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Fatal Journeys
Volume 4

Missing Migrant Children

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Cover Photo: A girl rides on her father's shoulders as they cross the Serbian-Croatian border.
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Chapter 2 | Vulnerabilities of migrant and forcibly displaced children

Claus Bech Hansen, Jan Beise and Danzhen You[78]

2.1. Introduction

In 2017, 258 million people were living outside their country of birth worldwide; 30 million of them were children[79] (UN DESA, 2017; UNICEF, 2018d). This latter number includes 12 million refugees and asylum seekers who, along with migrant children in irregular situations, are part of mixed migration flows,[80] whereby they travel outside the safety of regularized conditions with visas and travel documents (UNHCR, 2018; UNICEF, 2018a:1).

Children constitute a particularly vulnerable (albeit non-homogenous) group of migrant and displaced populations, under irregular conditions even more so. It stands to reason that children are usually not as resilient as adults and more susceptible to being hurt, as they have physically and psychologically not reached maturity and they are less experienced in navigating society. Evidence suggests that apart from age, factors affecting the vulnerabilities specific to children may include education, ethnicity, travel route and circumstances (accompanied/unaccompanied), and reason for travel (UNICEF and IOM, 2017; IOM, 2017b). Children are often at risk of violence and abuse; they may suffer at the hands of smugglers or may be enslaved by traffickers (UNICEF, 2017b).

Yet, data and evidence on migrant and forcibly displaced children's vulnerabilities are limited. Despite this initial evidence on children's vulnerability, there is poor analytical understanding of the concept, what constitutes vulnerabilities, how it might be amplified or diminished by different factors, and how it is manifested in real-life situations. Research is scarce and only provides limited insight into the many determining factors of vulnerability and the ways in which these interact with and reinforce one another. Apart from a few quantitative surveys (e.g. IOM, 2017b) with sufficiently disaggregated data, most of the knowledge available to researchers is based on the qualitative accounts of children's experiences. Moreover, while recent research points in the right direction, the international community is still a long way from creating internationally recognized mechanisms of data collection that could shed better light on the dynamics of vulnerabilities (IOM, 2017b).

The lack of clarity on vulnerability runs counter to the concept's growing centrality in international law and jurisprudence in recent years. Turner (2006), Peroni and Timmer (2013), Pobjoy (2015) and Flegar (2016) all provide insightful studies to this end, and Flegar (2016:1) has found that vulnerability is increasingly recognized by the European Court of Human Rights as a relevant criterion to provide international protection for migrants, necessitating further clarity of the concept. This chapter examines the relationship between vulnerability, resilience and risk to get

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[79] Defined as 0–17 years of age.

[80] Mixed migration flow is understood to mean: Complex migratory population movements that include refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants and other migrants, as opposed to migratory population movements that consist entirely of one category of migrants. Unaccompanied minors, environmental migrants, smuggled persons, victims of trafficking and stranded migrants, among others, may also form part of a mixed flow (IOM, 2011:2).

a better sense of the challenges and dangers that migrant and forcibly displaced children face and which, in the worst case, can lead to disappearance or death. We outline children's manifold vulnerabilities in different contexts and show how vulnerability can differ dependent on a series of factors. Due to space constraints, we focus primarily on undocumented children travelling in mixed migration movements and the vulnerabilities they face on their journeys. We focus less on the risks they experience in destination countries, upon return to their home country or a safe third country, or on the vulnerabilities of children migrating along regular pathways. As a result, we hope to further inform vulnerability as an analytical concept by setting out its parameters. This can not only lead to a better protection response for children in vulnerable situations, but also create an enabling environment for children to contribute to the communities they grow up in, allowing nations to harness the benefits of migration.

2.2. Risks and vulnerability of migrant and forcibly displaced children

Vulnerability is a central characteristic of any human being. Fineman (2008:9) writes that "vulnerability initially should be understood as arising from our embodiment, which carries with it the ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune." As such vulnerability is a universal feature of the human condition. But vulnerability is also *particular* because some groups are more likely than others to face vulnerability than others (Peroni and Timmer, 2013:1059–60). Children constitute such a group and are typically considered more vulnerable than adults. They have physically and mentally not matured, and therefore are less resilient than adults to the impacts of harm. Meanwhile, stages of growth, strength and development affect the specific degrees of vulnerability: an infant is naturally more vulnerable than a 17-year-old, but they both share an increased vulnerability compared with adults.

