one of the women who disappeared and whose family considered her dead eventually returned, *"but she is mad now, and living on the street."*¹⁷⁶ Another woman, who had an especially violent and abusive experience during migration, illustrated how returnees often have to keep many secrets and cannot share their real experiences, *"I want to be alone. I wish I could forget what I experienced. Even I wish I could*

171 Interview M15

172 Bilgili, Ö., Kuschminder, K., & Siegel, M. (2018). [Return migrants' perceptions of living conditions in Ethiopia: A gendered analysis](#). *Migration studies*, 6(3), 345-366.

173 Interview M10

174 Interview with representatives of IOM in Addis Ababa, November 2022. Also; IOM (2019) [Programme Seeks to Smoothen Migrants' Reintegration by Tackling Stigma](#) And; IOM (2021). [They Snatched From Me My Own Cry: The interplay of social norms and stigma in relation to human trafficking in Ethiopia](#). Geneva. And; Fejerskov, A.M. & Zeleke, M (2020) [No Place For Me Here. The challenge of Ethiopian male returnee migrants](#). DIIS.

175 Interview M28

176 Interview M09

die. The problem is I cannot forget it. I experienced so many problems." When she returned, she could not tell her mother and sisters what happened to her. *"Had my mother heard what happened to me, she would have committed suicide. That was why I didn't tell her or my sisters".* Due to a lack of appropriate support, she added, female returnees are sometimes pushed into prostitution.¹⁷⁷

Family anxiety and stress

The focus on returnees' mental health can overshadow consideration of families of migrants and especially families of those who are missing or who are being held against their will. As one mother told the research, *"whenever my son called to ask for money, he was always crying and saying how he was being beaten, and the whole family was disturbed for two or three weeks until we were able to send money."*¹⁷⁸ Another female respondent who had been a migrant herself and whose son had left to migrate while under the care of her parents explained, *"my parents suffered a lot. They are suffering from feelings of guilt and that is adversely affecting their mental health."* Her son was missing at the time of the interview, and she had already sold the house with her own migration earnings to pay the smugglers' earlier demands.¹⁷⁹

“Not having the chance to ever hear from their children forces them to lead their lives in an intense sadness.”

The focus group discussions and interviews with families of missing migrants offered repeated and sobering testimony to the sadness and sorrow that overwhelm and preoccupy families when members leave to migrate, and in particular when they go missing in transit for short or long periods of time. One respondent explained that *"parents want to hear their children's voice, want to see them alive. But, by not knowing about them they cannot calm down. They live in anxiety and sadness. Not having the chance to ever hear from their children forces them to lead their lives in an intense sadness."*¹⁸⁰ The psychological impact of dead family members is considerable, but when children or others are missing for prolonged periods of time or are suspected to have died the impact is complicated and more desperate.

'Ambiguous loss' and the bodies of the deceased

So-called "unresolved loss", long-term "embodied grief" and "ambiguous loss" have profoundly negative impacts on the families of missing persons with the traumatising effect of unanswered questions and an absence of *closure* resulting in long-term "complicated grief".¹⁸¹ A 2021 report by IOM focused on affected families in Ethiopia and described the "multidimensional emotional and psychological challenges that families experience due to the loss of their loved ones", including grief and social, legal and economic hardships.¹⁸²

177 Interview M12

178 Interview M17

179 Interview M20

180 Interview M33

181 Boss, P. (2017) *Families of the missing: Psychosocial effects and therapeutic approaches*. International Review of the Red Cross.

182 Mengiste, T. (2021) *Families of Missing Migrants in Ethiopia: Their Search for Answers, the Impacts of Loss and Recommendations for Improved Support*. IOM.

The IOM study's findings echo similar research in Central America and elsewhere where loss and uncertainty associated with unresolved cases of missingness affects family members for years.¹⁸³ Findings in this research offer similar evidence of ambiguous loss compounded with the often-mentioned despair at not having seen the body of the deceased or being able to bury it in accordance with Ethiopian culture. As one respondent who lost his brother four years previously stated, *"I wish I had located his body and buried it. I was informed that it couldn't be done. Had my mother seen his body and buried it, she wouldn't have passed away. I have lost both my mother and my brother. I am mourning for both. Since I lost them, I am not healthy."*¹⁸⁴

A community leader told this research, *"We have several families who haven't heard the voice of their children, not just for months but for years. It is common to receive the news that their children have died in Somaliland, Djibouti, Yemen, or Saudi Arabia and those who have already confirmed the death of their migrated family members are in a better condition than those who don't know the whereabouts of their children."*¹⁸⁵

In one less common case, a smuggler in Djibouti sent a picture of a dead son to the family through Facebook while explaining it was impossible to return the body as he had already been buried in Djibouti.¹⁸⁶

Death is common, but this kind of death is terrible. It hurts to not be able to bury your son's body and not be able to see it.

