

EGYPTIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN LIBYA

General Overview and Opportunities
for the Future

Background paper

Operationalization of Memorandum of
Understanding between Libya and Egypt



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Executive Summary	04
01	Introduction	05
02	Methodology	06
03	Labour Migration to Libya: background, trends and developments	07
	1. Evolution of Libyan labour migration policies	07
	2. Egyptian Labour Migration to Libya: A Historical Perspective	08
	3. Libyan Labour Market: Key characteristics	08
04	Overview of Egyptian labour migration in Libya	09
	1. Key demographics and characteristics	09
	2. Entry in Libya	10
	3. Employment status	12
	4. Access to documentation	13
	5. Remittances	14
	6. Mobility intentions	15
05	Conclusion & Way Forward	16
	Bibliography	17
	Annex: Qualitative questionnaire	18

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of Egyptian labour migration to Libya, emphasizing on the opportunities related to an improved management of labour migration between Egypt and Libya. This paper was drafted with the aim of guiding the operationalization of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on labour migration signed by both states in 2021. This document was drafted using IOM's Flow Monitoring Surveys (FMS) data (2020-2022), data from qualitative interviews with Egyptian migrant workers collected in June 2022 and relevant policy and academic literature (see Methodology section for more information).

For several decades now, Egyptian migrant workers have played a significant role in Libya, providing a much-needed skilled workforce in key sectors of the economy. Overall, this paper outlines the following characteristics of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya:

DEMOGRAPHICS

Egyptian migrants constitute 21 per cent of the total migrant population in the country. A total 95 per cent of them reported moving to Libya for a variety of economic reasons.

ENTRY IN LIBYA

Egyptian migrants' entry in Libya is characterized by large levels of irregularity. In some circumstances, entry in Libya was reportedly considered by respondents as unsafe, long and stressful.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

A vast majority of Egyptian migrants in Libya are employed (93%), whereas only 59 per cent were employed in Egypt prior to migrating to Libya. A high proportion of Egyptian migrants surveyed were employed in elementary occupations, characterized by activities involving manual labour. Beyond this, many respondents reported being employed in sectors such as carpentry; construction; manufacturing and agriculture.

ACCESS TO DOCUMENTATION

A vast majority of Egyptian migrants reported that they did not have a work permit (71%) or residency permit (68%) in Libya, confirming that migration from Egypt is characterised by a large proportion of irregularity. Several interviewees reported that this lack of official status created safety issues for them and their families.

REMITTANCES

Nearly half of Egyptian migrants reported sending money home since they arrived in Libya, which is significantly higher than any of the other migrant nationalities captured in DTM's surveys. This suggests that Egyptians migrants have good access to the Libyan labour market and are key contributors to their home country's economy.

MIGRATION INTENTIONS

A majority of Egyptian migrants (52%) expressed the intention of staying in Libya, this is more than any other nationalities surveyed by DTM.

WAY FORWARD

While the signature of a MoU between Libya and Egypt is a significant step, its prompt operationalisation and the creation of regular pathways between both countries is paramount to ensure the protection of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya.

01. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, when the Egyptian state sponsored teachers and white-collar workers to cater Libyan educational and bureaucratic staffing needs, Libya has been a preferred destination for Egyptian workers seeking opportunities abroad (Tsouparas, 2015). As of 2009, around 2 million Egyptians worked in Libya, accounting for more than 30 per cent of the total number of Egyptians abroad (Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Statistics cited in Zohry, 2013). Although the 2011 Arab Uprising and its effects on security in Libya led to a considerable return migration, the higher salaries compared with neighboring countries along with relatively easy and cheap access to Libya continued to attract a high number of Egyptian workers. As per the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) 2022 estimates, there is a total of 144,543 Egyptian migrants in Libya, which represents 21 per cent of the total migrant population in the country and the second largest share amongst all nationalities after Nigeriens.

In September 2021, the Governments of Libya and Egypt signed a series of 14 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and 6 agreements in several policy areas (Zaptia, 2021). In particular, one of them in the field of employment and social affairs confirmed the commitment of both countries to facilitate regular labour migration policies and protect the rights of Egyptian migrant workers already present in Libya (ibid). If capitalized upon, these agreements have the potential to benefit the national workforce and migrants' alike. The Libyan government is also in discussion with other countries of origin including Niger, to facilitate the opening of channels for regular labour migration and address concerns pertaining to the welfare of migrant workers (IOM, 2021).

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of Egyptian migration in Libya, with a focus on the main socio-economic characteristics of Egyptian migrant workers, including conditions of entry in Libya, employment status, access to documentation, remittances and mobility intentions. Evidence generated as part of this paper aims to guide Libyan and Egyptian officials in the operationalization of the signed Memorandum of Understanding between both countries.

02. METHODOLOGY

The paper relies on the following data sources:

(1) FLOW MONITORING SURVEYS (FMS)

Conducted by IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) in Libya is a data collection system used to conduct surveys with migrants along key migration routes, and at key locations in Libya. The sample analyzed for this paper included 9,916 Egyptian respondents, who took the survey in Libya between 2020-2022. The survey focused on a variety of topics, including demographics, migration histories, reasons, and decision making, means of travel to Libya; ability to send and receive remittances etc.

