



# CROSSING BORDERS, BUILDING LIVELIHOODS

## The insecure economic lives of migrants in Libya



POLICY BRIEF - JULY 2024

## INTRODUCTION

### Context

Libya stands at a pivotal location along the Central Mediterranean Route, despite grave protection concerns. Over recent years, the route has witnessed significant migration movements, with thousands embarking from Libya towards Italy, often resulting in tragic casualties. Amidst political, security, and economic instability, over 800,000 people, both Libyan and non-Libyan, require humanitarian aid. Vulnerabilities for migrants persist, exacerbated by human trafficking and widespread rights violations, while the available protection space continues to shrink.

Libya serves not only as a departure and transit point, but also as a destination country for migrants, primarily in search of economic opportunities. The country's labour market dynamics, characterized by readily accessible job opportunities offering attractive wages, play a significant role in influencing its central position in the flow of money along migration routes. Migrant workers play a crucial role in the Libyan economy by filling gaps in sectors typically overlooked by the local workforce, including construction and domestic services. However, the economic inclusion of migrants in Libya is hindered by persistent challenges related to their vulnerable status as the majority of available employment opportunities for them are informal, adding to their irregular situation.

Efforts are underway to recognize and harness migrants' contribution to the Libyan economy, with negotiations for bilateral agreements and a UN framework aimed at improving livelihoods. Yet, challenges persist regarding social security provisions and exploitation prevention.

### Research objectives and methodology

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) conducted research in collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) to investigate the multifaceted economic realities of migrants in Libya. It aims

to present findings regarding (i) the economic significance of Libya for migrants in their migration journey, (ii) the economic and financial conditions of migrants in Libya, and (iii) the opportunities and risks migrants face in the Libyan labour market. The research findings are primarily based on 317 quantitative interviews carried out in 2023 with migrants who had stayed at least 3 months in Libya. Quantitative data was collected through 4Mi, which is MMC's flagship data collection system, and contextualized by qualitative interviews with key informants as well as an extensive literature review.

## KEY FINDING

### 1. Economic factors strongly influence migrants' decisions to move to Libya, while security concerns drive migration onward

The primary reason given by respondents for leaving their country of origin was economic factors (77%), but they interplayed with other factors such as violence, insecurity and conflict (41%), and a prevailing culture of migration (39%). More than half of respondents (55%) decided to stop in Libya for work to finance their onward journey.

While many respondents chose to travel to Libya for economic reasons, two-thirds (63%) left the country because of security reasons, while only 35% left to seek better working conditions and 22% because they were seeking to earn more money.

### 2. The majority of jobs available to migrants in Libya are in the informal sector, lacking stability and financial security

Most respondents who earned money in Libya did not have a formal employment contract (92%) and were primarily making money through casual or occasional work (76%) in manual labour roles (see Figure 1). The informal and sporadic nature of migrant workers' livelihoods is a consequence of legal and policy frameworks that limit access to the formal labour market for migrants, leaving the majority in a precarious employment situation.

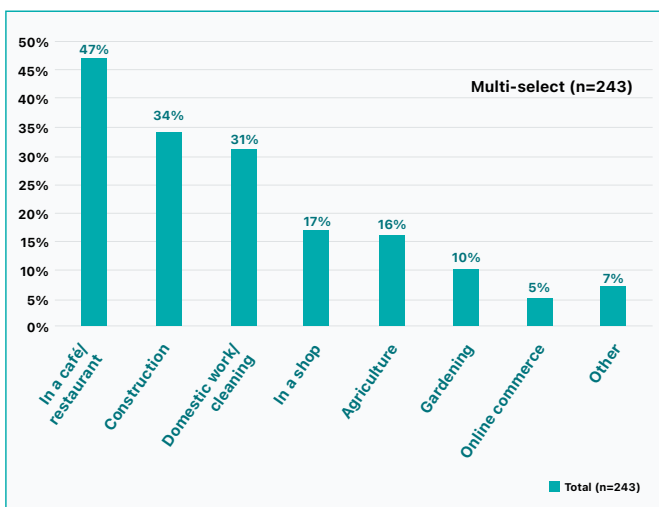
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**Figure 1. What kind of sectors did you make money in during your stay in Libya? (among respondents who made money in Libya)**



The income levels of half of interviewed migrants who earned money in Libya (48%) were insufficient to meet their basic needs. Only 20% were able to cover their needs while in Libya, and only 15% were able to save money. On the other hand, 47% relied on remittances from people in their country of origin.