A mother who had not heard of her son who migrated secretly with five friends said she was always thinking about her son and looking forward to seeing him and hearing his sound on the phone. She wept during her interview and said, *"I didn't hear about his death, and I am wishing and praying to hear about him."*¹⁸⁷ Another mother told this research that she would not believe in the death of her son but that if she provided or did the funeral ceremonies and could see his body it would give relief to her and her children and stop her thinking about him.¹⁸⁸

"Death is common, but this kind of death is terrible. It hurts to not be able to bury your son's body and not be able to see it", another mother spoke of her son's death. She said the grief is *"great and never-ending"* because she and her family never saw her son's body who died two years earlier. *"I will carry this pain with me till my dying breath."*¹⁸⁹

183 García Borja, A. & Viales Mora, E. (2021) [Searching for Missing Migrants in Central and North America: Five Good Practices of Civil Society Organizations](#). IOM. Also; Crocker, R., Reineke, R., & Ramos Tovar, M. (2021) [Ambiguous Loss and Embodied Grief Related to Mexican Migrant Disappearances](#). Medical Anthropology.

184 Interview M19

185 Interview M15

186 Interview M21

187 Interview M17

188 Interview M13

189 Interview M16

Although this research did not find evidence of distress directly related to the absence of burial specifically, the 2021 IOM study states that, 'one of the roles of the bereaved is in fact to help the deceased make the transition from the living world to the world of the dead, through a series of religious and cultural rites which cannot take place without the remains. Socially, it is believed that the inability to recover remains or to gather information about the whereabouts of a missing migrant implies that his or her family is cursed.'¹⁹⁰

5.2 Physical health of returnees and families

The longer-term impact of violence, violations and abusive conditions on the journey to, and time spent in, Saudi Arabia is likely to be understated. Not only have returnees and families rarely been asked about these impacts in earlier studies, but an appreciation of the causation of illnesses risks being forgotten over time or left unmentioned. Nevertheless, the testimonies given during this research offer clues to their existence.

Returnees are known to be mentally traumatised by their experience during their migration but can also have physical impacts. One key informant claimed that most returnees suffer from "many serious diseases".¹⁹¹ Recalling the widespread testimonies of severe violations and privations in earlier sections this, as well as injuries, could be expected. There are cases of sexually transmitted diseases affecting women who were raped (including AIDS, fistula, prolapses and STDs) and broken bones or disabilities caused by injuries sustained, normally from smuggler violence.¹⁹² When a girl escaped from a smuggler's compound in Yemen, one respondent reported that she was thrashed by the smuggler who thought she knew where the escaped girl was. He broke her hand during the beating so she could not work in Saudi and now also struggles to use it in Ethiopia, five years later. Moreover, her legs were badly damaged during the travel from Jijiga to Djibouti, and she still complains of the pain.¹⁹³ One woman who had also migrated spoke of her husband who in Bossaso had been *"severely beaten by smugglers when he tried to protect women from sexual abuse."* On his eventual return to Ethiopia, *"he died because of heart complications caused by physical beating."*¹⁹⁴

Respondents often mentioned that they fell sick during the journey, when in Saudi and on their return. Pain in the kidneys was cited in various interviews. A religious leader and NGO worker in Qibet town (SNNPR) said *"chronic kidney disease and prolonged back pains are the major ones; most returnees are suffering from these illnesses, and they are not in a position to engage in any job even where a job is available."*¹⁹⁵

Deaths in the family following news of a migrant's death

A striking example of the impact on families of migrants is the frequency that the death of a relative in Ethiopia is attributed to the loss or death of a migrant. When illness and death is closely related to shock, sadness or extreme stress its attribution cannot be proven but is significant enough that in the perception

¹⁹⁰ Mengiste, T. (2021) op cit.

