The impact of conflict on modern slavery and human trafficking in Sudan and the region

Acknowledgements

Contents

List of acronyms

Acronym	Definition
BMM	Better Migration Management
CBOs	Community-based organisations
CRSV	Conflict related sexual violence
CMR	Central Mediterranean Route
COR	Commission for Refugees (Sudanese)
EER	Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugees
ERRs	Emergency Response Rooms
EU	European Union
FSL	Food Security and Livelihood
GCM	UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration
GPG	Global Partners Governance
HAC	Sudanese Humanitarian Aid Commission
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IGA	Income Generating Activity
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
KI	Key Informant
KII	Key Informant Interview
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
MSHT	Modern Slavery Human Trafficking
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
OAU	Organisation of African Unity
OCHA	UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
OHCHR	Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
RSD	Refugee Status Determination
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SGBV	Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
SRRP	Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan
SSR	South Sudanese Refugees
TdH	Terre des Hommes
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
UASC	Unaccompanied and Separated Children
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
VAW	Violence Against Women
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHO	World Health Organisation
WFP	World Food Programme
WU	Western Union

Executive summary

On 15 April 2023, conflict erupted in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Since then, intense clashes have continued between the warring forces across several states in the country. This resulted in the forced displacement of 8.4 million people, including 6.5 million internally and 1.9 million in neighbouring countries.

Due to its geographical location at the heart of a key route from East Africa to North Africa and Europe, Sudan has long been recognised as an origin, transit, and destination country for victims of modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT).

However, the specific nature of the conflict and the mass displacement it has caused have led to the recording of increased rates of violence, including the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and mass killings based on ethnic division. Combined, these circumstances lead to heightened vulnerability to various forms of MSHT, especially among internally displaced people (IDPs) or refugees, both in Sudan and its neighbouring countries.

This report seeks to map these MSHT trends in real time as the conflict continues to progress. While service delivery deteriorated as a result of the conflict, key challenges already existed in addressing MSHT. Those reflect significant funding and capacity gaps, as well as a lack of incentives at various levels of government and the complicity of some security actors in smuggling and trafficking itself.

Since the start of the conflict, the set of risk factors for potential victims have increased. The conflict itself has magnified risks of forced marriage and forced conscription, which mirrors similar patterns from previous conflict in Sudan (such as in Darfur in 2003). The high numbers of displaced people have also created turbulent conditions in which vulnerable groups lack access to safe shelter and are more likely to be exploited by traffickers.

Within these broad factors, specific groups present particular vulnerabilities. For example, Sudan has historically absorbed high numbers of refugees from neighbouring countries (such as South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea) who are especially vulnerable to exploitation through MSHT because of historic discrimination, uncertain legal status, and pre-existing marginalisation. Women and girls have been particularly at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation through forced marriages, child marriages, and kidnapping. Men and boys have been more vulnerable to forced conscription and forced labour by armed forces, as well as forms of sexual violence. They have faced visa restrictions in travelling to neighbouring countries, during which they experienced heightened vulnerability from lack of protection and shelter.

The conflict has resulted in the complete breakdown of state institutions, including those responsible for upholding law and order. In some (more stable) states, local government has sought to cover aspects of federal government roles. Overall, however, capacity to respond to victims of MSHT or to take action against perpetrators is significantly reduced. There are no dedicated service providers that can provide the range of services needed to support victims. The quality of services still offered has been significantly impacted by the conflict. Moreover, notable stigma and social barriers remain for victims to come forward and ask for support, in particular for those who have experienced sexual violence or exploitation.

The main providers of services to MSHT victims have been international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and Sudan-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In response to ongoing fighting, most INGOs have now shifted to working remotely, which significantly impacted their reach and ability to support victims. A number of NGOs providing broader services (e.g. to IDPs, or in specific areas like health) have had to rethink their programmes to account for the large numbers of MSHT victims and the complex needs they present. In the face of significant gaps in the ability of INGOs and NGOs to effectively respond, a range of more informal local initiatives have developed, including youth-led initiatives and volunteer-led groups like the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs). They formed quickly as community-led responses that work in ad hoc and informal ways to help meet the basic needs of local populations. While it is not new for community-led efforts to step in and fill vacuums left by the state, they are under increasing pressure given the growing scale of needs.

Moreover, the conflict has fuelled inter- and cross-border displacement, which means that patterns of MSHT have also increased at a regional level. Our research focused on trends in Egypt, as a neighbouring country which has absorbed significant levels of Sudanese arrivals. Egypt has a long history of hosting refugees and a strong legal framework, including in relation to victims of MSHT. However, major gaps exist in its implementation. With growing pressures on its own economy, an increasingly hostile approach to the growing numbers of Sudanese refugees can be observed within Egypt. The lack of provision for these refugees and a lack of clarity over their legal status is fuelling further MSHT vulnerabilities. For example, large numbers of unaccompanied children from Sudan in Egypt have little to no access to education, which contributes to an increase in forced child labour and begging. With limited livelihood opportunities, women and girls have been particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Support to victims faces similar challenges in Egypt. These include institutional barriers, poor availability, and access-related gaps to services for MSHT survivors. While organisations maintained that the current Egyptian law to combat MSHT is comprehensive and compatible with international standards, they noted several issues with governmental capacity to implement it, and its lack of inclusivity to all vulnerable segments of society in Egypt.

Given these findings, we identify a number of recommendations for strengthening the ability of service providers to more effectively respond, and for governments and international actors to better support these efforts. These recommendations include:

Recommendations for NGOs/ INGOs
- There is a significant need for more capacity development for the range of providers who are currently 'first responders' to MSHT victims, to build greater specialist knowledge and support for victims.
- These organisations also need to be supported to increase their community awareness efforts, to shift social norms, and to raise awareness about the various forms of MSHT and about the available services for potential victims in each area.
- While there is no scope for a national referral mechanism in Sudan, there is significant scope to strengthen the informal and more ad hoc referral pathways that already exist, to support greater information sharing and coordination between those providers who are still operational.
- As part of this, there is a need to strengthen data collection – which is largely non-existent at present - to understand root causes, trends, and impacts of MSHT amongst vulnerable communities, and inform more evidence-based programming and advocacy.

Recommendations for donors
- Prioritise funding for more specialised anti-trafficking programs to ensure more comprehensive and holistic support. This should include more support for those informal community initiatives who are currently on the frontline of response efforts.
- Be more adaptable and flexible with compliance and contracting models due to the current conflict, and in recognition of the ad hoc and informal providers who are now at the frontline of MSHT response.
- Increase support to coordination efforts, including informal referral processes, which should reduce duplication of efforts and promote more comprehensive support.

1. Introduction

Sudan has historically been an origin, transit, and destination country for victims of modern slavery and human trafficking (MSHT), reflecting in part its geographic location as a key route from East Africa to North Africa and Europe. It has also historically had weak systems of protection for victims, reflecting overall weak systems of governance after a long period of dictatorship. Common forms of trafficking have included early and forced marriage, forced or bonded labour, child labour, domestic servitude, and forced prostitution. Sudan has also hosted significant numbers of refugees and displaced populations, who are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, especially in border areas.

The outbreak of conflict in 2023 has exacerbated these risks and vulnerabilities. Sudan now has over 6.5 million displaced people at high risk of MSHT, in addition to around 1.9 million in bordering countries. The specific nature of the conflict, with violence increasingly reflecting ethnic divisions and the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, further increases trafficking vulnerabilities. The capacities of government and non-governmental organisations to respond or provide services to victims has also significantly decreased as a result of the war.

This means that the risks and impacts of MSHT continue to increase, with very limited ability of a range of actors to respond. Information regarding trends on the ground, and how risks and vulnerabilities might be shifting, has also been scarce.

This research therefore is an innovative attempt to better map and understand these phenomena in real time, as the conflict continues to unfold. It aims to assess the human trafficking situation in Sudan before and during the war. In particular, it seeks to investigate the impact of the war on the ability of service providers within Sudan and in some neighbouring countries to meet the needs of victims and potential victims, including as those needs evolve. This emerging evidence is then used to develop recommendations for how different actors might better address existing gaps and what future priorities for responding to trafficking should be.

Our hope is that a range of policymakers, relevant stakeholders and service providers can access these recommendations and apply them in their work, in support of the wider goal of strengthening responsiveness to and understanding of the risks and impact of modern slavery and human trafficking in and outside of Sudan.

1.1 Methodology

This research project compares knowledge of the context before the war with evidence currently available as the conflict continues to progress. Therefore, our research methodology has had to be adaptive and responsive to changing patterns of conflict within Sudan and our ability to access and engage key stakeholders and data sources.

Given that the conflict is ongoing, with patterns of violence continuing to shift, it is challenging to give a comprehensive overview of total numbers affected by MSHT and to cover the significant regional diversity in trends within and outside of Sudan. Instead, we sought to capture the perspectives and challenges faced by service providers of different kinds.

A wide range of both formal and informal providers of support to victims of MSHT continue to operate within Sudan and in neighbouring countries. They provide a rich source of data on how risks and vulnerabilities for victims are shifting given the conflict, and on the abilities of service providers to meet these needs and wider capacity constraints for effective response. Where possible, we aim to triangulate these perspectives with other sources of available data. The key strength of this research is that it captures the perspectives and experiences of a set of diverse organisations working at the frontline of response to victims of MSHT. Their perspectives have so far been largely missing from broader data analysis and policy discussions of these trends, and they can provide a valuable insight into the real-world barriers and risks faced.

Analytical framework

Our research aims to explore key trends, including key shifts and changes since the conflict began, around a set of key factors.

First, we explored the types of vulnerabilities. Before the conflict, numerous forms of trafficking existed in Sudan, which varied between the different regions and demographics. They include early and forced marriage, forced labour, child labour and forced begging. Displaced populations and refugees were particularly vulnerable. The current conflict is expected to increase the risks of trafficking, since armed conflicts amplify the social and economic vulnerabilities of the people affected. In previous conflicts in the region, the most reported forms of trafficking included sexual slavery, recruitment of children into armed groups, forced labour, forced begging, and forced marriages. Our analysis sought to assess service

providers' perspectives and experience, to determine the most common vulnerabilities and how these are shifting because of patterns of conflict and violence.

Second, we explored the types of services available for victims of MSHT and how these are changing because of the conflict. Before the conflict, service providers were offering a range of services, including health and medical services, legal aid support, psychosocial and mental health services, economic support, and security and safety mechanisms (e.g. hotlines, police, safe housing). Even before the conflict, service providers had indicated significant capacity constraints within Sudan, including limited availability of shelters, lack of trust in law enforcement and reliance on insecure funding, which affected services' sustainability. There was no formal referral system, and instead coordination between different types of organisations was mostly done informally and based on personal relationships. Our stakeholder mapping and interviews conducted for this research sought to identify the main changes that have occurred because of the conflict for these services and the challenges associated in support provision by service providers and access by survivors. We also sought to highlight gaps in services geographically, thematically and the impact this may be having on potential victims of MSHT.

Third, we looked to understand the main types of providers, and how these might have changed with the outbreak of the conflict. Prior to that, we had identified a list of service providers that mainly consisted of community-based organisations (CBOs) and national non-governmental organisations which operate in numerous states in Sudan. These organisations partnered with technical governmental bodies, international organisations, and sometimes embassies, to provide services for human trafficking victims and survivors. Because of the conflict, many of these organisations have moved either to other states in Sudan or to neighbouring countries. Moreover, our research explored whether and how new actors have begun referring people to various types of services since the conflict began.

Research methods

Our methodology uses qualitative research with a focus on structured and semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with organisations that work to support victims of MSHT.

