

Asylum seekers' experiences on the migration journey to Italy (and beyond): Risk factors and future planning within a shifting political landscape

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Abstract

Images of desperate migrants attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea often encapsulate Italy's role in global migration, yet a variety of political developments – including the closing of Italian ports to humanitarian ships since 2018 – highlight a political landscape that is increasingly opposed to newcomers. This study utilises survey-based, quantitative interviews with 810 asylum seekers in Lombardy, conducted in 2017 and 2018, to better understand the impacts of recent political shifts. Findings show that the journey is becoming more dangerous, and that extremely adverse conditions are experienced across a range of categories. Data also suggest that despite the high rates of victimisation and growing anti-migration sentiment, migrants plan to remain in Italy and would most likely make the same choices. Moving forward, these preliminary data emphasise the need for additional research – perhaps made possible with new communication technologies – and long-term strategic responses, rather than short-term 'emergency' planning.

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean migration 'crisis'¹ garnered renewed international attention in the summer of 2018, beginning when the Aquarius – a search-and-rescue vessel operated by *Médecins Sans Frontières* (Doctors Without Borders)

and SOS *Méditerranée* – was turned away from Italy on June 10. Its 629 migrants were at the centre of a political standoff until Spain's government offered its port in Valencia. Far-right Italian politician Matteo Salvini², who had complained that other European states did not take adequate responsibility for accepting asylum seekers and migrants, declared victory – while others viewed the event as a 'symptom of a sick Europe' (Baker, 2018). Meanwhile, the hashtag #chiudiamoporti (#closetheports) became popular on social media. Similar dramatic events unfolded throughout the summer and into the following years, even though sea arrivals during this time were low compared to seasonal peaks observed between 2014 and 2017.

While these news stories situate Europe-bound migrants within the public imagination, scholars have limited knowledge about the so-called 'desperate journeys' at Europe's borders (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). Researchers have not fully appreciated the significance of the journey itself, which is viewed as a 'rite of passage' for young people in many countries (Birchall, n.d.; Grätz, 2010: 6). They often approach it merely as a transitory stage and focus their attention on the causes and consequences of exile. Until very recently, there has been a 'significant lacuna in research on refugee journeys' with most attention focussed 'on either one end or the other of the migration process' (BenEzer & Zetter, 2015: 299).³ Migration scholars have begun to challenge this view (see Crawley & Jones, 2020; Schapendonk et al., 2020), although the quantitative literature remains extremely limited. Some argue that the journey itself can 'be as complex and significant as other phases of migration' and it may have important implications for other phases of the migration process, especially if it is characterised by violence and trauma (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016: 247).

To contribute to growing scholarship on the migration journey, this article utilises survey-based, face-to-face quantitative interviews with 810 refugees and asylum seekers in northern Italy's Lombardy region. Data were collected in two different cross-sectional surveys, carried out in 2017 and 2018 by the Regional Observatory for Integration and Multiethnicity of the Italian Region of Lombardy (ORIM). Our aim is to (1) better understand the risk factors associated with the migration journey, and (2) to understand migrants' perception of the journey after their arrival and future intentions. These objectives are particularly relevant in the face of increasing restrictions on freedom of movement and rising anti-migrant sentiments in Italy (and throughout the European Union). This article first provides an overview of the Italian politics of migration, including recent developments that impact the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, giving political context for our study. Second, we outline the methodology used for this project, including a summary of the sample population and a description of the two-stage sampling design. Third, our findings centre on the risk factors experienced along the journey,⁴ as well as migrants' consideration of future plans. Data suggest that the journey to Italy is becoming more dangerous for migrants across a range of categories, and that migration strategies may be shifting to long-term plans in response to restrictions on onward movement. Lastly, we consider limitations of our study and offer recommendations for future research, with particular emphasis on opportunities related to technological advancements.

THE ITALIAN POLITICS OF MIGRATION AND THE 'REFUGEE CRISIS'

Historically a country of emigration, Italy has become a destination for migrants – both as a place for permanent settlement, as well as a transit country amid journeys further into the European Union (Colombo & Dalla Zuanna, 2019). Beginning with its first significant immigrant arrivals in the 1970s and following rapid increases during the 1990s and early 2000s, Italy has played an 'outsized role' in the current European migration situation 'by accident of geography' (Scotto, 2017). If the international economic crisis temporarily pushed the issue of immigration to the background of Italian politics and media coverage from 2010 to 2013, the onset of the European refugee 'crisis' brought it back to the forefront. Forced migration stemming from instability and human insecurity in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region following the Arab Spring – and particularly the re-escalation of conflict in Libya beginning in 2014 (McMahon & Sigona, 2016) – brought the issue of asylum to Italy's full attention. The Central Mediterranean route was the first major gateway of the current migration situation, with principal

launching points in Libya and Egypt (Tinti & Reitano, 2017: 90) and later Tunisia (Mixed Migration Hub, 2018; REACH, 2018). The Central Mediterranean migration route is by far the world's deadliest; nearly 20,000 deaths were recorded between 2014 and 2020, with an annual death rate that ranges between a minimum of 1.98 per cent in 2015 and 2017 and a maximum of 4.78 per cent in 2019 (Dearden et al., 2020; International Organization for Migration, 2020).