The vulnerability of our embodiment – whether it is universal or particular – is not an independent variable. It can be reinforced or diminished depending on the environment in which we find ourselves, or on the potential threats and risk characterizing any given situation. Examples of threats that may exacerbate vulnerability and heighten the risk a person faces in the context of migrant journeys can include poor weather conditions, warfare and human trafficking. In other words, vulnerability, threat and risk are intricately linked.[81] This understanding of vulnerability is reflected in the definition by IOM (2017a:4), which conceives of vulnerability as:

> *the diminished capacity of an individual or group to resist, cope with, or recover from violence, exploitation, abuse, and/or violation(s) of their rights. It is determined by the presence, absence and interaction of factors or circumstances that increase the risk of and exposure to, or protect against, violence, exploitation, abuse and rights violations.*

Moreover, vulnerability is best understood as a series of characteristics (e.g. age, gender, education) that define a person's capacity to resist threats, while risk can be defined as the chance to successfully resist threats in light of a person's vulnerabilities. Which of the characteristics are more decisive than others is defined by the specific context in which one finds oneself, and any research on vulnerability must take into account the intersections between the factors and circumstances that increase or decrease vulnerability. By shedding light on this intersectionality, we can arrive at a better understanding of how individual migrants can become vulnerable beyond their belonging to one particular group (IOM, 2017b:3).

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[81] The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) is a case in point. Its work comprises multiple layers of vulnerability, threats and risk, and the way these interact, to better predict and protect communities (UNISDR, 2016).

One vulnerability rarely comes alone. While intersectionality allows for a better understanding of how threats, risk and vulnerabilities interact, it is important to note that children are often exposed to what is best understood as "vulnerability chains" or "trigger vulnerabilities", that is, where the existence of one vulnerability can spark others when children try to cope with it. For example, debilitating health may lead people to seek help or medicine from the informal economy or through illegal channels because of curtailed access in displacement. Similarly, children – accompanied, unaccompanied or separated – may turn to irregular work and crime to get money to support their family or continue their journey, increasing their vulnerability to exploitative work. In addition, vulnerabilities may change as children move through different countries and regions. This often creates a chain of further vulnerabilities such as lack of schooling, a life on the street and affiliations with crime networks that can be difficult to break (İçduygu, 2016:6; Bhabha and Digidiki, 2017; Ombudsman for Children Sweden, 2017a; Ernst, 2018).

Vulnerability chains and the different dimensions mentioned above – universal and particular vulnerability, as well as determining factors – complicate attempts to clearly demarcate the conceptual boundaries of vulnerability. Just as new, previously unknown risks may arise through contextual changes, previously unknown sides of vulnerability, too, may gain salience due to new threats and risk factors. Further, the concept is challenged by different degrees of vulnerability that characterize migratory groups. A certain tension between analytical sharpness and conceptual inclusion is a common problem. The challenge is to retain analytical precision while at the same time allowing for a degree of flexibility to inform our understanding of vulnerability, to ensure that the concept does not exclude some children.

Vulnerabilities of migrant and forcibly displaced children – towards a taxonomy

Migrant and forcibly displaced children face particular vulnerabilities and are, legally speaking, rightfully awarded special protections in terms of care and entitlements through the Convention on the Rights of the Child (OHCHR, 1989).[82] This is a result of the acknowledgement of their vulnerabilities and the commitment to provide an environment that enhances their capacity to resist, cope with or recover from violence or abuse and ensure their equal chance for development in life. But what are the vulnerabilities of these children and how can we best identify them? Recent research suggests that children who travel alone without the protective support of family or friends, or outside regularized pathways, are more vulnerable to threats such as violence, exploitation or abuse than their peers who move to a new country with their parents through regular pathways with work or other kinds of visas (UNICEF and IOM, 2017:8). This is not to say that children travelling through regularized channels are not vulnerable, but they are better protected and have different vulnerabilities and face different risks (UNICEF, 2018c). However, the considerable data gaps we face on vulnerabilities mean that our understanding is often based not only on fragmented, piecemeal quantitative and qualitative data, especially when it comes to the risks and vulnerabilities of documented children travelling along regularized channels. Rather it is typically based on a series of other sources and fields, including medicine and paediatric sciences, which are used to infer the specific factors influencing the level of vulnerability of migrant and forcibly displaced children. This section analyses available data and evidence to provide an overview of some of the determining factors of vulnerability.