As a first step, we conducted a desk-based review of select available literature to inform our research design and the development of the interview guides. We also used this review to triangulate the primary data collected. This included review of a range of published and grey literature that assessed available data within Sudan on current patterns of trafficking, using sources such as relevant UN agencies and monitoring organisations in the region. We also conducted a limited review of previous conflicts in the region which shared similar features, to understand whether and how the types of patterns identified for Sudan are similar to those seen in other relevant conflicts.

In addition, we have been able to draw on an ongoing stakeholder mapping of service providers working directly and indirectly with victims and potential victims of trafficking. This draws on our pre-existing work and contacts, included 25 service providers in Khartoum, and over 90 service providers across Sudan and regionally, including transnational organisations (see Stakeholder Mapping section, and Stakeholder Mapping Tool annexed). We have mapped organisations at all levels, from CBOs, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international organisations (INGOs), technical bodies from governments, international organisations or donors/funders that may be involved in the topic or region.

We conducted primary data collection in the form of semi-structured interviews both remotely and in person with relevant stakeholders. We were able to reach a diverse selection of interviewees from the following sectors including health, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), legal, safety and security, and economic support. We spoke to representatives from a wide range of international and national organisations, as well as more informal, community-based groups. We developed a structured questionnaire and used a reputable research company to conduct interviews within Sudan while we conducted further interviews in Cairo, Egypt. We also used focus group discussions in Cairo, which gave us further opportunities for respondents to expand on gaps highlighted and could bring together a wider diversity of experience.

Originally, the research aimed to explore neighbouring countries such as Egypt, South Sudan, and Ethiopia. However, it was only practical to carry out primary research in Egypt, given our limited timeframe, our extensive network of organisations in Egypt and local Associate based in Cairo, and that many of our contacts with relevant Sudanese actors had relocated to Cairo after the war started. Moreover, given that other neighbouring countries are themselves fragile and conflict-affected, it would have been challenging to conduct research of this kind. We therefore prioritised more extensive research in one neighbouring country than more limited and ad hoc efforts across a range of countries. However, further research with a longer timeframe could be useful to examine similarities and differences across these countries.

We had initially identified eight towns across eight states in Sudan where primary data collection would be feasible. Given the nature of the research, and the wider context of conflict, these states were chosen to reflect geographic location and whether they lie on a mixed migration route; demographics; status of

conflict; safety and security including for those conducting the research. We were still able to speak with more than 37 service provider organisations and to gain a set of valuable insights into their experiences and the challenges faced.

Key terminology and definitions

For this report, we have adopted the term modern slavery under the umbrella of human trafficking. By approaching modern slavery within the framework of human trafficking, we overcame the linguistic challenges and contestation around the word modern slavery in Arabic. Human trafficking is a more widely accepted term in Sudan however it is crucial to note that key informants often conflate human trafficking with smuggling, which can skew our data analysis.

The following definitions were considered when conducting this research:

Human trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (Palermo Protocol, 2000).

Smuggling involves the illegal transport of individuals across international borders with their consent, making them complicit in the act. Unlike trafficking, those smuggled are not considered victims of the crime, retain their freedom upon arrival, and can change jobs or leave. The key element is facilitating unauthorised entry into another country. Smuggled individuals can be subject to exploitation and violation. The fundamental premise of exploitation remains consistent across both phenomena in which we aim to shed light on the complex network of exploitation and abuse that individuals may face in Sudan and whilst on the move to neighbouring countries.

Research limitations

Given the dynamic nature of the conflict, our research encountered several challenges that limited the scope of data collection and analysis, as the security situation deteriorated further, and new violence broke out in some of the states where we were due to conduct interviews. For instance, escalating violence in Al Jazirah state led to significant population displacement and meant that the research company we contracted had to relocate staff outside of Sudan. We faced significant challenges due to the evolving nature of the conflict and ongoing communication blackouts. Additionally, restrictions from the UK government limited our ability to interview Sudanese government entities operating on the ground. This meant that we covered a more limited selection of states and stakeholders than originally planned

Our research was also limited by the short time frame for implementation, given it developed as part of our need to adapt and change our project once the conflict had broken out, and had to be completed in under six months as a result. The other most noted challenge to the research is the general lack of data on trafficking in Sudan before the conflict started. This particular problem has long affected Sudan, as there was not accurate, up-to-date data about such activities even before the current conflict, as highlighted by numerous international reports, including the 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report. Due to the limited amount of available data, we have had to rely on our previous research, as well as those limited reports and data available online.

1.2 Contextual overview

Sudan was under the Bashir regime's rule for thirty years, from 1989 to 2019, and during that time he consolidated his power by weakening both civil society and key institutions of the state, while strengthening an array of security units and tribal militias. Towards the end of his rule, he grew increasingly reliant on the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which he forged in 2013 out of pro-government militias in Darfur and deployed in Khartoum. Bashir lost power in a 2019 popular uprising, leading to a committee of Bashir's top security officials taking the decision to oust him and assume power. Two powerful figures in this effort were General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, a senior army official and General Mohamed 'Hemedti' Hamdan Dagalo, the RSF leader, who had worked closely together during the counter-insurgency campaign in Darfur. These two generals formed a transitional military council and under popular pressure agreed to a military-civilian transitional government, paving the way for future elections.

Despite initial hopes of transition to democratic rule, a military coup in 2021 deposed the civilian counterparts in government and arrested its top officials, including the Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok. General al-Burhan declared a state of emergency and the military took full control (International Crisis Group 2023).

Tensions within the regime resulted in conflict breaking out in April 2023, following ongoing rivalry between the army, led by al-Burhan, and RSF, led by Hemedti. This new conflict has led to mass displacement into five neighbouring countries (Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, and South Sudan). As the conflict continues, the country has been effectively divided in two, with the army controlling much of the east of the country and the paramilitary RSF controlling much of the west and most of the capital Khartoum (International Crisis Group 2024).

Fighting continues as the RSF leads a push for more territory, with violence breaking out along ethnic divides and significant use of sexual violence as a tool of war. The UN has documented reports of sexual exploitation, slavery, trafficking, rape, and acts tantamount to enforced disappearances, which in some cases may have been racially, ethnically, and politically motivated, including for expressing opposition to the presence of armed groups in an area (OCHCR 2023). Reports of forced prostitution and forced marriage of women and girls have also emerged (ibid.).

Within Sudan, the humanitarian situation has deteriorated due to ongoing fighting and shortages of food, water, fuel, communications, and electricity, as well as very high prices for essential items. There has been significant destruction of infrastructure (including schools, hospitals, water, and electricity) impacting the provision of basic services. MSHT victims cannot access the care they need, due to insecurity and the lack of access to humanitarian relief.

Sudan and its neighbours were already hosting large refugee and internally displaced populations prior to this new crisis. Sudan has been grappling with protracted civilian displacement since 2003 when the Darfur crisis started. As of August 2022, there were more than 3.7 million IDPs across Sudan, of whom about 2.2 million were displaced between 2003 and 2011. Before the war, Sudan hosted over a million refugees – this included a significant proportion from South Sudan, as well as Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees. Around half of this population lived in Khartoum and White Nile states, while around 40% were in refugee camps. Displaced populations and refugees are particularly vulnerable to abduction and exploitation in border areas and within displacement camps where populations have limited mobility, livelihood opportunities, and less institutional support.

Sudan has historically been an important transit point in migration routes from East Africa to North Africa and Europe and an origin, transit, and destination country for victims of trafficking. Migrants often rely on the services of brokers, which exposes them to the risk of human trafficking, abuse, and exploitation, especially for women and young people.

Prior to the 2021 coup, Sudan had undertaken some efforts to address human trafficking, which enabled it to move to Tier 2 on the State Department Trafficking in Persons Report. This early progress was halted by the removal of the civilian government, and significant challenges remain because of the lack of accurate data on the prevalence of the crime or the number of survivors and perpetrators in the country. Both the 2023 Trafficking in Persons and United Nations Organised Drugs and Crimes 2022 reports noted that Sudan did not report comprehensive identification data for potential trafficking survivors.

2. The impact of conflict on modern slavery and human trafficking in Sudan

This section of the report outlines our primary findings concerning the impact of conflict on MSHT in Sudan. We examine the risk factors exacerbating vulnerability to trafficking among the population, including for specific vulnerable groups; analyse barriers to accessing services; provide an overview of our service provider mapping and assess the conflict's impact on services.

Our analysis reveals that key risk factors contributing to susceptibility to trafficking include the absence of protection and shelter, widespread displacement of populations, limited access to education and health services, and precarious food security and livelihood conditions. Identified vulnerable groups encompass refugees and IDPs, particularly Ethiopian and Eritrean Refugees (EER) and South Sudanese refugees (SSR), as well as specific vulnerabilities for different categories such as women, girls, men, which include conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), kidnapping, and abductions. Barriers to addressing these issues include social stigma, lack of awareness regarding available services, insufficient service provision, and institutional obstacles. The service mapping exercise underscores current significant gaps in the existing health, protection, security, and mental psychosocial support services available throughout Sudan.

2.1 Risk factors

More than nine months of continued conflict between Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has worsened the existing humanitarian crisis in Sudan. According to Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO), 24.7 million people need humanitarian aid and protection, and Sudan presents the world's largest child displacement crisis in the world. At the start of 2023, Sudan was already in a vulnerable situation, and these vulnerabilities have been exacerbated severely. The following section outlines the risk factors that make the population vulnerable to exploitation and abuse for MSHT purposes.

Protection and security

7.7 million people in Sudan need protection assistance, which extends to provision of support and interventions aimed at safeguarding the rights, well-being, and dignity of individuals affected by crises, conflicts, or disaster (IMMAP, 2024). As the conflict continues the number of people in need of protection is expected to increase, accompanied by increased displacement of people and predominance of sexual and gender-based violence and kidnapping. These protection challenges are leading communities to adopt negative coping mechanisms such as forced early marriage and forced enrolment into armed groups. These responses, in turn, increase risks of MSHT.

The security situation across Sudan has deteriorated, with security services such as police forces becoming non-operational. The resulting lack of rule of law and descent into criminality has exposed people to greater levels of violence. Both armed factions, SAF and RSF, are reported to promote criminality in some areas including looting, abductions and enforced disappearances of civilians (ACAPS, 2024). In response, some political and community leaders have called for civilians to arm themselves, which itself also increases protection risks across Sudan (Uddin, 2023). The absence of formal protection mechanisms means that individuals may rely on informal networks that claim to offer protection or security. Traffickers may exploit this dependency and individuals by posing as sources of protection.

Mass displacement and shelter

According to OCHA, the situation in Sudan has evolved over the last ten months to become the world's largest internal displacement crisis (OCHA, 2024b). 8.6 million people need shelter assistance, and the indiscriminatory nature of the conflict has destroyed both private and public infrastructure, resulting in mass displacement of the population (HNRP, 2024). Many IDPs are living in camps or in temporary accommodations in public buildings such as mosques or overcrowded homes. Camps, which were overcrowded prior to the conflict, now face dire conditions as the demand has increased significantly. Overall, mass displacement creates turbulent and vulnerable environments where traffickers can easily operate and exploit the desperation and lack of protection of displaced populations.

Education

19 million children are reported to be out of school with no access to education. Sudan is now the largest child displacement crisis in the world with 75% of IDP children with no access to education (IMMAP, 2024). Only a few schools and universities have reopened in safe states, and in other parts of the country, many schools have been transformed into emergency shelters for IDPs fleeing conflict. The Ministry of Education has opposed reopening schools throughout the country due to the educational disparities that may occur if some states reopen. Overall, the lack of access to education leaves children vulnerable to trafficking by limiting their opportunities, knowledge, and agency which collectively increases their susceptibility to exploitation by traffickers. Moreover, leaving children out of school leaves more opportunities for traffickers to approach and exploit them.