Policy responses changed during the onset of the crisis, leading to growing opposition to asylum-related migration and finally to more restrictive laws. An October 2013 shipwreck near the island of Lampedusa prompted the Italian government to launch the search-and-rescue operation Mare Nostrum. When arrivals reached unprecedented peaks; however, opposition parties argued that Mare Nostrum created a call effect for unscrupulous migrant smugglers. Even though the 'pull factor' thesis has been challenged by a lack of statistical evidence (Colombo & Dalla Zuanna, 2019), it remains popular among politicians and helps delegitimise search-and-rescue operations, thereby shrinking space for solidarity with migrants and refugees (Maccanico et al., 2018). Operation Mare Nostrum was replaced by a stripped-down, Frontex-led Operation Triton in November 2014 and by Themis in February 2018, which aimed to prevent foreign terrorist fighters from entering the EU (European Council, 2020). The European Council also established Operation Sophia (EUNAVFOR Med) with the aim of destroying smuggling networks and possibly making interventions into Libyan territory (see Abbondanza, 2017; Scotto, 2017).

Arrivals to Italy repeatedly peaked between 2014 and 2017 (Figure 1), heavily impacting the fragmented Italian reception system that was unable to keep up with international protection requests (Busetta et al., 2019; European Asylum Support Office, 2020). Deficiencies in the reception system, arbitrary decision-making, and migrants' efforts to leave Italy all contributed to increasing irregular migration and settlement (McMahon & Sigona, 2016). At the same time, the costs related to migrants' reception increased from just over 300 million euros in 2011 to almost 3 billion euros in 2017 (Villa et al., 2018). In 2017, the Italian government signed controversial bilateral agreements with Libya to curb sea arrivals with the declared aim of reducing migration pressures and avoiding the growth of anti-migration sentiments. It is notable that the political delegitimization of search-and-rescue operations following the Libya agreements led to criminal and administrative proceedings against NGOs and other private entities that deploy rescue vessels (FRA, 2020; ISPI, 2020). Furthermore, the pushback of intercepted or rescued migrants on the Mediterranean, often framed as 'rescue operations', have been criticised for violating the fundamental principle of *non-refoulement* – the legal concept that no one should be returned or sent to territories where they will face persecution, torture, or other degrading or inhumane treatment. The European Court of Human Rights found Italy in violation of the principle of *non-refoulement* in the *Hirsi Jamaa v. Italy* (2012)

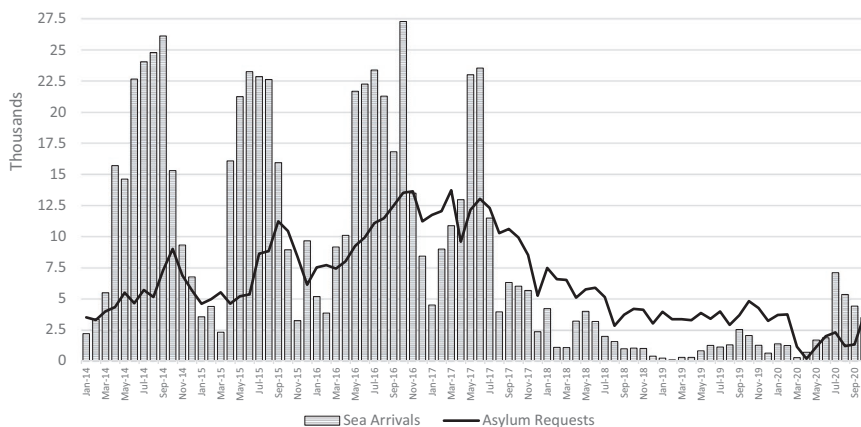


FIGURE 1 Sea arrivals and asylum requests to Italy, January 2014–October 2020. Source: Authors' elaborations on the Italian Ministry of Interior data

case, for instance, and subsequent incidents have directed rescued migrants back to Libya from Italy and Malta (Papastavridis, 2015: 237-238).