### 3. Migrants in Libya mostly lean on personal networks for access to job opportunities

Libya offers relatively quick access to the informal labour market for migrants seeking job opportunities as 61% of interviewed migrant workers were able to find a job within one month of arriving in the country. Two-thirds (64%) secured employment with the assistance of co-national networks or other migrants. The majority had received information about job opportunities in the Libyan labour market prior to their departure, mostly from relatives or friends currently (39%) or previously (41%) in Libya.

Migrant jobseekers also turn to more uncertain and less secure methods of finding work. Going to gathering places to meet employers was mentioned by almost half of respondents who were making

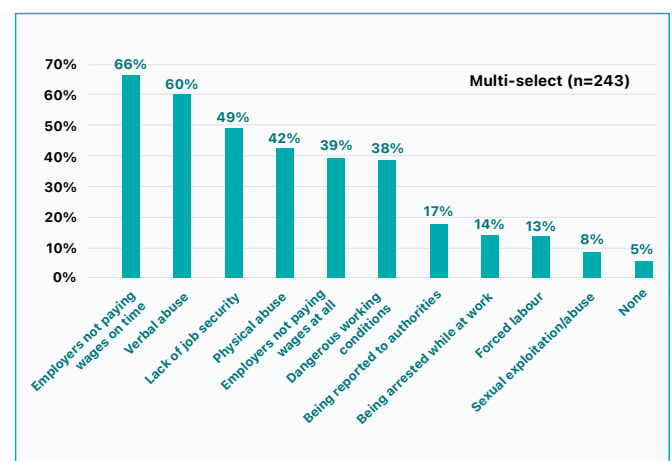
money (46%) as their successful strategy for finding a job. Casual and occasional workers in informal public gathering places were frequently at a higher risk of abuses and human rights violations, including forced labour, human trafficking, arbitrary arrest, and detention.

### 4. Most migrants who earn money in Libya face high levels of risks in the workplace

The absence of legal rights for migrants in Libya exacerbates their vulnerability and exposes them to heightened protection risks. Therefore, 83% of surveyed migrant workers estimated that they had been taken advantage of, exploited and/or abused while at work.

Wage theft and job insecurity are the most common types of protection risks faced by migrants in the workplace in Libya, followed by verbal and physical abuse (see Figure 2). Casual and occasional workers in informal public gathering places are at a higher risk of abuses and human rights violations, including forced labour, human trafficking, arbitrary arrest, and detention.

**Figure 2. What incidents did you experience while you were working in Libya? (among respondents who made money in Libya)**





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### 5. Gender has an influence on both the types of jobs the migrants get and the types of risks they are exposed to

There is less diversity in sectors available to women migrant job seekers, and the most common sectors of employment for women respondents were domestic work (39/58) and work in a café/restaurant (34/58). Women, whose level of education was generally higher than men, more often reported taking a job with a lower education requirement than what they possessed (48% (28/58) compared to 33% for men).

As women migrant workers tend to work in less visible sectors, which increases risks, they are also more affected by some protection incidents. Women respondents were more often affected by incidents related to job insecurity, sexual exploitation, and verbal abuse, while men more frequently faced the risk of being arrested at work.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As international actors in Libya shift assistance towards development and reconstruction, the assistance needs of migrants should not be left behind. Foreign donors and humanitarian organizations can support policy and programmatic responses aiming at enhancing the economic prospects and protection for migrants in Libya through the following actions:

- ▶ Advocate with Libyan authorities for amendments to current legislation that criminalizes migration, emphasizing its detrimental effect on the contributions of labour migrants to the Libyan economy.
- ▶ Incentivise the regular integration of migrants into the Libyan labour market by including them as a target population in broader socio-economic development funding initiatives and by adding legal aid and services programs to such funding.
- ▶ Increase funding that address migrants' protection needs, as well as their share in the general migration governance funding.
- ▶ Increase advocacy efforts with the Libyan authorities on access to migrants in vulnerable situations, particularly those in detention centres.

- ▶ Integrate Mental Health and Psychological Support (MHPSS) interventions with other protection responses targeting migrants in order to assist victims of human trafficking and other forms of verbal and physical abuse.
- ▶ Work with migrant community leaders to identify channels of access to vulnerable refugee and migrant workers, particularly women working in the domestic sector.
- ▶ Develop mobile units and other solutions that enable practitioners to overcome access constraints for the provision of assistance to vulnerable casual refugee and migrant workers in public and informal gathering places.
- ▶ Provide information to migrants on application processes for work permits and facilitate contact with their embassies to help them obtain missing documents usually issued by their country of origin.