Lack of basic services

It is reported that 15 million people are in need of primary health care services and 30 million people do not have access to healthcare services. 70% of healthcare facilities in conflict areas are reported to be non-operational across Sudan (ACAPS, 2024). Due to the nature of the conflict and the centralisation of healthcare in Khartoum, supplies and distribution have been heavily impacted, resulting in the deterioration of the entire healthcare system. The expanding conflict in Al Jazirah state has contributed to the dysfunctionality of healthcare facilities as main medical supply chains, and to the movement of people. This naturally shifted services to the sourthern state of Khartoum. Victims of SGBV also have limited access to health supplies. The absence of both adequate health and water services creates conditions of vulnerability that traffickers may exploit for their own gain.

Food security and livelihood

19.3 million people in Sudan need emergency food assistance. Due to the nature of conflict some areas are inaccessible for humanitarian relief, and more remote communities may particularly lack access to basic food items. The conflict has also damaged food production infrastructures and disturbed supply chains. Lack of availability has inflated prices of basic food. Looting of markets is widespread, with the Sudanese population on the brink of famine as a result. Limited access to food has led to people adopting negative coping mechanisms, with IDPs and refugees especially vulnerable.

2.2 Vulnerabilities of populations

Throughout the research, vulnerabilities of populations that may become victims or potential victims of trafficking have become more apparent. Sudan's population as a whole has been made vulnerable from its exposure to the conflict. However, more acute vulnerability exists within specific groups such as IDPs, returnees, and refugees who face risk of traumatisation, physical and mental abuse, injuries and loss of personal belongs and shelter (HNO,2022).
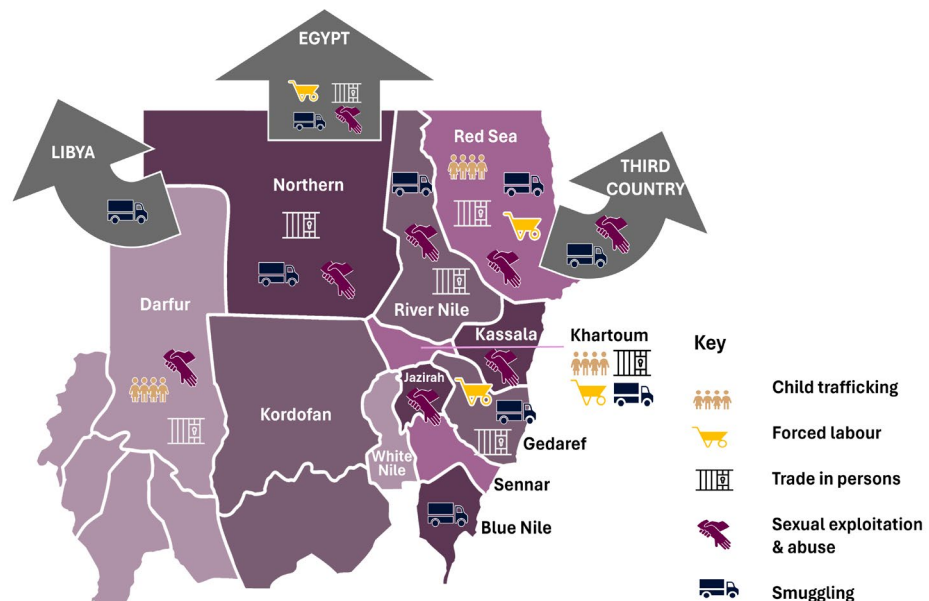
Figure 1 - Mapping of violations reported by state

Figure 1 provides a mapping of violations reported by state, particularly focusing on instances of trafficking across Sudan and neighbouring countries. It illustrates the widespread nature of these violations. Trafficking and its related violations a pervasive: they impact the entire population and not only specific regions, including those who are on the move.

IDPs and refugees

IDPs, refugees, and returnees face major risks due to the above-mentioned factors, especially if residing in temporary shelter sites. Security risks and concerns mean that they are unable to return to their places of origin. Vulnerabilities such as economic insecurity, social disruption, and lack of legal protection increases the risk of trafficking among IDPs as they are susceptible to exploitation.

'We have looked into some of the main aspects about the issue with shelter and the risk for girls, for

women, for children. And it is huge because most of these shelters are just random. It's not something that is organised by any organisation. It's like a school, a mosque. Who enters, who gets out? Nobody knows.' (KI 4, 2024)

IDPs that have sought refuge in neighbouring countries have also been exposed to various forms of abuse and exploitation on their way. Some of these incidences include forced labour and sexual exploitation (KI 23, 2024). One informant reported that, for their organisation, any forcibly displaced person is considered a victim of trafficking (KI 23, 2023).

Intergenerational refugees such as EER and SSR are at greatest risk of human trafficking in Sudan. EER and SSR were identified by key informants to be particularly vulnerable due to the pre-existing vulnerabilities and risk factors such as low economic status, lack of access to education, poverty, living and working in insecure environments like host communities and camps, domestic jobs, and servitude.

According to the UNHCR portal there are approximately 220,000 registered EER. However, that number is considered to be lower than the actual figure due to the bureaucratic barriers to registering as a refugee or asylum seeker. These groups are predominantly located in particular regions of Sudan. For example, Gedaref state has had a long history of refugee camps that are mainly populated by EER. Camp residents, which include those from the Tigray tribe, have been subjected to abuse both within and outside the camps. The lack of protection services within camps have left EER further vulnerable. Testimonies from the KI respondents highlighted that EER will not return to their countries of origin due to their political context: they feel that if they return, they will be subjected to further violence and danger. A particular KI respondent highlighted that if the conflict were to spread into Gedaref state, they would relocate within Sudan, as returning to Ethiopia is impossible. The fear of return therefore appears to be greater than the fear of abuse within Sudan.

EER are one of the most vulnerable groups to MSHT in Sudan due to the entrenched patriarchal norms and class-based discrimination that dictate socio-cultural norms in the country. A result of the complex history of migration routes from eastern Africa through Sudan, displaced people encounter higher risks of abuse and violation across borders and on routes to their final destinations. EER are subject to acts of violence from law enforcement, which reflects the normalisation of some negative societal norms such as ethnic and tribal discrimination and social class disparities.

Coupled with the socio-economic inequalities that are generally prevalent among refugees, EER are therefore generally viewed as marginalised and excluded from communities, which heightens their vulnerability:

'There is clear discrimination. For example, South Sudanese, Ethiopians, and Eritreans are exposed to more violence, and also to greater exploitation, as it begins with their journey itself and also their dealings with the smugglers themselves. Until they arrive in Khartoum, 90%…do not arrive legally and are exposed to exploitation from all sides and are exposed to financial exploitation.' (KI 23, 2024)

Women and girls

Women and girls form a particularly vulnerable group. The conflict has impacted them in various ways, in particular in the form of SGBVs. Key risks for women and girls include kidnapping, abductions, forced marriages, and child marriages. Reports suggest that armed groups, notably the RSF, are responsible for the majority of conflict related sexual violence (CRSV) incidences identified (ACAPS, 2024).

Various accounts of CRSV have been reported by KI respondents, as well as health practitioners, community leaders, and community-based protection networks (CARE, 2023). Incidences of CRSV have been mainly reported in urban conflict zones such as Khartoum, Darfur states, and Kordofan states. Forced marriage is being reported by various sources, specifically in Darfur where women are forcibly kidnapped and married to RSF soldiers (OHCHR, 2023). In other areas across Sudan, family members may agree to forced marriages in exchange for broader protection from armed forces. A KI respondent noted that their organisation alone has reported more than 132 cases of rape and kidnapping (KI 23, 2023). Moreover, the actual number of victims is presumed to be much higher, as most victims will either not report violations or will not have the means to report them.

The surge in enforced disappearances and kidnapping has been recorded. Those target women as well as men and children (see box below). KIs highlighted evidence that women and girls have been kidnapped and sold in slave markets in both Khartoum and Darfur states. An INGO key informant highlighted that women are more profitable than men in the markets, further reinforcing the CRSV atrocities that continue to occur (KI 15, 2024). This testimony was further underlined by SIHA, where the NGO published an article detailing that they are deeply concerned about this violation (SIHA, 2023).

Widespread kidnapping and abductions of men, women and children have been reported. This also extends to enforced disappearances where people are forcibly detained or arrested.
During these kidnappings some women are released once a ransom has been paid by their families (SIHA, 2023).The conditions of the abduction sites are reported to be 'inhuman, degrading slave-like' which are controlled by the RSF (UN, 2023). Kidnappings have been reported across the country in various states including Khartoum, Darfur and Kordofan states.

Some reports from the Sudanese group for victims of enforced disappearances has documented 800 civilian disappearances (Sudan Tribune, 2023). The actual number of kidnappings and forced abductions is unknown but widely reported on social media.

'Women and children are the most vulnerable groups, and people with disabilities. It is difficult for them to access services easily, unlike men, for example, who have sovereignty and access to information faster, and this affects women or children. Also, in Sudan, we have customs and traditions that prevent the participation of specific groups.' (KI 18, 2024)

Forced prostitution is widely reported, especially along migration and trafficking routes. Women are reportedly being made to work selling tea and coffee during the day and to engage in prostitution at night, often without payment or health support (KI 15, 2024). When unwanted pregnancies occur, women and girls are forced to undergo unsafe abortions, creating further health risks. Sexual exploitation within refugee camps has also been reported (OHCHR, 2023).

'A group of Ethiopian women during the war were forcibly displaced to Madani. When the war broke out, they lost all their sources of income. They found themselves in a completely new society. Their suffering after the war increased greatly. The safety and protection that they could have received while they were in Khartoum was not available in Al Jazirah state, because they were hosted in one of the homes, and they also did not get enough food, and unfortunately they are not even able to return to their country, because there are many tribal problems in their country, so their suffering has increased.' (KI 16, 2024)

Given the history of violence towards women and girls during the 2003 Darfur conflict (see box below), the risk of MSHT of women and girls is particularly high. The abovementioned incidences are not exhaustive as violations take many other forms that fall under the umbrella term of human trafficking.

Spotlight 2 – 2003 Darfur conflict
Many of the atrocities currently unfolding in Sudan bear a striking resemblance to those witnessed during the 2003 Darfur conflict. In 2003, many forms of trafficking were reported, such as sexual slavery, forced labour, exploitation of children; and various other human rights violations, including systematic abduction. Ethnicity had a central role in how factions were organised. The war in Darfur is a result of many civil wars and interethnic conflicts (Halton, 2011). The most common type of violence was attacks by Arab African on black African citizens that led to death, sexual violence, the destruction of villages, and the displacement of the population from targeted areas (Schneider, 2007). The ethnic aspect was central as interethnic fighting was characterised by numerous abductions to recruit victims for domestic servitude and sexual exploitation (US Department of State, 2006).

During the war in Darfur, armed groups abducted people and employed them in forced labour in 'illicit commercial operations, including mineral mines, rubber plantations, and logging operations, where they cut down valuable timber, or act as human "mules" carrying weapons, gems, drugs, timber and other goods' (Mazurana and Clarlson, 2006, p.6). In Sudan, boys in particular were used to fill the lines of warring combat forces and were recruited as members of armed forces, which consists human trafficking under the Palermo protocol [(Halton, 2011);(Valentine, 2003)].