The securitised approach to European migration, including Mediterranean migration to Italy, has led to grave human rights consequences – including unique vulnerabilities for children and women. The EU approach has 'emphasised policing, defence and an effort to push migrants back into non-EU countries rather than respect for human rights' (Ambrosetti & Petrillo, 2017: 27). A study of Afghan unaccompanied minors along the Eastern Mediterranean route, for instance, highlights how the securitization of EU's external borders leads to consequences such as the rise of new smuggling routes and illegal markets, increased threats of rights abuses and even death, and an upsurge in unaccompanied child migrants (Petrillo, 2016). Testimonies from sub-Saharan migrant women in Italy, Greece and Turkey illustrate how 'processes of enclosure and mobility' produce continuous human rights violations, including the risk of death and violence at border crossings followed by risks at external (Turkey) and internal (Italy and Greece) borders (Campani & Lapov, 2016: 142-143). Relatedly, a case study of Nigerian women in Italy focuses on vulnerabilities to sex trafficking and violence, as well as integration challenges such as lack of medical care and employment (Montenegro, 2018). 'Without a gender and age-sensitive approach to policymaking, we cannot fully understand the needs, experiences and motivations of refugees and migrants', writes Jenny Birchell, a researcher for UNICEF. 'Without it, policymaking cannot address migration and forced displacement at its root causes, and it cannot promote and enable the opportunities that migration offers' (para 5).

METHODOLOGY

This study utilises 2017 and 2018 data from the annual, cross-sectional Asylum Seekers Survey conducted by the Regional Observatory for Integration and Multiethnicity (ORIM) of the Italian Region of Lombardy⁵. (Blangiardo, 2018). ORIM developed the Asylum Seekers Survey in 2017 to focus specifically on asylum seekers – a subpopulation that is different in its demographic structures, its migratory patterns, and its levels of integration compared to the rest of the migrant population in Italy (Ortensi, 2015). The survey was replicated with a similar questionnaire in 2018. Its sample population is composed of migrants who lodged asylum applications in Italy, irrespective of the status of their applications. This population is, therefore, composed of asylum seekers who are waiting for the first outcome of their application, of migrants who have been granted a form of protection (such as refugee status, humanitarian or subsidiary protection), and of those who were rejected (either awaiting the outcome of an appeal or rejected without further recourse).

To reach its target population, the Asylum Seekers' Survey utilises a two-stage sampling design. In the first stage, asylum seekers are randomly sampled from a list of reception and support centres in Lombardy. In the second stage, migrants identified in those lists are chosen at random for survey-based interviews. This methodology was previously used to survey asylum seekers population in Italy (e.g. Chiuri et al., 2004; Chiuri et al., 2007). The target population includes foreign-born respondents (aged 18 and over) who arrived in Italy after 2013 and who lodged an asylum application, regardless of the outcome of the request. The interviews are conducted face-to-face in Italian, or in another language by translator-interviewers who have undertaken specialised training. The interviews last between 20 to 30 minutes and the rejection rate in this sample was 15.7 per cent. A total of 810 interviews make up the final pooled database; 409 interviews are from the 2017 survey and the remaining 401 are from the 2018 survey. Variables collected in both surveys are featured in the pooled database. Multivariate models were fit using only information collected in both years to allow for a larger sample size. When relevant, however, we analyse some information collected only in a single year.

Lombardy is a relevant research site for two reasons. First, Lombardy is the wealthiest and most populous region in the country, performing well above the national average in terms of all the major economic and employment indicators (Baussola, 2007). It is, therefore, perceived as a region that can offer asylum seekers opportunities to work and settle. Second, Lombardy's ORIM produced a unique data set focussed on asylum seekers that is

unavailable elsewhere, regionally or nationally. This data set enables us to shed light on the migration journey and asylum seekers' future intentions. Limitations of our data are discussed in the concluding section.

After providing a descriptive analysis of covariates, we then use a logistic regression model to assess the relationship between personal characteristics and the experience of extreme adverse situations, including violence and torture, during the journey to Italy. Due to the nature of the nominal dependent variable in each model and the available information in our survey, we use a logistic regression model for subject-specific covariates. Since migrants are clustered into countries of origin sharing similar backgrounds, observations are independent across groups (clusters) but not necessarily within groups. For this reason, we specify that the standard errors allow for intragroup correlation, relaxing the usual requirement that the observations be independent. We consider the following set of negative travel-related experiences:

- *Model 1*: Experience of hunger, thirst and illness during the journey to Italy
- *Model 2*: Experience of extortion and robbery during the journey to Italy
- *Model 3*: Experience of maltreatment, violence and torture during the journey to Italy
- *Model 4*: Experience of arrest and deportation during the journey to Italy

We control for the following covariates in each model: Marriage status, gender, age at arrival in Italy, year of arrival, migration principal decision-maker, presence of family or friends living abroad before migration, religion, job condition before migration, education, and reason to leave the country of origin. The covariate accounting for the continent of birth is also meant to account for different migration routes.⁶ We also test a set of interactions to disentangle various dimensions of risk, including the impacts of gender, age, year of arrival, place of origin, familial involvement in decision-making, job status, and motivations for migration. Only the interaction between gender and marriage status is relevant (except for model 1) and, therefore, included in the final models.

