

The Least Condemned Crime: Sexual and Gender Based Violence against Migrants and Asylum Seekers on the Move in the Horn of Africa

Sexual and gender based violence has been called the “least condemned crime” in conflict and fragile situations,¹ and the stories are far too familiar. Three Eritrean women were repeatedly raped by their smuggler in Libya, according to a May 2015 Amnesty report.² African women and girls arrive in Italy pregnant as a result of their rape, according to a UNICEF report.³ A CARE International report on South Sudan in May 2014 suggested “many categories of gender-based violence are pervasive and engrained in social norms and practices.”⁴ A joint Italian-IOM initiative offers testimonials to would-be migrants of those who suffered as victims of gender-based violence on their journey to Europe.⁵⁶

Internationally, governments and multilaterals agree sexual and gender-based violence is one of the major risks migrants and asylum seekers face on their journeys to Europe and South Africa. A World Bank/UNHCR report on forced displacement and mixed migration in the Horn of Africa stated, “[Sexual and g]ender-based violence [(SGBV)] is a pervasive challenge across the Horn of Africa, particularly in those countries affected by persistent conflict.”⁷ The United States Department of State stated in a report published on April 13, 2016 on Egypt, “Refugee women and girls, particularly sub-Saharan Africans, faced significant societal, sexual, and gender-based violence.”⁸

Lost in the testimonials and acknowledgements of the risks SGBV poses is how prevalent and perhaps commonplace SGBV has become among migrants and asylum seekers. Between November 2014 and June 2016, RMMS Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4mi) interviewed over 1,700 migrants and asylum seekers originating from Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia on a variety of topics, including gender-based violence. Throughout the interview period, migrants on the move reported 563 reported incidents of SGBV, including 334 incidents of rape, along the migration routes across the eastern tier of Africa. All enumerated incidents below were either directly witnessed or were survived by the respondents directly.

65 respondents reported surviving sexual abuse themselves in 227 incidents, whereas 103 respondents witnessed an additional 336 incidents. Rape is the most commonly witnessed type of SGBV, and survivors report a constellation of other SGBV incidents as well as rape.

¹ Aafjes, Astrid. *Gender Violence: The Hidden War Crime*. Washington D.C.: Kumarian Press, 1998. Print.

² http://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/libya_is_full_of_cruelty.pdf, p. 15

³ http://www.unicef.org/emergencies/childrenonthemove/files/Child_Alert_Final_PDF.pdf, p. 3

⁴ <http://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/the-girl-has-no-rights-gender-based-violence-in-south-sudan>

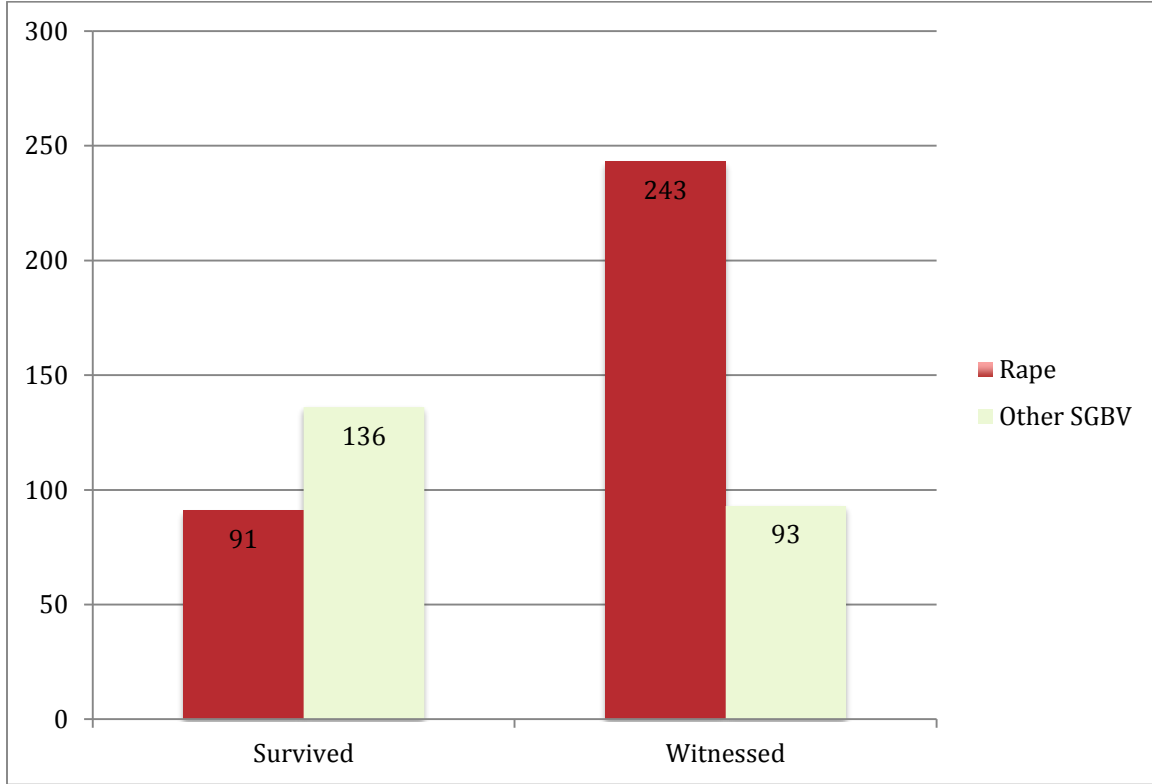
⁵ <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-italy-launch-aware-migrants-campaign>