Boys were often trafficked by local leaders to the Middle East (US Department of State, 2006). For example, there are 'reports that tribal leaders with government connections transported children to the Persian Gulf to be used as jockeys in camel races or as labourers' (ibid, p.20). Hundreds of these children have been then repatriated thanks to cooperation between international organisations, NGOs, and the Sudanese government. Yet, international abductions are not the most common type of trafficking during conflicts. Staying in Sudan, during the war in Darfur, boys and girls were routinely abducted and forced into different types of labour (Mazurana and Clarlson, 2006). Much of what we are witnessing today in Sudan is a repeat of history of the Darfur conflict of 2003 but at a larger scale.

Men and boys

Trafficking in conflict areas usually predisposes men and boys to certain types of violations such as forced

recruitment, forced labour, enforced abductions, and forms of SGBV. Both armed groups have been reported to recruit child soldiers into their armies to increase their strength and capacities [(KI 25, 2024);(KI 7, 2023)]. The armed parties have publicly called for the recruitment of men and boys to join their military, and some may be forced to do so by the absence of other options to provide and protect their families. UNICEF have reported that children out of education are now at risk of child labour, recruitment, and involvement in armed conflict (UNICEF, 2023). For example, in Kordofan state, unaccompanied children from poor families are targets for forced recruitments making them highly vulnerable to trafficking (UNHCR, 2023).

Sexual violence also affects men and boys. KI respondents have cited that boys and men have been subject to SGBV through various forms such as gang rape (KI 23, 2024). As a weapon of war, men are subject to SGBV to assert domination, control, and as a form of humiliation to threaten their masculinity. Due to stigma and social norms, sexual abuse towards men and boys often goes undocumented and unreported, making it difficult to know its true extent.

Due to visa restrictions to neighbouring countries, men and boys were discriminated against and could not enter countries like Egypt at the border like women and elders. This meant that boys and men had to wait in Wadi Halfa in Northern state to have their visas processed, which could take months. During this time men and boys have reportedly been particularly vulnerable to forced labour and recruitment as they lacked protection and shelter (KI 4, 2024).

Additional risk factors

Several additional risk factors contribute to heightened vulnerability among displaced populations. Firstly, the status of refugees or migrants significantly impacts their access to essential services. Some individuals may be denied registration by government authorities collaborating with UNHCR, leaving them without access to refugee camps and critical services. This lack of support exacerbates vulnerability to trafficking, as individuals become increasingly desperate, have limited options, and face heightened exposure to exploitation in their search for survival and better prospects. Secondly, the scarcity of economic opportunities leaves many individuals desperate for income and livelihoods. Traffickers often take advantage of this desperation by offering exploitative jobs or forced labour under false promises of legitimate employment. Moreover, refugees confined to camps for protection and services are restricted to living within camp boundaries, limiting their mobility. This heightens vulnerability, as closed settings increase the risk of exploitation, with traffickers using tactics of control and coercion over their victims. Additionally, individuals with disabilities face elevated risks during conflicts, as they may face more challenges to move freely and evacuate. This immobility renders them susceptible to exploitation, with traffickers exploiting their vulnerability. Furthermore, the lack of access to essential services further compounds the vulnerability of persons with disabilities, as they are unable to access crucial protection and assistance measures.

2.3 Barriers

This section describes the barriers, availability and accessibility to services that deal with instances of trafficking both directly and indirectly. Key informants noted various barriers that may affect victims and potential victims of trafficking in Sudan. These include: institutional barriers, lack of quality services, lack of available services, lack of awareness, and social stigma. Whilst there are other barriers that key informants highlighted, these five were most consistently identified during our research.

Institutional barriers

The conflict has resulted in the complete breakdown of law and order in which key institutions (like local police forces) are essentially not operating. Responsibility for administering Sudan's public services was centralised in Khartoum. Given the impact of fighting in the capital and state breakdown, local and state institutions have had to fill the role of the federal government in safe states to allow humanitarian assistance.

> 'You have to go to approval from line ministry, you have to go to the security department, you have to go to the military intelligence. So in order to have a permission to be able to just move or to implement, you need four different approvals and you have to access those… by yourself. So this is something that is very new. Within the humanitarian emergency, the action should be quick. But if this process takes 72 hours, it's too much.' (KI 12, 2024)

The main institutional barrier identified is the lack of operating security institutions. State security provision is essentially non-existent. Other security forces, including the warring parties, currently control physical access to different areas and have politicised humanitarian access. For example, KI respondents cited that in eastern Sudan, Kassala, INGOs working in refugee responses are operating at a lower capacity due to the security threats made by the RSF.

Historically, members of the police and army have been part of organised crime networks or misused their power and authority. This is underpinned by discriminatory practices towards foreigners that are tied to

deep ethnic and tribal ideologies. Therefore, as previously discussed, foreigners such as EER and SSR, or Darfuris, are more susceptible to discrimination from authorities. These groups will therefore not seek assistance from service providers for fear that they may be linked with security institutions. This interpretation is valid given that all humanitarian organisations and NGOs are centralised and controlled by government authorities, specifically the Humanitarian Aid Commission, that controls access and interventions.

The government frequently blocks access to telecommunications as a tactic during fighting between the SAF and RSF. Without internet connectivity and mobile network services, individuals find it difficult to report instances of trafficking or find available lifesaving services. Service providers have extended their outreach through social media platforms to raise awareness, but this is directly affected by communication blackouts.

KI respondents noted a lack of transparency among humanitarian and development NGOs and INGOs. This is due to the intense competition among organisations, government bodies and other stakeholders for funding and resources. This may incline organisations to selectively report successes and challenges or unintended consequences, and can create barriers to information sharing and collaboration among stakeholders.

Quality of services

All service providers, when asked about the quality of services and whether they sufficiently address the needs of victims and survivors, agree that they currently do not address these needs sufficiently. When questioned regarding impediments to accessing services, a significant proportion of respondents highlighted the lack of comprehensive quality in available services, which fails to adequately address the needs of trafficking victims.

'Survivors and victims do not know where they can receive specific services, or where they can go. One of the basic problems is that there is no place that the individual can go to in order to receive the required support.'

A key factor in the inadequacy of service provision is the lack of available funding. All organisations we spoke to highlighted the significant funding gaps overall, compounded by the project-based nature of funding. In reality, most of service providers reported that they were currently working pro-bono, or without funding at all.

Respondents cited that service provision, such as safe housing, is not a priority for government institutions. The conflict has forced several NGOs to cease operations due to infrastructure damage and operational challenges. Operational organisations are currently constrained by limited resources, necessitating their operation at reduced capacity amidst escalating demand, consequently impacting the quality of services.

According to the Humanitarian Needs Overview for Sudan 'specialised GBV services, such as the clinical management of rape (CMR), psycho-social support (PSS), legal aid, case management, and referral mechanisms, are unavailable in over 61 per cent of localities in Sudan' (HNRP, 2024). The lack of specialised services was a finding that was reinforced in all our interviews, which stressed the inadequate nature of SGBV provision in particular.

As mentioned above, the use of SGBV as a tactic in conflict has occurred before in Sudan's history. It was however further heightened since April 2023. NGOs and INGOs as well as diaspora groups have shared concerns over the fact that health service providers simply do not know how to manage sensitive cases. In some cases, risk of re-traumatisation occurs, creating further vulnerabilities.

> *'There are a number of gaps in the services provided, for example, lack of credibility, honesty, and clarity. Lack of institutionalisation, lack of justice, lack of laws that protect vulnerable people, vulnerable communities and groups, lack of their integration into development, and lack of involvement of all groups and sectors in developing plans and mechanisms for implementing them.' (KI 20, 2024)*

Overall, there is a general agreement with all KI respondents that the services available do not sufficiently address the needs of victims of trafficking and therefore cannot support their protection. This applies across both international and domestic providers.

Lack of awareness

Consensus emerged from interviews that there is a lack of data and awareness of service providers operating with victims or potential victims of trafficking or exploitation. KI respondents also noted that people are not aware of the available services in each location. Younger generations may foster better knowledge of services due to their access to technology and the internet, but overall awareness remains very low.

> *'Survivors and victims do not know where they can receive specific services, or where they can go.*

One of the basic problems is that there is no place that the individual can go to in order to receive the required support.' (KI 23, 2024)

Interviewees noted the need for more comprehensive and centralised databases that compile information on all individuals and institutions providing services to victims or potential victims of trafficking to improve accessibility and victim support. A KI respondent from an NGO that works in referral and support of victims of abuse emphasised the importance of geographically mapping service providers in localities as this reduces the risk to traumatisation as services are accessed more efficiently.

Availability of services

KI respondents highlighted the geographical challenge of accessing services in Sudan. There are some rural areas that do not have available services within their locality. Due to the lack of available services in very remote areas there are significant challenges in raising awareness to support potential victims of trafficking. Key informants reported that in conflict-affected areas, non-traditional service providers have often stepped in to address the demand for essential services. For instance, one NGO mentioned that victims seek refuge and basic services at mosques in some areas.

Certain services are exclusively accessible within refugee camps, requiring refugees to register with the governmental Commission for Refugees (COR) and subsequently coordinate with UNHCR for camp accessibility. Whilst refugee camps provide basic services, Sudan's encampment policy[1] restricts mobility and exacerbates vulnerabilities. This policy has been controversial due to its restrictions on movement, lack of essential services, security concerns, its perpetuation of dependency, violation of rights and its failure to provide durable solutions for refugees and migrants. Currently, these services are confined to refugees (i.e. from outside Sudan), neglecting Sudanese individuals including IDPs affected by the conflict, who are also susceptible to trafficking risks.

Throughout our research, a key gap identified in terms of the availability of services stems from the lack of shelters both prior to the conflict and after. Most respondents recognised the lack of safe housing for SGBV victims in Sudan directly increases vulnerability and threatens their safety and security.

It is worth recognising that there are currently no service providers whose sole mission is to address MSHT. Instead, there are a variety of service providers offering sectoral assistance such as mental health and psychosocial support, health services, economic support, security, and legal support. These collectively work in response to human trafficking both directly and indirectly, but there are no specialist providers functioning at present who can bring together the complex support needed to meet the needs of victims of MSHT.

Stigma

A further significant barrier to accessing services by victims of trafficking is stigma attached to MSHT, and specifically, reporting abuses that have occurred.

Sudan remains a traditional, patriarchal society that is governed by harmful gender norms. Therefore, discussing violations of rights is largely unheard of, especially in rural areas and with certain groups of people like men and boys. There is fear of societal backlash when reporting abuses or seeking assistance.

Victims of trafficking, especially in instances of sexual exploitation, may face blame for being abused. For example, women subject to SGBV may have their moral integrity questioned by service providers or civil society. This is identified as a significant barrier to seeking assistance by the majority of respondents interviewed, especially among NGO and INGO respondents. Violations and abuse of men and boys are also considered taboo topics. This directly affects their ability to report or seek help as there is a social expectation that men should be strong and resilient. Social stigma also extends to the private household, where victims find it difficult to trust family members when they have been violated which impacts their ability to report or seek assistance.

'People are not aware of how bad it could get if they don't receive support. So they just, to avoid the stigma, they just keep silent, which is something unhealthy.' (KI 11, 2023)

KI respondents cited that families do not know how to deal with instances of SGBV due to the stigma around the topic. Victim blaming is also observed especially regarding sexual exploitation. Exploitation tends to be internalised by women and men, boys and girls, creating a vicious cycle where exploitation goes unnoticed and undocumented.

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[1] Sudan's encampment policy involves the establishment and management of refugee camps to provide shelter, basic services, and protection to displaced populations, while also facilitating efforts for durable solutions such as local integration, resettlement, or voluntary repatriation in collaboration with international organizations and stakeholders (UNHCR, 2023).

