

Traffickers turn to teenagers to drive migrant boats across Mediterranean

People smugglers in Egypt and Libya are escaping justice by using children to ferry migrants to Europe, leaving the youngsters to face jail and huge fines

- [Luca Muzi](#) in Catania
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Migrants are taken to the mainland after being rescued by an Italian navy boat. Photograph: Giuseppe Lami/EPA

Traffickers in Egypt and Libya are increasingly using children to drive boats of migrants to Italy. Many of these teenagers are then detained and imprisoned by the Italian authorities, facing up to 15 years in jail and fines of hundreds of thousands of euros.

This year, 18 children have been sent to jail in Catania, Sicily, on trafficking charges. Others are being held in juvenile detention centres in Agrigento, Palermo, Siracusa and Reggio Calabria. Lawyers in Sicily say more and more minors are being charged with offences as traffickers attempt to evade Italian authorities by sending children in their place.

Said, now 19, was only 15 when he was jailed in Italy on charges of aiding and abetting illegal immigration and criminal association.

“I was offered a job as a fisherman on a boat but when we left Alexandria they told me they were going to take 100 people to Europe. I tried to rebel but the captain had a gun and threatened me,” he said from a foster centre in Catania.

“I only understood we were going to jail when one of the other crew told us that the Italians were going to lock us up. I was desperate and I started to cry.”

Lawyers representing minors facing lengthy jail terms say some were threatened, kidnapped or tricked into driving boats for traffickers. Children recruited from Libya, now in Italian jails, say they were taught to drive boats by traffickers in return for a free passage to Europe. Others were offered discounted passage, with few realising what lay ahead.

Khaled, a 17-year-old Egyptian, was held for five months at juvenile jail Bicocca in Catania. He is now living on probation in a foster centre. A few years ago he was helping his family by earning money skippering tourist cruises on the Red Sea.

Speaking to the Guardian through a lawyer working with children in the prison, he said after the tourists stopped coming, he agreed to go with the traffickers when they told him his passage to Europe would be free if he drove the boat. He was arrested when the Italian navy stopped his boat and he was identified as a smuggler by other passengers.



Rescuers from the Italian navy help migrants climb on their boat in the Mediterranean. Photograph: HO/AFP/Getty Images

According to NGOs working in Sicily, Egyptian minors are particularly targeted as potential boat drivers by trafficking gangs. Many come from families who once made their living from boat tourism, or, as sons of fishermen, know how to use and repair the old boats now transporting thousands of migrants to European shores every week.

Ali, a 16-year-old from a coastal village in Egypt, has been held at Bicocca for the past four months. He comes from a fishing family and said he was forced to leave Egypt because of political instability and the economic crisis. He said he felt pressured to help his family economically so he agreed to go with the traffickers when they told him his passage to Europe would be free if he drove the boat. Like Khaled, he had no idea he was committing a crime.

“There is a strong push effect at the moment in Egypt, and the traffickers have a big role in this”, said Viviana Valastro, Save the Children Italy’s director of child immigrant protection. “The broker goes from one house to another telling the parents to let the children leave and saying they will make a fortune in Europe.”

Francesco Turrisi, an Italian lawyer who has worked on children’s cases, says young people are increasingly attractive targets for traffickers.

“Even if [the children] are facing a huge sentence, if they have been told not to talk, they won’t,” he said. “They do not have the capacity to understand if they are being exploited. The traffickers know this and take advantage, leaving the children to take the risk while they stay behind.”

Said hails from a family of fisherman in Kafr el-Sheikh, a small town in the Nile delta. He felt pressure to help his family weather the economic storm that came with Egypt’s revolution. Speaking to the Guardian, he said that after accepting a job on a fishing boat, he was kidnapped by traffickers and forced to crew a packed and rickety boat with more than 100 migrants on board.

He was told that if he made problems for the captain, he would be shot. “The captain was a cruel person. He didn’t give us food or water, and when the passengers tried to complain they were badly beaten,” Said said.

Daria Storia, a lawyer specialising in migration, said Said’s story is a familiar one for those working on the ground in Catania. “It is not unusual that children are forced to work for the traffickers,” she said. “They embark on a boat believing they are going fishing and only after they’re out at sea do they discover they’re coming to Italy – at which point they can’t refuse.”



An Italian military ship arrives in the port of Pozzallo, Sicily, with migrants on board. Photograph: Giovanni Isolino/AFP/Getty Images

Said was one of three minors on that boat. All went to jail, charged with aiding and abetting illegal immigration and criminal association.

“The captain was prepared to be arrested, but I didn’t expect it,” Said said.

Ali spent five months in jail, a time he found isolating and traumatic. “The prison time was very heavy for me, especially because I had no one to talk to, I did not know Italian. The others were talking with their parents, while I was always told that nobody was answering at the number I gave to the authorities,” he said. “I felt guilty because my mother is sick and I was giving her this extra pain. The first thing I did when the judge put me in the foster centre has been calling home. They did not believe I was alive.”

Although his lawyer managed to get him released on probation after five months in jail, Said is stuck in Catania, held at a foster centre with no prospect of returning to his family until he turns 21. He says many children are facing the same ordeal.

“It’s not something they want to do,” he said. “They come from poor families and are forced to do this. The leaders of the organisations are not the ones who are on the boat, they stay on land in Egypt and they remain unpunished. There is a network of protection around these people.”

Ahmed, a 15-year old from central Guinea, is facing 15 years in jail and hundreds of thousands of euros in fines after he captained a boat of 270 migrants from Libya on the instructions of a trafficking gang.

Speaking through a mediator, Ahmed said he crossed Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and the Sahara before reaching Libya. Along the way all his money was taken by trafficking gangs “fining” migrants for safe passage, so he found himself with no means to pay for his crossing.

“They told me ‘you cannot leave if you have no money, but there is another way, you can drive the boat’,” he said. Unlike the Egyptian children, Ahmed had no idea how to do this. The Libyan coast was the first time he had seen the sea. “But they said, ‘don’t worry we will teach you’.”

He claimed the traffickers taught him over seven days how to drive a fishing boat, use a GPS and keep a straight course. He drove the boat for 24 hours before they were intercepted by the Italian navy.

Having been told that he would face jail only if people on board had died, Ahmed presented himself to the authorities as the captain and was arrested. He is being held at a foster centre in Catania, and is due to go on trial next year, charged with aiding and abetting illegal migration and criminal association with an international trafficking network.

Yet unlike Ali, Ahmed has a sense of pride in what he did: “I was the boat captain,” he said. “I drove all the way from Libya with more than 200 people, and nobody died.”