In the second part of our findings, we examine data related to migrants' consideration of their future plans and next steps. Model 5 shows determinants of the intention to remain in Italy 12 months post-interview versus the intention to continue the journey to another destination.

RESULTS

Distribution of the variables used in the models is outlined in Table 1, which includes data related to family and educational backgrounds, as well as reasons for migration, decision-making factors, and experiences along the journey. Respondents primarily identified as male (81.9%) with a median age of 26.6 years, compared to female respondents (18.1%) with the median age of 27.2 years. The majority of respondents were unmarried (78% of males, 56.6% of females) with varying levels of education and employment before migration. Most respondents left primarily in order to seek protection (75.77% of males, 66.9% of females) and were the primary decision-makers in this process (78.4% of males, 57.9% of females), although families did have input in decision-making, particularly among women. Furthermore, the majority of respondents did not have family or close friends in Italy before leaving (68.1% of males, 66.2% of females) and intended to remain in Italy for at least the twelve months following the interview (86.1% of males, 80.6% of females).

The occurrence of negative experience during the journey is extremely high; more than 70 per cent of respondents experienced hunger, thirst and illnesses, while more than 60 per cent experienced maltreatment, violence and torture. Men are nearly twice as likely to report extortion or robbery (49.5%) compared to women (28.3%). Finally, men are again more likely to report arrest and deportation (41.4%) compared to women (33.1%).

Our multivariate analysis of migrants' experiences with adverse conditions during the journey to Italy suggests that, among individuals in our sample, common assumptions about vulnerabilities are increasingly proven false as the journey becomes more dangerous; men and women, young and adult migrants all face high risks of

TABLE 1 Distribution of the variables used in the models by gender. ORIM Asylum Seekers survey, 2017–2018

	Male	Female
Gender	81.9	18.1
First five national groups	Nigeria (26.6) Senegal (9.8) Pakistan (9.5) The Gambia (7.8) Mali (7.8)	Nigeria (51.4) Eritrea (7.6) Ukraine (6.3) Ivory Coast (5.6) Syria (4.9)
% African migrants	82.3	84.8
Mean age	26.6	27.2
% unmarried	78	56.6
% with primary education or lower	37.1	42.8
% graduate	5.4	3.5
% unemployed before migration	12.1	13.2
% employed before migration (stable employment)	37.1	23.6
% employed before migration (unstable employment)	33.7	27.1
Main reason to leave: seeking protection	75.77	66.9
Main migration decision-maker: self	78.4	57.9
Main migration decision-maker: family	16.7	33.1
Family or close friends in Italy before leaving	8.9	17.2
No family or close friends in Italy before leaving	68.1	66.2
Waiting for first decision on asylum application	46.7	73.1
% who speaks and understands Italian	49.5	26.4
Distribution of Models' dependent variables		
Experience of hunger, thirst and illnesses during the journey to Italy	74.1	71.2
Experience of extortion or robbery during the journey to Italy	49.5	28.3
Experience of maltreatment, violence, torture during the journey to Italy	66	62.1
Experience of arrest and deportation during the journey to Italy	41.4	33.1
Intention to remain in Italy in the 12 months after the interview	86.1	80.6

Source: Authors' elaboration on ORIM Asylum Seekers Survey data, 2017–2018

extremely adverse conditions. More recent arrival cohorts in our sample face extreme difficulties, particularly if they originate from sub-Saharan Africa and/or are moving in search of international protection. Even those with resources commonly assumed to lessen risks – such as family support, networks and financial assets – are not guaranteed safer passage. These findings suggest that the journey to Italy is becoming more dangerous for migrants.

Data highlight dimensions of risk along the journey associated with gender and age, although the results are sometimes surprising. Women are commonly considered to be more at risk during migration than men, for instance – and certainly, there are instances when women face severe and often unique threats (see Del Re, 2018) – yet our data show that the risk of experience extremely adverse conditions is high for both men and women alike. Women are significantly more at risk of experiencing maltreatment, violence (including sexual violence)

and torture (model 3) than men, but their risk is not significantly different compared to men in models 1, 2 and 4. This gendered dimension interacts with marital status; married women are less at risk for experiencing extortion, violence and deportation than unmarried women (models 2–4). This relationship might be related to the fact that married women are more likely to travel with the partner or other family members compared to unmarried women, a dimension that we cannot explore in our data set. At the same time, married men are more at risk than unmarried men for all considered outcomes. Similarly, younger migrants are commonly assumed to face more severe threats along the journey. Our data show that age is another relevant factor, although only in relation to certain threats. Younger migrants are more at risk of experiencing maltreatment, violence, torture, arrest and deportation (models 3–4). However, our analysis shows that age is not correlated to a significantly higher risk in relation to hunger, thirst, illness, extortion and robbery (models 1–2).

