

AFRICAN CENTRE
FOR JUSTICE AND
PEACE
STUDIES



August 2025

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS

AMIDST THE ONGOING CONFLICT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research addresses issues of human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan within the context of the armed conflict that erupted in April 2023. The conflict has led to a structural collapse and deterioration of security, creating an environment conducive to the proliferation of organized crime networks. The study aims to provide an in-depth qualitative understanding of these complex phenomena in light of the political and social transformations occurring in the country. It analyzes the national legal context, the positions of various actors, and the impact of the conflict on victims, particularly women and children, highlighting their experience.

The research employs a qualitative methodology, collecting data from individual interviews with victims and their families, expert opinions in the field of combating human trafficking and smuggling, and a desk review of legal documents and national and international reports. This approach has facilitated the development of a comprehensive understanding of these issues within the Sudanese context.

The findings indicate that human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan have evolved from marginal issues to systematic practices driven by armed conflict and exacerbated by the collapse of state institutions and the lack of legal and social protections. Sudan has shifted from being merely a transit point for irregular migration to a source and destination country, particularly due to escalating internal displacement, growing poverty, loss of basic services, the breakdown of protection systems, insecurity, and the absence of border controls. These factors place large segments of the population, especially women and children, in vulnerable situations that facilitate exploitation.

Through the testimonies of victims and their families, the research documents various patterns of human trafficking, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, forced recruitment of children, forced marriage, and exploitation along smuggling routes.

The findings reveal a significant confusion in understanding and applying the distinction between human trafficking and migrant smuggling within state institutions. This confusion often results in the criminalization of victims instead of their protection and contributes to the impunity of perpetrators. It also highlights the lack of effective national mechanisms for identifying victims or referring them to protection services, making redress and reintegration extremely challenging.

Testimonies indicate that armed conflict has strengthened trafficking networks through the use of informal smuggling routes, complicity with armed groups, and the decline of police and judicial services, creating a dangerous security vacuum. Civil society organizations, which serve as the first line of defense, have also been adversely affected by insecurity, access difficulties, and a lack of resources, thereby weakening their capacity to document cases and provide necessary support.

Legally, despite the Anti-Human Trafficking Law enacted in 2014, its implementation has been limited due to poor coordination, insufficient training, and a lack of political will, compounded by the absence of specialized units within the criminal justice system. This has resulted in a dysfunctional justice system that obstructs the prosecution of trafficking networks and hampers effective victim support.

The study asserts that human trafficking and migrant smuggling are not only direct consequences of the security and institutional collapse in Sudan but also indicators of the fragility of the social and legal systems, the absence of justice, and the prevalence of impunity. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive national response supported by strong political will, effective community participation, and genuine collaboration with the international community to ensure full protection for victims, end the cycle of exploitation, and restore the dignity of the Sudanese people in times of war and peace.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach to explore and analyze issues of human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan within the context of the ongoing armed conflict that began in April 2023. The focus is on identifying patterns of trafficking and smuggling, understanding the motives and methods of operation, and examining the direct impacts on victims, as well as the responses at national, regional, and international levels to combat these issues.

Qualitative data was collected using:

Interviews with Victims:

Seventeen in-person and online interviews were conducted with victims who experienced trafficking, smuggling, or attempted exploitation during the conflict. These interviews included victims from various states within Sudan, as well as refugees who fled with their families to neighboring countries such as Egypt, Libya, Chad, and South Sudan. Victim testimonies constitute the primary source of research, accounting for approximately 80% of the total research material. These testimonies are essential for understanding patterns of exploitation and the methods used by smugglers and traffickers.

Interviews with Witnesses and Experts:

The research included interviews with several legal experts, government officials, representatives from civil society organizations, field observers, and eyewitnesses, totaling six interviews. These interviews aimed to provide a comprehensive legal perspective on these phenomena and to analyze the political and social context of the conflict. This segment represents 20% of the research sources.

Focus Group Discussion:

A focus group discussion was organized to gather experts and specialists in human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan. The purpose of this discussion was to examine current trends in organized crime within conflict settings and to analyze both national and international legal frameworks and responses.

Analytical Method:

The collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, categorize types of violations, and pinpoint key actors and areas of activity. The credibility of the accounts was confirmed by cross-referencing them with information from international and national reports.

Ethical Considerations:

The research methodology adhered to ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent from participants, who were informed that they would not receive compensation for their involvement. The African Center took extensive measures to avoid re-traumatizing survivors and witnesses. To protect the safety and privacy of victims and witnesses, pseudonyms were utilized.

Limitations:

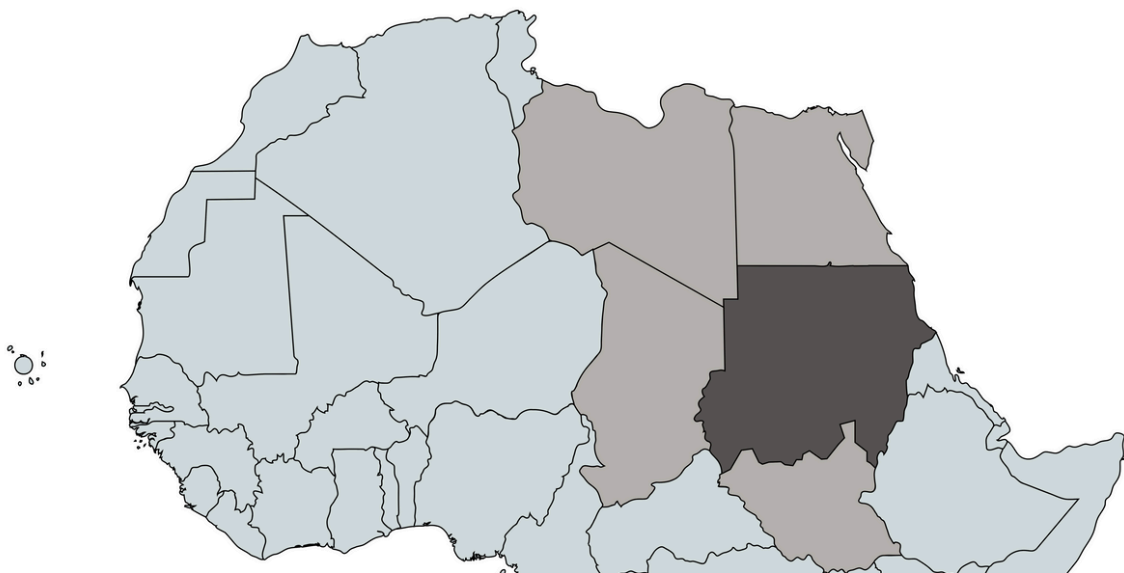
The research faced several limitations that impacted its comprehensiveness. While it specifically focused on human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan during the ongoing armed conflict, it was unable to provide a thorough estimate of the prevalence of these issues nationwide. This limitation arose from challenges in accessing victims in certain conflict-affected regions and logistical constraints encountered by the research team. Despite these obstacles, the research aimed to document victims' stories through direct interviews while adhering to ethical guidelines.

Expected Outcomes:

The research methodology seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan amid the current conflict, along with evidence-based recommendations to reinforce political, legal, and social efforts to address these issues.

Geographic Scope of the Research:

The research focused on Sudan, as well as Sudanese individuals both within the country and in neighboring countries (Egypt, Libya, Chad, and South Sudan), which the African Center reached through various means of communication.



Timeframe of the Research:

The research covers the period from April 15, 2023, to the present, conducted over five months from March to July 2025.

General Objectives of the Research:

- Increase awareness regarding human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan.
- Advocate for accountability among policymakers and decision-makers at the national, regional, and international levels concerning human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants.
- Raise awareness about human trafficking and migrant smuggling and their impact on human rights in society.

Specific Objectives of the Research:

- Provide an in-depth understanding of human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan and how conflict influences the rise of these phenomena.
- Highlight the prominent patterns and trends of human trafficking and smuggling in Sudan within the context of armed conflict.
- Review the levels of national, regional, and international responses to human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan, along with the challenges faced in combating these issues.

INTRODUCTION

Sudan's geographical location is crucial for understanding the patterns of human trafficking and migrant smuggling within the country. Positioned at a key crossroads for both organized and unorganized migration to the Middle East and Europe, Sudan serves as a source, transit, and destination point for victims of trafficking and smuggling. This situation is further exacerbated by the state's weak legal and institutional infrastructure, which predates the recent armed conflict.

Since the outbreak of war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces on April 15, 2023, there has been a systematic collapse of law enforcement institutions, the judiciary, and social protection mechanisms. This collapse has significantly heightened the risks of human trafficking and migrant smuggling across Sudan, particularly in border areas with Egypt and Libya. Women, children, and persons with disabilities have become especially vulnerable to trafficking networks and armed groups due to the lack of safe routes, shelters, and avenues for redress.

Social stigma, fear, and cultural barriers have led to significant underreporting of crimes, particularly those involving sexual violence and physical exploitation. Reports from the United Nations and various international organizations, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), reveal a troubling rise in the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation, child marriage, and forced child recruitment. According to the 2024 USAID report, Sudan has fallen to Tier 3 in the global ranking for efforts to combat human trafficking, reflecting its failure to meet minimum standards and insufficient actions to address this issue.

This situation underscores a critical lack of public awareness regarding these crimes, even within law enforcement agencies that often confuse human trafficking with migrant smuggling and irregular migration. Furthermore, foreign victims—especially those enroute to Europe or the Gulf—frequently refuse to remain in Sudan for legal proceedings, undermining prosecution efforts.

This research is a qualitative endeavor aimed at addressing the documentation and analysis gap by illuminating the patterns and trends of human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan amidst armed conflict. It draws on direct testimonies from victims as well as an analysis of the legal and political context, along with the challenges faced by national and international response efforts. The objectives of this research are to:

- Raise awareness about these crimes and their effects on human rights in Sudan.
- Document cases and firsthand accounts from victims.
- Advocate for accountability and prosecution of perpetrators at national, regional, and international levels.
- Deepen the understanding of decision-makers and international organizations regarding the nature of these crimes in the Sudanese context, thereby contributing to the development of more effective and equitable responses.

The research is organized into three main chapters, each addressing a key theme essential for understanding human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan during conflict. Chapter 1 establishes a conceptual and legal framework for distinguishing between human trafficking and migrant smuggling, reviewing the relevant national and international legal frameworks, including gaps in implementation and accountability. Chapter 2 examines the broader context of the escalation of these issues, focusing on the impact of armed conflict, institutional collapse, and the geographical, economic, and social factors that foster an environment conducive to these crimes. Chapter 3 analyzes patterns of trafficking and migrant smuggling through testimonies from victims, witnesses, and experts, exploring prevailing trends, the parties involved, and the challenges surrounding protection and accountability.

Chapter One:

The Conceptual Framework of Human Trafficking and Smuggling of Migrants



Section One: The Difference Between Human Trafficking and Migrant smuggling

Understanding the distinction between human trafficking and migrant smuggling is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of transnational organized crime, particularly in countries facing humanitarian crises and armed conflicts like Sudan. While both phenomena exploit the human desire to escape or improve one's situation, they possess distinct legal, social, and humanitarian characteristics. This differentiation is essential not only for the accuracy of research but also for developing effective responses to protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable.

This section aims to deconstruct the theoretical framework of each phenomenon, analyzing the fundamental differences regarding intent, means, the relationship between perpetrator and victim, and ultimate goals, while also highlighting the complex intersections between them, particularly in the context of Sudan.

Human trafficking is a form of organized crime that involves the recruitment, transportation, harboring, or receipt of individuals through unlawful means, such as coercion, threats, or deception, for the purpose of exploitation. This crime is considered one of the gravest violations of human dignity due to its blatant infringement on an individual's freedom and fundamental rights. The concept of human trafficking is based on three key elements: the act (e.g., transportation or recruitment), the means (e.g., coercion or deception), and the purpose (e.g., sexual exploitation, forced labor, or organ removal). In cases involving children, the means is not required; exploitation alone is sufficient to constitute trafficking.

In specialized studies, human trafficking is viewed as a complex process aimed at transforming a person into a commodity, exploiting their social vulnerabilities. This crime primarily targets women, girls, and children, especially in societies marked by conflict, poverty, or marginalization. A report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)[1] indicates that over 60% of trafficking victims worldwide are women and girls, while children account for approximately 25%.

The trafficking networks involved are intricate, comprising intermediaries, brokers, and implementers, often connected to local, regional, and international systems. Therefore, human trafficking is not merely an individual crime; it reflects an institutionalized pattern of wrongdoing that thrives on corrupt or weak systems.

[1]UNODC report - 2022

Smuggling of Migrants - Definition and Conceptual Analysis

Migrant smuggling, on the other hand, is a complex global phenomenon that has intensified in recent decades, particularly in politically and economically unstable regions. It is defined as the process of organizing the illegal passage of individuals across borders to enter or remain in a country without authorization under national laws. This arrangement typically involves a financial payment made by the smuggler to the smuggling party. Initially, this relationship is often voluntary, with the smuggler actively involved in planning the journey and communicating with the smuggled individual.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) report[2], migrant smuggling is "the facilitation of the illegal entry of a person into a country of which they are not a national or do not have permission to reside, in exchange for a financial or material benefit." This definition suggests that the crime of smuggling harms the state as the party whose laws are violated, while the smuggled individual may not necessarily be considered a victim if they willingly participated in the process.

Smuggling typically involves networks or individuals who provide transportation by land or sea, without the intention of exploiting the smuggler after their arrival. However, this idealistic assumption often fails to align with reality. Numerous international reports[3] indicate that smuggling operations frequently lead to exploitation, particularly when the smuggler does not pay the agreed-upon amount or is coerced into forced labor or sexual exploitation to repay what is known as "journey debts."

Unlike human trafficking, smuggling does not involve illegal means such as deception or coercion, clearly distinguishing the two crimes. While individuals being smuggled are generally aware of the risks involved, the lack of alternatives and the pursuit of better life opportunities often compel them to undertake the journey despite the dangers.

The forms of smuggling vary based on geographical and political contexts. In the Horn of Africa, particularly in Sudan, smuggling is complex, extending from conflict and refugee zones such as Eritrea and Ethiopia. Smugglers transport individuals through eastern Sudan to Libya or Egypt, and from there across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. Reports indicate that some transit passengers pay between \$2,000 and \$5,000 to smuggling networks, with no guarantee of safe arrival or protection from abuse.

Although legally classified as a crime against the state, smuggling poses significant risks, particularly for vulnerable individuals, including women and children. Their circumstances can closely resemble or overlap with trafficking, complicating legal responses. Many individuals who are smuggled find themselves exploited during or after their journeys, transforming what might begin as "voluntary cooperation" into an unequal relationship characterized by exploitation, humiliation, and coercion.