Several barriers hinder individuals' access to essential services and support systems. Those barriers can be physical, such as inaccessible infrastructure or lack of transportation services. There can also often be a lack of nuanced understanding of what MSHT entails and the various forms it can take, impeding effective identification and response efforts. Financial constraints also pose a significant barrier, with many individuals unable to afford the costs associated with receiving services. Discriminatory practices based on race and religion further marginalise vulnerable populations, exacerbating their already precarious situations. Furthermore, inadequate legal frameworks fail to provide sufficient protection for individuals at risk or affected by MSHT. Interviewees cited that referral mechanisms are currently informal with no case management and follow-ups of cases. Whilst these informal referrals are effective to an extent as they overcome bureaucratic impediments, they have their drawbacks as case management and sharing information between stakeholders is challenging. Due to the complexity of trafficking cases, this could risk survivors not receiving specifically tailored services and could lead them to be re-targeted by traffickers. Finally, language barriers present significant challenges, as individuals may struggle to communicate with service providers effectively, hindering their access to assistance and support. Addressing these barriers is crucial to ensuring comprehensive and effective support for victims and survivors of MSHT.

2.4 Mapping of services

Through our interviews and network of contacts, we were able to map out service providers across Sudan. However, we recognise that this is not a comprehensive mapping and that there are various informal service providers that operate and assist victims of exploitation which may not be covered. The map below provides a visual representation of the range of services offered across different states at present.
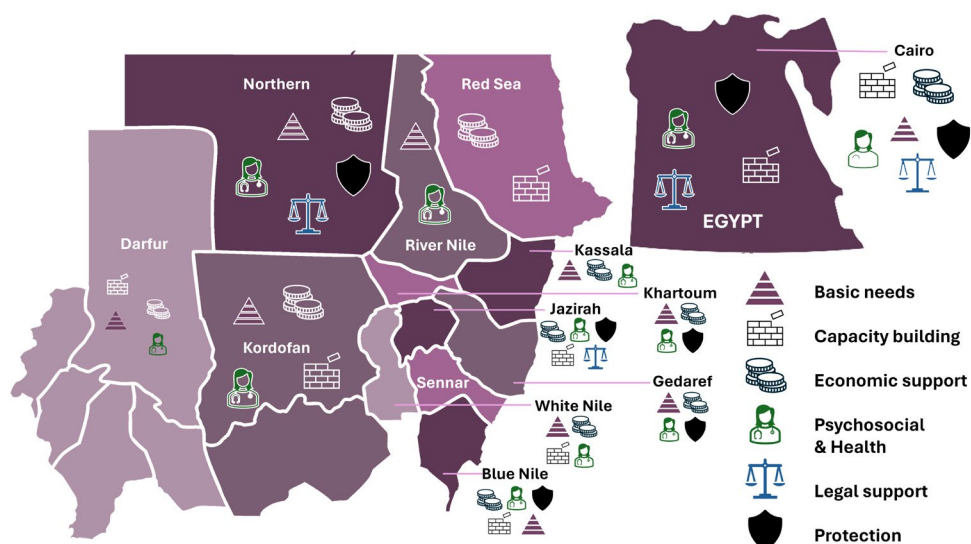

Figure 2 – Mapping of services

The main types of service providers identified are a mix of NGOs and INGOs that work in the humanitarian and development sectors and engage with victims of trafficking or potential victims of trafficking directly and indirectly. These NGOs and INGOs work in either service provision, referral and support, and advocacy in the following sectors: i) health services ii) economic support iii) mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) iv) security and protection and v) legal and justice.

Health service providers may provide treatment and assistance on a needs basis. They treat physical injuries incurred because of the conflict as well as SGBV victims, including through abortions. Economic support entails cash distributions for individuals to cover their basic needs or transportation to reach a service. MHPSS includes counselling and sessions for individuals in distress or suffering due to trauma. Security and protection services include the referral to protection networks or informal safe houses on a needs basis. Legal and justice services include pro bono work for individuals who are subject to legal issues regarding trafficking and migration. For example, courts are operational in Gedaref, where refugees and migrants have been subject to indiscriminate lawsuits, and some service providers are providing legal assistance.

Most of the identified services have some service providers that have operational presence in various states across Sudan. Some of these offices have closed due to the conflict but may continue to operate in safe states or remotely reaching individuals in need. Most of the organisations with presence in eastern Sudan have continued to operate with limited capacity, including Gedaref and Kassala. Some state presence was

recognised in River Nile state and Al Jazirah state. The map provided illustrates the available services across the states in Sudan, reported from our key informants and secondary sources. It provides an overview of the existing infrastructure and resources. However, despite this portrayal, the depicted services face significant barriers that impede their effectiveness. Consequently, while the map showcases the current landscape, it underscores the urgent need for further development and enhancement of services to adequately meet the diverse and evolving needs of the population.

Sudan had a national project that was a collaborative effort between the government in Sudan, INGOs and international partners such as the EU, IOM and UNODC called Better Management and Migration (BMM). BMM aimed to improve migration management, border security and regional cooperation to promote safe and regular migration whilst combating irregular migration, human trafficking, and smuggling. The project included various INGOs and NGOs in Sudan, which we incorporated into our mapping of services. It is currently not operational, but talks are reportedly underway regarding restarting elements of this approach.

There are no organisations that address trafficking as a stand-alone issue. However, some organisations are delivering interventions nested within wider human rights and protection responses. Through our research, we identified two NGOs that are conducting anti-trafficking projects: one in research on trafficking in eastern Sudan, the second on the provision of community protection networks in specific localities in Kassala.

2.5 Impact on services

The conflict has had a significant impact on the delivery of services, as earlier described. The persistent insecurity and looting of humanitarian facilities, alongside targeted attacks on humanitarian workers as well as bureaucratic challenges has led to the disruption and hindrance of aid delivery in Sudan. Service providers have had to adapt to the ever-changing context by creating innovative approaches to service delivery as well as increasing outreach due to the growing demand with existing structures.

Prior to the conflict, delivering services and assistance was already difficult due to Sudan's underlying fragility. Public service delivery is considered humanitarian aid, and is centralised by the federal and local government in each state through the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC). The local and federal government is expected to formally authorise any service delivery and accompanying interventions, access, and movements of organisations in each locality. This highly centralised system has detrimental effects on the delivery of basic services, creating further vulnerabilities for populations. The relationship between organisations and the state has been tense and rigid.

Currently, in safer states, the role of the central government has been taken over by both local governments and service providers (UNICEF, 2023). These safer states have come under increasing strain, as they have had to accommodate ever higher numbers of IDPs, and the complex needs these present.

Service providers noted that whilst services for victims of MSHT have not changed, the demand has significantly increased. Overall, there is a rising demand of services, where service providers were already operating with limited resources before the conflict.

KI respondents mentioned that a large number of INGOs have had to work remotely, when telecommunications allow, which has led to the lack of formal referral of cases through them.

Another notable impact of the conflict is the now estranged relationship between INGOs and UN entities with the de facto government. Outreach and coordination suffered as these INGOs are now reluctant to engage with local initiatives without risking the already strained relationship with the government (KI 16, 2024).

Some NGOs have had to rethink their programme activities due to the increasing demand in specific sectors. INGOs that previously did not work in protection sectors have had to incorporate it into their programming due to the demand and increase of risks such as SGBV. NGOs have also extended their programming to include social support in safer states like Red Sea state, Kassala, Blue Nile state and emergency states Khartoum and Al Jazirah state (KI 19, 2024). Other programming changes include the increase of awareness-raising sessions to overcome the barriers of reporting abuse and seeking help, including targeting particular groups such as youth.

As the conflict continues to spread to other states, some organisations have had to halt their operations altogether. Following the outbreak of conflict in Al Jazirah state, the UN had to halt and suspend all operations there (UN News, 2023). Some NGO KI respondents have said that the only operational offices are in safe states such as Northern state, Kassala, Gedaref and River Nile.

Organisations have continued to play a coordination role that falls outside their scope of work by informally and formally referring cases to government institutions. Technical bodies of the defacto government have reportedly continued to work impartially outside the political environment. For example, cases have been

referred to social welfare departments such as the Unit to Combatting Violence against Women, as other units such as the Family and Child Protection Unit and the State and National Council for Child Welfare. These units work closely with INGOs and UN entities like UNICEF.

Changes to service provision

One of the main organisational changes in response to the war is the formation of local initiatives that seek to fill the gaps in services from traditional NGOs and INGO providers. At the frontline of these are the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and youth-led initiatives which have been providing rapid assistance to people affected by the conflict. They are 'self-organised, volunteer-driven hubs at neighbourhood and locality level which provide aid and support to area residents and the internally displaced' (SCCU, 2023). The ERRs were quickly formed and developed in the weeks following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023. These community initiatives provide basic services including food, water, and health services in each locality.

Sudan has a long history of community led initiatives that have developed in response to shortcomings of the state. The ERRs are located across the country with their own governance system, and they are acknowledged to have access to community-specific areas where the UN, INGOs and other NGOs are unable to reach (SCCU, 2023).

ERRs have proven to be advantageous as they have a more agile delivery model, combined with a deep understanding of the local socio-political landscape and relationships with local communities. ERRs often overlap with previous community initiatives like the local resistance committees that overthrew the previous regime and are viewed as trusted individuals and groups that have experience in mobilising volunteers and providing lifesaving assistance.

ERRs are widespread in most states and in different localities. However, where there are existing community initiatives, ERRs tend to work in collaboration with them. Instead of duplicating efforts, they reportedly often work in collaboration with others (KI 4, 2024).

ERRs face various challenges, including a significant lack of funding. They tend to rely on donations by communities both nationally and internationally. There is often scarcity of basic supplies for their work, such as medicine, fuel, and food. Another challenge is the lack of governance and organisational capacity including an ability to conduct financial and strategic planning as well as the high turnover of volunteers in some areas as the conflict continues to spread. However, ERRs have been subject to thefts, arrests, and volunteers are being targeted whilst providing assistance (UN News, 2024).

The Sudanese landscape has undergone significant transformation since the outbreak of the war. Sudanese and foreign populations were forcibly displaced and now face considerable threats, including of physical violations, SGBVs, and heightened risks of trafficking. While the international and national responses attempt to deliver services to meet the rising needs of these vulnerable populations, those organisations are met with considerable obstacles in the breakdown of national and administrative structures, limited funding, and disrupted infrastructures. Whilst limited in both scope and capacity, community-based initiatives carry on in supporting the population at the local level and seek to address their most pressing needs.

3. The impact of conflict on modern slavery and human trafficking in neighbouring countries: Spotlight on Egypt

Introduction

The ongoing conflict in Sudan has driven a wave of both inter- and cross-border displacement. According to IOM, an estimated 8.4 million people have been forcibly displaced due to the outbreak of conflict in Sudan since April 2023, including 6.5 million internally displaced (IDPs), and 1.9 million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, as of March of 2024 (IOM, 2024).

Data published in March 2024 by the IOM showed that primary destinations for people leaving Sudan were Chad (37%), South Sudan (31%), and Egypt (24%). 63% of arrivals in those countries were Sudanese nationals, while an estimated 37% were reportedly foreign nationals (IOM, 2024).

'A refugee should not have to have a passport; a refugee should not have to do any of the things that they've been required to do. But that's what happened.'

Although displaced people from Sudan have sought refuge in these different neighbouring countries, this report has chosen to highlight both the journey to and the situation in Egypt. The following sections captures in a non-exhaustive way the risks Sudanese and non-Sudanese face along their route into Egypt, and highlight their vulnerabilities to violations, including MSHT and the status of service delivery in Egypt.