Year of arrival and geographic place of origin are also associated with risk, highlighting how the journey is becoming increasingly dangerous – and especially for migrants from particular parts of the world. The timing of arrival in Italy is significant in models 1 and 4, suggesting that conditions in transit countries are quickly deteriorating. Those who arrived more recently are significantly more likely to experience hunger, thirst, illness, arrest and deportation during their journey. For instance, those who arrived in 2016 tend to fare better than those who arrived in 2017. This is consistent with the recurrent evidence that journeys are being increasingly complicated by restrictions on freedom of movement, which in turn fuel smuggling and more extreme risk-taking (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Tubiana et al., 2018; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2018). Sub-Saharan African migrants in the sample faced more risk in transit compared to others. Indeed, the risk of experiencing hunger, thirst and illness (model 1) is three times higher than that of non-sub-Saharan African migrants. The risk of experiencing maltreatment, violence and torture (model 3) is six times higher, and sub-Saharan Africans are nearly five times more likely to experience arrest and deportation (model 4). The risk of extortion and robbery (model 2) is the only model that remains the same for both sub-Saharan African and non-sub-Saharan African migrants. Notably, African migrants represent the majority of our sample; four of the five most common national groups within our sample of male respondents originated in Africa (Nigeria, Senegal, The Gambia, and Mali). Sub-Saharan African countries made up three of the five most common national groups within our female participant pool (Nigeria, Eritrea, and Ivory Coast).

Family and employment status also factor into risks along the journey. Data show that migrants who migrated mostly as the result of a family decision are less at risk for experiencing hunger, thirst and illness (model 1) compared to those who decided autonomously, suggesting that they could possibly rely on family economic resources to afford the travel. (However, migration decision-making is not significant for models 2–4 that account for violence and abuses.) These mixed findings suggest that family support and networking is complex, and perhaps does not offer positive benefits frequently assumed. For instance, migrants who had a family member or friends living outside their country before migration do not experience better journey conditions. Further, having a stable job before migration – and, therefore, possibly having more reliable financial conditions – does not result in a safer journey to Italy. On the contrary, migrants who had less regular/formal working conditions before migration (namely students, the unemployed or homemakers) face less risk of maltreatment, violence and deportation (models 3–4) compared to those who had a stable job. Additionally, education level does not reduce risks along the journey.

Finally and interestingly, migrants who cite reasons related to international protection (such as war, insecurity, discrimination or persecution) as their main reasons for leaving their home country are significantly more at risk for experiencing hunger, thirst, illness, extortion, robbery, maltreatment, violence and torture (models 1, 2 and 3) during the journey to Italy (Table 2). In the population surveyed and in the context of mixed migration flows, therefore, people leaving for reasons related to protection are significantly more vulnerable than other migrants (for instance, migrants journeying to Europe for primarily economic motivations). Notably, we tested a set of interactions to assess whether this condition interacts with other dimensions, such as gender or age, but no significant interaction was found.

TABLE 2 Odds ratios (OR) and related standard errors (SE) of experiencing extreme adverse conditions during the journey to Italy

	Experience of hunger, thirst and illnesses during the journey to Italy Model 1		Experience of extortion and robbery during the journey to Italy Model 2		Experience of maltreatment, violence, torture during the journey to Italy Model 3		Experience of arrest and deportation during the journey to Italy Model 4	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Marriage Status: Married (ref. Unmarried)	2.171**	0.493	1.979*	0.539	2.527**	0,728	2,078**	0,527
Marriage Status: Separated or widowed (ref. Unmarried)	0.623	0.434	0.392	0.245	0,429	0,364	2,353	1,603
Interaction Marriage status#Gender: Married#Women	0.543	0.298	0.446*	0.176	0,135***	0,077	0,309***	0,104
Interaction Marriage status#Gender: Separated or widowed#Women	2.277	1.764	2.602	2.688	1,577	1,391	1,245	0,930
Gender: Female (ref. Male)	1.076	0.202	0.545	0.233	2,365*	0,840	0,804	0,206
Age at arrival in Italy	0.982	0.018	0.990	0.013	0,952***	0,013	0,954***	0,012
Year of arrival	1.273**	0.108	1.067	0.075	1,036	0,083	1,392***	0,124
Continent of Birth: sub-Saharan Africa (ref. Other)	3.082**	1.288	1.424	0.464	6,332***	2,755	4,925***	2,066
Who decided to leave: Family (ref. Self)	0.658**	0.104	0.989	0.182	0,941	0,192	0,932	0,155
Who decided to leave: Other persons (ref. Self)	0.524*	0.170	0.726	0.177	0,638	0,179	1,035	0,196
Family or friends living abroad before migration: Yes (ref. No)	1.604**	0.229	1.218	0.216	1,075	0,209	0,812	0,143
Religion: Christian (ref. Muslim)	0.754	0.172	0.879	0.136	0,497***	0,096	0,666*	0,116
Religion: Other/no religion (ref. Muslim)	0.857	0.709	0.594	0.450	0,308	0,189	0,538*	0,158
Job condition before migration: Unstable job (ref. Stable job)	1.780*	0.411	0.844	0.144	0,672*	0,135	0,602***	0,082
Job condition before migration: Other (ref. Stable job)	1.395*	0.215	0.743*	0.096	0,564**	0,114	0,692**	0,088
Education: Junior high school or professional school (ref. None or primary)	1.065	0.195	0.961	0.138	0,783	0,121	1,504**	0,227