[2] UNODC report - 2022

[3] UNODC report - 2022

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in its 2020 report, 58% of migrants smuggled from Africa experience some form of exploitation after crossing borders, whether through forced labor, extortion, or physical violence. This underscores that smuggling is not merely an illegal transportation process; it is a hazardous journey where economic and humanitarian crimes intertwine, potentially escalating into human trafficking.

In the Sudanese context, smuggling routes from eastern Sudan to Libya via the Sahara Desert are particularly active and dangerous, especially for Eritrean refugees who arrive in Sudan vulnerable and are subsequently drawn into smuggling ventures. Field testimonies documented in a Human Rights Watch report[4], reveal that many smugglers are detained in desert camps in Libya, facing forced labor or coerced into paying ransoms to armed gangs for their release.

Structural factors contribute to this crisis, including weak legal protections, corruption at border crossings, ineffective monitoring, and the absence of legal migration alternatives. These elements compel individuals to risk their lives through smuggling networks, often unaware of the true costs they may incur.

Consequently, while migrant smuggling differs in purpose and means from human trafficking, it can serve as a gateway to trafficking, particularly in environments lacking institutional protection and effective legal responses. This reality underscores the importance of establishing a clear conceptual distinction as a foundational step toward understanding the complexities of the issue and developing more effective and realistic solutions.

Overlap between Human Trafficking and Smuggling of Humans

Despite the fundamental differences between human trafficking and migrant smuggling—regarding definition, intent, and the dynamics between victims and perpetrators—on-the-ground realities reveal significant gray areas where the two intersect, particularly in crisis and fragile environments like Sudan. Here, the absence of institutional protection, the prevalence of control, and the systemic exploitation of individuals' humanitarian and economic needs are evident.

One notable similarity is that both arise from conditions of poverty, displacement, war, and insecurity. Victims of both smuggling and trafficking often come from extremely vulnerable economic and social backgrounds, making them easy targets for exploitative networks. Smuggling typically begins as a voluntary arrangement between an individual seeking to migrate and a network of smugglers but can quickly devolve into exploitation upon arrival, either due to the victim's inability to pay the demanded fees or as a result of initial deception.

Reports from the UNODC[5] indicate that around 35% of identified trafficking victims in armed conflict zones began their journeys through organized smuggling operations, later falling victim to sexual

[4] Human Rights Watch report - 2019

[5] UNODC report - 2022

exploitation, forced labor, or forced begging. This highlights that smuggling can serve as a pathway to trafficking, making it difficult to distinguish between the two phenomena, particularly in countries lacking robust legal and institutional frameworks.

Furthermore, the criminal networks involved in smuggling and trafficking may be the same or interconnected through complex chains of interests. Often, the same intermediary or smuggler orchestrates the victim's journey and subsequently hands them over to others for exploitation. This can happen through prior agreements or by taking advantage of the victim's vulnerability when they find themselves in unfamiliar environments, where they may not understand the language or the law and lack formal protection[6].

In the Sudanese context, for example, refugees are frequently smuggled from Eritrea through Kassala and Gadarif states, where they may be detained at internal crossing points, subjected to ransoms, or sold to Libyan networks. A report by the Refugee Review organization[7] cites testimonies from researchers indicating that kidnappings and detentions occurring after border crossings may not be part of the original smuggling plan. Instead, these incidents arise from a fragile security situation, transforming victims from partners in smuggling into full-fledged victims of trafficking, often without official recognition of these cases as trafficking crimes.

Both share a commonality: victims endure profoundly painful psychological and human experiences, characterized by loss of control, humiliation, and a lack of protection. Many victims may not grasp the legal distinctions between smuggling and trafficking, viewing their experience as a singular exploitative process that began with consent and culminated in humiliation or violence.

This overlap necessitates careful classification by researchers, legislators, and field actors, alongside the development of flexible analytical tools to understand the dynamics of the situation. It is essential to trace the shifts in the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator and analyze the contextual factors that enable smuggling to mask the deeper crime of human trafficking.

The intersection also presents significant challenges for protection agencies. Legal and relief interventions should not rely on abstract classifications but should be grounded in risk analysis, individual case assessments, and proactive protection measures for those vulnerable to exploitation, regardless of their method of crossing borders or entering a country[8].

Consequently, the contemporary perspective on irregular migration and cross-border crimes increasingly views smuggling and trafficking not as separate offenses but as overlapping phenomena. Addressing them requires integrated policies that balance law enforcement with respect for human rights.

[6] ACJPS interactive focus group discussion with experts and specialists on human trafficking issues - June 2025

[7] Refugee Review Report - 2021

[8] ACJPS interactive focus group discussion with experts and specialists on human trafficking issues - June 2025

The relationship between the perpetrator and the victim in both human trafficking and smuggling of migrants

Perpetrator- victim relation in cases of trafficking and smuggling is a crucial analytical indicator for distinguishing between these crimes. Smuggling is characterized by a “temporary contract” between the parties involved, while trafficking is marked by an informal relationship that is inherently unequal. This relationship is based on deception, coercion, or coercive control and often persists after the crime, with the victim becoming an instrument of ongoing exploitation.

In migrant smuggling cases, the initial relationship often stems from the voluntary choice of individuals seeking to migrate irregularly. These individuals reach out to smugglers for assistance in reaching specific destinations. While they are generally aware of the associated risks, they weigh these against their challenging living conditions. In this early phase, smugglers are typically seen not as malicious actors but as intermediaries offering a "dangerous service" for payment. Even when aspects of financial exploitation or neglect arise, the smuggler does not exert complete control over the victim, and the relationship usually ends upon arrival.

However, this dynamic can shift dramatically in certain situations, particularly if the victim fails to meet their financial obligations or when smuggling networks exploit their increasing vulnerability, leading to involuntary involvement in trafficking relationships characterized by forced labor, prostitution, or organized begging. In such cases, the relationship transitions from a voluntary agreement to one of control and exploitation, closely resembling trafficking dynamics.

Human trafficking fundamentally differs from smuggling, as the connection between the perpetrator and the victim encapsulates the essence of the crime. Trafficking involves not only exploitation but also the means of controlling the victim—through coercion, threats, kidnapping, deception, or the exploitation of vulnerability. Victims often find themselves stripped of their will or trapped in coercive circumstances that prevent escape. The perpetrator, rather than acting merely as an intermediary, has a direct interest in the continued exploitation of the victim, whether in prostitution networks, informal factories, households, or fields[9].

A report from UNODC highlights that trafficking relationships can begin within families or local communities, with victims sometimes recruited by acquaintances or relatives, adding complexity to the situation. As the relationship progresses, control over the victim can take various forms, such as document confiscation, geographic isolation, threats of exposure, or enforced drug addiction to maintain dominance[10].

[9] ACJPS interactive focus group discussion with experts and specialists on human trafficking issues - June 2025

[10] UNODC report - 2022

An illustrative case is provided by reports from Human Rights Watch and IOM, which describe networks targeting Sudanese women in Libya after smuggling them. These women are detained and coerced into forced marriages or sexual exploitation in exchange for food or protection. This relationship extends beyond mere material transactions; it encompasses physical and psychological humiliation, reducing the victim to a "human commodity" stripped of identity and decision-making rights.

In the Sudanese context, particularly in border areas and camps, the dynamics between victims and perpetrators can shift rapidly. Many victims initially view their smugglers as trusted individuals, possibly even locals. However, economic pressures and organized crime networks entice smugglers to "sell" these individuals to exploitative networks after crossing borders. This change redefines the victim's status from an illegal immigrant to a commodity for transport, sale, and exploitation. These indicators illustrate that the relationship between victim and perpetrator is not only crucial for classifying the crime but also essential for understanding the dangers faced by victims and the urgent need for proactive intervention by international and local institutions, particularly in conflict-affected countries with ineffective justice systems.

Sudan's Peculiarity on the Distinction Between Trafficking and Smuggling:

Sudan's unique challenges in differentiating between human trafficking and migrant smuggling are the most critical issues in both legal and humanitarian contexts. This is particularly relevant given the ongoing armed conflict that began in April 2023, compounded by prior institutional fragility and multiple threats to the rule of law. In Sudan, the distinction between these two crimes is often obscured by a complex interplay of structural, geographical, and political factors, resulting in hybrid forms of organized crime that blur the lines between smuggling and trafficking.

First: One notable aspect of Sudan is its intricate border geography. The country shares extended, open borders with seven nations, some of which are plagued by chronic conflicts, such as South Sudan and Libya, while others, like Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Chad, are significant sources of migration. This positioning has established Sudan as a traditional transit route for migrants and asylum seekers, facilitating the operations of smuggling networks in regions like Kassala, Gadarif, Blue Nile, and Darfur. In these areas, an individual's journey may start with the intention of "illegal crossing," but many quickly become victims of exploitative networks, particularly when these groups receive protection or leniency from local armed factions[11].

Reports indicate that eastern Sudan is one of the most hazardous migrant smuggling routes in Africa, especially for Eritrean refugees. Smuggling networks in this region are often linked to actors both inside and outside Sudan, with many engaging in trafficking practices, such as holding victims for ransom or transferring them to networks that exploit them in Libya[12].

[11] ACJPS interactive focus group discussion with experts and specialists on human trafficking issues - June 2025

[12] Report issued by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) - 2022

Second: Sudan's legal framework is characterized by weak enforcement and a lack of clear differentiation between trafficking and smuggling. Although Sudan ratified the Palermo Protocol to Combat Trafficking in Persons in 2014 and integrated some of its provisions into national law, authorities still lack the technical and legal means to accurately distinguish between the two crimes. As a result, cases are frequently classified based solely on illegal crossing, ignoring the intent of the perpetrators or the circumstances of the victims. This often leads to the criminalization of victims instead of their protection, allowing exploiters to evade accountability[13].

The issue is further complicated by "field confusion," whereby victims, particularly women and girls, are detained alongside illegal immigrants without specific criminal investigations related to trafficking. Many victims also do not receive specialized services or legal assistance. A report by Refugee Review highlights that victims in Sudan are rarely officially recognized as trafficking victims, despite strong evidence suggesting otherwise, due to limited police capacity, a lack of trained legal personnel, and instances of corruption or local collusion in some areas[14].

Third: Armed conflict significantly complicates the relationship between smuggling and trafficking in the Sudanese context. With state institutions having collapsed across vast regions, the rule of law has weakened, creating security gaps that facilitate the growth of criminal networks. Some smuggling operations are now controlled by armed groups as a means of self-financing, while certain IDP camps have been transformed into sites for forced recruitment or sexual exploitation, further blurring the lines between "escape" and "exploitation."

In this context, the legal identity of the victim becomes unclear. A girl smuggled from El Fasher to the Libyan border in search of safety may be kidnapped along the way and sold in a modern slave market. Legal authorities often struggle to determine whether she is a victim of smuggling or trafficking. This ambiguity is confirmed by reports from UNOHCHR, which document numerous cases of women and girls who begin their journey as irregular migrants only to become victims of exploitation.

Fourth: Cultural and economic factors further complicate this ambiguity. Smuggling is sometimes perceived as a "legitimate solution to escape poverty or war," while the legal and moral implications of the victim's fate are overlooked. This perception makes it challenging for victims and their communities to report trafficking cases or to differentiate between the smuggler and the exploiter, particularly when the perpetrator is from the local community or has social or tribal protection.

Consequently, distinguishing between human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan presents not only a legal challenge but also a cognitive, ethical, and institutional one. Addressing this issue requires multi-level responses, including legal reform, building institutional capacity, developing monitoring tools, and fostering a human rights culture in society. This way, victims are not left trapped in the gray areas between "voluntary exit" and "forced exploitation."

[13] Reference Ibid. (11)

[14] Report by Refugee Review - 2021

Section Two: Legal Frameworks for Combating Human Trafficking and Migrant smuggling

National laws and international agreements ratified by Sudan are crucial in combating human trafficking and smuggling of migrants. Effectively addressing these crimes necessitates a legal framework that provides precise definitions, criminalizes all their forms, imposes deterrent penalties, and offers legal protection for victims. In the Sudanese context, despite political and security challenges, the state has enacted several significant pieces of legislation, particularly the Anti-Human Trafficking Act of 2014, amended in 2021, along with related laws such as the Child Law, the Immigration Law, and the Labor Law. The Sudanese government has also committed to accede to international agreements directly related to these issues.

First: Relevant National Laws

1. The Anti-Human Trafficking Act of 2014, amended in 2021

This law serves as the foundational legislation in Sudan addressing human trafficking. It was enacted in response to Sudan's obligations under the United Nations Protocol against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol).

Article 7 defines human trafficking as "the luring, recruitment, transportation, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, the exploitation of a state of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of sums of money or benefits for the purpose of exploitation. This includes, in particular, sexual exploitation, forced labor or service, slavery, and the removal of human organs[15]."

Regarding penalties, Articles 7-11 of the law impose deterrent punishments on perpetrators, ranging from imprisonment for no less than five years to no more than twenty years[16], depending on the gravity of the act. Penalties are increased in certain cases, such as when the victim is a child or a woman, if the crime is committed by an organized criminal group, or if it results in the victim's death or permanent disability. The law also mandates the confiscation of funds or means used to commit the crime. In addition to criminalization and punishment, the law offers measures to protect victims, including shelter, medical and psychological support, legal assistance, and granting temporary residence to foreign victims until their status is reconciled.

2. The 1991 Criminal Code and Amendments

The Sudanese Criminal Code of 1991 does not provide a direct definition of human trafficking; however, it includes several provisions that criminalize acts related to human trafficking, particularly those associated with slavery, forced labor, sexual exploitation, and child exploitation.

[15] Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act - 2014, Amended in 2021 - Article 7

[16] Reference Ibid. (15)

Article 162 addresses kidnapping and deprivation of liberty, while Article 163 targets forced labor, imposing strict penalties on anyone who coerces an individual to work through force or threats—practices that are considered key forms of trafficking for exploitation. Articles 154 to 157 criminalize various forms of sexual exploitation, including prostitution and the sexual exploitation of children, and impose severe penalties on offenders. Despite the lack of a unified definition of human trafficking at the time of its enactment, these provisions play a crucial role in addressing forms of human trafficking, as evidenced in multiple trials involving exploitation, slavery, or sexual abuse. Nonetheless, the necessity for specific and comprehensive legislation led to the introduction of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act of 2014, which aimed to unify the concept of human trafficking, criminalize all its forms, and align the law with international obligations.