¹⁹¹ Interview M15

¹⁹² Interview with Agar, Evangelical Church Addis Ababa. November 2022

¹⁹³ Interview M09

¹⁹⁴ Interview M08

¹⁹⁵ Interview M15

of others the causal link is believed to be real. According to one respondent, *"the greatest impact was the passing away of my mother. Immediately after his departure for migration, she became ill. After almost a year, she learned of his death, which worsened her predicament. Several months later, she also passed away. Therefore, the disappearance and death of my brother served as the primary cause of my mother's illness and death."*¹⁹⁶

...but being shocked by hearing the death of his grandson (whom he was raising), her father fainted and passed away on the third day.

Another respondent told of how she lost her elder son through migration, *"but being shocked by hearing the death of his grandson (whom he was raising), her father fainted and passed away on the third day."*

¹⁹⁷ Again, a respondent said, *"after one year, the victim's father died thinking about his son, and this impacted the whole family."* The respondent herself *"became forgetting of everything and developed a problem with her eyes after illegal migration and the death of her son."*¹⁹⁸

In another case, where a son completely disappeared for years after leaving to migrate, a respondent said, *"his parents died due to the sadness of his disappearance. Now it is only his brothers that are alive. His brothers pray to hear from him one day."*¹⁹⁹ A woman who travelled through Yemen with her cousin spoke of how she died in a road accident in Yemen. When her family in Ethiopia was informed, *"the cousin's mother passed away after receiving the news. Her father and her other three siblings are leading a harsh life now. Up to now her family couldn't accept her death."*²⁰⁰

If news of a missing/deceased child or grandchild does not cause such an extreme reaction, it is still very significant to the families and communities concerned. The research findings indicate that the stress and anxiety of the families of those missing is high. One respondent reported that, *"it has been five years since my sister's daughter has disappeared. Her father has died in the mind [become unbalanced] through trying to find her, but her whereabouts still remain unknown."*²⁰¹

5.3 Economic loss

The overwhelming driver for Ethiopians to migrate to Saudi Arabia is to escape grinding poverty, find work and change their own and their families' lives. This has been confirmed repeatedly the last decade or more in all relevant studies and is confirmed here too. Expressing the hopelessness and degradation that accompanies poverty, one woman said, *"it is the hate of the life here."*²⁰²

196 Interview M19

197 Interview M21

198 Interview M22

199 Interview M33

200 Interview M31

201 FGD 01

202 FGD 01

Migrant missingness and death may appear to have little direct associated cost or economic loss, but when set within the context of Ethiopia and the characteristics of the Eastern Route the economic burdens are clear:

- Migrants taking the irregular Eastern Route are often from extremely poor families with few assets and the lowest income groups, often rural.
- Married male fathers who migrate effectively abandon their wives and children for the period of the migration until they can earn an income to send home. If they become missing or die, the economic situation of those they left behind becomes severe.
- The unavoidable nature of migrant commoditisation and repeated extortion on the Eastern Route means during and before missingness families pay smugglers' demands. The process impoverishes families and communities.
- Families struggle to raise the amounts demanded by smugglers and are forced to sell oxen, cows, goats, houses and land. Alternatively, and normally when these are exhausted, they may turn to moneylenders, microcredit groups or assistance from other families.
- In the case of relatives already working or living in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere, the payments to smugglers are normally made by them and the rates demanded appear to be higher.
- Migrants who are missing for long periods or who die cannot contribute to household incomes or repay/recoup ransom losses and represent lost opportunities economically.
- Many migrants do not have successful migration experiences insofar as they fail to remit income to Ethiopia during their time away and/or are unable to bring whatever they earn back with them (due to Saudi police, cheated by employers or smugglers in Saudi, robbery etc).
- Even where migrants manage to find work and send remittance money home, there are the initial costs of migration to recoup (land, livestock, savings and loans) not to mention family tensions about the amount being sent and/or what the family spend the remittance money on.
- Whether the missing migrant returns or not, the household is left more impoverished than before the migrant left — a cause of considerable shame and discomfort for many returnees who come back empty handed.