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Experience of hunger, thirst and illnesses during the journey to Italy Model 1		Experience of extortion and robbery during the journey to Italy Model 2		Experience of maltreatment, violence, torture during the journey to Italy Model 3		Experience of arrest and deportation during the journey to Italy Model 4	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Education: High school or university (ref. None or primary)	0.985	0.250	0.736	0.159	0.795	0.144	1.063	0.167
Reason to leave: War, insecurity, discrimination (ref. Other reasons, not related to international protection)	1.489*	0.244	1.503***	0.154	2.189***	0.338	1.454	0.291
AIC	880.5		1992.8		934.1		1027.3	
Log pseudolikelihood	-421.3		-527.4		-448.0		-491.8	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Number of cases: 807

Source: Authors' elaboration on ORIM Asylum Seekers Survey data 2017–2018

Considering future plans and evaluating the experience

Data associated with migrants' future plans connect to Italy's changing political landscape, particularly as strategic decision-makers must consider increasing restrictions on onward migration. Table 3 outlines results from model 5, which shows determinants of the intention to remain in Italy twelve months post-interview versus the intention to continue the journey to another destination. The majority (85.1%) of respondents planned to stay in Italy, while 7.0 per cent intended to migrate onward to another country. There is also a proportion of undecided (7.4%), while only a small fraction (0.6%) aimed to return home. Some of the findings are not particularly surprising; for instance, migrants with a better knowledge of the Italian language are more likely to express the intention to stay. Migrants whose application was definitively rejected are less likely to plan to stay in Italy. Other results are more interesting; for example, seemingly important characteristics in the decision to engage in onward migration – including the reason for leaving one's country of origin, education level or job seeking status – had no significant effect on the intention to remain in Italy.

Migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are more likely to express the intention to stay. The size of one's identifiable 'community' that has settled in Italy is also important; migrants who originate from countries with a large number of residents in Italy (a proxy for the presence of easy-to-find ethnic networks) are more likely to express the intention to remain. At the same time, migrants who have family members or close friends living in another EU member state are more likely to express the intention to leave Italy compared to migrants whose community in Italy is small.

Lastly, migrants in our sample who arrived in recent years – from 2014 to 2018 – are more likely to express the intention to remain in Italy compared to those who migrated earlier. Here we perhaps see strategic responses to the closing of borders and the limiting of freedom of movement within the European Union. While conditions are certainly not ideal for asylum seekers in Italy, particularly with increasing policy restrictions and anti-refugee and xenophobic rhetoric propagandised by far-right and populist parties, newcomers have fewer options for onward migration. Legal onward migration in other EU states may require long-term strategic planning that necessitates longer residency in Italy (e.g. by gaining the long-term status or naturalization).

TABLE 3 Odds ratios (OR) and related standard errors (SE) of the intention to remain in Italy 12 months post-interview

	Intention to remain in Italy in the 12 months following the interview (Model 5)	
	OR	SE
Marriage Status: Married (ref. Unmarried)	1.057	(0.435)
Marriage Status: Separated or widowed (ref. Unmarried)	1.114	(0.572)
Gender: Female (ref. Male)	0.694	(0.146)
Age at arrival in Italy	0.992	(0.024)
Year of arrival	1.540**	(0.226)
Continent of Birth: sub-Saharan Africa (ref. Other)	2.253**	(0.603)
Who decided to leave: Family (ref. Self)	0.942	(0.301)
Who decided to leave: Other persons (ref. Self)	2.557	(1.268)
No family or friends living abroad before migration: (ref. Family or friends living in Italy before migration)	0.776	(0.299)
Family or friends living in another EU country before migration: (ref. Family or friends living in Italy before migration)	0.281***	(0.086)
Family or friends living in another non-EU country before migration: (ref. Family or friends living in Italy before migration)	1.431	(0.728)
Religion: Christian (ref. Muslim)	0.399**	(0.127)
Religion: Other/no religion (ref. Muslim)	0.696	(0.328)
Job condition before migration: Unstable Job (ref. Stable Job)	1.832	(0.600)
Job condition before migration: Other (ref. Stable Job)	0.750	(0.172)
Education: Junior high school or professional school (ref. None or primary)	1.597	(0.594)
Education: High school or university (ref. None or primary)	0.938	(0.332)
Reason to leave: War insecurity discrimination (ref. Other reasons, not related to international protection)	0.883	(0.159)
Language: Understands Italian (ref: Speaks and understands Italian)	0.544**	(0.120)
Language: Does not speak or understand Italian (ref. Speaks and understands Italian)	0.496*	(0.172)
Appealed against application rejection (ref. Waiting for first decision)	0.942	(0.497)
Asylum application definitively rejected (ref. Waiting for first decision)	0.434*	(0.234)
Permits to stay granted after asylum application (ref. Waiting for first decision)	0.813	(0.241)
Actively looking for a job: Yes (ref. No)	1.625	(0.557)
Number of children living in Italy with the interviewee	1.292	(0.302)
Number of co-nationals residing in Italy (thousands)	1.016***	(0.004)