In a later legislative development, the Sudanese Penal Code was amended in 2009 to include Part V, titled "Crimes Against Humanity." This section criminalizes acts that, under certain circumstances, may constitute human trafficking when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against civilians. These acts include sexual slavery, forced displacement or transfer of populations, forced labor, forced pregnancy or sterilization, and persecution based on gender, religion, race, or culture[17].

3. The Passports and Immigration Act of 1994 and Amendments

This law governs the entry and exit of foreigners from Sudan, containing provisions that criminalize the smuggling of individuals across borders, regardless of whether the intent is exploitation. This serves as a legal foundation for combating migrant smuggling. The law penalizes unauthorized smuggling across national borders with imprisonment and fines, depending on the circumstances of the crime[18]. Although it does not explicitly differentiate between smuggling and trafficking as outlined in the Palermo Protocol, amendments to this law could help align it with international standards.

4. The Child Act of 2010

This law aligns with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, containing provisions that prohibit the exploitation of children in activities that violate their rights or endanger their safety. It explicitly forbids the recruitment of children for armed conflict and criminalizes child exploitation in hazardous or forced labor, organized begging, and pornography, along with child trafficking[19].

The law imposes prison sentences on individuals guilty of selling, buying, or exploiting children, with penalties varying based on the nature of the crime and the extent of harm inflicted on the child.

[17] Article 186 of the Sudanese Criminal Code of 1991, Amended in 2009

[18] Sudanese Passports and Immigration Act - 1994

[19] Children's Act of 2010 - Articles 46, 45, and 37

5. Labor Law of 1997

This law prohibits forced labor and compulsory labor, which are common forms of human trafficking. It stipulates that every worker has the right to fair wages and humane working conditions. It prohibits the use of children under the legal age in any harmful or coercive work. Violation of these provisions entails administrative and financial penalties, in addition to the possibility of criminal prosecution if the act is accompanied by elements of coercion and exploitation. However, the law does not explicitly address forced labor in the context of human trafficking, which calls for legislative amendments to enhance integration with the Human Trafficking Law[20].

Second: Relevant International Agreements

1. The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children of 2000

Sudan ratified the Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Convention), which is the international reference document for defining and criminalizing human trafficking. The Protocol obliges states to criminalize trafficking in persons, especially women and children, stipulates the need to adopt preventive measures and provide protection and support to victims, and calls for enhanced cross-border judicial and security cooperation.

Sudan has incorporated a significant portion of the Protocol's content into its 2014 law, but implementing its provisions still requires procedural and institutional reforms.

2. Protocol against the Migrant smuggling by Land, Sea and Air, supplementary to the Palermo Convention of 2000

The Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants, supplementary to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Convention), adopted in 2000, is one of the key international legal instruments regulating international efforts to combat cross-border smuggling of persons. The Protocol aims to prevent and combat the smuggling of migrants, enhance cooperation between states, and protect the rights of migrants who are victims of smuggling, with full respect for state sovereignty. Although Sudan has signed the Palermo Convention, it has not ratified the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants, weakening the national legal framework in this area[21].

3. Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol

This convention, to which Sudan has acceded, stipulates the protection of children from all forms of sale, abduction, and trafficking, the provision of care and rehabilitation for child victims, and the commitment to prosecute perpetrators and impose appropriate penalties[22].

[20] Sudanese Labor Law of 1997

[21] Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air, annexed to the Palermo Convention of 2000

[22] Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict of 2010

4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW):

Despite the reservations expressed by the Sudanese government, Sudan's accession to this convention obligates it to work to protect women from all forms of violence and exploitation, including trafficking for sexual purposes or forced marriage.

5. International Labor Organization Conventions (Nos. 29 and 105)

Convention No. 29 prohibits forced or compulsory labor and requires states to take strict measures to combat it[23]. Convention No. 105 requires the abolition of forced labor as a punishment or a means of discrimination or political repression[24]. Sudan's ratification of these two conventions requires the incorporation of their provisions into national laws and the establishment of monitoring and investigation mechanisms.

Third: Recent Regulatory and Legislative Efforts

In response to growing challenges, recent years have seen the state strengthen its legal and regulatory framework through several endeavors, such as:

- Enhancing cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) by training government agencies on border control and identifying trafficking victims.
- Forming partnerships with the European Union to combat smuggling and trafficking along eastern routes.
- Developing new legislation or reviewing existing laws, such as the Immigration Law and the Labor Law, to incorporate clearer definitions and align more closely with international agreements.

Despite the presence of numerous national laws and Sudan's adherence to key international agreements, the legal framework for addressing human trafficking and migrant smuggling remains underdeveloped and poorly implemented. While the penalties outlined in the legislation may serve as a deterrent, their effective enforcement is hindered by inadequate resources, insufficient training, and a lack of coordination among relevant authorities. Therefore, possessing advanced laws must be complemented by political will and strict enforcement to ensure effective victim protection and achieve overall deterrence[25].

[23] International Labor Organization Convention No. 29 of 1930

[24] Abolition of Forced Labor Convention No. 105 of 1957

[25] A focused interactive discussion session prepared by ACJPS with a number of experts and specialists in human trafficking issues - June 2025

Section Three: National, Regional, and International Mechanisms to Address Human Trafficking and Migrant smuggling in Sudan

Human trafficking and smuggling of migrants' crimes present significant challenges in Sudan, necessitating a coordinated response at national, regional, and international levels. At the national level, Sudan has established the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking under the 2014 Anti-Human Trafficking Law. This committee comprises representatives from the Ministries of Justice, Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Social Welfare, along with security agencies and civil society organizations. Its responsibilities include developing national strategies, coordinating between governmental and non-governmental agencies, and reviewing relevant laws. Although the committee adopted a national action plan for 2017–2021, its implementation has been fraught with challenges, primarily due to a lack of funding and ongoing political unrest. The war that erupted in April 2023 severely impacted the committee's operations, causing disruptions at multiple stages[26].

In addition to the National Committee, law enforcement agencies serve as a critical component in combating these crimes. The criminal police and their anti-trafficking units are tasked with dismantling criminal networks. However, their effectiveness is compromised by inadequate technical training, the absence of a national database, and inconsistent responses among states. The General Directorate of Passports and Immigration also contributes to border control and monitoring smuggling cases but faces significant challenges, including limited resources and technology, as well as extensive shared borders with countries like Libya and Chad, which also struggle with weak territorial control. The Public Prosecution has established specialized offices for human trafficking cases in some border states, but the lack of targeted training and expertise in this area diminishes the effectiveness of investigations. Within the judicial system, human trafficking cases are typically processed in general courts since specialized courts do not exist, which slows down adjudication and increases the risk of victims' rights being overlooked. Additionally, judges often lack experience in handling such sensitive cases, highlighting the need for specialized judicial training programs.

At the civil society level, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a crucial role in supporting victims by providing shelter, psychological support, legal representation, and raising community awareness in vulnerable areas. However, these organizations often struggle with a shrinking civic space[27] and unstable funding, which limits the sustainability of their activities. Sudan has strengthened its efforts by collaborating with international organizations such as IOM, which has trained police, prosecutors, and judges and established shelters in states like Kassala and Gadarif. The UNHCR has also offered specialized support to protect refugees, one of the groups most vulnerable to exploitation, while the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has assisted in institutional reform and infrastructure modernization for some judicial institutions.

[26] A focused interactive discussion session prepared by ACJPS with a number of experts and specialists in human trafficking issues - June 2025

[27] An interview conducted by ACJPS with the Kayan Women's Empowerment Organization - April 2025

Regionally, Sudan is involved in the Horn of Africa Initiative, also known as the "Khartoum Process," launched in 2014 in partnership with the African Union and the European Union. This initiative aims to combat migrant smuggling and human trafficking across the Horn of Africa. Sudan has participated in several training workshops under this framework, which has helped strengthen data systems and facilitate the exchange of expertise. However, implementation has been inconsistent due to the country's political crises. Additionally, Sudan cooperates with the African Union through the Regional Migration Mechanism, a platform for information and expertise exchange among African countries that seeks to enhance their capabilities to monitor and document migration issues. Through bilateral cooperation, Sudan has signed security agreements with countries such as Ethiopia, Chad, and Libya to secure borders, combat criminal networks, and facilitate the exchange of wanted persons. However, the effectiveness of these agreements is hindered by a lack of political will in some countries, border disputes, and weak infrastructure.

Internationally, UNODC provides vital technical support to Sudan, including the development of national legislation in line with the Palermo Protocol and training for justice agencies. The Office has also helped create national training curricula on human trafficking. UN human rights bodies, such as the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, monitor Sudan's progress and have submitted reports and recommendations urging the country to enhance victim protection and establish effective reporting and enforcement mechanisms.

At the treaty level, Sudan has ratified several key international instruments, including the Palermo Protocol, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions on forced and compulsory labor. These ratifications create a legal obligation for the state to align its national legislation with these standards. Additionally, Sudan has received bilateral support from some European Union countries, including Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands, to finance shelters, provide training programs, and support victim reintegration initiatives. However, the continuation of this support depends on the country's stability and the assurance of humanitarian access.

Section Four: Challenges Facing Human Trafficking and Migrant smuggling in Sudan

Combating human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan is a complex, multidimensional challenge that intertwines legal, political, social, economic, institutional, regional, and international factors. Despite the significant efforts made by the Sudan in partnership with the international community and regional organizations, various challenges persist, hindering an effective response to these crimes and exacerbating the suffering of victims while strengthening the activities of cross-border criminal networks.

- The first challenge involves the legal environment in Sudan. Although a legal framework exists, its implementation and effectiveness are weak. The Anti-Human Trafficking Law, 2014 amended in 2021, contains relatively advanced legal provisions. However, few cases progress to advanced trial stages or lead to convictions. This is largely due to a lack of knowledge and training among police and public prosecutors about the characteristics of this crime, weak coordination among implementing agencies, and the absence of specialized units in many rural and remote areas where trafficking and smuggling are common. Additionally, the overlap between the Human Trafficking Law and other laws—such as the Labor Law and the Passport and Immigration Law—creates confusion in the legal classification of the crime, contributing to impunity[28].
- Institutionally, the limited human, technical, and logistical capacities of relevant institutions are significant issues. Despite the presence of the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking, which suffers from a lack of resources and adequate political backing. Poor coordination among ministries and organizations results in task duplication and conflicting responsibilities. Furthermore, security and judicial agencies lack a comprehensive national database on crime patterns, suspects, accused persons, and victims. There is no systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and sharing information, which hampers the country's ability to promptly detect and respond to trafficking cases[29].
- From a security and political standpoint, the war that erupted in April 2023 has severely weakened the state's structure and institutions, directly affecting Sudan's capacity to enforce the law, protect victims, and prosecute perpetrators. The collapse of the judicial system and the disruption of courts and prosecution offices in many areas due to the conflict have undermined efforts to prosecute criminal networks.

[28] A focused interactive discussion session prepared by ACJPS with a number of experts and specialists in human trafficking issues – June 2025

[29] An interview conducted by ACJPS with the Unit for Combating Violence Against Women - April 2025

- Moreover, armed groups controlling parts of the country, along with regions beyond state control, have allowed these networks to operate with greater impunity, exploiting the security vacuum and lack of oversight. Compounding these issues are political challenges, including weak political stability, successive governments, and a focus on security and military concerns at the expense of human rights, leading to diminished interest from decision-makers in addressing this crime.
- Economically and socially, Sudan is facing a severe crisis that affects all aspects of life and heightens the vulnerability of weak groups. Poverty, unemployment, and the collapse of essential services create an environment ripe for exploitation, driving many young people toward irregular migration or into the hands of smugglers. Conflicts in various regions have resulted in widespread internal displacement, creating marginalized and unprotected communities that are easy targets for human trafficking networks. Socially, poor awareness of human rights, widespread illiteracy, and negative perceptions of victims contribute to the scarcity of reporting and seeking redress. In some communities, these crimes are not even recognized and are regarded as private or family matters.
- At both regional and international levels, Sudan's geographic location presents significant challenges. Positioned as a major transit country between the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and Europe, this location could have served as a strategic advantage. However, it has become a burden in the absence of effective regional cooperation. Bilateral agreements with neighboring countries such as Libya, Chad, and Ethiopia often remain unimplemented due to weak political will or border tensions. Moreover, Sudan lacks an effective system for intelligence sharing and cross-border prosecution. Despite participating in initiatives like the Khartoum Process, the impact of these efforts has been limited by political changes within Sudan and decline of its international relations.
- Sudan faces a shortage of funding and technical support necessary to combat human trafficking, both from the state budget and international partners. The complex bureaucratic environment, along with restricted access for international organizations in conflict-affected areas, hampers the implementation of humanitarian and development projects intended to protect vulnerable populations. Further challenges include inadequate reporting and complaint mechanisms, as well as weak protections for whistleblowers and witnesses, which hinder victims' ability to seek justice or safety[30].

[30] A focused interactive discussion session prepared by ACJPS with a number of experts and specialists in human trafficking issues – June 2025

- Another significant challenge is the lack of rehabilitation and reintegration programs for victims. Once removed from trafficking situations, victims often find themselves without psychological, legal, or social support, increasing their vulnerability to re-exploitation. There are no systematic programs in place for the reintegration of children or women who have been exploited. Alarmingly, some victims are administratively detained during immigration procedures, violating international standards that advocate for humane treatment and non-punishment.

Overall, it is evident that the challenges of combating human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan are interconnected and complex, encompassing weak legal frameworks, institutional shortcomings, fragile economic and social structures, and escalating regional and international conflicts.

Chapter Two:

The General Context of Human Trafficking and Migrant smuggling in Sudan



Section One: Sudan's Geographical Role as a Corridor, Source, and Destination

Since the outbreak of armed conflict in mid-April 2023 between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces, Sudan has shifted from a country with a peripheral role in human trafficking and smuggling to a central hub of conflict that has created extensive corridors for human trafficking, serving as both a route and a destination. The country's geography stretches from the Red Sea coast, connecting to the ports of Port Sudan, to the depths of the Sahara Desert. This positioning creates an open link among the countries of the Horn of Africa, North Africa, and Europe. Additionally, its borders with seven countries contribute to the distribution of influence and power among official and unofficial tribal militias, facilitating the smuggling of people and goods through a network of desert roads and hard-to-monitor border crossings.

In eastern Sudan, the borders of Gadarif and Kassala states are frequently used as transit points for migrants from Ethiopia and Eritrea. Women and children are clandestinely recruited from conflict zones and taken to transit camps, where they are later charged for onward journeys to northern Sudan or across the Red Sea to Yemen and Saudi Arabia, often in small boats operated by local smugglers. In western Sudan, human convoys from Darfur and Kordofan traverse the sandy desert toward Libya and Chad, forming a crucial route in the clandestine migration networks to Europe via the Mediterranean, as established by the "Khartoum Process" agreement with the European Union since 2014. The local security infrastructure has collapsed due to the ongoing war, turning checkpoints into payment points for passage, where personnel are sometimes complicit in human trafficking at the expense of victims.