(2) QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

Conducted with 8 Egyptian migrants in Benghazi and Tripoli, in June 2022. The interview questionnaire is available in the Annexes.

(3) REVIEW OF RELEVANT ACADEMIC AND POLICY LITERATURE

Due to the limited availability of government produced data, most of the data provided as part of this paper is self-reported by migrants. While this enables the paper to provide an indication of the perceptions of Egyptian migrants in Libya, findings in later sections of this work cannot necessarily be generalized to the entire population

03. LABOUR MIGRATION TO LIBYA

BACKGROUND, TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENT

3.1. EVOLUTION OF LIBYAN LABOUR MIGRATION POLICIES*

Libya adopts Law No. 6 of 1987, as the main framework governing the entry of foreign nationals.

Law No. 6 is complemented by Law No. 10 of 1989, which allowed nationals from Arab countries to enter Libya and reside in country. These foreign nationals benefited from advantageous conditions, including enjoyment of some political rights.

Following the UN air and arms embargo on Libya (1992-2000), Gadaffi adopted policies aiming to facilitate migrant from Sub-Saharan African countries, especially Nigeria, Sudan, Chad and Mali.

Libya and the European Union launch cooperation to combat irregular migration to Europe. New laws and rules were introduced with the purpose to regulate large number of undocumented migrants in Libya. However, these measures led to large-scale rejections at borders and repatriations of undocumented migrants.

New visa requirements were imposed to all foreigners, with the exception of Arab country nationals.

Migrant workers are currently allowed to obtain work permits if they have employment contracts in Libya, according to national rules and regulations. However, the procedures are not always strictly or literally applied by the authorities

Libyan authorities including the Ministry of Labour and Rehabilitation started the negotiations with the Governments of Niger and Egypt to conclude bilateral labour agreement to facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration to Libya.

The Ministry of Economy and Trade issues a decree banning non-Libyans from: real estate brokerage; renting bakeries and other commercial places for themselves.

1987

⋮

1989

⋮

1990s

⋮

2000s

⋮

2007

⋮

2019

⋮

2020

⋮

2022

* Overview of Labour Migration Policies and Developments in Libya (1980s to today). Adapted from Borgnäs, E., Cottone, L. and Teppert, T. (2020), Labour Migration Dynamics in Libya. In: Migration in West and North Africa and Across the Mediterranean: Trends, Risks, Development and Governance.

3.2. EGYPTIAN LABOUR MIGRATION TO LIBYA: A Historical Perspective

Bilateral relations between Libya and Egypt, as well as domestic and foreign policy developments have played a decisive role in shaping Egyptian migration trends and dynamics.

Egyptian emigration to Libya started in the 1950s under the Gamal Abdel Nasser era. The Egyptian state organized the migration of Egyptian teachers, bureaucrats and other professionals to Libya. At the time, various ministries, including the Ministry of Education, dispatched thousands of teachers and white collar employees to Libya, thereby making up for the limited availability of manpower. In 1971, Libya abolished visa requirements for Egyptians, allowing them to enter with a mere identity card. As a result of this policy, thousands of Egyptian workers (skilled and unskilled) entered Libya, taking advantage of the fact that most Libyans continued to work in agriculture, rather than construction or services (Tsourapas, 2015).

Some important changes in the relations between Egypt and Libya occurred in the 1970s. Under the mandate of Anwar El Sadat, relations between Libya and Egypt deteriorated, leading Libya to stop issuing visas for nearly a decade and resulting in the deportation of thousands of Egyptian migrants from Libya between 1974 and 1976 (ibid., 8-10). Egyptian-Libyan relations reached their lowest point when a four-day war broke out between the two countries, from July 21-24, 1977. Although tensions persisted for months afterward, Libya resumed issuing visas for Egyptian in November 1977, ushering a few quite years for Egyptians in Libya (ibid).

After the 2011 Arab Uprising, we observe a significant number of Egyptians returned to Egypt, first due to the 2011 uprising and 2014-2015 waves of violence due to rival groups seeking control of the territory of Libya. Despite this, Egyptian migrants continue to migrate to Libya in search of a better future (El-Kamouni et al., 2019).

3.3. LIBYAN LABOUR MARKET: Key Characteristics

Over the past few years, a number of studies assessed the state of the Libyan Labour Market (see for instance: REACH 2022 (a); REACH 2022 (b)). These studies outline the following main trends affecting the country's labour market: a bloated public sector (employing nearly 70 per cent of salaried employees); a private sector with limited capacity, and an education system that could be strengthened. The following sections outline the main characteristics of the Libyan labour market in further depth.

Libyan labour market appears sufficiently large to absorb foreign labour force, with migrants going to Libya reportedly finding little to no difficulties to find employment (Juillard et al., 2021). In fact, as per DTM's 2022 June-July "Migration Report", 76 per cent of migrants reported being employed in Libya at the time of the interview, while only 52 per cent said they were employed in their country of origin. Migrants are primarily employed in the construction, water supply, electricity and gas sectors, as well as agriculture, pastoralism and food industry (Borgnas et al., 2021).