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

	Intention to remain in Italy in the 12 months following the interview (Model 5)	
	OR	SE
Number of co-nationals residing in Italy (thousands), squared term	1.000**	(0.000)
AIC	629.1	
Log pseudolikelihood	-282.6	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Source: Authors' elaboration on ORIM Asylum Seekers Survey data 2017-2018

Finally, we consider answers to the following question: 'Based on your experience, if you could go back, you would still leave your country to come to Europe?' using declared negative experiences during the journey. As data are only available for 2018 and the sample is limited, we only present the descriptive analysis based on 399 respondents (Table 4). We observe that while most respondents would repeat the journey irrespective of their experience, the proportion of those who would make the journey again is significantly lower among those who suffered negative experiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Data from ORIM surveys in 2017 and 2018 show that experiences of violence and abuse are pervasive among migrants, especially those originating from sub-Saharan Africa. This study suggests that the dangerous journey is becoming a great equaliser; the likelihood of facing extremely adverse conditions is very high and shared across a spectrum of categories (such as sex, age and socio-economic status) that migrants are frequently classified into. Data also suggest that the journey to Italy is becoming more dangerous for migrants across a range of categories, and that migration strategies could be shifting to long-term plans and settlement in response to restrictions on onward movement that was prevalent in the first phases of the crisis (Stranges & Wolf, 2018). Those challenges – as well as limitations on onward mobility and the territorial selection of the sample – likely factor into why the majority of respondents intended to remain in Italy even in the face of negative experiences during the journey, high unemployment rates and growing anti-refugee sentiments. As migration to Italy becomes more difficult and dangerous, the need for information about the journey itself becomes increasingly important – and yet researchers still do not know enough about that process.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the ORIM surveys covered only reception and support centres in one Italian region and cannot be considered nationally representative. Moreover, most asylum seekers arrive at the maritime border in the southern regions and only afterwards (if they do not voluntarily leave or escape the centres of first reception) are they transferred to the central and northern regions (Stranges & Wolff, 2018). Asylum seekers who arrive in Lombardy are, therefore, self-selected, now living in the wealthiest region of Italy. Second, data are mostly collected among migrants hosted in reception centres. Research shows that many migrants end up living in informal settlements (Busetta et al., 2019; Mendola & Busetta, 2018) and this population is not covered by this survey. Third, data are also partially limited in the scope of collected variables; information about the eventual presence of family members during the journey – a factor that may create a buffer against abuses, especially for women – is not available. Finally, despite the high occurrence of reported negative experiences during the journey in our sample, previous research suggests that violence during forced migration

TABLE 4 'Based on your experience, if you could go back, you would still leave your country to come to Europe'? Answers according to negative experience declared.

	Hunger, thirst and illnesses		Extortion robbery		Maltreatment, violence, torture		Arrest or deportation		Some negative outcomes		
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No difficulty	Total	
Yes, I would definitely make the same choice again and leave my country	58.6%	34.3%	43.2%	33.6%	57.5%	30.1%	42.1%	33.0%	80.0%	35.9%	37.8%
Yes, I would do it again even if I took many risks / suffered trauma	13.8%	26.1%	18.8%	28.7%	15.9%	27.6%	24.3%	24.3%	0.0%	25.3%	24.3%
Total positive answers	72%	60%	62%	62%	73%	58%	66%	57%	80%	61%	62%
No, because I took too many risks / suffered trauma	6.9%	25.8%	15.3%	29.1%	7.1%	29.4%	13.6%	34.1%	0.0%	24.3%	23.1%
No, I certainly would not do it again and I would not leave my country	5.2%	4.4%	6.3%	3.1%	8.8%	2.8%	6.5%	2.2%	5.0%	4.5%	4.5%
I do not know	13.8%	8.8%	15.3%	4.9%	9.7%	9.4%	12.6%	5.9%	15.0%	9.2%	9.5%
He or she does not declare	1.7%	0.6%	1.1%	0.4%	0.9%	0.7%	0.9%	0.5%	0.0%	0.8%	0.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Fisher's exact test: sign.	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.002	-	-

Note: The question was only included in the 2018 questionnaire. Respondents =399. Source: Authors' elaboration on ORIM Asylum Seekers Survey data 2018.

may be underreported (De Schrijver et al., 2018). The extent of underreporting in this survey is unknown and may vary by gender and citizenship.