3.1 Journey to and across the border

People in Sudan intending to reach the border tend to follow specific internal routes. Whenever the battle lines shift, people seek to avoid checkpoints that are either manned by the RSF or SAF. Several interviewees stressed the risks of violence and assault at these checkpoints, which further incentivised people to leave the country (KI 1, 2023). These risks of violation carry a gendered component, as girls are more likely to face sexual violence, physical violence, and verbal abuse on their journey, whilst boys most often encounter verbal abuse, detention, and physical violence (KI 9, 2023).

These risks are also dependent on the mode of transportation taken. People with pre-existing vulnerabilities, single parents, sole caregivers, or unaccompanied children were more likely than others to experience difficulties. One respondent noted that refugees, including children, reported being detained, kidnapped, exploited by smugglers, or forced to work to pay the exuberant fees for their journeys (KI 9, 2023). Another respondent noted that unaccompanied girls face the risk of sexual violence and of being held hostage (KI 3, 2023). These risks are exacerbated in the case of non-Sudanese populations, for whom the language barrier consists an additional challenge.

3.2 The Sudan-Egypt border

'A refugee should not have to have a passport; a refugee should not have to do any of the things that they've been required to do. But that's what happened.' (KI 30, 2023)

Because of the close ties between the two countries, out of Sudan's seven borders, the one it shares with Egypt has historically been especially active. Since 1976, Sudanese nationals enjoyed relative ease of travel to and residence in Egypt. Restrictions were applied in 1995, but lifted again in 2004 when both countries signed the Four Freedoms agreement. The accord intended to guarantee freedom of movement, residency, work, and property ownership for citizens of both countries (Egypt & Sudan, 2004).

The Egyptian government has imposed increasingly stringent entry requirements on Sudanese nationals since the outbreak of war in April 2023. The visa restrictions, which are inconsistent with the Four Freedoms agreement, have exacerbated the already desperate humanitarian situation at the border, where asylum seekers have been forced to wait in long queues without shades or proper facilities (Azza & Amin, 2023).

Initially, these restrictions required males ages 16 to 49 to obtain a visa, which led to families being separated on the border (Sudan Transparency & Policy Tracker, 2023). In late May 2023, Egypt stopped accepting emergency travel documents from Sudanese nationals (HRW, 2023). In June 2023, the government announced that it would expand these restrictions and now require all Sudanese to obtain visas to enter Egypt, including women, children, and the elderly.

Egyptian authorities have claimed these restrictions were imposed to reduce visa forgery (Reuters, 2023). Sudanese can receive visas from the two Egyptian consulates in Wadi Halfa (a Sudanese city located near the Egyptian border) and Port Sudan (the de facto capital city). Consequently, numerous media reports and organisations reported that many refugees were left stranded at the border.

Smuggling

As a result of the Egyptian policy change on visas, irregular border crossings assisted by smugglers have been reported to take place, as refugees adopt increasingly desperate and dangerous measures to flee the conflict in Sudan.

Numerous organisations noted an increase in the number of people entering Egypt irregularly, including Sudanese and third-country nationals who were living in Sudan [(KI 9, 2023);(KI 1, 2023)]. They reported that many made the decision to use smugglers after being left stranded in Wadi Halfa. Some were reportedly compelled to wait up to a month as they struggled to secure food, accommodation, and health care.

Sudanese organisations that we interviewed in Egypt reported an increase in smugglings from Atbara, in Sudan's River Nile state, in favour of the shorter journey from Wadi Halfa. Recent reports[2] confirmed this, noting that a smuggling hub has been established in the northern town of Gabgaba, which has been nicknamed 'Gabgaba Airport' (Osman, 2024).

> *'Recently I'm seeing people, families. I have one of the families that I know, she came solo and two young babies, and they came through Atbara. They just come through this vehicle. Simple vehicle (pickup truck). You want to sit in the front, you have to pay 200, and it's very cheap. If you sit in the back, under the sun, you pay 160. The pickup drops you at Aswan and then from Aswan, they just go by minibuses.' (KI 1, 2023)*

It is important to note that while the rates of people crossing the Sudanese borders have increased because of the war, people were already moving out of Sudan before the current conflict. Indeed, various reports highlighted that smugglers and traffickers have a long history of participating in illicit trade across the seven countries that Sudan borders (Mailey, 2024).

Sudan is also situated at the heart of the Central Mediterranean Route (CMR), one of the deadliest migration routes in the world. The route links Sub-Saharan African with North Africa and Europe. Previous reports noted two key routes that bisect Sudan, either from West Africa to Khartoum, or from East Africa to Darfur. While some of these movements start as smuggling, they hold a risk of leading to trafficking and labour or sexual exploitation from smugglers (KI 7, 2023).

Due to the current state of conflict in Sudan, it remains unclear whether the same existing routes are used. Experts noted they do not think that the CMR has changed, though this would need to be confirmed over time. It is however certain that smuggling networks currently in operation across the Sudan-Egypt border are organised and familiar with the tough desert terrain along the border (KI 9, 2023).

Another organisation reported that three Sudanese networks of smugglers were identified, each with their own mode of operation in Egypt. One of these networks used to keep the people they smuggled inside a house they rented in Aswan. The other two depart directly to Cairo, one of them transporting the people themselves, while the other providing them with train tickets (KI 2, 2023).

Other organisations noted that rates of smuggling have increased since the RSF carried out attacks in December 2023 in Al Jazirah, a state which had until then been a safe haven for those escaping the fighting in Khartoum. Consequently, the number of refugees at the border grew and waiting times for visas increased by up to two months (MMC, 2024).

Once entering Egypt, displaced people are still at risk of abuse. We were informed of the particularly harrowing case of a husband and wife who were abandoned in the desert by the man smuggling them into Egypt. The couple were sexually assaulted by a group of people who found them and dropped them off at the border. After arriving to Cairo, the husband experienced severe psychological distress and tried to take his own life. Both are currently receiving psychosocial services (FGD, 2024).

Another case involved a family forcibly detained by their smuggler. The trafficker held them for ransom, asking for increasingly high sums from the father, who had already reached Cairo:

> *'We have a case of a mother and her three children who were smuggled. The smugglers called the husband who is already in Cairo and working on a tuktuk and told him to transfer 13,000 EGP to release his family. The husband had to sell his tuktuk, and eventually transferred the money. He was later asked to transfer extra 7,000 EGP, as the price was set for 5,000 EGP per each member of the family. He did and the family later arrived safely to Cairo. The smuggler knew that the husband was working and would be able to transfer the money.' (KI 28, 2024)*

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[2] These reports include: the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC), Quarterly Mixed Migration Update North Africa, Quarter 4, 2023, and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Invisible: The Regional Displacement Crisis triggered by the Sudan Conflict, 2023

Since the outbreak of the war in Sudan, approximately half a million people have crossed the border into Egypt (IOM, 2024). For the refugees who cross the Sudan-Egypt border, only one international organisation, the Egyptian Red Crescent, was given permission to provide support on the Egyptian side. While the Red Crescent is a United Nations refugee agency partner, the UNHCR was not allowed by Egyptian authorities to open an additional office near the crossing points (Norman, 2023).

The United Nations has acknowledged this gap and began addressing it through various initiatives, including the provision of additional capacity-building training on issues related to sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, trafficking, and smuggling. One interviewee noted that several meetings have also been arranged with CBOs working in Aswan. During these meetings, these CBOs noted their inability to handle the number of people arriving to Aswan. They reported that Sudanese migrants have no intention of remaining there, but want to settle in either of Egypt's main cities: Cairo or Alexandria. These organisations also noted that refugees who wish to register with UNHCR or formalise their status must travel to Cairo to do so (KI 5, 2023).

Due to these circumstances, new arrivals are vulnerable to numerous forms of exploitation, as they struggle to find accommodation or transportation to continue their journeys onward, usually to Cairo (KI 9, 2023). An Egypt-based respondent described the case of a young girl who was sexually assaulted by a group of Egyptians, after arriving from Sudan. The organisation intervened with UNHCR and registered the girl and her family, before providing them with the necessary legal aid. The organisation also mentioned that they are currently working on four cases of human trafficking in Aswan, where both traffickers and survivors were initially detained. However, the survivors were later released by the prosecutor, while he continues his investigation of the case (KI 2, 2023).

3.3 Life as a refugee in Egypt

Egypt has a long history as a refugee hosting country within the region (Kelsey, 2017). While the country does not have an official policy on refugees, Egypt continues to host displaced people from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria, and Palestine. Refugees and asylum-seekers in Egypt are largely concentrated in Greater Cairo, Alexandria, Damietta, and several towns on the north coast.

Egypt has asserted its responsibility towards refugees in its constitution since 1953. The right to asylum was reiterated in the 1971 constitution. The 2012 constitution affirmed the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers in Article 57, prohibiting the extradition of political refugees. The current constitution of 2014 stipulates granting protection to refugees subjected to persecution in article 91 (Rashed, 2023).

However, the Egyptian economy is in an alarmingly precarious state, due to currency depreciation, heavy foreign debt, and spiralling inflation (OECD, 2024). This challenging economic environment is affecting both Egyptians and refugees alike. The cost of basic goods, including everyday essentials has soared, hitting the most vulnerable the hardest and leaving many to rely primarily on humanitarian assistance to cover their basic needs. Consequently, these refugees are reporting protection issues which have ranged from physical assaults, robberies, gender-based violence, and detention, amongst others.

> 'In Egypt, there is no camps for refugees, so they are living like Egyptians. They go to the market like Egyptians… They are living as Egyptians. So, I think they are affected by the economic situation, like Egyptians.' (KI 2, 2023)

Egypt ratified the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol) in 2004. In 2010, it issued its national Combatting Human Trafficking law of 64/2010 (Egypt TIP Law, 2010). In 2021, Egypt's National Coordinating Committee for Combating and Preventing Illegal Immigration and Trafficking in Persons launched the Third National Action Plan 'to combat and prevent illegal immigration' for the period 2021-2023.

During interviews held in Egypt, organisations stressed that the country's legal framework on anti-trafficking is strong and compatible with international standards. However, they acknowledged that there are key gaps in both its interpretation by different agencies and its implementation. Another issue relates to governmental capacity, namely, their bureaucratic procedures, first responders' ability to recognise potential victims of trafficking, and data collection and sharing.

It is also noted that although Egypt has a national referral mechanism (NRM), Egyptian national organisations admitted that they do not use it for potential victims of trafficking. In one interview, various gaps were highlighted that could explain the reluctance of stakeholders to engage with it. In particular, respondents pointed out issues with the government-run shelter for MSHT survivors; namely, that current Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) limit access for female survivors of MSHT. Moreover, two respondents noted

that while the shelter should accept foreign survivors of MSHT, there is no data to indicate the actual number of foreigners admitted. They also pointed out that many relevant stakeholders within the NRM structure were unfamiliar with its functioning; the prolonged period required to process cases; and limited access to the governmental shelter for recognised survivors (KI 5, 2023).

These shortcomings led the US State Department to downgrade Egypt to Tier 2-Watch List in its 2023 Trafficking in Persons report. This decision relied on the fact that 'despite high trafficking risks for foreign nationals in Egypt, authorities rarely identified or provided services to non-Egyptian trafficking victims. Victim services and shelter remained insufficient, and the government relied on international organisations and NGOs to provide some services, especially for men and foreign victims, without financial or in-kind support' (TIP, 2024).

Status of incoming communities

Egypt is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa. It also ratified a memorandum of understanding with the UNHCR in 1954, which delegates the UNHCR with all responsibilities related to registration, asylum documentation, refugee status determination and assistance. Currently, UNHCR has three offices for registration of asylum-seekers and refugees in Egypt: two in Cairo and one in Alexandria. Meanwhile, the role of the Egyptian government is limited to issuing travel documents and residence visas and regulating the work of service providers.