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82 See also Chapter 3 in this volume.

Individual capacity and resilience

It is not possible to draw up an exhaustive list of the factors influencing a child's capacity to cope with adverse and harming influences. But although the evidence base is limited, recent research highlights the manifold ways in which individual capacities or characteristics can protect or put children in danger of harm. Apart from age, a UNICEF and IOM (2017:33–34) study on children's vulnerability on the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes from North Africa and the Middle East to Europe showed that education plays a vital role. Children with a higher education level reported less experience of abusive behaviour during migration than those with little to no education. With the data currently available, we can only surmise about the underlying reasons for this difference, but it is well-documented that schooling is correlated with resilience in children in general (Cahill et al., 2014:5–8). It stands to reason that children's ability – for example, to read or communicate in different languages – enables them to inform themselves about the challenges of a migrant's journey, to familiarize themselves with different environments and to navigate them. But far more research is necessary to arrive at conclusive results.

Equally important to shaping the vulnerabilities specific to children is gender. Girls and young women typically face different vulnerabilities compared with boys and young men, and fall victim to a larger degree to sexual abuse or other certain kinds of exploitation, as shown by trafficking research. Based on recorded trafficking cases, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018a:10) found that 72 per cent involved girls (23%) and women (49%). The types of trafficking vary, but sexual exploitation far outweighs other detected forms that girls and women face, accounting for 62 per cent of all cases (UNODC, 2018a:33). Despite the overwhelming prevalence of female victims of trafficking and exploitation, boys and men are also vulnerable to trafficking, albeit of a different type from that experienced by girls and women. According to UNODC (2018a)'s global trafficking report, 65 per cent of detected cases of trafficking for forced labour involved boys (10%) and men (55%).

While UNODC's account is based on detected trafficking data, other research show that migrant and forcibly displaced children of both genders face acute vulnerabilities, albeit in often different ways, during their migration journeys (IOM, 2015:6–9; UNICEF, 2018b:33–45). Evidence collected from migrant interviews and surveys tell riveting accounts (Human Rights Watch, 2014; RMMS East Africa and Yemen, 2017a; UNICEF, 2018a;). In 2016, IOM interviews with Nigerian women and girls arriving in Italy suggested that more than 70 per cent could have witnessed sexual exploitation during their journey (IOM Italy, 2017:5). Research among migrant and non-migrant populations conducted by the Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC), which holds the world's largest data set on trafficking cases, show that traffickers appear to use similar methods to control children and adults, although children are more likely to be dominated through physical abuse and psychoactive substances than adults (IOM and Polaris, 2018). However, since the data on missing or deceased child[83] trafficking victims are nebulous at best, it is impossible to estimate the number of missing among this distinct group. UNODC (2016:47) data on trafficking victims are based on recorded cases with an estimated very high hidden population, likely making the true number of victims and deceased children far higher.