Even with these limitations in mind, we observe clear evidence of a higher occurrence of violence in the most recent cohorts of arrival. The long-term consequences of recent Italian migration policies are unknown, but it is clear in the shorter term that restrictive measures have increased risks along the journey. Existing scholarship highlights how challenges to free movement fuel demands for human smuggling and trafficking within and beyond the Mediterranean region. Moreover, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in Europe led to a generalised closure of national borders and worsening of the pre-existing 'rescue gap' at sea due to the impossibility of carrying out search-and-rescue operations (FRA, 2020). This did not deter sea arrivals; however, arrivals increased in Italy and Spain during 2020 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020).

The migration journey presents inherent challenges to researchers, although technologies offer new possibilities. While survey data can catch particular moments in time, it is harder to keep track of participants and engage in follow-up survey collection; people move without leaving a forwarding address. Yet this situation is changing with technological advancements in communication tools such as WhatsApp, which provide researchers with new possibilities for engaging in longer term, cross-country research (see United Nations Development Programme, 2018). Technologies also offer opportunities for protecting human rights and offering vital humanitarian aid. Recent attention to promising digital technologies tend to focus on migrants after the journey; for instance, tools for enabling businesses to engage with migrant workers in their supply chains, as well as for enabling migrant workers to engage with each other and access justice (see Farbenblum et al., 2018). Scholars also highlight the ways that information systems and technologies can benefit refugee services after the journey, including within refugee camps or countries of resettlement (Maitland, 2018).⁷

Migration will continue to play a prominent role in Italy's ever-changing political landscape, and research data about the journeys of asylum seekers in Lombardy highlight the challenges associated with this vast issue. While increasing securitization of borders and rising anti-refugee sentiments mark recent politics, desperate newcomers continue to undertake perilous voyages as strategically as possible. Interview data highlight the growing risks associated with migration, as well as hint at a shift towards longer-term strategic decision-making. Further scholarly attention to the journey itself – as well as technologies that might enhance research, advocacy and service provision – offer key next steps for understanding migrants' strategy and survival on their voyages to Italy and beyond.

Peer Review

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ENDNOTES

1. While Italy (and the Mediterranean region more generally) continues to play a central role in debates about migration to the European Union, scholars warn that characterization of the situation as a temporary, unique "crisis" can have serious negative consequences for migrants and ignores the broader problems facilitating rights abuses against displaced people (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018).
2. Salvini was Italy's deputy prime minister and interior minister at the time of the standoff. While he is perhaps Italy's most notorious critic of migration reception, it is notable that such tensions existed before (and after) his tenure and represent a longstanding tension within Italian politics.
3. Benezet and Zetter (2015) notably provide a rationale and an agenda for research on refugee journeys, as well as lay out conceptual challenges.

4. Accurately documenting the scale and nature of risks along the migration route is difficult. Challenges in data collection include the clandestine and irregular nature of the population movements, the sensitivity of shared information, and potential post-traumatic stress (Mixed Migration Centre, 2018). Risks along the way have mostly been documented using qualitative research approach by the UNHCR, IOM, and various non-governmental organizations. Recurrent experiences include witnessed or experienced sexual and/or physical abuse, kidnapping, robberies and detention, and witnessing the death of fellow migrants (Mixed Migration Centre, 2018; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019; Border Violence Monitoring Network, 2019).
5. Quantitative studies on refugees are uncommon due to major difficulties in finding adequate data on which to perform statistical analysis. Lack of large-scale dedicated surveys, nationally representative data, and lists from which to draw large random samples are recurrent challenges (de Vroome and van Tubergen, 2010; Åslund et al., 2010).
6. We tested several sets of recordings, starting from the country of birth, and analyzed pairwise comparisons of marginal linear predictions between more detailed areas or main countries of origin. The only difference was among sub-Saharan countries and other countries, while no significant differences were observed between sub-Saharan countries or between other countries. Surprisingly, we did not observe any significant difference between migrants originating from countries such as Pakistan or Afghanistan, even though many migrants from those countries arrive through the Balkan Route where abuses are largely documented (Jordan and Moser, 2020). For these reasons and for the sake of simplicity, we opted for recoding only distinguishing sub-Saharan countries from other geographical areas.
7. Less developed are ways to utilize technologies along the journey for research, advocacy, and service provision – although technology is already strategically used by migrants themselves. Migrants and grassroots organizers have already identified communication tech as a strategic tool. Activists have engaged in "electronic civil disobedience" along the U.S.-Mexico border for years, such as using cell phones to direct undocumented migrants to safe routes and resources (Dunbar, 2011).

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