'The majority of Sudanese refuse to be registered. They think that registration with UNHCR is useless.'

It is also noted that UNHCR in Egypt has chosen to apply the 1969 OAU Convention on the Status of Refugees to its refugee population. While the convention's definition of a refugee is more expansive, it only provides them with temporary protection with no prospect of resettlement to a third country. Moreover, Egypt's no-camp policy means that refugees are not entitled to housing upon arrival. They also must receive residency permits along with their registration with UNHCR. These permits are however only valid for three months and the renewal process can be cumbersome.

According to UNHCR, as of February 2024, the refugee population registered with them comprised 235,705 Sudanese, 154,905 Syrians, 39,269 South Sudanese, 33,087 Eritreans, 17,693 Ethiopians, 8,622 Yemenis, 7,664 Somalis, 5,631 Iraqis, and individuals from over 54 other nationalities (UNHCR, 2024). Most of them reside in urban areas, with the majority living in Greater Cairo and a smaller percentage in Alexandria. Children accountied for 37% of the registered population, including more than 4,900 unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) (UNHCR, 2024).

While refugees could expect to have access to many public services on equal footing with Egyptians, especially education and health, many new arrivals are facing social and economic hardships. Those result both from their displacement and the impact of the economic crisis unfolding in Egypt. Organisations have noted that these struggles are exacerbated by the arrival of women-headed households or UASC.

Before the current conflict in Sudan, organisations noted many Eritrean children in Egypt, as they sought to escape mandatory conscription in their country. Respondents linked the conflict in Sudan with an increase in UASC arrivals, especially after Egypt changed its visa policy. One organisation reported that they had over 300 newcomers in October alone (KI 3, 2023). These newcomers did not just include Sudanese children, but also Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somali children who used to live in Sudan but can no longer stay there.

Many displaced Sudanese who moved to Egypt since the start of the conflict are professionals, but governmental work and residency regulations limit their ability to secure appropriate employment opportunities, thereby increasing their sense of insecurity. Because of these restrictions, Egypt-based organisations noted that many refugees have resorted to informal work (KI 13, 2023).

> *'It is hard to find a job. They can't get work permits, and their money's running out, and they don't know what to do. Their options here are to clean houses, work in factories, and have rather menial jobs … the level of unhappiness is growing. The level of economic distress certainly is growing now.' (KI 30, 2023)*

Another issue that refugees in Egypt face relates to education. While in principle refugees have access to public schools, refugees struggle to register their children due to issues related to overcrowded classrooms, changed curriculum, and bullying. Alternatively, Sudanese can register either in expensive private schools, or in informal community schools that offer education in the Sudanese curriculum.

As for healthcare, refugees are entitled to access the public health sector. In 2018, Egypt adopted the National Health Insurance Law, which stipulates that refugees can enjoy health insurance services within specifically-devised insurance schemes (UN, 2022). Despite these efforts, refugees from Sudan still face

some financial burdens related to healthcare. The high price of medicine and hospital care and the changes in prescription for patients with chronic diseases are some of the most significant burdens highlighted to us [(KI 1, 2023);(KI 27, 2024)].

Accessing aid provided by UN agencies and international organisations has also been challenging. Throughout the interviews conducted, organisations noted that refugees initially did not want to register with the UNHCR, either due to misconceptions or the length of the process. Instead, many chose to register with the IOM.

> 'The majority of Sudanese refuse to be registered. They think that registration with UNHCR is useless. They will not get benefit from it. They see that there is a big number of Sudanese who came to Egypt, and so the UNHCR will not be able to provide financial assistance for all of them. Because the UNHCR budget is not sufficient. And to be honest, UNHCR itself didn't have a solution for this problem.' (KI 2, 2023)

Refugees face difficulties in meeting their needs for basic household items and livelihoods. They are equally concerned about the steadily increasing prices of rent, some of which have doubled since the outbreak of the war. These hikes in rent have not only affected new arrivals who are unable to afford housing, it also impacted host and foreign communities who were already living in Egypt and are now facing eviction. Whereas some of the new arrivals could access housing support, these existing communities complain that their aid has decreased, as the focus has shifted from them.

These challenges have led to increased tensions between various communities and resulted in intercommunal violence in some neighbourhoods in Cairo. Interviewed organisations noted an increase in robberies, gang violence, and fighting between groups of youths from different nationalities.

Further complicating matters is that many of these refugees must cope with the effects of the violence and trauma that they have suffered during the war, whilst also dealing with the abovementioned vulnerabilities arising from their displacement and challenging living conditions. Some of these people have resorted to negative coping mechanisms to address these emotions, including substance abuse. Organisations that provide psychosocial services noted that the accessibility and variety of drugs on offer in Egypt are a contributing factor to this problem:

> 'We see depression, and even more likely, what we are seeing is substance abuse… Drugs are very cheap, so you do not have to have a lot of money for drugs. You can get high for very little money on the street.' (KI 30, 2023)

3.4 Response to MSHT in Egypt

The complexity of the situation of refugees in Egypt, because of the nature of the conflict they have fled, and the legal and institutional systems that they must navigate, has left them extremely vulnerable to violations. These difficulties can be exacerbated by certain factors such as age and gender, especially for UASC. Lack of child protection can, in turn, contribute to instances of early marriage, child labour and child begging.

The following section examines the main categories of MSHT identified for Egypt.

Child labour and begging

Like during previous displacement situations in the region, organisations are noting higher rates of child labour and begging. Children involved in these activities are usually those who are affected by the lack of child protection mechanisms in terms of their access to education, delayed registration, lack of legal documents, or irregular entry into the country.

As a result, children are involved in hazardous labour in various sectors. Boys can be found working in factories, construction sites or in the service sector, while girls are employed as domestic workers or in informal home-based businesses: cooking or sewing [(KI 3, 2023);(KI 27, 2024)]. These children report being employed in unsafe work environments and are vulnerable to numerous violations. Those include not receiving their full wages, harassment, or unduly long working hours.

Meanwhile, informants have also reported cases of children or family units begging on the street. These children are exposed to insults, harassment, potential abuse, and road accidents. In some cases, those begging activities are coordinated by criminal organisations, which places them within the definitions of human trafficking (KI 29, 2024).

Gender-based discrimination and violence

Throughout the interviews, respondents noted the prevalence of SGBV as a risk factor increasing the

vulnerability of girls and women to trafficking. One interviewee noted that severe financial difficulties could lead women and girls to venture or seek employment in more dangerous areas of Cairo, which in some instances led to their disappearance or abductions (KI 27, 2024).

Moreover, organisations reported instances of seasonal marriages, through which, in exchange for money, a man and a woman can be married for a short period of time. These types of marriages are considered a form of trafficking by IOM (KI 5, 2023). Some of these marriages involve underage girls. It is important to note that these marriages are not certified at court: they are not recognised by the government and do not provide legal protection for the engaged parties. During interviews, respondents noted that while these types of marriages were common in certain areas of Egypt amongst poor communities, the war in Sudan and the resulting displacement have contributed to this phenomenon, including by involving younger women (KI 5, 2023).

'In many communities, women tend to be the strongest, tend to be a bit more vocal, tend to know everything that is happening, tend to fight a bit more, or could be against forced marriage that could be sometimes linked to trafficking… Here in Egypt, the seasonal marriage is normal, whereas the government put it as trafficking type… One of the families that we talked to was saying, she's prepared, she wants it. It's seen as normal. So, it sometimes is child protection-oriented, but also could be trafficking if the girl did not consent and the family forced her to get married and there was a financial transaction.' (KI 5, 2023)

Forced labour

The economic crisis in Egypt, combined with the conflict in Sudan, have driven an increase in exploitative labour conditions and potential cases of forced labour. Lack of work permits often makes refugees become more vulnerable to and susceptible to abusive labour. The ambiguous legal status of refugees in the labour market also makes them hesitant to report cases of abuse.

Informants highlighted the dire working conditions in the Egyptian gold mines. In some instances, workers did not receive their wages, or charges were deducted from their pay on account of their food and accommodation costs, or other unforeseen expenses. Similar violations were reported in domestic work. Their documents are usually withheld by their employer and some of them experience harassment or sexual abuse (KI 30, 2023).

Organ trafficking

While organ trafficking was prevalent in Egypt before the conflict in Sudan erupted, service providers noted that some people have been willingly selling their organs to address economic challenges. They also noted instances of abductions for the purpose of organ trafficking, as well as some well-known neighbourhoods of Cairo where the violation occurs (KI 28, 2024).

3.5 Service delivery

As part of this research, we were able to map a range of Egyptian and Sudanese service providers and UN agencies providing MSHT services within Egypt, operating in the following areas:

- Legal aid services
- Health services and referrals
- Housing support, either temporary or for protection purposes
- Mental health and psychosocial support
- Educational services and community schools
- Community outreach and trainings, on various topics including social cohesion, positive parenting, safeguarding, and community protection
- Capacity building packages
- Livelihood to employment skills
- In-kind assistance

Egyptian organisations which are UNHCR partners also support the refugee agency with refugee status determination, resettlement, referrals, and protection screenings. It should be noted that these organisations provide services to migrant and refugee communities from different countries, including Sudan, but also South Sudan, Syria, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iraq, and Yemen. Some of these organisations provide their services across Greater Cairo, while others are focused on specific geographical areas.

Moreover, these organisations have established either formal or informal referral mechanisms with other service providers, which deliver additional services or cover other geographical areas. The main formal pathway is between UNHCR and its implementing and operational partners. These partners currently include:

- Egyptian Foundation for Refugee Rights (EFRR) and United Lawyers for legal assistance
- Egyptian Red Crescent, Caritas, and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) for health services
- Save the Children and St. Andrew's Refugee Services (StARs) for Child Protection, with the latter being an expert on unaccompanied children
- Terre des Hommes (TdH) and Psycho-Social Services and Training Institute in Cairo (PSTIC) for psychosocial support and services (UNHCR, 2023)

UNHCR and its partners also refer cases to other UN agencies, especially the World Food Programme (WFP), IOM, and UNICEF.

Moreover, several Sudanese initiatives and organisations that were previously operating in Sudan are working informally within Egypt, for instance to assist refugees with community schools, access to health and housing, and employment skills. Some of these initiatives are also collaborating with Egyptian and international organisations to provide psychological support and assistance.

Each of these Sudanese initiatives has created its own referral pathway with various entities that include other Sudanese organisations, CBOs, national and international organisations, in addition to refugee-led organisations or initiatives. Referral amongst these organisations is done utilising various communication platforms and methods, and some cases are referred informally for sensitivity reasons.

Lastly, it is important to note that due to the restrictions imposed by the Egyptian government, both national and Sudanese initiatives work under challenging circumstances to meet these growing needs. Sudanese initiatives in particular must work at an informal level, with a low profile, to overcome logistical and financial obstacles.

3.6 Challenges to service delivery

Even before the current influx of refugees, the situation in Egypt was already fragile, as services were already overstretched. Therefore, the current wave of refugees, most of whom are in need of basic services, has aggravated the existing challenges that service providers were facing and led to significant gaps in service delivery. While service providers reported numerous challenges during our interviews, we chose to highlight the most prominent factors identified, namely funding constraints; stigma and discrimination; and detention and deportation.

Underfunding and donors

The key challenge highlighted by all organisations interviewed in Cairo was their inability to meet the needs of an ever-expanding number of people with inadequate resources. The economic downturn in recent years has exacerbated this problem. As a result, available services remain insufficient in comparison to the numbers of people in need.