This regional context explains why Sudan is repeatedly classified as a source country for trafficking victims. In conflict-affected areas, residents are desperate to escape violence, hunger, and poverty, often falling prey to false promises of safety from local agents. By the end of February 2025, approximately 12.3 million people have been displaced, with 8.8 million remaining within the country and 3.5 million crossing borders. Among these, half are women and children, with children making up 53% of the displaced population. Many lack identity documents, forged travel papers are frequently sold to them[31].

Boys and girls are lured from conflict zones, such as besieged neighborhoods in Khartoum or displacement camps in Darfur, for purposes of sex trafficking, forced labor, forced marriage, or recruitment into armed groups. UN reports indicate that children are being sold in "slave markets" in areas controlled by the Rapid Support Forces in North Darfur, while some young men seek to join militias in exchange for food, only to be used as soldiers.

[31]A report issued by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) - 2025

Sudan has evolved from being merely a transit destination for refugees to a place where some camps are environments ripe for internal exploitation. Despite hosting over a million refugees from South Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia as of March 2023, camps like Shagarab and Wad Sharifi in eastern Sudan have seen instances of forced child marriage, sexual exploitation, and forced labor. Smuggling routes have emerged from these camps through local networks to Libya, Egypt, and Chad. Weak legal protections and a lack of international support have been exploited to coerce women into labor in exchange for food or passage, transforming these environments into closed arenas for armed ideologies rather than sanctuaries of hope[32].

Sudan's extensive, multi-border geography, combined with the chaos of conflict, has fostered an optimal environment for the proliferation of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Loose borders, war economies driven by extortion and corruption, forced displacement, family fragmentation, and the erosion of legal safeguards have allowed smuggling networks to operate like transnational corporations. Reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicate that approximately one-fifth of Sudanese have been internally displaced since April 2023, underscoring the country's transformation into fertile ground for smuggling and trafficking, as well as the obvious physical abuses documented by the United Nations, including gang rape and the use of child soldiers.

[32] A focused interactive discussion session prepared by ACJPS with a number of experts and specialists in human trafficking issues – June 2025

Section 2: The Impact of Armed Conflict in Sudan on the Rise of Human Trafficking and Smuggling of Migrants

Since the outbreak of armed conflict in Sudan in April 2023, between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, the country has faced one of the most severe humanitarian and security crises in its contemporary history. This conflict has led to hundreds of thousands of deaths and injuries, displaced over 11 million people both internally and externally, fractured the social fabric, and exacerbated poverty and insecurity. This dire situation has not only served as a bleak backdrop for the escalation of human trafficking and migrant smuggling but has also created an environment that directly propels the unprecedented acceleration, expansion, and transformation of these issues. The ongoing conflict in Sudan generates victims, fuels organized crime, creates demand for smuggling services, and provides resources for human trafficking networks, making it a direct contributor to the rise of humans' trafficking and smuggling.

It is increasingly evident that the relationship between conflict and human trafficking is no longer indirect or coincidental; instead, it reflects a systematic causal relationship manifested in various social, economic, and security dynamics that affect both victims and perpetrators alike. In times of conflict, the population's vulnerability to exploitation intensifies due to limited alternatives, weakened state protection for citizens, and the chaos of war, which local and international smuggling networks exploit to commodify people in a constantly expanding black markets.

First: Forced Displacement as a Direct Trigger for the Rise in Victims

One of the most significant consequences of the armed conflict in Sudan is widespread forced displacement, leaving millions of civilians without shelter, income, or legal protection, making them prime targets for human trafficking networks. According to United Nations reports, by June 2025, over 11.4 million people had been displaced internally or sought refuge outside Sudan, including more than 4.8 million children. Women, children, and the elderly are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, especially amid escalating poverty, hunger, and the loss of community or family support.

Field testimonies from Khartoum, Al Jazeera, Darfur, and White Nile states indicate that many children who lost their families due to the war are being lured by individuals posing as travel brokers. These children are subsequently transported to border areas to be recruited, sold, or forced into degrading labor. In some instances, underage girls are married off under pressure from their circumstances, disguising a form of human trafficking as "legitimate marriage."

Second: War as a Driver of Demand for Smuggling

Conversely, the conflict has spurred a growing smuggling of migrants' market, driven by the need to escape war zones or reach safe havens within or outside Sudan. What was once a marginal criminal activity has evolved into a thriving, institutionalized market, with smuggling networks competing to manage convoys, secure routes, and organize cross-border operations. Different pricing for smuggling trips has been documented, varying by route, gender, and age.

Irregular migration rates have swelled significantly due to the deteriorating economic situation and rising insecurity, prompting thousands to leave the country illegally. Statistics from IOM indicate that Sudan has become one of the largest sources of irregular migrants in the region, especially following the escalation of fighting in many areas of the country.

Third: Exploiting Chaos to Expand Criminal Networks

The insecurity stemming from the war has created an ideal environment for the growth of human trafficking and smuggling networks. These groups have capitalized on the state's absence to establish their presence at crossing points, displacement camps, and even in neighborhoods of major cities. Reports from ENACT Africa and the Global Initiative indicate that some leaders of these networks previously engaged in arms, drug, or illegal mining trades before transitioning to migrant smuggling, taking advantage of weak oversight and the breakdown of security.

The activities of these networks range from smuggling individuals across borders, document forgery, and kidnapping for ransom, to facilitating sex trafficking, forced labor exploitation, and, in some cases, organ trafficking. The war creates a favorable environment for these activities, aided by the complicity of certain armed groups and the authorities' inability to prosecute criminals.

Fourth: Forced Recruitment and Child Trafficking

One of the most horrific aspects of the conflict is the recruitment of children into hostilities, which constitutes a form of human trafficking according to UN protocols. Reports from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child indicate that both the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces have committed grave violations against children, including forced recruitment and the use of children in combat or logistical roles, such as digging trenches, delivering supplies or as spies.

This recruitment often occurs through offers of money, food, or protection, exploiting the lack of alternatives for children who have lost their families or are living in dire conditions[33]. The consequences of such recruitment are devastating, resulting in long-term psychological and physical harm to children and posing a threat to national and social security on long term[34].

Fifth: Conflict as a Catalyst for Normalizing Exploitation

As the war drags on and the humanitarian crisis worsens, certain forms of exploitation—such as forced marriage, labor for food, and organized begging—are becoming nearly "socially acceptable" practices driven by necessity. This normalization of exploitation is one of the most dangerous indirect effects of the conflict, complicating efforts to hold perpetrators accountable and restore rights, while perpetuating a culture of impunity[35].

[33] ACJPS Interview with Ms. Aisha, mother of a child forcibly recruited - May 2025

[34] ACJPS Interview with witness Ni'ma - May 2025

[35] ACJPS Interview with the Anti-Violence Against Women Unit - April 2025

Civil society organizations report that thousands of women in conflict zones are currently exploited for work in homes, factories, or farms without pay or under conditions akin to slavery. In some instances, refugee or displaced women are coerced into providing "domestic" or "sexual" services in exchange for food, medicine, or shelter.

This analysis reveals that the armed conflict in Sudan has not only fueled the spread of human trafficking and migrant smuggling but has also structured and intensified these phenomena. The conflict has generated a massive number of potential victims, created opportunities for organized criminal networks, increased demand for smuggling services, and entrenched a culture of exploitation and crime normalization. Without effective international intervention and an end to the fighting, these issues are likely to escalate further unless their structural, political, and humanitarian roots are addressed.

Section Three: Institutional Collapse and Its Impact on Victim Protection

Since the outbreak of armed conflict in Sudan in April 2023, the country has experienced a comprehensive institutional collapse that has severely affected all protection and justice agencies. This collapse has contributed to the rise of organized crime, particularly human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Beyond the direct consequences of the conflict previously outlined, the breakdown of institutions is a critical factor in the state's inability to protect victims and deter perpetrators. This section explores the effects of the absence or dysfunction of state institutions—such as the police, judiciary, civil registry, Commission of Refugees, and national organizations—on the increase in human trafficking and migrant smuggling. It analyzes how this collapse has fostered an environment of impunity, making victims easy preys.

The collapse of police and security services, combined with the erosion of control in many regions of Sudan, has resulted in widespread security chaos. Prior to the conflict, the Sudanese police were already hindered by limited resources and personnel. As fighting intensified, most police stations became inoperative either due to destruction or militia takeover. United Nations reports indicate that over 75% of police stations in Khartoum and other major states ceased operations between April and November 2023. This situation created a security vacuum that allowed armed groups to establish unofficial checkpoints, where civilians were held for ransom, women and girls faced sexual exploitation, and children were sold in open markets—all without legal oversight or deterrence. Additionally, instances of enforced disappearances of activists and civilians have been reported in militia-controlled areas, highlighting the encroachment of armed groups on state security functions, which have transformed into mechanisms of oppression rather than protection.

The judiciary and judicial facilities has also been severely impacted; courts and prosecution offices in major cities such as Khartoum, Madani, Nyala, and Zalingei have been targeted, leading to the suspension of criminal court sessions and the closure of prosecution offices. Many judges and prosecutors fled conflict zones, resulting in a near-total shutdown of the judicial system. This paralysis hindered the legal capacity to track down perpetrators or protect victims, particularly in the absence of effective specialized prosecution offices. Filing complaints and initiating lawsuits became nearly impossible in many areas, fostering a culture of impunity and leaving victims as silent witnesses, often forced to coexist with exploitation.

Furthermore, the loss of documents and the suspension of civil registry services in several areas have stripped hundreds of thousands of Sudanese of their basic rights. Civil registry services are essential for any legal protection process. Attacks during the conflict forced the closure of civil registry centers across large regions, leading to many children and women losing their identification cards and birth certificates.

This legal invisibility left them unprotected, impeding access to healthcare and humanitarian assistance while facilitating their exploitation by smuggling networks. The situation also led to a proliferation of forged documents sold at exorbitant prices on the black market, enabling illegal travel to Libya, Egypt, and the Gulf[36].

Commission of Refugees (COR) and the National Humanitarian Aid Commission for (HAC) failed to keep pace with the worsening humanitarian crisis, hindered by limited resources and poor coordination with local authorities. With over ten million displaced persons, COR faced mounting pressures without any significant improvements in its capabilities or strategies. This situation left thousands of children and mothers unprotected, while displacement camps became susceptible to trafficking and recruitment networks, lacking effective monitoring and intervention. The absence of a unified database for displaced persons and refugees obscured the identities of victims, complicating efforts to track cases of exploitation and provide legal protection.

Furthermore, the decline of national organizations and civil society, which had previously played crucial roles in supporting victims and documenting violations, exacerbated the crisis. The outbreak of war led to the collapse of these initiatives, as organizations faced robberies, looting, and targeted attacks on their staff. Consequently, many were forced to suspend their activities or relocate to safer areas, diminishing the geographical reach of their programs and services. Military authorities and militias imposed restrictions that impeded access to affected regions, while international resources were redirected to emergency needs, limiting the effectiveness of these organizations. As a result, victims are left without adequate protection plans, and community awareness and prevention programs that once shielded vulnerable groups from exploitation have disappeared.

One of the most alarming consequences of this institutional collapse is the establishment of a culture of impunity. Since the war began, the disintegration of the justice system, the collapse of investigative bodies, and the lack of judicial independence have created a safe haven for perpetrators. This situation is exacerbated by the fragmented control among the warring parties, with the Rapid Support Forces dominating some areas while the military controls others, making it nearly impossible to prosecute offenders.

The absence of local and international coordination for evidence collection and witness protection further complicates matters. As a result, crimes are committed and forgotten, leaving victims to fend for themselves, often in fear of retaliation or social seclusion.

In Greater Darfur, a region severely affected by conflict, the protection crisis has deepened. Ethnic violence has rendered women and children vulnerable to abduction, rape, and recruitment. Reports from Amnesty International documented over 150 cases of mass rape in El Geneina alone between June and September 2023, with no investigations initiated.

[36] ACJPS interactive focus group discussion with experts and specialists on human trafficking issues - June 2025

UN reports reveal organized smuggling networks transporting girls from displacement camps to Libya, facilitated by members of both regular and irregular forces. This highlights how the absence of state authority and institutional collapse have commodified victims.

In contrast to the experiences of other countries facing similar conflicts, such as Colombia and Lebanon, where some governments have established specialized units to protect victims and support local communities in documenting violations, Sudan has seen little action. Lebanon, for instance, enacted a human trafficking law in 2011 that allowed for the prosecution of offenders outside the traditional judicial system. However, in Sudan, a lack of political will and failure to acknowledge the scale of the issue have relegated protection efforts to mere rhetoric. An analysis of Sudan's situation during the conflict reveals that institutional collapse has played a critical role in enabling human trafficking and migrant smuggling, while victim protection has all but disappeared. Protection institutions have become ineffective, civil society has been marginalized, and victims are left to confront their fates in silence.

Chapter Three:

Patterns and Trends in Human Trafficking and
Migrant smuggling in Sudan Amidst Current Armed
Conflict



Section One: Victims of Human Trafficking and Migrant smuggling in Sudan (Accounts from Victims and Witnesses)

1- Detention and Forced Labor - Saber's Story

Sabir, a victim of a brutal experience, shares his harrowing account:

In July 2023, as violence and conflict escalated in Khartoum, my brothers in the Resistance Committees and I attempted to protect our neighborhood from rampant looting and plundering. When the Rapid Support Forces began invading residential areas, we had no choice but to dig holes and set up barricades to defend our community. For a time, we successfully safeguarded our people.

However, the situation rapidly deteriorated. The forces managed to enter into our neighborhood and began searching for those responsible for the barricades, likely guided by informants. On the night of July 15, 2023, they knocked on my door, forced their way in, assaulted me, and brandished a weapon. They threatened my family and harassed my wife in front of me. Then, they tied me up and dragged me from my home, leaving me powerless. A few minutes later, some locals arrived and freed me. But my captors, before leaving warned me, "You have a deadline to leave. If you don't, we will kill you." It became clear that staying was no longer an option. I gathered my children and fled to Beir Hamad, where we stayed for five days before moving to Dar al-Salam for another three days. I returned home briefly but ultimately decided to escape Khartoum permanently, disguising myself in women's clothing to evade persecution.

I made my way to Renk in South Sudan. The journey was perilous, and upon arrival, I stayed in a camp for six months. It soon became evident that the camp was indirectly controlled by the Rapid Support Forces, who transported their wounded under the guise of "refugees" for treatment in Juba.