⁶ <http://www.awaremigrants.org>

⁷ <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/892801436371029880/forced-displacement-horn-of-africa-Report.pdf>, p. 4

⁸ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2015/nea/252921.htm>

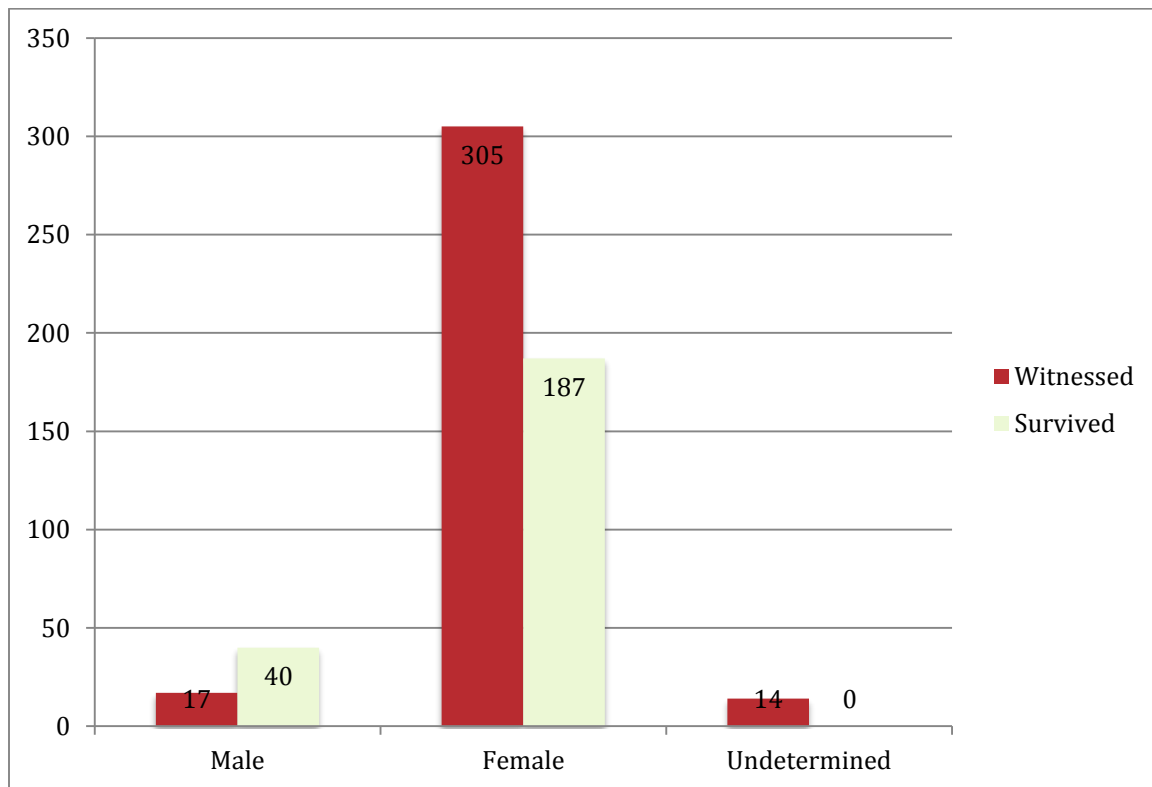
Figure 1: Types of SGBV by Type of Account