Besides, migrants are not necessarily perceived by the local community as competing with Libyan citizens in the job market, since they often occupy jobs that Libyans are generally not willing to do. In particular, employers in key sectors such as construction or agriculture report difficulties hiring Libyans because many lack the technical skills for specific positions and desire to perform jobs requiring physical labour (El Kamouni-Janssen et al., 2019). Therefore, these industries reply to varying levels on migrant workers. As such, despite the security challenges faced by Libya over the past decade, migrants continue to provide key contributions to the Libyan labour market.

04. OVERVIEW OF EGYPTIAN LABOUR MIGRATION IN LIBYA

4.1. KEY DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHARACTERISTICS

According to IOM, there is a total of 144,543 migrants from Egypt in Libya which represents 21 per cent of the total migrant population in the country – the second largest share among all nationalities. The majority of whom were single, male and had a middle school level education or higher. The majority of Egyptian migrants were located in the East (47%) or the West (48%) of Libya while a minority are in the South (5%). A significant number of Egyptian migrants come from the following three governorates (*muhafazat*): Menia, Fayoum and Behera. 95 per cent of respondents reported moving to Libya for different economic reasons, related to insufficient income in country of origin (65%); lack of job opportunities at home (15%) or looking for job opportunities in Libya (15%).

• EDUCATION LEVEL

No formal schooling

5%

Incomplete primary

12%

Primary school

24%

Middle school

25%

High school

19%

Post-secondary

14%

Source: DTM flow Monitoring Surveys Jan - Dec 2021

• GENDER

Men

99%

Women

1%

Based on the overall gender breakdown of migrants across Libya (n.b. the breakdown by gender is not available by nationality) there is an estimated 78 per cent adult males, 12 per cent adult females and 10 per cent children.

• MARITAL STATUS

Single, never married, separated or divorced

59%

Married

41%

• AGE

30 YEARS OLD
ON AVERAGE

• THE MAIN REASON FOR WHICH MIGRANTS DECIDED TO LEAVE THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Insufficient income in the country of origin

65%

No job opportunities in the country of origin

15%

Looking for job opportunities abroad

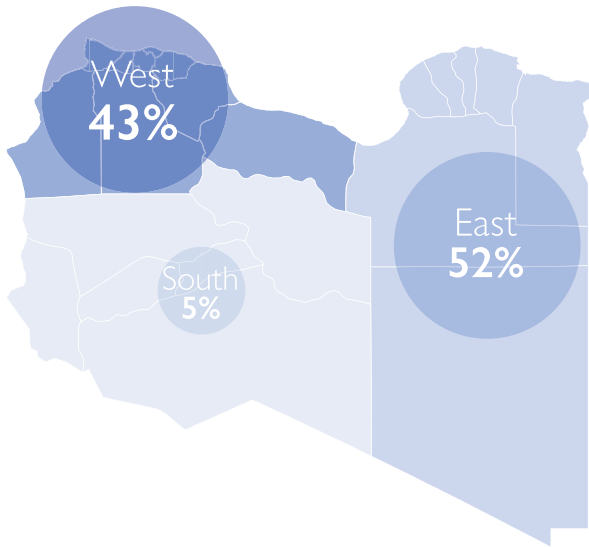
15%

Other

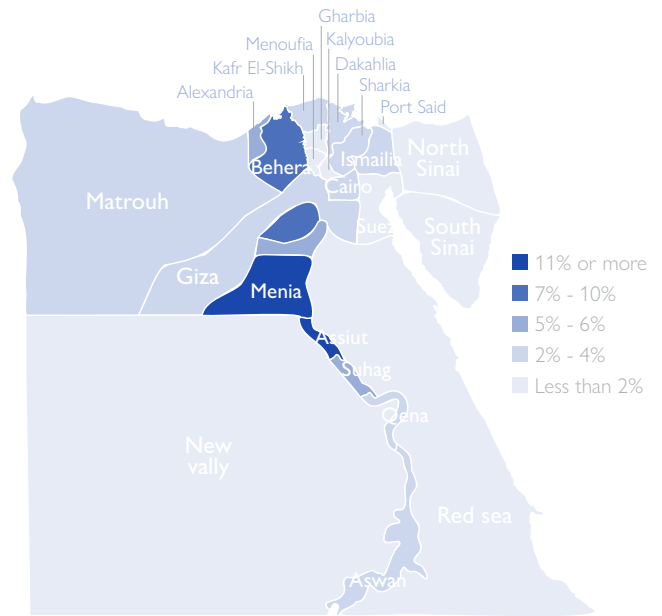
5%

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

The majority of migrants from Egypt are located in the east or the west of Libya while a minority are in the south.