We endured unconceivable humiliation there, as the local South Sudanese viewed us with contempt and subjected us to daily insults. The situation worsened, and on January 17, 2024, after receiving explicit execution threats, I decided to flee again. I had just given birth to a baby girl who was less than a month old, but I had no choice but to leave, once more disguised as a woman.

Before reaching El Daein airport, armed men from the Rapid Support Forces stopped us. They forced me out of the vehicle while allowing my family to continue to Libya. I was taken to a place called Balambai, where I endured a three-month nightmare.

During this time, I faced relentless humiliation. I was coerced into loading weapons and preparing ammunition and subjected to daily psychological and physical torture. Our meals were meager, often limited to a glass of water that did little to quench my thirst. They ensured we remained exhausted to prevent any thoughts of resistance, sometimes throwing us their leftovers.

They brought in soldiers from El Daein—primarily from the Rizeigat and Misseriya tribes—along with fighters from the south, who traveled in convoys of fifty vehicles to Khartoum. On one occasion, the force assigned to scour the area around El Daein airport seized an opportunity and fled.

I managed to find a car to take me to the city, where I sought refuge with acquaintances who sheltered me for a day. I explained that my family was in Libya and that I needed to be with them, as I was the head of the family. I headed to El Fasher, where the road was filled with armed groups. Each checkpoint became a site of extortion and humiliation, requiring payment for us to pass. From there, we proceeded to Mellit and opted for the Libyan road to Kufra, crossing through the border triangle.

We traveled in a small, overcrowded vehicle, with nineteen passengers plus the driver and his companions. The journey was hellish. Upon reaching Kufra, the situation only worsened. The road to Tripoli was controlled by militias that viewed us merely as sources of plunder or forced labor.

Every checkpoint in Libya was a nightmare. We were compelled to clean military headquarters in the bitter cold and rain without compensation. Some militias insulted us, while others demanded exorbitant sums for passage. Failing to pay meant detention until we either paid or worked off as forced labor. When I arrived in Zawiya, an armed group arrested me and imprisoned me for a week. They confiscated my phone and contacted my family, demanding 1,000 dinars for my release. There were six of us. Once the money was sent, we were crammed into a military truck meant for two people and dumped in a nearby market with the instruction to "go."

In another incident, they took us from my neighborhood under the guise of "work." We toiled for two days at a government facility without pay. The same claim was employed at another site near the sea, where we were again forced to work for free, at gunpoint.

I have now been in Libya for almost a year. Life here is challenging, and safety is a constant concern. Shootings occur over trivial matters. As a Sudanese, I face unemployment, and when I do find work, Libyan employers often refuse to pay me. I have been betrayed multiple times.

Nevertheless, I thank God for finally reuniting with my family. I am just a man trying to be a good father in a world ravaged by war, borders, and militias[37].

2- Detention and Forced Labor - Khansa's Testimony

Khansa recounted her husband Ahmed's (a pharmacist) arrest by the Rapid Support Forces. She explained:

The ordeal began when a force from the Rapid Support Forces' intelligence arrived at his workplace. There was no arrest warrant or clear charges; they merely asked him to "come with them for questioning." They interrogated him and confiscated his phone. After the investigation, they took him away, and from that moment until his release on Ramadan 25, 2025, no one communicated with him, and no formal charges were filed.

[37] ACJPS Interview with survivor Saber - April 2025

He later told us that during the early days of his detention, he was forced to leave every morning with a medical assistant to treat patients. During the cholera outbreak, the Rapid Support Forces had also arrested medical professionals, compelling them to work in detention centers without medical supplies and in dire conditions. Although we received information from intermediaries that he worked in a pharmacy "affiliated with the prison," he confirmed after his release that there was no pharmacy, only a few scattered medications, and a severe shortage of supplies.

After his release, he shared that the detainees were deliberately starved. Even water was rationed in small containers resembling soap bottles. Despite his poor health, he fasted during Ramadan simply because he had nothing to eat or drink. During his detention, he was moved to five different centers without any charges. We went to the Rapid Support Forces headquarters to inquire about the reason for his arrest. They claimed, "We have information that he is cooperating with the army." We responded that Dr. Ahmed had not left his home or the pharmacy, but they insisted, "He was smuggling medications from the pharmacy to the army. We seized the smuggled medications coming from that pharmacy."

Our painful journey began with financial extortion. They told us, "We have an advisor who will prosecute the doctor. Pay a certain amount, and we will release him." We agreed and paid the required sum, but then they returned, stating, "To send the file to the advisor, you must pay us again." And so, we paid once, twice, and three times.

The total amount they demanded reached millions of pounds: first four million, then six million, followed by an "amount for the prison officers" and for Officer (M), who had carried out the arrest. We paid him as well, with the promise that he would be released upon his return from a "mission." He then asked for money to return from the same mission, and with each payment, another was required. Eventually, we were told that he had "sold" him to Officer (H), and we should negotiate with him.

We found ourselves trapped in a vicious cycle of extortion and organized looting while my husband was shuffled between detention centers, sick, exhausted, afraid, and innocent. This continued until the army advanced into Khartoum and freed several detainees, including my husband.

He returned to us physically exhausted and spiritually burdened. He was no longer the same person; his features had changed, and his health and mental state had deteriorated.

As his family, we endured horrific abuse from the Rapid Support Forces. We were not only financially drained but also emotionally and psychologically scarred. We lived in constant fear that he would be killed at any moment. We paid money out of fear that he might die in detention, suffer torture, or starve[38].

3- Slavery and Forced Labor – Saleh's Story

Saleh, a native of West Darfur, recounts that on November 8, 2023, the Rapid Support Forces launched a violent attack on the Ardamata area in El Geneina, following the withdrawal of the army's Fifth Infantry Division. This attack resulted in a mass massacre, with between 800 and 1,300 people killed, and over 20,000 residents fleeing to neighboring Chad for safety.

[38] ACJPS Interview with Ms. Khansa, wife of survivor Ahmed - April 2025

Amid the chaos, the Rapid Support Forces stormed our home, ordering us to leave and forcing us to sit on the ground at gunpoint. Some of them beat and insulted us. I heard one soldier say, "We killed all of those Masalit comrades," indicating a mass ethnic targeting.

One soldier approached me, saying, "Come here, I have work for you to do." When I asked about the job, he replied that he wanted me to grow beans for him. Reluctantly, I agreed and got into their vehicle, where they took me under the cover of darkness to one of the neighborhoods they controlled. Upon arrival, a woman in the house objected to my presence, complaining, "Who are these people you brought here?" The soldier decided to move me to another house, telling them, "I brought this person here to help you with the farming." I began working in agriculture, assigned to grow beans on two farms in rotation—two days on each farm since they were close to the neighborhood. I worked for over twenty days without pay or compensation, with no agreement in place; the work was forced upon me.

After finishing the bean planting, I was informed of another task: grinding hay. I worked three additional days on each farm, during which I had no contact with my family. I was uncertain whether they thought I was dead or alive, and I had no information about their well-being.

Everyone who arrived at my location questioned me about my origins, viewing me with suspicion as a "comrade." One day, I inquired about the workers' wages on the farm. They told me they earned 40,000 pounds for each "makhmas" (agricultural unit). Since I had planted three "makhmas," I thought to myself, "I wish they would only pay me half that amount." I asked the person who brought me to see my family. Each time, he replied, "I'll take you to your family," but he kept delaying for several days. Eventually, I decided to go alone. He reluctantly agreed and took me to the main road, where I got in a car and drove until I reached a safe area[39].

4- Enforced Disappearance and Medical Work Under Duress - Amal's Testimony

Amal, Dr. Yasser's wife, recounted her painful experience regarding her husband's disappearance amid the ongoing armed conflict in Sudan. She recalled that their last communication was on the evening of Sunday, November 19, 2023, at 9:00 PM. During that call, Yasser informed her that the Rapid Support Forces had attacked Jebel Aulia area, and the security situation around the hospital where he worked had worsened critically.

According to Amal, Yasser was the medical director of the hospital and insisted that medical personnel and staff evacuate first for their safety. He remained behind until everyone else had left, becoming the last medical staff member present that day. The following morning, Monday, November 20, 2023, reports emerged that the Rapid Support Forces had gained full control of Jebel Aulia area, cutting off all contact with Yasser. A month after his disappearance, the family began receiving information from multiple sources indicating that Yasser had been arrested by the Rapid Support Forces and taken to al sharika al arabiya "Arab Company" detention center in Taiba Camp, south of Khartoum. These sources reported that he was coerced into performing surgeries on the wounded within the detention center, under harsh conditions and without his consent or independent medical supervision.

[39] ACJPS Interview with survivor Saleh - May 2025

In January 2024, new information emerged suggesting that he had been transferred to Soba Prison, where he was assigned to a prison medical unit and compelled to work. Testimonies from former detainees who had been released confirmed that Dr. Yasser was forced to provide medical services and perform surgeries while under constant guard by members of the Rapid Support Forces. Some witnesses reported seeing him in hospitals in White Nile and Gezira states, temporarily summoned for surgeries before being returned after completion, highlighting the systematic exploitation of his medical skills. To this day, his family has no means of contacting him and remains unaware of his health condition or current whereabouts, making his case one of the most prominent instances of enforced disappearance linked to forced labor and exploitation in the context of war[40].

5- Abduction, Forced Labor and Domestic Servitude - Laila's Story

This account is shared by Laila's aunt, Mrs. Hanan, who spoke bitterly about the disappearance of her niece, a twenty-year-old woman named Laila. The family was devastated by Laila's sudden disappearance on June 29, 2023, from their home in the Al Doroshab suburb, north of Khartoum Bahri.

Laila was on her way to the market when she was ambushed near Souq Al Arab (Arab's Market). Unknown assailants attacked her, striking her on the head multiple times until she lost consciousness. When she awoke, she found herself trapped in a small, enclosed house with nineteen other girls her age, all in a state of shock and fear.

They soon learned that their kidnappers were members of the Rapid Support Forces. Their abduction was not for murder but for exploitation; they were forced into labor, assigned various tasks. Some were made to cook and clean, while others cared for the wounded, though untrained nurses, facing threats and beatings.

Laila later recounted their systematic abuse. Food was scarce, and clean water was often unavailable. Anyone who showed discontent or fatigue was threatened or beaten. In a desperate bid for freedom, Laila and another girl attempted to escape one evening while the kidnappers were distracted. However, they were caught by members of the Rapid Support Forces, and the punishment was severe. They endured brutal beatings and were deprived of food and water for three days. As a result of the punishment, surveillance intensified, and security measures became stricter.

This harrowing ordeal continued for weeks until an unexpected opportunity for escape arose. A significant number of Rapid Support Forces members were engaged in fighting and looting around the capital, which loosened their grip on security. At that moment, some of the girls, including Laila, managed to escape after careful planning and immense patience.

Today, Laila still grapples with the aftermath of her experience: psychological trauma, chronic fear, and a constant sense of apprehension around strangers. Her aunt mournfully states, "Our daughter is no longer the same, but at least she's alive among us, and now we're seeking justice[41]."

[40] ACJPS Interview with Ms. Amal, wife of the missing person Forced - Yasser - May 2025

[41] ACJPS Interview with witness Hanan - April 2025

6- Arbitrary Detention, Forced Labor, and Attempted Sexual Exploitation - Sanaa's Testimony

Sanaa, a young woman in her twenties, recalls the terrifying events of January 31, 2025. She was inside a building telecommunications, that had telecommunication facility, near her home in Burri neighborhood of Khartoum when the sound of heavy gunfire filled the air with dread. Masked members of the Rapid Support Forces, dressed in civilian clothes, stormed the building, accusing her of providing coordinates to the army. Just then, her brother appeared, attempting to defend her. They shot him twice, and he collapsed, covered in blood. In that moment of desperation, Sanaa boldly declared, "I won't go with you. Kill me if you want." One of the assailants responded threateningly, "You must come with us, or we will kill you." Reluctantly, she surrendered, fearing the escalation of tragedy, and left with them.

I was taken to a Irtikaz (checkpoint), a field detention point, where I was confined with two other women in a dark, sealed room. Even the air felt suffocating. The hours dragged on, filled with the sounds of screaming and torture echoing from outside as we muttered prayers, hoping for salvation. After an eternity, someone entered with water, a jug, and a prayer rug before leaving.

Shortly after, I was led to another room where he sat on a bed, pointing a weapon at me. He claimed my appearance indicated innocence and offered to help me escape, provided I married him and accompanied him to the West. I refused, explaining that I had a fiancé waiting for me. He persisted, alternating between intimidation and offers of money. As he approached, I swore on my soul, convinced that death was preferable to submission. Suddenly, footsteps echoed nearby, prompting him to halt his advances and exit the room. They returned me to my original detention center.

This cycle continued for several days until I was transferred to the Riyadh detention center, where an officer coldly informed me that I would not be leaving. I remained in this state for two weeks without an investigation, surrounded by female prisoners of all ages. The conditions were brutal; we suffered from hunger, cold, and medical neglect, routinely enduring insults and beatings. The worst part was being forced into hard labor within the detention center. We had to cook for the soldiers and wash their clothes, all under the threat of weapons and violence. One guard would loom over us, shouting and brandishing his weapon if we slowed down or protested. We were treated as their property, stripped of any control over our lives. We were forced to perform these tasks under the constant threat of violence, a scene that represented slavery and humiliation in its most outrageous form.

In mid-February, a horrific explosion shook the ground as it struck a nearby building. Fear engulfed us, and we prayed zealously, convinced that death was imminent. On the 17th of that month, we were hastily transported from the Riyadh detention center, blindfolded, in a vehicle packed with weapons, dogs, and numerous soldiers to an unknown destination. After a prolonged journey, the vehicle stopped, and we found ourselves at a new detention site: The Central Reserve Detention Center.

Then, on the 26th of Ramadan, as the sounds of shelling and artillery intensified, we were ordered to board a passenger bus. Halfway through the journey, we were instructed to disembark and flee at our own risk. Accompanied by several other female detainees, I crossed Jebel Aulia Bridge amid heavy drone and artillery fire. We sought protection through prayer, navigating the perilous situation with the hope of reaching safety. After two days of walking, we finally arrived Salha area of Omdurman, where I breathed a sigh of relief and thanked God for the blessings of life and freedom[42].