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[83] Throughout this chapter, the authors use the term "missing" to refer both to those who are missing and presumed dead and those who are missing whose fate remains unknown.
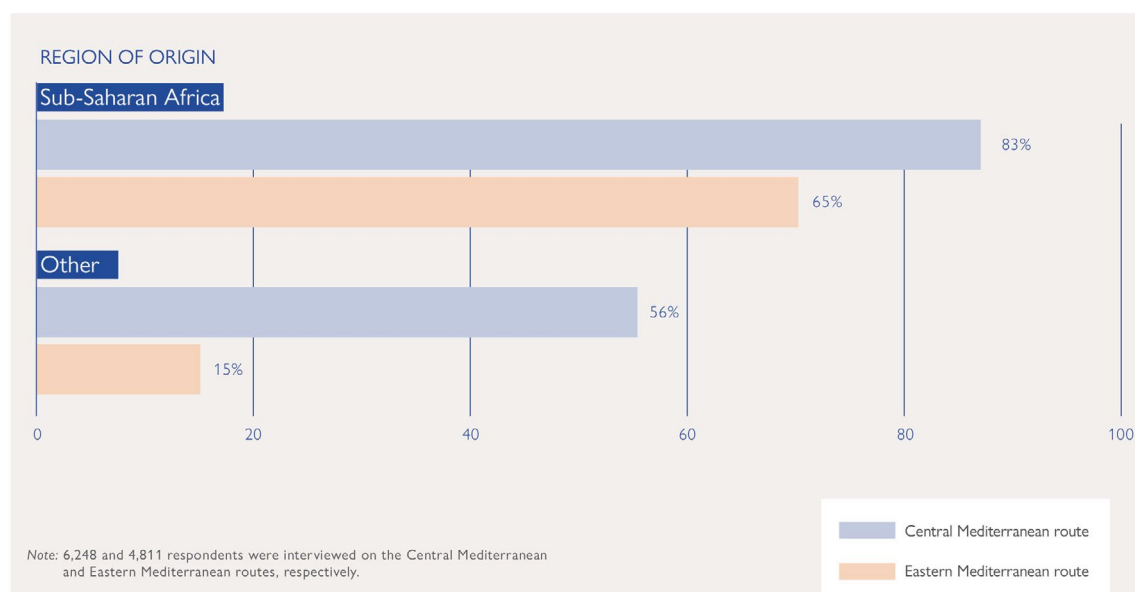
> Twin brothers Aimamo and Ibrahim, 16, migrated from the Gambia on their own, their journey to be paid for in exchange for labour upon arrival in Libya. They did not expect this work to be akin to slavery. Along with 200 other sub-Saharan Africans, they spent two months working on a farm – and enduring beatings and threats. When work was done for the day, they were locked in to prevent them from escaping. After that ordeal, getting on the flimsy inflatable raft that took them to Italy was a relief.
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> Another migrant from the Gambia, 17-year-old Sanna, described being willing to take any work to get the money he needed to continue on his way. "But the Libyans sometimes refused to pay us," he said, "and if we discussed it with them, they would bring a gun. You cannot do anything; we were like slaves" (UNICEF and IOM, 2017:26).

Gender discrimination, homophobia and other phobias against sexual orientation and gender identity is particularly felt by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) children. The US State Department (2019) counts some 80 countries where consensual same-sex acts are criminalized and highlights the need for special protection. In fact, as shown by several studies (UNHCR, 2010:5–9; Zappulla, 2018), LGBTQ adults and children often face the very same discrimination they escape in home countries during their journeys and upon arrival, suggesting that current frameworks are poorly equipped to protect this particularly vulnerable group. Identifying as LGBTQ is a good example of how chain vulnerabilities work. Research has found that LGBTQ-identifying children often face discrimination or outright rejection of care in destination countries (Gruberg et al., 2018: paras. 22–23), while others are less likely to seek medical support due to fear of discrimination (Lambda Legal, 2010:12–13), thus perpetuating a downward spiral of worsening health, which can lead to inability to attend school and so on.

Country of origin and ethnicity are also characteristics that can be a source of vulnerability. Throughout history, population groups have become victims of various forms of racism and xenophobia expressed through pogroms, ethnic cleansing or genocide. Across the world, migrant and forcibly displaced children face discrimination due to the colour of their skin, ethnicity, nationality or religious beliefs. In fact, research suggests that xenophobia and racism may be a driving force of exploitation, violence and abuse against these children. UNICEF and IOM (2017:39) found that sub-Saharan children are at much higher risk than children from other regions travelling on the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes to Europe, experiencing disproportionately high levels of violence and abuse on their journeys (see Figure 11). There are many forms of discrimination based on personal characteristics which include deprivation of statehood and limited access to services and education to name but a few known to be caused by racism and xenophobia.

Figure 11. Adolescents and youth from sub-Saharan Africa are more vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation than those from other regions

REGION OF ORIGIN

Sub-Saharan Africa

83%

65%

Other

56%

15%

| 0 | 20 | 40 | 60 | 80 | 100 |

Central Mediterranean route
Eastern Mediterranean route

Note: 6,248 and 4,811 respondents were interviewed on the Central Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean routes, respectively.

Source: : UNICEF and IOM, 2017.

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Other factors that can have severe impacts on the vulnerability of children are their health and their physique. Poor health makes children less resilient to conditions on their journeys or in displacement. Given their unique physiology, children under 18 – particularly those who are very young – are more susceptible to temperature extremes and their consequences than adults who are better able to adapt (American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), 2018). This is particularly true for children who are disabled and dependent on special support – all the more if they are chronically ill and/or dependent on medication that may be hard to get. Journeys or displacement often come with a considerable lack of access to essential services and doctors, and this combination only reinforces the vulnerability of children.