ORIGIN OF MIGRANTS IN EGYPT

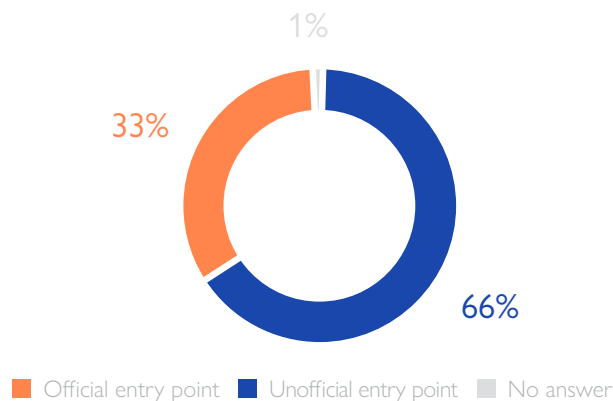


4.2. ENTRY IN LIBYA

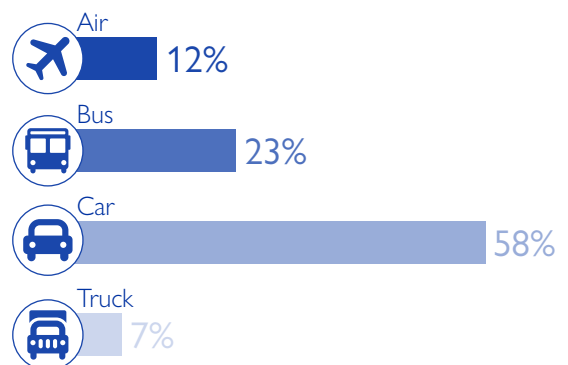
Egyptian migrants' entry in Libya is characterized by large levels of irregularity, with two third of respondents (66%) reporting that they entered Libya crossing the border through an unofficial entry point.

Between 2020 and 2022, modes of transportation used by Egyptian migrants to enter Libya varied significantly. While the majority of respondents (58%) reported entering the Libyan territory with a car, a significant number of respondents reported using other means of transportation, including bus (23%); air (12%) and truck (7%). Corresponding to the variety of transportation modes, respondents also reported a wide range of cost of journey to enter Libya, with reported costs varying from USD 100-500 (30% of respondents) to more than USD 5,000 (2%).

TYPE OF ENTRY



MODE OF TRANSPORTATION MIGRANTS USED TO ENTER LIBYA



Depending on the mode of transportation, Egyptian migrants' experiences of travel vary significantly. In particular, individuals who traveled with cars, buses or trucks outlined that their travel was long, stressful and expensive:

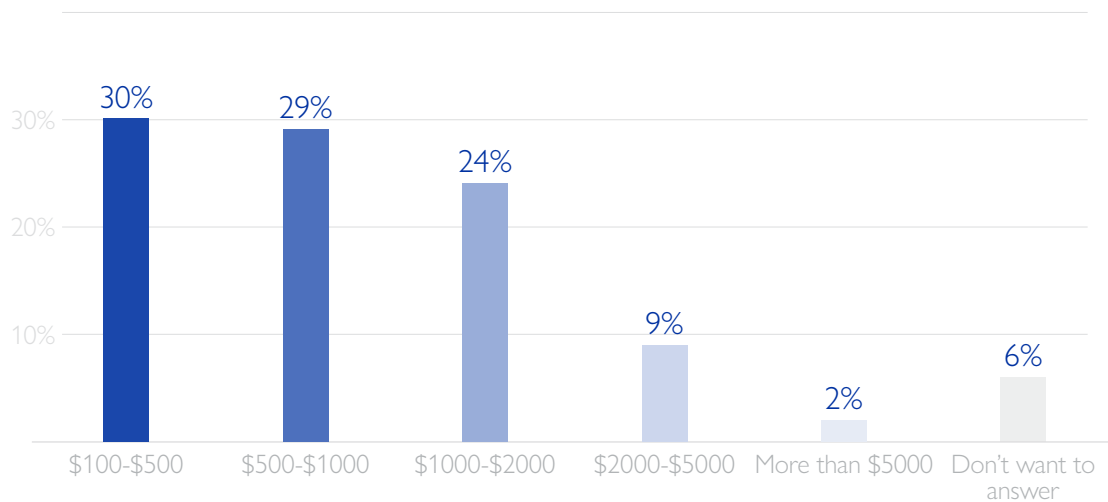
“My trip to Libya was very difficult. I traveled from Minya to Alexandria and from there to Matrouh and passing through Salloum, until I entered the city of Tobruk through Amsaed border crossing. In total it took 16 days. I settled 8 days in Tobruk, 4 days in Ajdabiya and 4 days in Salloum. I was accompanied by migrants from Salloum, who helped with food and transportation. This journey cost about 3,600 Libyan dinnars in total”.

Female, Free Trader / Cleaner, 52 years old

“My trip was from Assiut to Benghazi by land. It was an arduous and long journey. I entered the country illegally. The trip cost almost 1550 dollars. The duration of the trip was from four to five days. I felt very anxious for the trip, especially at the moment of crossing the border. Thankfully my cousins were waiting for me, it was easier to settle”.