The following selected quotes from those interviewed illustrate these points and the desperate vicious cycle of poverty and unsuccessful migration that many experience:

"Families of most migrants live in despair when their children do not succeed in their journey and fail to earn a good living." ²⁰³

"My mother sold all the cattle we had. She had nothing left to sell; my mother even got credit from a microfinance institution to pay the smuggler to let me cross the sea." ²⁰⁴

203 Interview M29

204 Interview M10

*"To transfer money to the trafficker while she was being kept captive in Somaliland, her family in Ethiopia sold farms. She laments not being able to reimburse her family for that money. Her family was unable to recover the valuable lands they had lost."*²⁰⁵

Because they had previously lost their farmland [from paying earlier ransoms for her], my family was much more destitute.

One returnee said she has trauma every time she remembers the circumstances in the smugglers' detention camp in Yemen. *"Because they had previously lost their farmland [from paying earlier ransoms for her], my family was much more destitute."*²⁰⁶

*"In Bossaso we were beaten to pay the money. I begged to them to leave me because my father had already sold the goats [to pay the first demands] and we had nothing left to sell. When I was overwhelmed by pains of the beating, I allowed them to call my father. My father already paid 10,000.00 birr [\$200 USD] and had no many to pay again. When they called my father while beating me they also threatened to kill me. My father begged them a lot, but they refused to stop. Then, my father unable to endure my outcry and promised them to sell land to send the money. After 15 days of my stay, my father managed to send me the 15,000.00 birr [\$300 USD] they have demanded."*²⁰⁷

Other studies have mentioned the additional costs to families of missing migrants — searching for their loved ones, taking time to contact authorities and even travelling abroad.²⁰⁸ In this research, none of those interviewed mentioned any efforts to search for the missing, investigate deaths, recover bodies, rescue family members from situations in Saudi Arabia or any other activity besides occasionally mentioning their cases to local government departments in their vicinity. They also asked other returnees for news of their missing relatives. Presumably, the prospect of setting out on the same route without protection is too daunting, and most families affected are too impoverished. The bleak sense of helplessness and unresolved grief must be extreme in these circumstances. Some families of missing migrants and other key informants expressed these emotions in their interviews.

Combined impacts

Isolating impacts of the Eastern Route and missingness into mental, physical and economic health creates an unrealistic division of elements that are, in fact, combined. Individuals, families and communities are impacted by a combination of negative effects of migration which differ from case to case and have nuanced and non-typical responses as well. For example, representatives of NGOs who work with returnees talk of how returnees may not be noted for their isolation and shame but are instead loud,

205 Interview M07

206 Interview M07

207 Interview M28

208 Mengiste, T. (2021) & García Borja, A. & Viales Mora, E. (2021) op cit.

aggressive and act superior because of their external experiences.²⁰⁹ They are uninterested in what they see as small financial grants to make a new start in Ethiopia and instead only plan to remigrate.²¹⁰

*"Regardless of the sufferings, it is common to encounter returnees who have experienced migrating several times through this route. They think that they will be successful one day."*²¹¹

Unpublished data from the Ethiopia Migration Project confirms that in some areas of Ethiopia it is not unusual for people to migrate to Saudi Arabia multiple times. Key informants for this research also report that returnees can be more licentious and involved in substance abuse and far from being reclusive, they become disruptive in communities. Of course, these behavioural traits may also come as a result of the impact (and trauma) of migrating.

Findings from this research also point to the fact that marital relationships and parent/child relationships were often very tested by migration. When smugglers make their extortive phone calls while torturing family members, *"most fathers don't want to sell their farmland, while mothers urge them to sell whatever they have to save their son/daughter."* According to a community leader interviewed, this has been creating divisions in *"many families and consequently leading to family disintegrations."*²¹²

The impact of the imprisonment of a family member in Saudi again ruins the life of their families here.

Speaking to the combined nature of impact on the person migrating and their families, the same interviewee discussed the lengthy imprisonment in Saudi prisons. He said, *"Most of the returnees you find here have returned after imprisonments of a month to two or three years. This, in turn, has a psychological, moral, health, and economic impact on them. The impact of the imprisonment of a family member in Saudi again ruins the life of their families here."*²¹³

The impact of grief at the death of a family member, or the ambiguous loss of a permanently missing relative, can only be imagined on families and communities, especially where other families in the community experience the same loss.