> 'We have been advocating for the forgotten crisis because in the sphere of funding and donors, they tend to forget the crisis in some places, and they tend to support the one that just happened. But, we are not getting anything for Gaza as well and… for Sudan, it has been very limited. So you have to choose between the most vulnerable, which is from the humanitarian perspective, a very challenging and difficult decision to make.' (KI 5, 2023)

Similarly, respondents noted that some donor organisations remain inflexible with their requirements, despite the ongoing conflict. Others noted that some donor agencies seem hesitant to sponsor projects in Egypt due to the current situation in the country and regulations by the government (FGD, 2024).

Moreover, Sudanese organisations criticised donor agencies for not involving them in discussions about current agendas for funding development or humanitarian initiatives. They also noted that the limited funds have turned the current environment into a 'marketplace', where various organisations are fighting to receive the available grants. One organisation noted:

'We have been advocating for the forgotten crisis because in the sphere of funding and donors, they tend to forget the crisis in some places, and they tend to support the one that just happened.'

> 'If there is a conflict in a country… organisations, international organisations, they seek opportunities to work. But this create like a market environment, which is not healthy.' (KI 11, 2023)

Another related point is the restrictions maintained by the Egyptian government over civil society organisations. These restrictions not only limit their activities and visibility, but they also make it difficult for organisations to secure or receive funds, especially in foreign currencies. Some organisations resorted to

partnering with Egyptian counterparts to receive their funding, while others receive their funding through Western Union (WU), though they admit that this is not sustainable as some organisations were blocked from WU due to Anti-Money Laundering fears (FGD, 2024).

Other administrative and operational challenges closely tied to funding exist, including staff retention due to high competition with international organisations.

Stigma and discrimination

The second challenge that organisations highlighted relates to stigma, as some communities still struggle to seek help, especially on matters related to sexual violence or mental health. Interviewees noted that refugees find it difficult to report violations, which in turn hinder their ability to respond appropriately and in a timely fashion (KI 3, 2023). Sociocultural stigma also becomes a barrier with issues like seasonal or forced marriages, particularly when children are involved.

Organisations also reported that the current structure of Refugee Status Determination (RSD) interviews by the UNHCR heightens the discomfort felt by refugees. For instance, women might not be comfortable disclosing what they went through to a male interviewer or interpreter. A similar situation might occur in hospitals with doctors. Equally, discriminatory behaviour prevents many refugees from approaching either governmental or non-governmental stakeholders, including the police. Organisations emphasised that the process of approaching the police to file a complaint is both stigmatising and discriminatory as police either do not take them seriously or refuse to proceed with the case.

'There is currently a media campaign that is asking for Sudanese to be deported from Egypt. People are now being deported from Aswan...We are literally being recycled across the border by smugglers who just want us to pay more money.'

During an interview with a Sudanese organisation, they reported the case of a woman who experienced several attacks from Egyptian people, including some on her children. After several attempts to report the crimes were discouraged, she voiced her regrets of having left Sudan in the first place:

> *'After the attack on her son, the mom went to UNHCR to seek legal aid…The UNHCR lawyer advised her to drop the case. After hearing this, the mom now just wants to find any way to return to Sudan. Why? Because she said that there is safer for them. Many people now regret that they came to Egypt.' (KI 28, 2024)*

These compounding challenges prevent vulnerable refugees from accessing justice, even if they are being exploited by their landlords, their employer, or anyone else. A further complicating factor is found in the growing instances of hate speech against refugees. Both Egyptian and Sudanese organisations have warned of an increase in anti-refugee sentiment caused by misinformation campaigns blaming refugees for the current economic crisis.

> *'As a general rule, the police are going to favour an Egyptian if the problem is with an Egyptian and people would not go if they have that kind of problem because it would backfire on them. So I hate to say, but that's the reality, there's a tremendous amount of discrimination and unhappiness about them (refugees) being here at this point, so that it's not easy and it's affecting everybody. So who has problems now? It's everybody. I think probably third country nationals in more trouble than the Sudanese because the country doesn't understand that third country nationals are actually coming because of the Sudan crisis. So they don't get treated well.' (KI 30, 2023)*

Detention and deportation

In spite of its ratification of the 1951 Refugee Convention, organisations noted that the Egyptian government is still detaining and, in some cases, deporting refugees. According to interviews conducted, these cases include refugees who are registered with the UNHCR, in addition to those who are unregistered.

Poor data availability prevents a complete understanding of the prevalence of these practices. It is nevertheless a worrying trend that is creating an increasing sense of alarm and fear among refugee communities. Organisations noted that they rely on community leaders to track some of these cases and attempt to intervene if possible. It remains unclear whether some of those people who were detained or deported were potential victims of trafficking. One organisation shared that they were aware of families and children who were deported, including 38 Eritrean families.

> *'There is currently a media campaign that is asking for Sudanese to be deported from Egypt. People are now being deported from Aswan. Smugglers would report people whom they smuggled into Egypt to authorities, which will then deport them back to Sudan after being detained. I heard a case of a*

family of 82 members who were deported back to Sudan. We are literally being recycled across the border by smugglers who just want us to pay more money.' (KI 28, 2024)

3.7 Experiences in other neighbouring countries

In March 2024, IOM data showed that 729,473 individuals had entered Chad, 117,445 Ethiopia, and 608,262 South Sudan. It is estimated that 63% of arrivals in these countries are Sudanese (IOM, 2024).It is also important to note that as opposed to Egypt, no official restrictions are in place to prevent people from crossing the border into these three countries.

Amongst these neighbouring countries, Chad received the largest share of refugees, as people continue to flee ethnically motivated attacks in West Darfur. UNHCR data shows that 88% of refugees arriving from El Geneina, a city in west Darfur, to the Chadian border town of Adré are women and children. 75% of registered refugees are 26 or younger, and 50% are 12 or younger (UNHCR, 2024). Organisations have reported dire conditions in Adré due to overcrowded refugee camps and lengthy registration process. Children death as a result of malnutrition were reported, as well as instances of violations on adults, including SGBVs (Haroun, 2024).

> *'Many people in Darfur – and now Darfur is the most unstable in the country – is fleeing to Chad. Now Chad itself is not stable. Now there is local conflict in Chad…the situation will be more dire, more severe…and things are starting to escalate there.' (KI 11, 2023)*

A respondent noted that some refugees are choosing dangerous routes to make the journey to avoid checkpoints:

> *'People were going through very risky and dangerous routes, for example, from Zamadi to Ethiopia, which was previously not a very popular route. And it's also extremely risky for everyone who's traveling, especially for those with specific vulnerabilities.' (KI 9, 2023)*

These new arrivals have magnified pre-existing social and economic pressures in receiving countries, which were already struggling with their own protracted crises. Multiple reports have noted that these refugees are making these journeys in extremely vulnerable conditions, highly traumatised from the experiences they lived or witnessed, and in need of humanitarian assistance. Unfortunately, they are met with similar challenges in those other countriesas refugees arriving to Egypt, especially in relation to underfunding and limited availability of needed services (IOM, 2024)

Indeed, the United Nations continues to appeal for more funding for its Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan and the Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan which were launched on 17 May 2023. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) however, the plan is chronically underfunded as there is a 2.6 billion USD funding gap (OCHA, 2024a).

4. Conclusions and recommendations

Throughout this report, we have delved into the multifaceted dimensions of MSHT in Sudan, and the prevalent forms, vulnerabilities, and the impact of conflict on service provision in both Sudan and Egypt. Based on the current conflict dynamics and the overarching findings of this report, below are a set of targeted recommendations aimed at mitigating the risks of MSHT in Sudan, and amongst refugee communities in neighbouring countries. These recommendations are grounded in a pragmatic understanding of the current socio-political landscape and are informed by insights garnered from extensive research, fieldwork, and consultations with stakeholders.

The final section of this report serves as a roadmap for stakeholders, including governmental bodies, international organisations, non-governmental entities, and civil society actors, to galvanise collective action and effect tangible change. These recommendations are designed to address the structural deficiencies that perpetuate vulnerability to exploitation and to bolster the protective mechanisms necessary for safeguarding the rights and dignity of all individuals, particularly those most marginalised and at risk.

Recommendations for NGOs/INGOs

Capacity building and training

It is recommended that organisations – including INGOs, NGOs – and donors should provide training and capacity building to service providers including local community initiatives that are working as first responders on survivor-centred and trauma-informed care to support capacity on case management. This is particularly needed given the lack of specialist MSHT organisations offering support to victims and the barriers discussed above. Mentoring sessions and training of trainers could be held remotely as part of this, and to ensure ongoing support is offered to a range of organisations.

Community outreach and awareness

It is recommended that organisations should incorporate community awareness sessions into their programming to shift social norms and raise awareness about the different forms of trafficking, available services, and the rights of individuals. INGOs should work in partnership with community leaders who have access and influence in communities to raise awareness in this way.

Collaboration and networking

It is recommended that a coordination board for referrals is created to support victims of trafficking. There should be a coordination board for the referral system to centralise policymaking and coordinate efforts across different service providers. The coordination board should be made up of the service providers themselves incorporating local and national actors. This could usefully bring together the more ad hoc and informal systems that already exist, to help connect them and support more comprehensive coverage.

It is recommended that stakeholders engage in cross-border working groups or monthly forums that work to combat MSHT. This is to improve transparency and avoid duplication of efforts as well as to present opportunities for collaboration.

Data collection and research

It is recommended that efforts should be made to collect data and conduct research on MSHT in Sudan and the wider region. INGOs and NGOs should prioritise data collection to understand root causes, trends, and impacts to try and better understand this complex phenomenon. This is especially needed given the overall lack of data on MSHT for Sudan and could be used to support greater coordination and network-building efforts.

Recommendations for governments

Government of Sudan

It is recommended that local government authorities strengthen their connections with, and the capacities of, service providers, law enforcement and first responders such as community leaders to improve awareness and responsiveness to MSHT. Key priorities remain the creation of safe houses for MSHT victims and awareness campaigns to educate individuals about their rights and risks regarding MSHT. These campaigns should include marginalised communities and be tailored to their cultural and language needs.

Government of Egypt

It is recommended that the government of Egypt should increase the capacity of government personnel

working to combat MSHT. By conducting capacity-building training, the link between the legal framework and service provision will be strengthened and improve the efficacy of responding to victim's needs.

It is recommended that the government of Egypt should take a role in better coordinating and streamlining all the different activities to tackle MSHT. By centralising activities such as hotlines, efforts are more impactful and sufficient as they respond to needs more efficiently.

Regional interventions

The following recommendations were particularly emphasised by key informants who rely on donor assistance for their implementation:

- It is recommended that donors prioritise funding more specialised anti-trafficking programs to create comprehensive projects that sufficiently address the needs of victims in a more informed and holistic manner. This would include supporting existing services to a greater capacity and building more specialist knowledge of the range of types and vulnerabilities for MSHT.

- Donors and international organisations should aim to increase their support for informal community initiatives that have access or influence in communities. This will need to involve more agile ways of working including changes to traditional compliance and contracting models in recognition of the capacity constraints and voluntary nature of these organisations. There are already precedents for this which can be built upon.

- Donors should fund coordination mechanisms that are designed to improve and strengthen referrals which allow for greater harmonisation of efforts and more comprehensive support. Alongside this, it is recommended that donors should increase support to address data and research gaps in Sudan, to improve the understanding of MSHT phenomena across the country and region. This can be in the form of weekly or quarterly reports on the trafficking landscape in the region.

Through the implementation of the aforementioned recommendations, organisations, governments, and donors can contribute to collective efforts of combatting MSHT in Sudan and the wider region, and to the protection and dignity of vulnerable individuals.

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