Male, Vegetable Grocer, 22

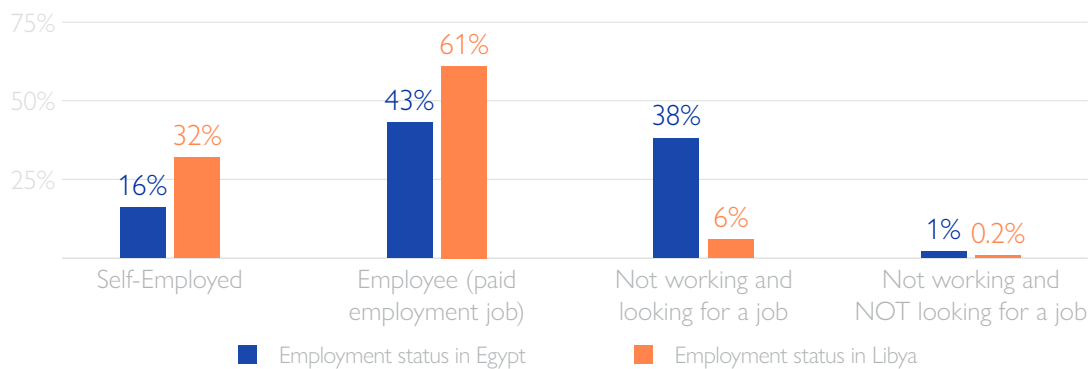
COST OF JOURNEY



4.3. EMPLOYMENT STATUS

A vast majority of Egyptian migrants in Libya are employed (93%), whereas only 59 per cent of them were employed in Egypt. This figure is line with finding in section 4.1. According to which a significant majority of Egyptian migrants moved to Libya due to lack of economic opportunities in their home country. This finding is also consistent with the idea that the Libyan labour market is sufficiently large to absorb migrant labour workers and that Egyptians workers' skills are complementary to those of the local population (Juillard et al., 2021).

EMPLOYMENT STATUS IN EGYPT AND LIBYA



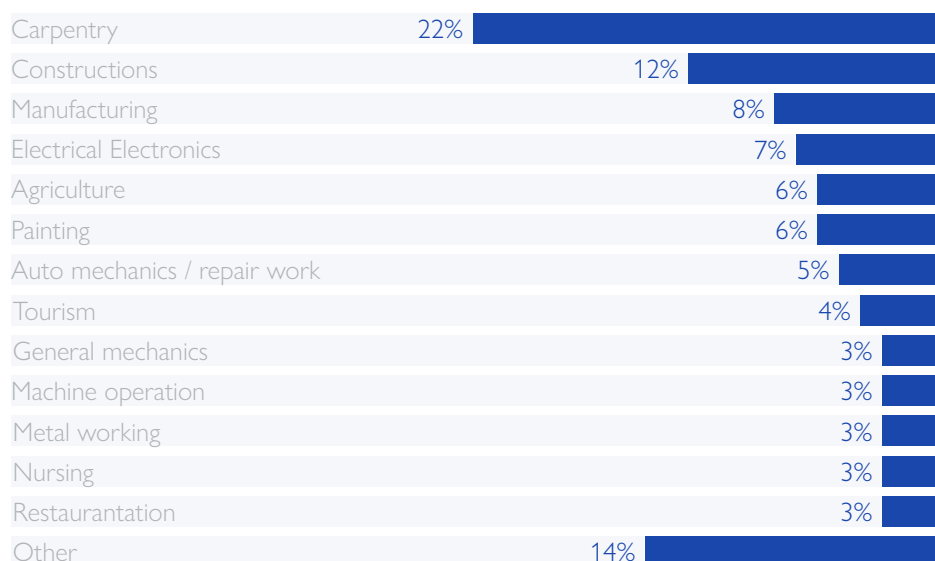
A high proportion of Egyptian migrants are employed in sectors involving a manual activity, such as carpentry (22%); construction (12%); manufacturing (8%); electrical/electronics (7%) and agriculture (6%). Interestingly, a number of respondents also reported that they had several activities at the same time or changed activity over time. For instance, one of the interviewees for this paper outlined that:

“At first, I worked as cleaner in a house, then I participated in a trade with my sister’s friend for a few months. I then moved to work in a sweet factory and learned sewing and embroidery to work in a small clothing factory and started to trade clothes between Libya and Egypt”.

Female Egyptian migrant, 52 years old, Benghazi

As a result, a number of interviewees outlined that their experience in Libya enabled them to acquire new skills. For instance, one interviewee reported the following: *“in Libya, I had several different activities and learned a lot”.*

• EMPLOYMENT SECTOR



Employment of Egyptian migrants in Libya is characterized by considerable levels of informal work, since only 4 per cent of respondents reported having a written and signed contract and 17 per cent reported that they had neither a written contract nor an oral agreement in their job. One interviewee outlined the following:

“I used to work in a sewing business, without contract or agreement with the business owner. On several occasions, I was not payed to the level that I was expecting. The work that I had was daily work and it was very unreliable. From one day to another, I had no idea whether I would be renewed”.