However difficult the conditions are, there is also joy at the reappearance of migrants presumed missing. When one young man was deported to Ethiopia after being held in Saudi Arabian prisons for a year he said, *"my family couldn't believe that it was me when I returned,"* he said. *"Though they lost many things, they were happy for me to return home."*²¹⁴

209 From interviews with representatives of IOM and the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus Development and Social Service Commission Addis Ababa. November 2022.

210 Ebrahim, E.A. & Biru, B. Z. (2022) [Multivariate Analysis of Drivers of Migration, Challenges, and Prediction of Future Scenarios of Female Ethiopian Return Migrants From the Middle East](#). Frontiers in Applied Mathematics and Statistics.

211 Interview M15

212 Interview M15

213 Interview M15

214 Interview M23

One girl who was just 15 years old when she migrated returned aged 17 after two years of appalling abuse and prolonged missingness. She phoned her family once she landed in Addis and said, *"they never expected that I would return alive. They were extremely glad to learn that I was alive and returned."* Her family didn't complain to her about the money they spent on her travel [extortion] nor did they ask her whether she brought any money back with her. *"They said it is quite enough to receive you alive,"* she said.²¹⁵

06

Section 06: Discussion and conclusions

A uniquely commodified route

Based on the findings of this research that build on those of various studies stretching back to at least ten years, we propose that **the irregular migratory Eastern Route out of Ethiopia is, every step of the way, characterised by levels of *commodification* unseen in any other multi-country route globally.** The pay-as-you-go model or even the 'don't worry about payment, you can pay us from earnings in Saudi Arabia' lure, is just a recruitment deceit disguising an extortion *machine*. As such, the migrants are commodities from whom value or rent is extracted at three or four points (minimum) along the journey.

Many females are additionally commodified insofar as they are treated as objects to be used for sexual gratification by smugglers and associates of smugglers along the route. This is a facet that is common to other migratory routes and part of the gendered aspects of aggravated migrant smuggling, but this study suggests that the extent of the *commodification* through extortion may be unique. Extortion occurs on other migratory routes but is normally part of a package of abusive practices that affect some migrants and not others. On the Eastern Route these practices are widespread and systematic.

A uniquely high-volume multi-country route

Another exceptional aspect of the Eastern Route is the consistently high average number of people using the route. As a multi-country route where smugglers use similar stopping points (extortion

points) such as Las Anod, Tadjoura, Bossaso etc. and appear to have Ethiopian nationals managing the process from Ethiopia up to and within Saudi Arabia, this route stands out as unrivalled. Where else do such defined routes cater for over 8,000 migrants per month, year on year for more than a decade? The hundreds of thousands who cross the Mexico/US border each year, for example, are a wide mix of independently moving individuals or groups as well as smuggler-organised migrants. They use multiple crossing points, cross into one country from another and while some may face extortion it is not the ubiquitous *modus operandi* as it is on this Eastern Route. Equally, with Afghans migrating west to Türkiye and Europe, the West African route north to Europe or the thousands using the Darien Gap in Panama, the volume has varied from year to year and evidence suggests the numbers are significantly lower than those using the Ethiopian Eastern Route.

This study posits that the consistently and reliably high number of migrants using the Eastern Route over many years has directly contributed to it becoming the most commoditised route allowing smugglers to operate on an 'industrial' scale.

Systematic extortion means systematic violations

Again, as a result of the extortion and commodification of migrants on this route, **it is characterised by levels of brutality, abuse and negligence probably unseen in any other multi-country route globally**. The treatment of migrants in Libya, especially Sub-Saharan migrants, is severe and possibly the worst example globally — numerous reports continue to condemn it.²¹⁶ However, if the abuse and violations against migrants is worse, then this is likely due to the appalling protection challenges facing migrants in Libya itself that are distinct and separate from the whole Central Mediterranean route from any part of Africa. Even though abuse and negligence of migrants are common on many routes, it is unlikely to match that along the Eastern Route in terms of systematic practices connected to widespread extortion starting almost from the onset of the migration journeys.²¹⁷

There are, no doubt, some differences between the direct experiences of different migrants on the Eastern Route, especially depending on the migrant's ability and willingness to pay the successive ransom demands. However, the findings from this study depressingly echo those of the many earlier studies documenting the vicious and abusive practices on the Eastern Route — some written by the author of this study.²¹⁸ If anything, it appears the abuse has become more systematic over recent years on this route.