Source: 4mi (<http://4mi.regionalmms.org/>)

SGBV survivors were reported to be overwhelmingly female; however, some males also were reported to have survived SGBV.

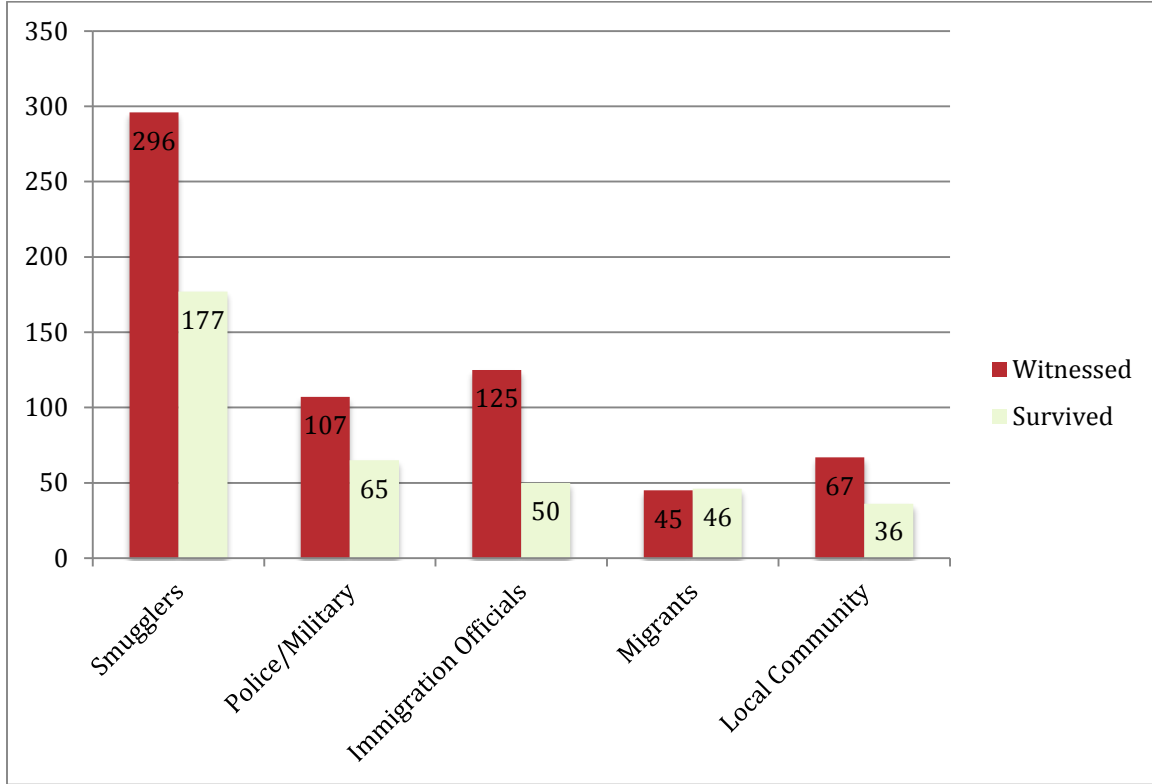
Figure 2: Gender of Survivor by Type of Account



Source: 4mi (<http://4mi.regionalmms.org/>)

While the majority of incidents had smugglers and brokers perpetrating SGBV at least in part, other perpetrators included police, immigration officials and local community members.