Social status and wealth also belong to the demographic features that increase or decrease children's capacities to withstand adverse influences and threats. Greater financial resources typically allow for safer travel either by opening up regular pathways or – if in irregular situations – by securing better conditions in smuggling contexts (IOM, 2016:59–61). Research on vulnerability to sex trafficking is suggestive in this regard. Researchers found that in-school adolescent respondents in Nigeria were vulnerable to sex trafficking due to poverty (77.2% of respondents), unemployment (68.4%), illiteracy (56.1%) and low social status (44.5%) (Omorodion, 2009:33). But this research is indicative at best and there is a need for more substantive research between vulnerability and wealth given the many other possible intersections with other determining factors. Education, for example, typically accompanies wealth, while poverty is often associated with lower levels of education. However, we do not know which of these two factors is more significant or how these factors stand in relation to other features such as ethnicity and health. Further research can help conclusively understand better which determining factors carry more significance in which situations.

Contextual factors influencing vulnerability

Apart from the demographic factors influencing vulnerabilities specific to children, the context and situation of migration and displacement are crucial in influencing their capacity to resist adverse influences. And as in the case of demographic factors, it is impossible to draw up an exhaustive list of ways in which the context can produce or exacerbate the vulnerabilities faced by migrant and forcibly displaced children. Nevertheless, research into the challenges they face has produced a considerable evidence base that shed light on how the context can affect vulnerability and resilience.

Ever since the rise in numbers of asylum seekers in Europe during 2015–2016, there has been a strong focus on human smuggling as a measure of facilitating border crossings of migrants or refugees. Despite different contours of smuggling, the premise of smuggling remains a transaction between a buyer – the migrant – seeking irregular passage across one or several borders with the help of a smuggler against some form or payment (ICAT, 2017; UNODC, 2018b). By seeking this sort of transaction, the buyer makes herself dependent on the smuggler, a situation that manifestly increases the risks. The buyer quite literally often places her life in the hands of the smuggler, given the often-extreme dangers facing migrants or refugees in irregularity – be it in overfilled zodiac boats across the Mediterranean, or with "*coyotes*"[84] attempting to cross the desert on the border between Mexico and the United States (UNICEF, 2016b; Stone-Cadena and Álvarez Velasco, 2018). This dependency comes not only at a monetary cost. Evidence from migration routes in Africa suggests that violence and exploitation against migrants is highly likely to happen at the hands of the smuggler, including violence, deprivation of freedom, exploitation and unpaid work (UNODC, 2018b:9). Despite the dangers of human smuggling, it is important to underline that smuggling is a multifaceted business that also entails brokers who provide services that include ensuring the safety of the buyer (RMMS East Africa and Yemen, 2017a; Zhang et al., 2018). Moreover, by relying on smugglers, migrant and forcibly displaced children enter a relationship whereby they may become more vulnerable to violence or exploitation violence or exploitation.[85] At the same time, not all smugglers are abusers and many simply arrange passage for a fee. They can be locals along a particular migration route, who know the language and the terrain (UNICEF, 2017b:22). To better understand regional differences across the world and highlight the nuances of smuggling, there is a need to conduct more in-depth research.

The specific conditions of the journey are also crucially influential to the vulnerabilities specific to children. Typically, migrating on any route without legal status is more dangerous than regular pathways. On irregular journeys, migrants need to avoid border checks and security, and they take hazardous and unsafe measures and methods to do so. Along dangerous pathways, children are particularly exposed to perilous travel conditions, tragically exemplified by the more than 30,000 migrant deaths registered by IOM worldwide since 2014, including more than 650 children who perished on the Mediterranean alone (Missing Migrants Project, 2019). Rough landscapes and natural borders become deadly zones for migrants seeking irregular entry into a country. The Mediterranean, for example, yearly takes thousands of migrants' lives. The same is the case for the Sonoran Desert between the United States and Mexico and the Sahara in Northern Africa.