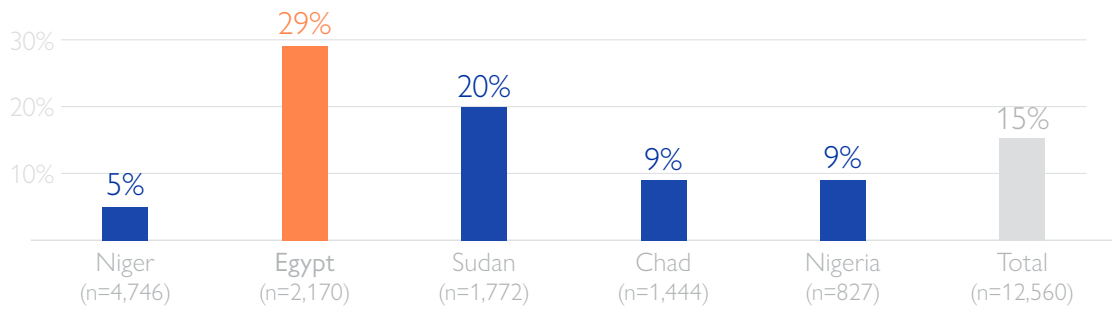
Female, formerly sewer now unemployed, 47, Tripoli

4.4. ACCESS TO DOCUMENTATION

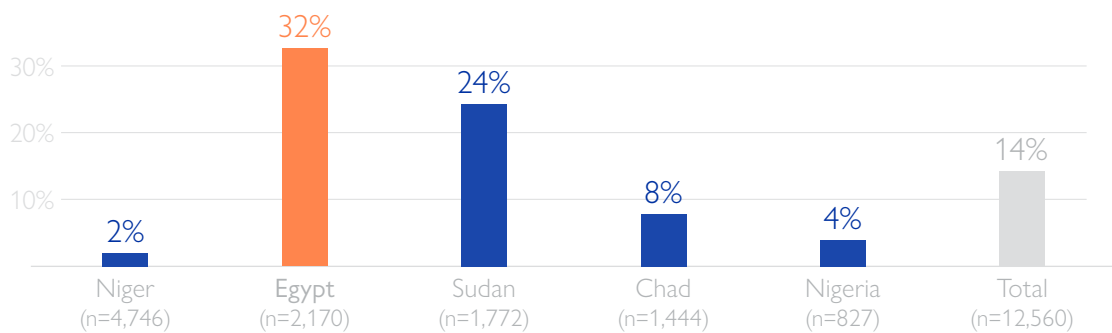
Nearly a third (29%) of Egyptian migrants reported having a work permit in Libya, considerably more than the 15 per cent average for all nationalities. As such, out of the 5 main migrant nationalities in Libya, Egyptians are most likely to have a work permit. A similar pattern can be observed for residency permits. 32 per cent of Egyptian migrants reported having such permit in Libya, considerably more than the 14 per cent average for all nationalities.

A number of interviewees outlined that the lack of documentation constituted a significant challenge to their daily life. For instance, one interviewee outlined that *“the lack of identification papers contributed to a great difficulty in moving and mobility, in addition to lack of safety. I experienced detention in a shelter for 10 days in Benghazi, but I was released after this period”* (female, free trade/cleaner, 52-year-old, Benghazi).

WORK PERMITS IN LIBYA (TOP 5 MIGRANT NATIONALITY)



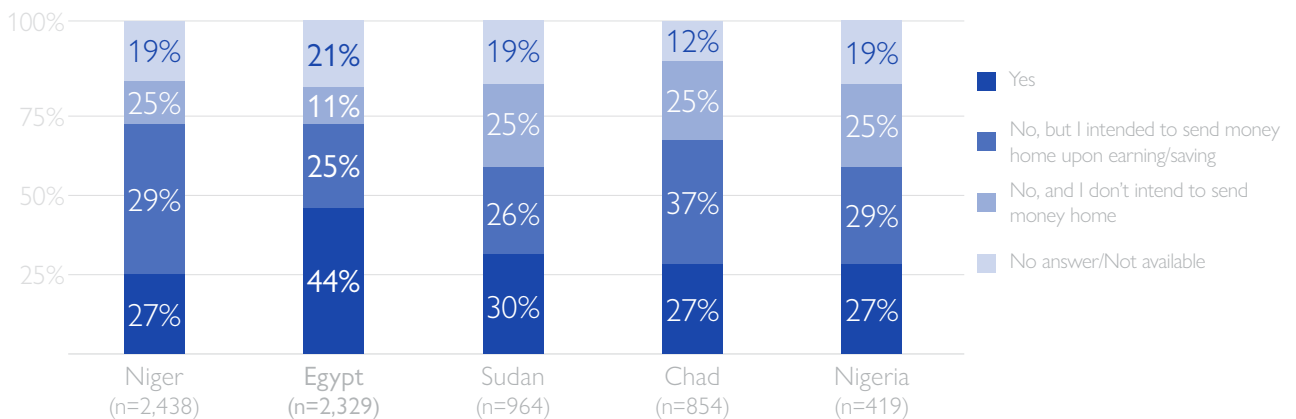
RESIDENCY PERMITS IN LIBYA (TOP 5 MIGRANT NATIONALITY)