Figure 3: Perpetrators of SGBV by Type of Account

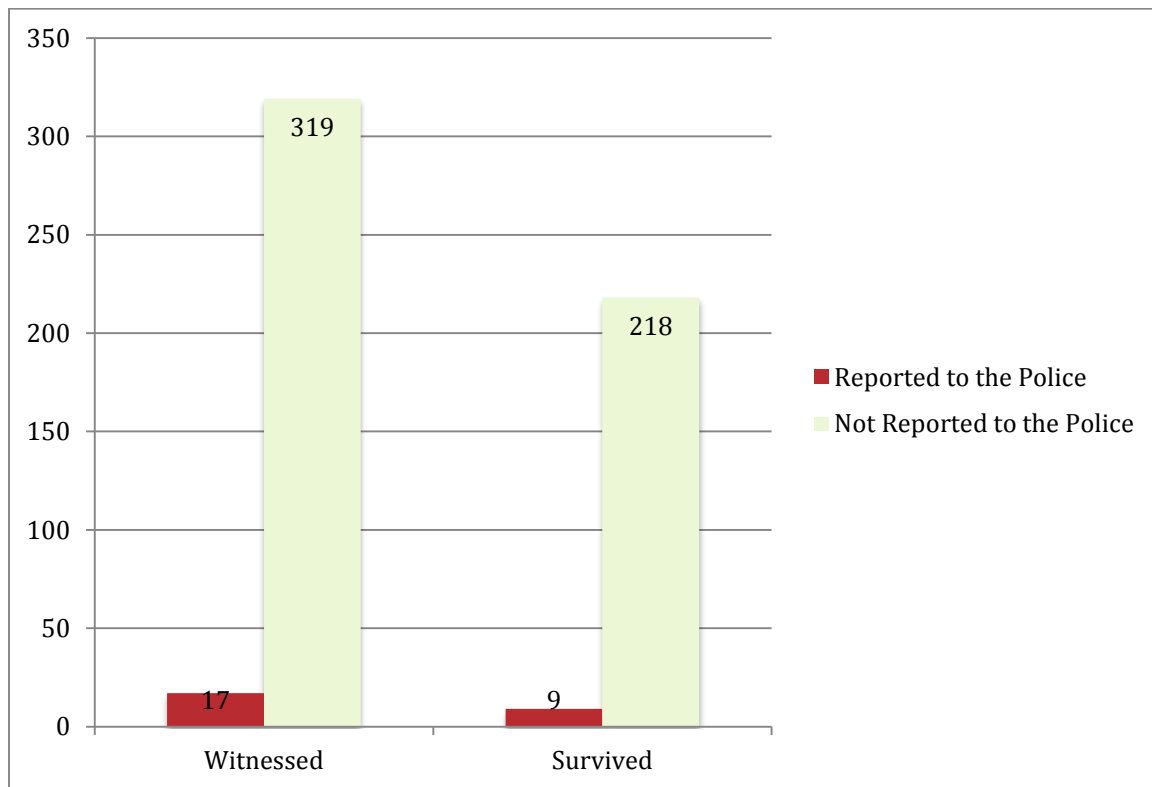


Source: 4mi (<http://4mi.regionalmms.org/>)

Much like in the West where the vast majority of SGBV goes unreported,⁹ migrants and asylum seekers on the move reporting SGBV to the authorities is very rare with only a handful of respondents reporting they had reported the incident to the authorities.

⁹ <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>, an estimated 34.4% of rapes are reported to authorities in the United States