[42] ACJPS Interview with survivor Sanaa - May 2025

7- Sexual Slavery and Forced Pregnancy – Sara's Story

One year before the war broke out, twenty-two-year-old Sara lost her father. Amid the conflict, her mother's health deteriorated due to kidney failure, and she was unable to receive treatment because of the complete collapse of the healthcare system. She passed away before Sarah could even finish mourning her father. Sarah recounted, "One day in June 2023, four armed men from the Rapid Support Forces came to our house. They were stationed nearby, searching for empty homes and single women. They asked if there were any men in the house. I hesitated at first but then whispered, 'I'm alone.' They left, but my heart was not at ease." That same night, they sneaked into my house while I was laying in my room. When I heard their footsteps, I hid under the bed, but it was futile; they found me. The two men who had broken in during the day raped me at gunpoint. Shortly after, the other two entered and committed the same crime.

For several days, all four men remained in the house, taking turns to rape me repeatedly. They humiliated and trapped me. I tasted no food, surviving only on sips of water. There was no escape and no hope for survival; I was trapped in a hell unlike anything I had ever experienced.

A few days later, they received a military call and left in a hurry. As soon as they were gone, I fled to a neighbor's house. Unable to explain what had happened, I simply asked to be taken to a safer area. I then moved in with a friend to eastern Sudan, seeking refuge outside the reach of war.

Months later, I began to experience concerning health symptoms. I visited a health center and received the news I had dreaded: I was pregnant. No one listened to me; even my friend abandoned me. My presence became a burden, and shelters refused to accept me because I was "pregnant."

Lost in an unfamiliar city and ostracized by everyone, I finally found refuge in a women organization that welcomed me as a human being before considering my circumstances. They embraced me, provided psychological and medical support, and stayed with me until I gave birth.

Today, I live in a constant state of anxiety. I cannot return to my home in Khartoum because it is still unsafe, and the community there would show no mercy to me or my child. In their eyes, I am a "stigma," still a victim of a crime I neither chose nor caused[43].

8- Rape and Extortion Inside a Refugee Camp - Helen's Story

Helen, a 29-year-old Eritrean refugee, was staying in a safe house inside Al Shagarab camp in Kassala State, awaiting psychological treatment after suffering severe sexual abuse. She recounts, "After the outbreak of armed conflict in Khartoum and the loss of my father, I moved to the camp and lived with my sisters and younger brother, who was still a child. One night, a member of the regular forces stationed inside Al Shagarab camp sneaked into our house by jumping over the fence, exploiting the house's vulnerabilities. He raped me under threat. Despite my cries for help, neighbors who heard my screams saw him with their own eyes, but because he was part of the security force inside the camp, no one intervened.

I filed a report at the camp's police station, but it led to no action, and the perpetrator remained free and unaccountable. In my attempt to rebuild my life, I married an Eritrean refugee living in the same camp, but the marriage was short-lived, and he divorced me soon after. After the divorce, he attempted to win me back, but I refused.

[43] ACJPS Interview with survivor Sarah - May 2025

Unable to accept my rejection, he broke into my house one day and sexually assaulted me again, resulting in my pregnancy. Following this incident, the camp committee pressured me to return to him after I gave birth, despite my fragile psychological state. Eventually, I received a chance to be resettled in Canada with my child, and the travel procedures began, including interviews, medical examinations, and follow-up by the UNHCR and organization C.

As the departure date approached and we were ready to issue flight permits, a permit officer from Organization C named Hamid approached me and said, "You have a child with a Sudanese man, and you cannot travel with him." I explained that the child's father was an Eritrean refugee known to them, and I presented his refugee card and Eritrean ID. Despite this, they insisted that the case needed to be referred to court to establish the child's paternity, which would delay my travel. Hamid then offered to resolve the issue for 2 million Sudanese pounds, plus an additional 1.5 million to expedite the process. Under immense psychological pressure and in tears, I managed to negotiate a compromise of 750,000 Sudanese pounds. I borrowed money from a relative in the Wad Sharifi camp, who sent it via the "Bankak" app to Hamid on April 23, 2025.

A few hours after the transfer was confirmed, the travel permit was issued, allowing Helen to travel to Canada. Her experience highlights the disturbing connection between sexual abuse and financial exploitation in refugee contexts, even within institutions meant to protect and support survivors[44].

9- Forced Recruitment of Children - Aisha's Story

Aisha, a resident of Adila locality in East Darfur state, shared her painful story about her son's absence. She is 35 years old and recalls that before the war, her family lived a simple yet stable life.

Her children attended school regularly, received primary healthcare, and played in the neighborhood after school, laughing and chasing after football like all children their age. Although we didn't have much, we lived in peace—until the war changed everything. Schools were closed, health centers were disrupted, and militias occupied the streets. I began to notice children in our neighborhood disappearing one by one, recruited by armed groups active in the area, including the Rapid Support Forces and their affiliated militias.

My eldest son, Abu Bakr, was only 12 when they took him. They specifically targeted children because they were weaker and easier to control, enticing them with promises of money, food, and even weapons, claiming that they would become "men" and that fighting was "heroism." I remember very well the day my son returned after being gone for two weeks. He was no longer the person I once knew. He had become aggressive and silent, with a strange look in his eyes. Then he disappeared again, and I haven't seen him since. I don't know where he is now or if he is alive or dead. I wonder if he is fighting or crying in a place no one knows.

His case is not isolated; many children in our region were recruited this way. We have lost an entire generation. This is not just the destruction of families, but the shattering of our entire society[45].

[44] ACJPS Interview with survivor Helen - June 2025

[45] ACJPS Interview with Mrs. Aisha, mother of the forcibly recruited child A. Abu Bakr - May 2025

10- Systematic Recruitment and Stolen Childhoods – Ni'ma's Testimony

Ni'ma, a fifty-year-old woman living in East Darfur State, expressed her sorrow over the absence of children and spoke bitterly about the phenomenon of their recruitment. She said, "Before the war swept through our country, we lived a difficult life, but it was stable enough to raise our children. The schools were poor, and the infrastructure was weak, yet our children found hope in education. Healthcare was scarce, and we often waited days to see a doctor or get medicine. Nevertheless, we maintained our community cohesion, celebrating occasions, gathering at weddings, and sharing stories as we always did. The children enjoyed their childhood, playing traditional games and laughing innocently. But the war came like a fierce wind, turning everything upside down. Children began to disappear. Initially, we thought they had been displaced with their families to safer areas, but then painful news began to emerge: they had been recruited. More than a hundred children from our community were taken, some of them not even ten years old."

The militias took advantage of the families' poverty and the children's naivety, luring them in with alluring promises: "You'll earn money, you'll eat well, and you'll be a hero wielding a weapon." Exhausted by life's hardships, the children had no idea that these promises were merely a deadly trap. I witnessed children returning after conscription, their appearances transformed. They became aggressive, shouting at their mothers and remaining silent for hours, as if burdened by years of pain. They were no longer the young people we once knew; it was as if the war had devoured their souls, leaving us with hollow shells.

What is occurring here is not just the destruction of our children's childhoods; it is a disintegration of the social fabric that once united us. The war has robbed us of security, stolen our children, and shattered the hearts of our mothers[46]

10- Children exploitation, recruitment, and kidnapping for ransom- Dr. Rawya's Testimony

Based on her observations in Khartoum State between February and April 2024, Dr. Rawya, an activist and human rights defender, provide:

"I witnessed the sale of children in the Mayo Market (Market 6) happening in broad daylight, right in front of passersby. Children aged 5 to 12 were transported in trucks driven by individuals in Rapid Support Forces uniforms and unloaded at the market. Initially, a male child was sold for 4,000 Sudanese pounds and a female child for 3,000 pounds, but prices later plummeted to 2,000 pounds for a male and 1,000 pounds for a female. Some children were accompanied by their families, who, driven by need, greed, or ignorance, sold them directly to those offering to "care for" them.

Among the distressing scenes, I saw shipments containing plastic boxes bearing the logo of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which had been looted from one of its warehouses, confirming that the source of these operations stemmed from an entire looted area.

[46] ACJPS Interview with witness Ni'ma - May 2025

The sales were conducted for inhumane purposes, as confirmed by statements from members of the Rapid Support Forces, indicating that some children were taken to the front lines as soldiers, while others were exploited for sexual purposes. In Jebel Aulia area, south of Khartoum, I witnessed widespread forced recruitment of children into the ranks of the Rapid Support Forces. Twelve military checkpoints were established in that area, and I observed a significant number of children in military uniforms. In the Nobatia area alone, there were three checkpoints, each staffed by children. From Nobatia to Kalakla Sanga'at Street, there were two more checkpoints, and from Sanga'at to Kalakla Park, there were three additional ones. From Kalakla Park to Jebel Aulia, there were two more checkpoints. Furthermore, each motorcycle involved in the sweeps carried at least one child alongside two armed members, all being armed. Local sources informed me that three main groups—the Rizeigat, the Misseriya, and the Beni Halba—were involved. The children of one leader, known as "Madkhur," from the Bani Halba tribe, made up all of his forces. The youngest child I saw was just eight years old. The Qubba School in the area was being used as both a detention center and a military base, with more than 50% of its personnel being forcibly recruited children.

Regarding her testimony about kidnapping for ransom, she recounts:

"My colleague Omar, from a well-known family in Khartoum, was kidnapped, and his family was demanded to pay 13 million Sudanese pounds as ransom for his release. The ransom was paid to members of the Rapid Support Forces, and he was released. Another colleague, a volunteer in a humanitarian initiative in Jebel Aulia, was also kidnapped and detained by the Rapid Support Forces. Her family was financially blackmailed for 3 million pounds for her release and threatened with selling her in Libya if they did not pay the ransom. Rawya confirms that all of these victims were subjected to physical and psychological torture and severe beatings during their detention. Their experiences were marked by suffering and extortion[47].

12- Forced Marriage - The Story of Child Hind

In a village in Al Jazeera State, fifteen-year-old Hind lived a simple life with her family, under the care of her father, Hashim, a farmer known for his generosity and concern for his family. However, everything changed when the Rapid Support Forces invaded the area in late 2023.

Hashim recounts: "Armed men entered the village and set up a checkpoint. At first, we thought they were just passersby, but soon the terror began. Soldiers searched houses, harassed girls, and imposed their authority. One of the group's leaders came and asked for my daughter's hand in marriage. We told him she was a minor, but his words were not a request; they were a command.

Hind was forced into marriage, effectively a form of human trafficking based on forced sexual exploitation amid armed conflict. Hashim adds, 'I had no choice. Refusal meant death for me, my other children, and my daughter. I could see the fear in her eyes, but I couldn't protect her. They were armed, and we were defenseless.' At gunpoint, the girl was married off, marking the beginning of her life as a victim of an undeclared slavery system, in a lawless environment with collapsed judicial institutions in Al Jazirah State.

The family later managed to escape to a safer area, and Hind continues to receive psychological care due to the trauma she experienced[48].

[47] ACJPS Interview with witness Dr. Rawya - May 2025

[48] ACJPS Interview with the father of the child Hind - May 2025

Section Two: Migrant smuggling in Sudan (Accounts from Victims and Witnesses)

1- Torture, Forced Labor, and Extortion - The Story of Lawyer Khaled

Lawyer and activist Khaled had been living in Omdurman – Al Thawra since 2008. With the outbreak of armed conflict in Sudan in April 2023, he tried to persevere for a full year amid escalating violations. However, his professional status as a lawyer working for a human rights organization made him vulnerable to repeated targeting by security agencies. According to his account, he faced numerous harassments at his office and home.

Khaled states, "Due to the direct threat, I decided to flee with my family to Egypt by land, accompanied by a neighbor who works as an army officer. He first took us to the city of Ad Dabbah, and from there to Dongola. However, everything changed when the security forces stopped us. I was interrogated for three hours, photographed, and the photos were shared with their groups, a clear violation of my privacy and safety. Due to the increased risks at the Argin crossing, we changed our destination and decided to head to Libya via the smuggling route. We took a bus to the Al Khanaq area, then traveled in smuggling vehicles (Land Cruisers) carrying approximately 30 people in a humiliating manner, with no regard for humanity or safety, until we reached the border triangle between Sudan and Libya."

At the checkpoint, upon presenting my identification papers, I was accused of being affiliated with armed Darfuri movements and labeled a "gharabi- from the West," despite being a civilian lawyer with no political involvement. Military intelligence arrested me and confined me in a small room with over 67 other detainees.

On the first night, I was taken to an open courtyard, where six officers severely beat me and subjected me to physical and psychological torture. They threw racial slurs and degrading insults, threatening extermination with statements like, "The gharabi are the cause of Sudan's setback and must be exterminated." I was also isolated from my wife and children, who were detained with me, and barred from any contact with them, which deepened my psychological distress.

During my six days in detention, I was forced to work in construction, carrying stones, cleaning facilities, and even wearing officers' uniforms. This was a clear case of forced labor under humiliating and harsh conditions. After intervention from a well-known merchant in our neighborhood, I was released on the condition that my case would be transferred to Dongola.

Following my release, we stayed in Dongola for three days until I received my passport and phone. Fearing re-arrest, I arranged a nighttime escape from the Triangle to the Uwaynat Mountains on the border. My family and I spent two days in the mountains before smugglers handed us over to a Libyan authority.

During our journey through the desert, we were pursued by Libyan "illegal immigration" forces; one of our vehicles was seized while others managed to escape.

After three grueling days of traveling through the desert and walking long distances, we reached the outskirts of Kufra and sought refuge at an abandoned farm. We spent several days there recuperating from the effects of torture. I suffered from severe back pain and spent 15 days lying on my stomach, receiving care from a Sudanese nurse who volunteered to help me. I then remained in Kufra for 20 days.

The journey was not over, as we continued along the smuggling route from Ajdabiya to Tripoli. We had to pay bribes at every checkpoint or crossing to avoid imprisonment, beatings, or being forced into labor again[49]

2- Sexual Assault on the Smuggling Route to Egypt – Hanaa's Story

Hanaa's sister recounted that after the armed conflict escalated in Khartoum, they had no choice but to flee with their father. They decided to head to the nearest safe country, choosing Egypt and using smuggling routes. There were no papers or regulations, only brokers selling unsafe passage at exorbitant prices.

Hanaa rode in the back of a small pickup truck, while her sister and father sat in the front seat. She trembled with fear—not from the rough terrain, but from the stares of strange men accompanying the smuggler on the road. Hands reached out to her, mercilessly harassing her. Her privacy was violated, and her dignity was attacked in that desolate environment. When she tried to protect herself by remaining silent, the abuse only intensified. She later confided to her sister that someone had urinated on her. Her body felt no longer her own, and her willpower gradually eroded.

They arrived in Cairo after a harrowing journey and temporarily settled in the Fustat area. But Cairo was not a sanctuary for her; it was merely the final stop on a journey of pain. She was restless, constantly cleaning her body and clothes, refusing to touch any of her old belongings, washing repeatedly as if trying to erase something in vain.