The extortion driver

If the above points are accepted then, according to the findings of this research, the **intent of smugglers managing this route is unambiguous and should be considered as distinct from routes in other parts of the world** where those organising the movement (smugglers) may be considered as more *benign*

216 The most recent, Van Reisen, M., Mawere, M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (2023). [Enslaved, Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya](#).

217 For example, North Africa and Central America routes in UNODC (2021) [Abused and neglected - A gender perspective on aggravated migrant smuggling and response](#)

218 MMC (2012) [Desperate choices: conditions, risks & protection failure affecting Ethiopian migrants in Yemen](#). Also; IOM (2014) [Fatal Journeys: Tracking Lives Lost during Migration](#).

performing a 'moral' service.²¹⁹ The narrative that smugglers are generally decent and assist those in mixed migratory journeys has become assertive in recent years, partly based on findings from some selected routes, but partly driven by those who want to counter government narratives that demonise smugglers as a pretext to halting mixed migration itself.²²⁰ In the case of the Eastern Route, according to this research and other studies, there appears to be less ambiguity; the smuggler operates with specific intent to exploit with **extortion as the primary business model**.²²¹ Notwithstanding the limitations associated with the non-random research sample for this study, our findings allow little room to suggest there are other models used by smugglers in cases where people travel with smugglers and are detained.

The trafficking continuum

It is useful to understand different migratory routes and different migrants' experiences as being located along the *trafficking continuum*.²²² The 2022 Save the Children study describes this continuum with **'transaction-based facilitation by smugglers at one end of the continuum, and trafficking for exploitation at the other. Between the two extremes are a range of inhumane and degrading practices, known as aggravated smuggling'**.²²³

The term *aggravated smuggling* is also used in the 2021 UNODC report on gendered violence against migrants drawn from the original 2000 'Palermo Protocol' on smuggling, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.²²⁴ Article 6(3) states that situations are aggravated where smuggling of migrants occurs in circumstances that 'endanger, or are likely to endanger, their lives or safety', or that 'entail inhuman or degrading treatment, including for exploitation, of such migrants.'²²⁵

However, these descriptions of violations come very close to those used to define human trafficking. Compare the findings from this report (and others referenced) against the following formal definition from the 2000 'Palermo Protocol' on trafficking: **'The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, or abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or 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. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation is irrelevant where coercive means have been used. The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt**

219 For example, Achilli, L. (2018). [The "Good" Smuggler: The Ethics and Morals of Human Smuggling among Syrians](#). The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. Also, Gilardi, J. (2020) [Ally or Exploiter? The Smuggler-Migrant Relationship Is a Complex One](#). Migration Policy Institute

220 Mixed Migration Centre (2021) [Smuggling and mixed migration. Insights and key messages drawn from a decade of MMC research and 4Mi data collection](#)

221 Other routes may have a mix of financing models including aspects of this eastern one (for example the route out of Ethiopia across the Central Mediterranean, through Libya), but in the Eastern Route this is the only model seemingly used for all who use it.

222 Schwarz, C., Alvord, D., Daley, D., Ramaswamy, M., Rauscher, E., & Britton, H. (2019). [The Trafficking Continuum: Service Providers' Perspectives on Vulnerability, Exploitation, and Trafficking](#). *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 34(1), 116–132. This source is based on cases in the US but explains the concept well.

223 Save the Children (2022) [Tipping Points to Turning Points](#)

224 UNODC (2021) op cit. And; Article 6, [Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime](#) (2000).

225 Article 6, [Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime](#) (2000).

*of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered trafficking in persons even if this does not involve the use of coercive means.'*²²⁶

The trafficking–smuggling nexus has been discussed in various analyses including a 2015 paper by MMC that found, *'in cases of human trafficking, both profit and purpose are directly tied to the exploitation of the migrant.'*²²⁷ It also found that *'it has become increasingly apparent that the legal distinction between migrant smuggling and human trafficking does not always stand in the real world.'*²²⁸ Speaking in February 2021, the UNHCR Special Envoy for the Central Mediterranean Situation, Vincent Cochetel also stated that: *'The distinction between smuggler and trafficker has become obsolete.'*²²⁹