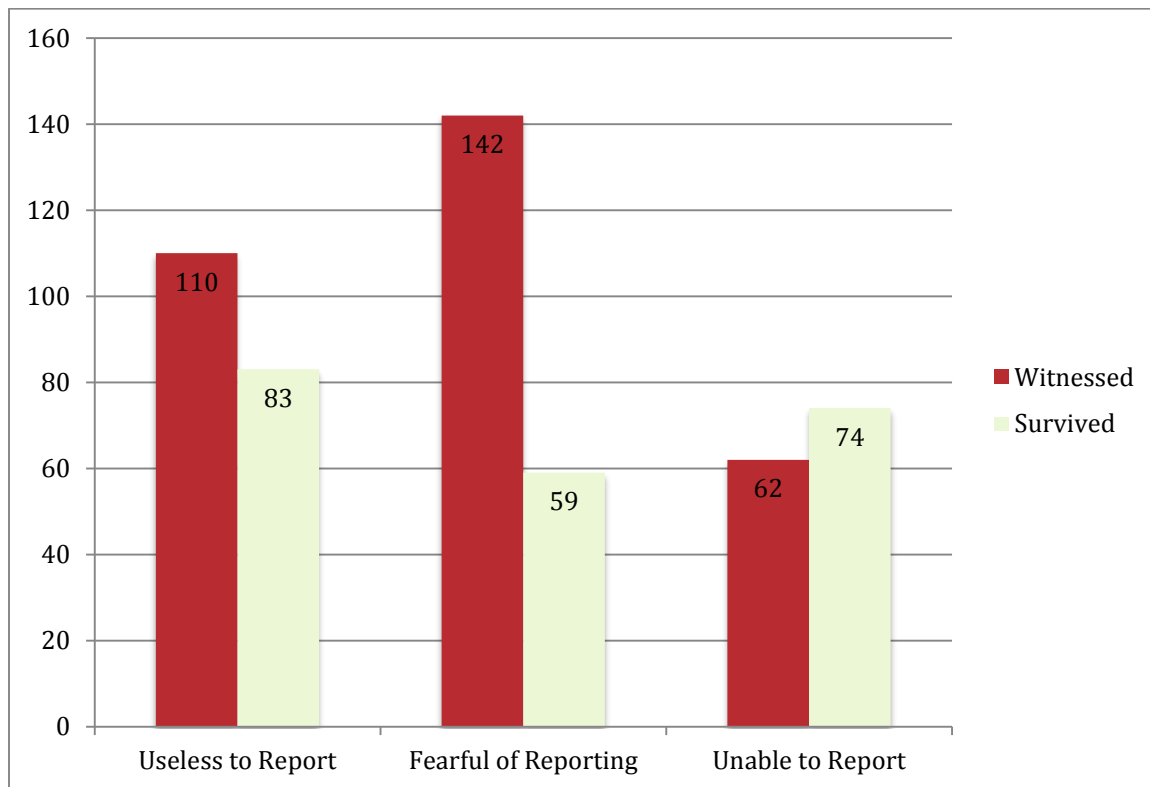
Figure 4: Incidents Reported to the Police by Type of Account



Source: 4mi (<http://4mi.regionalmms.org/>)

A combination of fear, lack of access, and lack of faith in the justice system hinder official reporting. While shame and fear over social stigma of SGBV may influence reduced reporting rates, personal concerns over the survivors' or witnesses' legal status in the host country may play a role in the lack of reporting.

Figure 5: Reason for Not Reporting SGBV by Type of Account



Source: 4mi (<http://4mi.regionalmms.org/>)

The bulk of reported incidents occurred in Sudan (256), Egypt (109), Ethiopia (86) and Libya (59), along the western route to Europe. In 477 interviews completed in Tanzania and South Africa, migrants and asylum seekers on the southern route from the Horn of Africa to South Africa reported only 13 incidents. The disparity in reported incidents may be due partially to the mismatch between the profile of 4mi monitors, who are exclusively male on the southern route, while some of the monitors in Egypt are female, and the profile of survivors, who are generally female.

Figure 6: Number of SGBV incidents per country



Source: 4mi (<http://4mi.regionalmms.org/>)

There were restrictions to the above analysis, which affected the final numbers. Only incidents directly experienced or witnessed were analyzed, and 121 SGBV incidents against men, women and children were accounts relayed to respondents by other migrants and asylum seekers and then transmitted to 4mi. Standards of consent migrants and asylum seekers hold may differ from international standards¹⁰ and affect reporting. Further, the embarrassment, fear and shame engendered by SGBV among survivors may lead to underreporting and/or reporting the incident as happening to another person instead of yourself. The possibility exists that witnesses

¹⁰ <http://www.fmreview.org/fragilestates/hough.html>



underreported SGBV as well. Therefore, it is a safe conclusion that the real number of SGBV incidents is far higher than what is documented in this analysis.