4.5. REMITTANCE

Nearly half of Egyptian migrants (44%) reported sending money home since they arrived in Libya. This is significantly higher than any of the other nationalities captured in DTM’s Flow Monitoring Survey. This score may be explained by the employment rate of Egyptian migrants in Libya (nearly 93%). Besides this, Egyptian migration in Libya is long-standing and, in some communities, Egyptian migrants are well established, which likely makes easier transfer of money home. Finally, financial remittances are traditionally one of the key characteristics of Egyptian migration world-wide, with remittances from Egyptian abroad constituting USD 18 billion in 2012 (Zohry 2013).

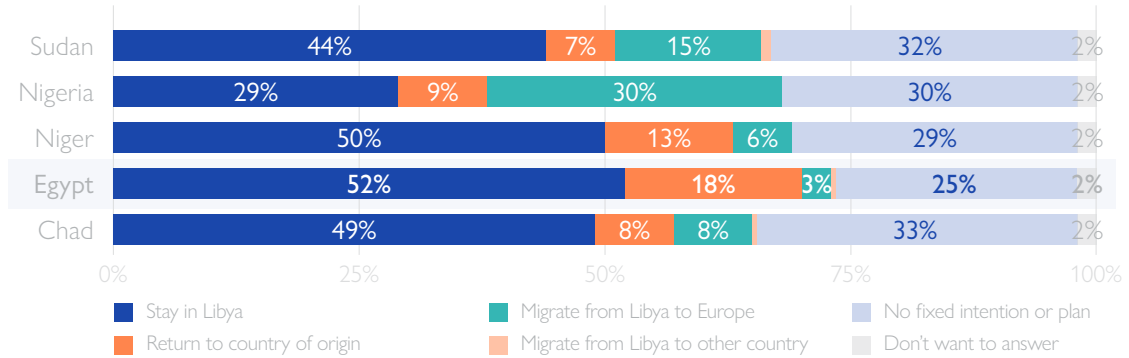
HAVE MIGRANTS SENT MONEY HOME SINCE ARRIVING IN LIBYA? (TOP 5 MIGRANT NATIONALITIES)



4.6. MOBILITY INTENTIONS

Over the period 2020-2022, a majority (52%) of Egyptian migrants surveyed expressed their intention to stay in Libya. This share is slightly higher than other nationalities captured in DTM’s Flow Monitoring Survey.

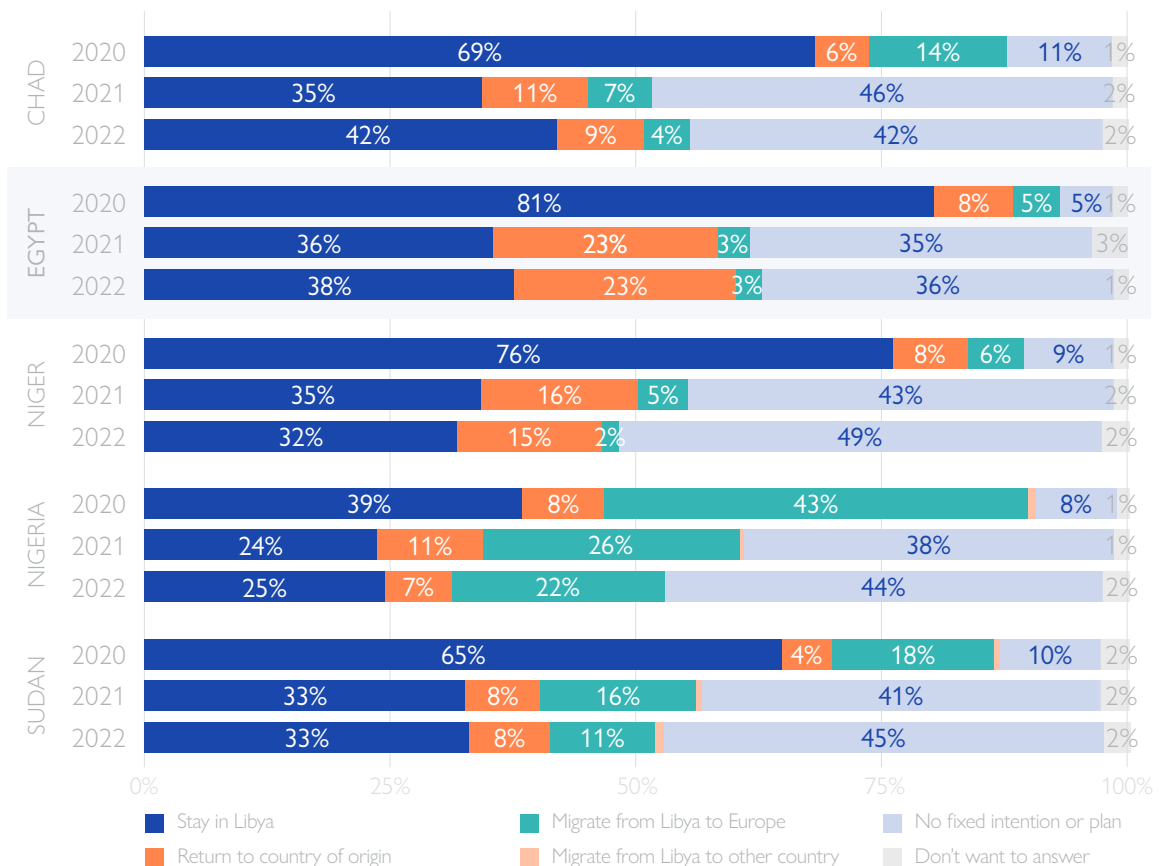
CURRENT MIGRATION INTENTIONS FOR TOP 5 NATIONALITIES IN LIBYA (2020-2022)