Writing specifically about Libya it has been said that 'definitions [of smuggling and trafficking] and the distinction that arises from them tend to become meaningless.'²³⁰ The same authors further suggest that the UN Convention and its protocols are not adapted to contexts with little to no rule of law, such as Libya and Yemen, and the kidnapping and extortion experienced by Eritreans in Libya is 'neither trafficking, nor smuggling, but a crime against humanity orchestrated by an organized criminal network.'²³¹ A recent publication on Libya chose to describe and define the treatment of Eritreans and others in Libya as 'enslavement', and describes the context where extortion takes place as 'human trafficking for ransom' as a separate sub-category of human trafficking.²³²

The authors use the designation *'human trafficking for ransom'* that they created some years earlier referring to a *'specific form of trafficking that combines slavery, forced begging, severe violence, and torture (or threat of torture), often using ICTs (information and communication technology) such as mobile phones to broadcast this torture to relatives or friends to motivate payment of the ransom.'*²³³

Pertinent to the findings of this research, another description of human trafficking for ransom describes it as, *'... particularly brutal, and [...] characterised by abduction, displacement, captivity, extortion, torture, sexual violence and humiliation, commoditisation, serial selling and killing. The 'trafficking' aspect of the phenomenon involves the taking of people against their will or by misleading them and holding them as hostages for ransom or further sale. The trafficking victims are exploited as they are forced to beg for money from relatives, extended family or people in the diaspora to pay the ransoms demanded. Furthermore, the trafficking victims are sold from one person to another as if they were the traffickers' 'property'. As such, those who are trafficked are treated as slaves.'*²³⁴ The term 'trafficking for ransom' was coined to describe the context in Sinai some years ago where Eritrean migrants and refugees faced

226 Article 3, [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime](#) (2000).

227 Carling, J., Gallagher, A. T., & Horwood, C. (2015). [Beyond definitions: Global migration and the smuggling–trafficking nexus](#) (No. 2; Discussion Paper). Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (RMMS).

228 Ibid, page 4

229 MMC. (2021). [Videos from UNHCR-MMC Policy Workshop: Protection Challenges on the Central & Western Mediterranean Routes, held February 2021](#). (Quoted in Save the Children, (2022) op cit. footnote 75)

230 Kuschminder, K. and Triandafyllidou, A. (2020), [Smuggling, Trafficking, and Extortion: New Conceptual and Policy Challenges on the Libyan Route to Europe](#). Antipode, 52: 206-226

231 Ibid

232 Van Reisen, M., Mawere, M., Smits, K., & Wirtz, M. (2023). [Enslaved, Trapped and Trafficked in Digital Black Holes: Human Trafficking Trajectories to Libya](#).

233 Van Reisen, M., & Rijken, C. (2015). [Sinai trafficking: Origin and definition of a new form of human trafficking](#). Social Inclusion, 3(1), 113–124.

234 Van Reisen, M., Estefanos, M., & Rijken, C. (2014). [The human trafficking cycle: Sinai and beyond](#). Oosterwijk: Wolf Legal Publishers

brutal extortion for considerable sums in conditions very similar to those faced by Ethiopians along the Eastern Route.

Nevertheless, some may also question the importance of definitions at all and find it more useful to define the situation merely as a 'severe protection crisis'.²³⁵

Concerning Ethiopian migration, it has already been argued that so-called voluntary and regular labour migration is tainted by accusations and evidence of trafficking and/or conditions of forced labour by ILO's standards.²³⁶ Human Rights Watch don't hesitate to describe many of the practices on this irregular route as trafficking.²³⁷ This report argues that **the prevailing characteristics of the Eastern Route would locate it closer to trafficking practices, and without question a route where aggravated smuggling typically occurs**. It should be regarded, therefore, as a mis-categorisation to describe the Eastern Route as just a smuggling route. Besides, the idea that smuggling rather than trafficking is a victimless crime is unsustainable once stories from those who have been smuggled are heard.²³⁸ At a minimum, therefore, what we see on the Eastern Route is a mix of trafficking and smuggling practices, possibly more correctly described as 'human trafficking for ransom' along the whole route.