Just a week after their arrival, she ascended to the eleventh floor and gazed into the vast void before her. Perhaps she longed to escape or to regain control over her violated body. In that moment, she made the heartbreaking decision to end her life, one marred by suffering, abuse, and the denial of her dignity. She jumped from that height, seeking to distance herself from a world steeped in cruelty. She passed away that day in January 2024, carrying with her a living testimony to the horrific violations faced by displaced men and women on treacherous escape routes, where the body becomes a battleground for assault, and the soul a target for destruction[50].

3- A Journey of Displacement and Exploitation in Libya – Sami's Story

Sami, 32, recounts his harrowing experience with human trafficking:

In 2023, as war raged in the capital, Khartoum, I was forced to seek means of survival. I worked in Souq Libya (the Libyan market), selling clothes on the sidewalks, hoping to support my family amid the destruction. Yet, even with this meager livelihood, I was not spared from the brutality of armed militias. Members of the Rapid Support Forces roamed the market like warlords, looting goods, brandishing weapons, and instilling fear in our hearts.

[49] ACJPS Interview with survivor Khaled, April 2025

[50] ACJPS Interview with victim Hanaa's sister, May 2025

Many times, they approached my stall, buying without paying or ordering me to climb into their vehicles under the pretense of settling scores, only to suddenly demand I get out, threatening me with their weapons if I objected.

This grim reality was one of the first seeds of departure planted in me—not an exodus for a better life, but an escape from a homeland suffocating me to the brink of death. My destination was Libya, across the Sahara Desert. I began my journey in western Sudan, passing through Al Khanaq, Al Muthallath, and Jabal Uwaynat, until I reached Kufra. Along the way, our only connection to the smugglers was fear. Each crossing point was governed by the whims of those wielding weapons. Prices fluctuated, agreements were violated, and those who couldn't pay were abandoned in the desert.

I was financially and psychologically drained, believing Kufra was my only escape. Yet that thought proved to be a mirage. Seven days after entering Libya, I sold my wife's phone and our wedding ring to fund our journey to Ajdabiya. We arrived there on the first day of Ramadan 2024 and spent nearly 18 days without finding work. I sought not luxury, just sustenance and safety.

We then moved to Tripoli. I agreed with a driver on a fare and paid in advance. However, halfway through the journey, he stopped the car and informed me that the amount covered only one person—my wife or me. I stood in shock in the desert, grappling with the trap we had fallen into. Fortunately, one of the other passengers, witnessing our plight, graciously donated the remaining fare. We arrived in Tripoli with nothing but weary hope.

Finding shelter proved difficult; we had no friends to turn to. I searched for work for a long time but was unsuccessful. One day, a kind stranger helped us, and by God's grace, she facilitated modest housing for us. However, that housing soon turned into a new nightmare, infested with human trafficking gangs that kidnapped women and children in broad daylight. One day, while I was out searching for work, my wife was home alone. She heard violent knocking on the door and windows, with armed men surrounding the house. My wife called me, but my phone was out of reach. She then called my aunt, who was nearby and rushed over. When the armed men saw her, they fled in their vehicles. We survived that night, but the terror never left us afterward.

I didn't report the situation to the police because they are themselves vulnerable to extortion by gangs. There was a real fear that they might frame me and deport me for lacking legal documents. To preserve my wife's dignity, I decided to move to a different area, despite the high rent.

We registered with the UNHCR, sent out distress calls, and sought protection, but received no response. Here we are now, bearing the weight of war, displacement, and exploitation, waiting for a glimmer of hope at the end of this dark tunnel. We fled a burning homeland only to fall into the hands of human traffickers and cross-border militias. All we desire is a dignified and safe life—nothing more[51].

[51] ACJPS Interview with survivor Sami, May 2025

4- Blackmail and Dangers on the Smuggling Route - Nada's Story

Nada, 26, reported that on September 25, 2024, while crossing from Al-Khanaq in the Northern State to the Libyan city of Kufra, she and her family faced exploitation and blackmail. Their long journey of displacement began in Omdurman in May 2023, when life there became a nightmare amidst the sounds of shells and bullets. They first sought refuge in Wad Madani in Al Jazeera State, then moved to Port Sudan in December of the same year. However, in search of work to support her family, Nada returned alone to Sinja, only to be caught by the war there as well. She then returned to Port Sudan, where her family was living.

In moments of helplessness and confusion, we found ourselves faced with the unexpected decision to emigrate to Libya—a choice we had never considered before. An old friend of my mother's lived there and had always encouraged us to visit, but we had declined each time. However, in September 2024, we decided to go. Our only concern was finding shelter that would ensure our safety, even if that meant crossing the border.

Their journey started from Al-Khanaq toward Kufra via a smuggling route. My younger brother was suffering from malaria, and my father had kidney failure. We agreed with the smuggler to take us directly to Kufra, bypassing the border triangle to safeguard our parents' health, as that route would prolong the journey and increase our hardships.

However, once we started walking, conditions turned upside-down and the smuggler changed his mind, detaining us for three days in the Triangle. He then demanded an additional payment to continue our journey to Kufra, despite having already paid in advance. With no choice, we complied. During the journey, our car broke down in the desert, and we ran out of water. We endured the scorching heat of the day and the freezing cold of the night, remaining stranded until the next day when other vehicles finally arrived to transport us to Kufra.

But arrival was not the end of our ordeal. We were taken to an abandoned farm, lacking any basic facilities, where we stayed for a full month as we awaited the registration procedures necessary for a temporary residency card. In the meantime, my brother's condition worsened, prompting a Libyan man to take him into his home and care for him. Each day, he brought my brother back to us for assurance.

After receiving the registration cards, I took my family to Benghazi. I then decided to return to Sudan through the Sudanese embassy to seek work to support my family in Libya. The journey had drained all our money and patience[52].

5- A Humiliating Journey and Multi-Level Exploitation – Walid's Story

Walid, 30, shares his harrowing experience, stating, "I never imagined my journey would begin in Al Nehud, the capital of West Kordofan State, and transform into a bitter and unforgettable ordeal. I fled the war in search of safety and a livelihood, only to become a victim of a vast network of smugglers and armed groups that openly traffic in human beings and shatter their dreams.

[52] ACJPS Interview with survivor Nada, April 2025

The journey to Kufra, Libya, was dangerous from the very start. I boarded a vehicle known locally as a "Tundra," a large pickup vehicle designed for desert travel. More than forty of us were crammed inside—eight in the back seat and the rest lined up in the trunk. Those at the ends were tied with ropes, like animals, to prevent them from falling during the journey.

Our trip began in Nahud, navigating through several Sudanese army checkpoints. At each stop, the driver was required to pay a fee for us to pass. At one checkpoint, we were deliberately humiliated and threatened with imprisonment, accused of wanting to join the Rapid Support Forces. We assured them that our only intention was to reach Libya in search of work, and they temporarily allowed us to go.

However, the most dangerous encounter occurred at a Rapid Support Forces checkpoint. We were all ordered to disembark, show our IDs, and unlock our cell phones. A thorough and humiliating search followed. Young men from specific areas faced direct accusations: "You are Falngayyat- members of Darfuri armed movement," "You are Kizan- National Congress Party members." Others were labeled as affiliated with the Joint Forces. We were not released until we paid a substantial amount of money. In Umm Bayada area, our vehicle broke down due to "overloading." The smuggling driver instructed us to continue on foot to Beir Hawar. We trekked approximately 40 kilometers through the harsh, cold desert at night until we reached a location with a water well and a shop tent offering basic necessities. We remained there for eight days while the driver repaired the vehicle.

Once it was fixed, we continued on to the Triangle, where the interrogation and abuse began. We passed through four checkpoints known as "cover gates," operated by the joint forces. At each gate, everyone was searched, and a fee was charged for passage. At the Triangle gate, those coming from Khartoum were instructed to step forward. Despite having left Khartoum for Nahud when the war broke out, my ID and passport were confiscated, and I was placed in a group of about 25 people who were detained and interrogated in degrading ways.

In the evening, we were photographed and interrogated again. They demanded details about our homes in Khartoum and sent the photos to security agencies for further investigation. I remained there for days, thrown out into the street each evening and ordered to return the next day under the pretext of "waiting for a response." During this time, I met a young man from my neighborhood, no older than 19, who had been detained for a full month. They coerced him into confessing to being part of the Rapid Support Forces and listed him among those on call. He told me, "I work here as a servant for them," and asked me to deliver a reassuring message to his family.

Finally, after retrieving our passports, a Libyan vehicle transported us from the Triangle to Kufra, crossing a border fraught with fear. Along the way, we had to cover our heads and remain still when passing a Libyan army checkpoint, terrified that our presence would be discovered.

I arrived in Kufra exhausted and frightened, but I was grateful to my acquaintances who welcomed me. Our journey starkly illustrated the human exploitation perpetrated by smugglers and armed groups in the absence of state protection, where individuals were treated as commodities, bought and sold in broad daylight[53].

[53] ACJPS Interview with survivor Walid, May 2025

6- Selling, Detention and Extortion- Salim's Story

In April 2024, 39-year-old Salem decided to leave Sudan with three friends, hoping to reach Europe for a safe life via Libya. Salem recalls, "We began our journey by smuggling to Egypt. From there, we made a deal with a man who claimed he could help us reach the sea and then the 'other shore.'"

Our journey to Libya was relatively easy; a minibus took us across the desert. However, hell began the moment we arrived. The man we had trusted handed us over to another man who, we later learned, had "bought" us. This man took us to a place resembling an abandoned warehouse: filthy, dark, infested with insects, and locked tightly behind us.

Inside that dingy basement, there were fourteen young men. We had nothing. Our phones were confiscated, and we were forced to provide our family contact numbers. Every day, he would enter our space, his loud voice and painful beatings demanding silence and obedience. Then, he would call our families, demanding an unimaginable ransom. For less than a thousand dollars, he used threats and blackmail, exploiting the chaos of the country and the plight of our war-torn families. Even those whose families paid the ransom were not released. The man continued to call, bargain, and threaten us. We felt trapped with no way out.

One day, we resolved to break this hellish cycle. We silently planned our escape and began to leave one by one through the roof until we finally broke free from that nightmare. But we had nothing left but our exhausted legs and shattered spirits.

We walked in the desert for hours, aimlessly lost until we spotted a Libyan taxi that stopped for us. We pleaded with the driver and climbed into the back of the vehicle. If it weren't for that man, we might not have lived to tell our story. He took us to a neighborhood populated by Sudanese people, where we finally reconnected with our families.

My health was deteriorating; my feet were swollen, and I suffered from nerve damage. I decided to return to Egypt for treatment before continuing my journey to Sudan. I returned burdened with experience and bitterness and resolved to join the ranks of the Joint Forces. Now, I am striving to find meaning in life^[54].

[54] ACJPS Interview with survivor Salem, April 2025

Section Three: Analyzing Patterns and Trends in Human Trafficking and Migrant smuggling in Sudan Amidst the Current Armed Conflict

Since the outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023, Sudan has witnessed an alarming increase in human trafficking and smuggling of migrants' activities. This rise is marked by a transformation in the nature and patterns of these crimes, which are now closely linked to the ongoing war and the resulting security, social, and political disintegration within the country. This section aims to analyze the emerging patterns of human trafficking and migrant smuggling, utilizing accounts from victims as well as testimonies from relevant authorities and field observers.

First: Patterns and Trends in Human Trafficking and Smuggling of Migrants

The accounts collected in Section One reveal several recurring and interconnected patterns in human trafficking and smuggling of migrants' crimes. These patterns reflect the evolving methods of criminal activity and the profound impact of war on the landscape of human exploitation in Sudan.

- A significant pattern identified in conflict zones is the sexual exploitation of women and girls, often referred to as sexual exploitation and sexual slavery. Victims, primarily women and girls, are subjected to repeated gang rapes, which can amount to sexual slavery. The Director of the Combatting Violence Against Women Unit has noted that human trafficking has become a tool for conflict-related sexual violence[55], a view supported by the UN Security Council. This encompasses a range of abuses, including rape, forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced prostitution, forced marriage, and sexual slavery, along with detention and coerced domestic and service labor, ultimately resulting in complete sexual exploitation. The unit has documented numerous cases where abducted women were initially forced to undertake tasks such as cooking and cleaning in detention sites run by the Rapid Support Forces or trafficking gangs. Subsequently, these women were exploited as instruments of sexual slavery, highlighting a clear and complex pattern of crime[56]. Testimonies from victims and their families indicate that girls aged 14 to 19 are particularly at risk of being targeted. Furthermore, the Unit for Combating Violence Against Women has reported instances of unaccompanied girls abducted from Khartoum, Al Jazeera, and Sennar, who were held for months in remote areas where they faced sexual exploitation, extortion, and threats of sale.

• [55] ACJPS Interview with the Unit for Combating Violence against Women, May 2025
• [56] ACJPS Interview with the lawyer Muhannad Mustafa Al-Nour, April 2025

- Forced marriage, a form of human trafficking that is often overlooked despite its exploitative nature, involves coercing women or girls into unions that falsely legitimize sexual relationships or maintain control over the victim. Since April 2023, reports of forced marriage have surged in Sudan amidst ongoing conflict, especially in areas controlled by armed militias. Victims and testimonies from specialists and field monitors [57] surveyed by the African Center for Justice and Peace Studies reveal that many girls in conflict zones and displacement or refugee camps have been compelled to marry in exchange for protection[58].
- Forced pregnancy, as a form of human trafficking, intersects with patterns of gender-based violence, illustrating how victims become trapped in an invisible web of humiliation, systemic and social violence[59].
- Another significant pattern observed is the detention of individuals for forced labor. Testimonies indicate that forced labor manifests in various overlapping forms, including coercion to provide medical services. This suggests that human trafficking can extend to professional categories, with individuals exploited in wartime conditions to deliver services under duress[60]. Such practices constitute forced labor and align with international definitions of human trafficking. Additional forms of forced labor for service purposes have emerged, encompassing farming[61], construction, digging[62], mechanics, plumbing, and other demanding jobs. These instances represent a form of contemporary slavery, as armed groups exploit human resources in areas under their control without any financial compensation or legal protections[63]. Testimonies from women and girls detained by militias reveal that they are often forced to work as maids in military sites and detention centers[64]. These situations are no less perilous than slavery, as women are treated as unprotected captives and compelled to serve fighters in inhumane conditions. Such acts rank among the most severe forms of conflict-related gender-based violence.
- Additionally, accounts of cross-border human trafficking have surfaced, particularly involving victims who are refugees or internally displaced persons. They are often lured by brokers promising safe transport to secure areas, only to be detained and extorted for money[65] or forced to work to repay the "smuggling costs." In some instances, victims are sold to other cross-border networks[66], reflecting a complex landscape of multifaceted crime.

