



# Round Table: Responses by Ilse van Liempt

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**Question 1: The rhetoric surrounding smugglers is packed with graphic images of violence and exploitation. What does your research indicate? Are smugglers really parasites profiting on human desperation, or, at the end of the day, do they provide a service to those on the move? How do we move the conversation forward?**

My research takes migrant's perspectives on human smuggling into account. It shows that there is less stigma attached to the smuggling business than the current rhetoric suggests. Smugglers are described as 'helpers', as people who save lives. This perspective is overlooked in current discourse. It is important to realise that smuggling refugees is nothing really new, the need has been there since borders were introduced. What has changed is an increase in the level of border control, surveillance, and resources invested in 'fighting' smuggling,



which has resulted in more complex and professional businesses, especially at the fringes of Europe. Closer to home refugees still often make use of the more family-oriented, small scale smuggling businesses. I do not want to argue that there is no crime involved in smuggling, but we need to better acknowledge the diversity within the smuggling industry. The current discourse around smuggling leaves too little room for understanding the diversity that exists within the smuggling industry and the social context in which smuggling occurs. A way forward would be to emphasise more strongly the unintended consequences of 'fighting against smugglers'. It seems so easy to blame smugglers for tragedies related to migration, but fighting smugglers may cause even more human right violations like preventing people to find international protection against war and violence.

**Question 2: Media, academic and policy circles suggest that human smuggling is a gateway into human trafficking. Many times both terms are used interchangeably. Does your work provide any insight into these phenomena and what does that say about migration?**

Linking smuggling up with organised crime makes it easier to conflate smuggling with trafficking. This is worrying because it puts emphasis on the criminals (read Mafia) behind this phenomenon, rather than focus on the link between the increase of smuggling as a result of a lack of legal migration opportunities. Emphasizing the criminal elements around smuggling makes it easier to 'fight' against it, rather than analyse the direct relationships with European's migration policies and the constraints on mobility for many people in the world today. The [UN Palermo Protocols](#) (2000), the main international legal instrument on smuggling and trafficking, is very clear on how the two terms are legally separated. [My own research](#) shows that in practice smuggling can easily turn into trafficking, especially when migrants do not get any legal security and remain in vulnerable positions. On the other hand, female smuggled migrants are often a priori categorized as victims of trafficking. As such there is a gendered way of applying the concepts of smuggling and trafficking which is problematic because framing female migrants as victims can lead to generalizations that all migrant



women are at risk and need to be protected. This in turn may lead to [protective policy measures that often restrict women's choices even further](#).

**Question 3: Another myth connected to smuggling is the one pertaining to its organisation. We hear of smugglers organised into cartels, networks or transnational groups, but also of small-scale operations. What does your work suggest, and what does that say about irregular migration?**

[My research with smuggled migrants](#) shows clear geographical differences in terms of modus operandi. In some regions smuggling is still rather small scale, however the closer you get to Europe the more organised it becomes. I have called this the 'chain of trust'. Closer to home the chance is higher that one personally knows his or her smuggler or that the smuggler is embedded in local networks. As such there is less risk for exploitation because smugglers will be controlled and personally corrected when things go wrong. I remember interviewing someone whose smuggler decided to quit the job while being en route because one of their group members had drowned while crossing a river and he was responsible himself for communicating this news to the boy's parents.

**See more responses here:**

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