That said, Egyptian migrants mobility intentions are not consistent over the years. In 2020, a vast majority of them (81%) intended to stay in Libya, but this percentage decreases significantly significant in 2021 (36 %) and 2022 (38%). This difference is likely explained by the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly limited mobility perspectives for migrants at the time.

In 2021-2022, the percentage of Egyptian migrants who expressed their intention to return to their country of origin increased reaching 23 per cent, compared to 8 per cent in 2020. Similarly, a higher share of Egyptians migrants outlined in 2021 and 2022 (respectively 35% and 36%) that they had no fixed intention.

CURRENT MIGRATION INTENTIONS FOR TOP 5 NATIONALITIES IN LIBYA (2020-2022)



The variety of mobility intentions was also reflected in the qualitative data collected. For instance, one male carpenter outlined his intention to engage in circular migration:

“The near future plan is to return to Egypt, get married, have a period of rest. Then I will return again to Libya. Job opportunities are always available. The financial income is very good, and I also have many relationships with Libyan contractors. I understand the customs and traditions of the Libyan society, and I can communicate and work with them comfortably, which makes me stable here. I have no intention of leaving and working in any other country”.

05. CONCLUSION & WAY FORWARD

Despite political changes and conflict, Egyptian migration to Libya has remained a relatively stable phenomenon in the history of both countries since the 1950s. This paper confirms the significant contribution of Egyptian migrant workers both to the Libyan and Egyptian economies. On the one hand, an overwhelming majority of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya are employed (93%), suggesting that they contribute to filling a gap in the labour force of key sectors such as construction, carpentry or agriculture. On the other hand, out of all migrant nationalities in Libya, Egyptian migrants are the most likely to transfer money back to Egypt, which makes them key contributors to the development of the Egyptian economy.

Despite being a long-standing phenomenon, Egyptian migration to Libya is also characterized by large levels of irregularity and informality. A vast majority of Egyptian migrant workers reported that they entered Libyan territory through unofficial entry points. Besides, many do not have contracts with their employers or residency/work permits, oftentimes resulting in high levels of stress, anxiety as well as significant protection risks for migrants themselves. This situation also represents a missed opportunity for the Libyan state since Egyptian migrants do not contribute to Libyan public finances through paying taxes. While the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding between Egypt and Libya in 2021 is a significant step, its prompt operationalization is paramount to improve the situation of Egyptian migrant workers in Libya.

In particular, key steps ought to be taken towards the regularization of Egyptian workers already on Libyan territory. As per this paper's findings, Egyptian migrant workers fill out an important gap in the Libyan workforce. As such, it is of importance that their status and entry in Libya becomes regular, ultimately ensuring that Egyptian migrant workers in Libya benefit from relevant protection mechanisms.

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ANNEX: QUALITATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

UN Migration Agency

A qualitative questionnaire about Egyptian labour migration to Libya

The date of the interview		Region and city	
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1. Introductory questions:	
1.1.	Please introduce yourself, and then make sure the interviewee answers the following questions:
Nationality	
Age	
Occupation	
Duration of stay in Libya	
1.2.	Why did you leave Egypt and decided to come to Libya specifically, and what is your goal in staying in Libya?
1.3.	How was your life in Egypt? (Any region in Egypt, occupation, description of family/relatives, etc..)

2. The trip to Libya:	
2.1.	How would you describe your trip to Libya? (Duration of the trip, cost of the trip, with/on your own, feelings associated with departure, such as: ease/difficulty of the trip, anxiety before departure, etc.)

3. Life in Libya:	
3.1.	Can you tell me more about your life in Libya? (place of residence; with whom; what jobs the participant has outside work)
3.2.	How would you describe your workplace? (Which working conditions are good/bad and why?)
3.3.	Have you acquired any skills in Libya that you think will be useful for the future? If yes, how do you plan to use these newly acquired skills? If not, what kind of skills will help you get a better job opportunity in Libya?
3.4.	Reflecting on your experience in Libya, what are the main challenges and opportunities?

4. Prospects:	
4.1.	What are your main projects for the coming years? (i.e. stay in Libya / return to Egypt / go to a third country)



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