[57] ACJPS Interview with the father of survivor Hind – May 25, 2025

[58] Interviews conducted by ACJPS with survivor Sarah and Eritrean refugee Helen, May 2025

[59] ACJPS Interview with witnesses Khansa, wife of pharmacist Ahmed, and Amal, wife of doctor Yasser), April 2025

[60] Interview conducted Saleh by ACJPS with survivor Saleh – May 2025

[61] ACJPS Interview with survivor Khaled

[62] Interview conducted Saber by ACJPS with survivor Saber – April 2025

[63] ACJPS Interview with a witness regarding the detention and exploitation of her niece Laila, April 2025

[64] ACJPS Interview with survivor Yasser – April 2025

[65] ACJPS Interview with survivor Salem - April 2025

[66] ACJPS Interview with the Unit for Combating Violence against Women - May 2025

- Cases of child exploitation, particularly involving underage girls, have also been reported. These children may be directly abducted from their homes or shelters, or their families may be lured with false promises of education or care, leading to their sale or sexual exploitation. This pattern has been observed in displacement and refugee areas, notably in Al-Jazeera, Kassala, and Darfur.

Second: Crime Networks and Patterns

- Testimonies reveal that human trafficking in Sudan during the conflict is not solely executed by isolated criminal gangs; it is also facilitated by armed regular forces, notably the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). These forces have been repeatedly accused of establishing military bases that house abducted men and women for sexual exploitation or forced labor[67].
- The Anti-Violence Against Women Unit has confirmed that certain markets in RSF-controlled areas have been transformed into centers for the sale of women. However, accessing direct eyewitnesses has proven difficult due to security threats faced by some collaborators of the unit. Some of these individuals have received serious threats following the leak of bank transfer notifications that indicated ransom payments or sale prices[68].
- Furthermore, the Unit has reported that some smuggling and human trafficking gangs operate independently, taking advantage of the chaos and security collapse in Sudan. A documented case of a gang arrested in the Butana region for smuggling victims confirms that the trafficking phenomenon is not confined to a specific armed group; rather, there is an intersection of armed groups, individuals, and organized criminal networks involved in these activities[69].

Third: Factors Motivating the Spread of Human Trafficking and Migrant smuggling in Sudan

Victim and expert testimonies highlighted several interconnected factors driving the rise of human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan during the war:

- The breakdown of state security and judicial institutions across large areas has created a vacuum that armed groups and organized criminal networks exploit.
- Widespread displacement from Khartoum and Darfur to central and eastern states, combined with unprotected camps, has created opportunities for the recruitment of women and children.
- Severe economic hardship and insecurity have led some families to resort to cross-border smuggling in search of better living conditions[70].

[67] ACJPS Interview with the witness, Dr. Rawya, June 2025

[68] Ibid. (66)

[69] ACJPS Interview with the Unit for Combating Violence against Women - May 2025

[70] ACJPS Interview with the witness, Dr. Rawya, June 2025

- A weak legal framework and the inability to enforce laws, particularly in areas controlled by the Rapid Support Forces, allow for violations to occur with impunity[71].
- The widespread arming of paramilitary groups and tribal militias has resulted in violence, with victims being exploited for various purposes, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, extortion, and recruitment[72].

Fourth: Geographical Characteristics and the Most Dangerous Areas

Testimonies align with field monitoring reports to highlight regions with high rates of human trafficking, categorized as follows:

1- Khartoum State:

- This region has become a hub for kidnapping and exploitation, particularly in areas like Mayo, Jebel Aulia, Kalaklat, Nubatia, and Galabat Street, where military bases of the Rapid Support Forces containing minors have been observed [73].
- Human rights defender Rawya reported the existence of a public child market in "Market 6" in Mayo area, where children are sometimes sold at the request of their families.

2- Al-Jazeera State:

- Certain areas have emerged as transit points for trafficking victims and smugglers, with frequent incidents of women and girls being kidnapped. The Anti-Violence Unit has confirmed numerous cases of girls transported from Khartoum and Al Jazeera, where they were detained, sold, or sexually exploited. Several instances of forced marriages of girls and minors have also been documented, often occurring at gunpoint or under the pressure of family poverty[74].

3- Darfur States:

- Documented cases reveal the transfer of girls between states for sale or sexual slavery. Testimonies from field observers indicate the presence of armed tribal groups involved in smuggling and exploitation, particularly in areas controlled by the Rapid Support Forces or their allies[75].

4- Eastern States (Kassala, Gadarif, Red Sea)

- Major crossing points for smuggling of migrants' operations exist at the borders between Libya and Egypt, where victims are often blackmailed and coerced into paying or forced labor.
- The account of "Helen," a refugee who was raped by a member of the force at the Shagarab camp, underscores the presence of networks that actively exploit women within the refugee camps, highlighting the inadequacy of protective measures[76].

[71] Ibid. (69)

[73] Interactive focus group discussion prepared by ACJPS with experts and specialists in human trafficking issues, June 2025

[74] Ibid. (70)

[75] ACJPS Interview with lawyer Muhannad Mustafa Al-Nour, April 2025

[77] ACJPS Interview with the Violence Against Women Unit – May 2025

[76] ACJPS Interview with the survivor Helen – June 2025



5- The Border Triangle (Sudan-Libya-Egypt)

According to testimonies documented by the African Center for Justice and Peace Studies, the border triangle is one of the most dangerous transit areas for victims. Armed forces manning checkpoints engage in blackmail, detention, and unfounded accusations against displaced persons, compelling many to pay money or endure forced labor.



Fifth: The nature of human trafficking and migrant smuggling during the Sudanese conflict has evolved, as reflected in the accounts of victims and experts.

Key features include:

- The blatant and audacious nature of the crimes, with children and women being sold openly in markets without fear of prosecution. A witness reported seeing children sold in the Mayo Market, while other accounts detailed the sale of girls in Darfur.
- The convergence of organized crime and armed activity is increasingly evident, as trafficking is no longer confined to smugglers; armed groups within the state exploit their power to conduct these operations. Impunity and a lack of justice prevail, with no effective mechanisms to protect victims or prosecute perpetrators, even when documentation exists. As the Director of the Unit to Combat Violence Against Women noted, some witnesses who provided evidence faced threats[77]. Additionally, forced medical labor has been used as a method of exploitation, exemplified by the case of a doctor who went missing in Jebel Aulia and was later found to be detained and forced to perform surgeries for the Rapid Support Forces[78].
- The emergence of illicit payment channels within certain institutions is illustrated by "Helen's" experience, where she was compelled to bribe an official in the C Organization to obtain a travel permit after an intentional delay, indicating widespread corruption among agencies meant to provide protection[79].
- The data presented in this section, drawn from direct testimonies of victims, statements from specialists, and observations by fieldworkers, reveals a troubling shift in the nature and scope of human trafficking in Sudan, linking it closely to the ongoing armed conflict and its political, social, and economic consequences.
- The crime has transcended its previously concealed or limited organized scope and is now being carried out openly in some areas, shielded by security chaos and the complicity of certain armed forces. This environment has made conflict zones, particularly those controlled by the Rapid Support Forces, ripe for the exploitation of women and children through various forms of trafficking, including sexual slavery, forced labor, forced recruitment, extortion, and exploitation through adoption or organ sale[80].
- Accounts and expert testimony reveal that the primary victims of human trafficking in Sudan are the most vulnerable groups: women, young girls, and children from displaced or impoverished families. Many of these individuals, seeking refuge, fall victim to luring and exploitation or are forced to flee, increasing their risk of being smuggled and re-trafficked. Witness accounts of the widespread sale of abducted children and girls in conflict zones underscore the inadequacy of existing protection and deterrence mechanisms.

[77] ACJPS Interview with the Violence Against Women Unit – May 2025

[78] ACJPS Interview with the witness Khansa, wife of Dr. Ahmed – April 2025

[79] ACJPS Interview with the survivor Helen – June 2025

[80] ACJPS Interview with the Violence Against Women Unit – May 2025

- An analysis of perpetrator patterns indicates a diverse array of actors, including military elements within the Rapid Support Forces, armed groups allied with the Sudanese army, organized smuggling networks operating across borders, and even some individuals within organizations meant to protect refugees. This diversity complicates accountability efforts, particularly given the fragility of judicial and security systems in conflict zones.
- Experts testify that the crimes extend beyond sexual violence to include slavery, forced marriage, forced pregnancy, and forced abortion, indicating that patterns of human trafficking during wartime intersect with those of conflict-related sexual violence[5].
- Weak documentation and societal concealment hinder progress. Victims often fear stigma, especially in cases of sexual exploitation, which deters many from coming forward. Local communities sometimes prefer to conceal these scandals, allowing the crimes to persist and emboldening perpetrators to repeat them, capitalizing on a culture of silence.
- There is a lack of coordination among service providers. The Unit for Combating Violence Against Women reported that the war has disrupted communication lines between agencies offering legal, psychological, or protective support to victims, rendering reporting and documentation of cases nearly impossible in some areas. Furthermore, national efforts remain fragmented and fail to reach trafficking victims in an organized manner.
- Geographically, the epicenters of human trafficking have shifted from traditional border areas, such as the East and West, to major cities and displacement centers, particularly in Khartoum, Al Jazeera, and Darfur. This shift necessitates a reevaluation of humanitarian and preventive intervention strategies.

[80] Ibid. (77)

Conclusion



The phenomenon of human trafficking and migrant smuggling presents a serious threat to Sudan amid the ongoing armed conflict that began in April 2023. This research has uncovered multiple dimensions of this complex issue, which is expanding in a fragile security environment and a profound legal and institutional void. The conflict marks a critical turning point, transforming these crimes from isolated incidents into integral components of war dynamics, directly linked to the collapse of state institutions and the disintegration of the social fabric, thereby creating fertile ground for the exploitation of individuals in horrific ways.

Qualitative analysis based on interviews with victims, field testimonies, and expert opinions confirms that Sudan has become a prominent site for human trafficking and migrant smuggling. It is no longer merely a transit country but has evolved into a source of victims and a destination for exploitation. The findings indicate that the most affected groups are women, children, individuals with disabilities, and displaced families. These populations endure a near-total lack of protection, lack basic services, and are compelled to make risky decisions for survival.

The institutional collapse of justice and law enforcement in Sudan's conflict zones is a significant characteristic of the situation. This breakdown has fostered an environment that encourages the growth of organized crime. Police forces have largely ceased operations in many regions, there is a lack of prosecutors and courts, and control has shifted to unaccountable armed groups. Consequently, the state's ability to prosecute offenders and protect victims has weakened. Victims themselves often fear reporting crimes due to potential retaliation or the risk of being treated as lawbreakers rather than as individuals needing protection and support.

A key finding of the research indicates that the confusion between human trafficking and migrant smuggling extends beyond conceptual and legal definitions to practical applications. Victims of trafficking are frequently detained alongside irregular migrants without clear distinctions, denying them access to psychological support and legal services. This confusion fosters impunity for perpetrators and criminalizes victims rather than empowering them to reclaim their rights. It underscores the urgent need for substantial reforms in the justice system to differentiate between these two issues and to provide effective protection in line with international standards.

The research also highlighted structural deficiencies in protection mechanisms at legal, practical, and organizational levels. There are inadequate specialized units within the police, prosecution, or judiciary to tackle these crimes. Additionally, the state lacks a unified database to track trafficking cases, and there are no established referral and reporting mechanisms, resulting in a weak and disorganized response. Victims often face their circumstances alone, without access to justice or protection; many may be detained or silenced through threats or social stigma.

Meanwhile, civil society, which once served as the first line of defense for victims and documentation of violations, is under increasing pressure. Many organizations have had to stop their activities or relocate to safer areas, facing legal and security restrictions that limit their outreach to affected communities. This decline in civil society's role has weakened the social protection network, creating a vacuum that trafficking and smuggling networks have exploited.

At the regional and international levels, cooperation remains limited and inadequate to combat transnational organized crime, despite initiatives like Khartoum Process and Sudan's commitments to various international agreements. The research found that a lack of political will, divisions among regional actors, and ineffective coordination all undermine these partnerships, preventing the development of sustainable solutions.

Furthermore, the ongoing armed conflict not only serves as a backdrop for these crimes but also plays a central role in their perpetuation. The war in Sudan continuously generates displacement, family breakdown, and a lack of decent living conditions, driving individuals to risk everything in search of safety, food, or shelter. Many cases documented in the research began with a desire to escape violence but ended with individuals falling victim to trafficking or smuggling or both.

This research emphasizes the necessity for a comprehensive, multi-level approach to combat these issues. Such an approach should start with reforming the legal system and implementing it effectively, building the capacity of national institutions and civil society, and enhancing regional and international cooperation for better coordination and information sharing. Achieving this requires strong political will, strict accountability for violators, and a commitment to listening to the voices of victims, transforming their experiences into catalysts for collective societal change.

Recommendations



The study concludes implementation of following steps to address the issues of human trafficking and migrant smuggling in Sudan:

At the International and Regional Level

1. Exercise diplomatic and political pressure on the parties involved in the conflict to end violations against civilians that may constitute human trafficking crimes.
2. Incorporate human trafficking and migrant smuggling issues into the priorities of negotiations and political dialogue regarding Sudan.
3. Support international and local investigations into violations related to human trafficking, particularly in conflict zones.
4. Establish a regional mechanism to monitor and track activities related to human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants in the Horn of Africa and North Africa.

At the National Level

1. Review and amend relevant laws to clearly define the crimes of human trafficking and migrant smuggling, including appropriate penalties and protection measures.
2. Enhance the capacity of police, prosecutors, and judicial staff to understand the nature of these crimes and effectively assist victims.
3. Activate bilateral and regional agreements to secure borders, exchange intelligence, and facilitate the prosecution of criminal networks.
4. Establish a national database to monitor and track crime patterns, victims, and suspects.
5. Create safe shelters for victims in and outside conflict zones, ensuring the provision of psychological, social, and legal support.
6. Develop programs to rehabilitate and reintegrate victims into society, with a focus on women and children.
7. Support civil society organizations in their role of protection and community awareness through media campaigns and educational programs designed to dismantle the social stigma surrounding victims and change harmful social norms associated with human trafficking.
8. Incorporate topics of human trafficking and migrant smuggling into educational curricula and training programs for legal, health, and social workers.
9. Reactivate the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking, providing necessary resources, ensuring its independence, and reviewing its national plan to align with post-conflict developments.
10. Invest in building the knowledge capacity of frontline service providers, as first responders to human trafficking and migrant smuggling, through specialized training programs that enhance their ability to identify victims and provide comprehensive support.