Short and long term missingness

Inherent in this model of premediated intentional extortion are periods of detention, abduction, kidnapping, sale and 'rental' of migrants, which are experienced as multiple periods of missingness from the point of view of their family and friends. Not only is temporary 'missingness' a main characteristic of this route, but **long term missingness (disappearance) and fatalities are commonplace and** have been for many years. The number of Ethiopians who have perished along this route while under the strict control of smugglers is unknown and most likely unknowable, as most die without record, investigation or identification.

MMC's 2014 study *'Abused and Abducted'*, identified that many women who made the sea crossing from Djibouti or Somalia went missing upon arrival in Yemen, and suggested it was likely they were abducted by criminal and trafficking gangs operating on the Yemeni coastline.²³⁹ Since then, there has been an absence of in-depth follow-up and investigation into the fate of women and girls upon arrival in Yemen.²⁴⁰ Part of the rationale for this current enquiry was to seek answers to questions the 2014 research raised. What happened to seemingly thousands of disappeared people, mainly female? Why did they disappear once they reached Yemen or even before then? Did they ever re-appear? The findings of this report now shed clearer light on the reasons for the apparent missingness of both women and men along the Eastern Route, although they still do not explain where those people who are missing for prolonged periods

235 Interview with Save the Children Ethiopia team for this research.

236 Asfaw, M.B. & Mekonen, K.D. (2016) [The Ruthless Side of Human Trafficking in Ethiopia: Returnees Recounting Their Experience of Abuse and Exploitation in the Arab Countries](#) And; ILO (2020) [Policy Brief: Key findings and recommendations from survey on labour migration from Ethiopia to Gulf Cooperation Council states and Lebanon](#)

237 Human Rights Watch (2019) [Ethiopians Abused on Gulf Migration Route Trafficking, Exploitation, Torture, Abusive Prison Conditions](#)

238 Mixed Migration Centre (2017) [Human Smuggling – No victimless crime: Voices from those on the move](#)

239 MMC (2014) [Abused & Abducted: The plight of female migrants from the Horn of Africa in Yemen](#)

240 Mixed Migration Centre (2021). [Opportunities and Risks: Ethiopian women on the eastern mixed migration route between the Horn of Africa and Yemen.](#)

are — unless they are dead. The numbers of individuals and families affected are not small; the 2021 Ethiopian government household survey data suggested that over 8,000 Ethiopians were reported as missing (included dead) in 2021 along the Eastern Route.²⁴¹ Clearly, serious questions remain unanswered concerning the long-term disappearances of migrants who are not known to have died but are never heard of by their families for years or decades after starting migration.

Findings from this research echo findings from the limited existing research on the families of missing and returnee migrants. **The impact on families and communities can be multi-dimensional, inter-generational and debilitating. It is under-researched, and little understood or appreciated** within the migration or humanitarian/development sector and warrants deeper analysis as a precursor to targeted support. Virtually all returnees and families of missing and returnee migrants spoke of having received no support of any kind from government departments or non-government agencies. Nevertheless, the 2021 IOM study offers interesting insights into local community-based support systems among families of missing migrants in Ethiopia.²⁴²

Hidden in plain sight?

All research is limited by its premises and methodology. While this study makes some distinct and new claims about the Eastern Route out of Ethiopia, it also recognises that what appears to characterise this route may actually have characterised the route for many years. What we 'find' now may have been *hidden in plain sight* all along. Analysts develop their framing and build on earlier assumptions over time. In this study, where the focus was placed on issues of commodification and missingness, the nature of the extortion machinery and the extent of missingness due to exploitation and trafficking-like practices were laid bare. However, it may also have developed over time. In the opinion of one focus group participant, *"previously, the route to illegal migration was relatively safe and there was less death than now. These days, people are being sold like slaves. Let alone bringing money, men are not returning even alive. Now things have become worse and bloody."*²⁴³

This analyst's view is that if the Eastern Route is now a well-oiled and cynical programme of extortion and exploitation by Ethiopians for Ethiopians, it was not always so. What we see in 2023 is likely an illustration of a developed market of criminal supply meeting desperate demand as evolved in a context of almost complete impunity played out in some of the poorest countries in the world.

241 Central Statistics Agency (CSA) [Ethiopia] (2021) [Labour Force and Migration Survey Key Findings](#). Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

242 Mengiste, T. (2021) [Families of Missing Migrants in Ethiopia: Their Search for Answers, the Impacts of Loss and Recommendations for Improved Support](#). IOM

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