It is not only the natural environment that influences the safety of migrant and forcibly displaced children on the journey. The security of the countries they travel through is another contributor. In 2017, more than 80 per cent of children passing through Libya experienced violence, abuse or exploitation – far more than in any other country (UNICEF and IOM, 2017:14–16; UNICEF 2017a). In other words, in destabilized, fragile States where violence is prevalent and the rule of law non-existent the vulnerability of migrant and forcibly displaced children rises exponentially. The same goes for war zones or countries that have been struck by natural disasters. The Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat East Africa and Yemen (RMMS; since 2018, the Mixed Migration Centre) has shown how in such contexts State agents such as border guards, police or militias may further exploit a child's vulnerabilities (RMMS, 2017b: 19–21).

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[84] This nickname refers to smugglers and guides who sell their services to people crossing the US–Mexican border.
[85] As discussed in Chapter 4 in this volume, the ability of children to consent to any contract is questionable.

Text box 4. Risks to migrating children on the southern Africa route: Evidence from Mixed Migration Centre surveys

Danielle Botti[86]

Research suggests that there are increasing numbers of children and youth on the move around the world, with an estimated 1 in 8 migrants estimated to be children. Yet there is a lack of robust knowledge on children on the move, particularly those moving in mixed migration[87] flows. This results in uncertainty about how many children are moving, why they are moving, and their experiences and protection concerns along the way. Children in mixed migration flows can be motivated to move by many factors, have different legal statuses (including refugees and asylum seekers) and face a variety of vulnerabilities. Regardless of their status, children are exposed to protection risks at every stage of the migration journey – from when they leave home, throughout the journey, and even upon reaching their destination (if they do).

In 2018, the Mixed Migration Centre's Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi)[88] carried out a study with UNICEF to understand more about children on the move in southern Africa along what is commonly called the 'Southern Route' (a migration route primarily towards South Africa). Using the 4Mi methodology – a unique mobile survey tool – data collectors accessed migrant and refugee communities to gather in-depth data in a context where irregular movements are changing rapidly. Using a specialized child protection-focused survey and strict child safeguarding measures, interviewers in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Zambia interviewed children on the move from countries in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa.

Over 870 children (455 girls and 415 boys) between the ages of 13 and 17 were interviewed, with the average age being 15. The children came from a variety of countries, including Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, South Sudan, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. About half of the children who participated in the survey noted their main reason for leaving home was violence and general insecurity, followed by personal/family reasons, economic reasons, a lack of freedom and/or discrimination in their country of origin, and a lack of social services. Children reported that they chose destinations where they thought they would have better chances of getting a job and sending remittances home, as well as where there would be improved general security and opportunities to access better education, to reunite with family and to access to better medical care.

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[87] The Mixed Migration Centre defines mixed migration as 'the cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel - often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.'

[88] See http://4mi.regionalmms.org/ (accessed 13 March 2019).

What is clear is that regardless of their reasons for migrating or their legal status in the country where they were, children on the move in Southern Africa face a variety of protection risks, including detention, kidnapping and lack of access to basic services: around 25 per cent of children reported not having access to food or clean drinking water and less than half had access to shelter or hygiene facilities. Their risks are further exacerbated if they are unaccompanied (travelling without adult family members or guardians) or lack documentation. Nearly a quarter of the children MMC interviewed were travelling alone,[89] and only 40 per cent began their trip with documentation. Many countries along the southern route treat illegal entry to their territory as a crime and unaccompanied children are therefore often subjected to the same human rights violations as undocumented adults; furthermore, if they are not recognized as children, unaccompanied minors face detention, deportation and violence.[90] Nearly 16 per cent of the children interviewed reported being held in detention, with the average length of detention being about four months. 12 per cent of children interviewed reported being kidnapped or held against their will – over 80 per cent of perpetrators were smugglers or criminals and most children reported they had been freed only after families paid ransoms.

There are serious concerns for the safety and protection of children and young people on the move, and children with an "irregular status" risk falling outside the protection (and identification) mechanisms that could keep them safe. However, child mobility can not only be understood as a source of increased risk of exploitation and abuse, but also as a source of opportunities, and children are increasingly recognized as actors, rather than merely victims. In this sense, child mobility is also a matter of child rights. There is need for more integrated and informed programmes which seek to understand the holistic experience, motivations and needs of children and young people on the move. By identifying the violations that children experience and the points at which abuses happen, MMC research hopes to support partners who can respond to the needs of these children.

Perhaps most evidently, the vulnerability of migrants increases significantly when they travel alone or are separated from their family, legal guardian and/or travel companions. In 2017, UNICEF and IOM found that children travelling alone experience higher levels of exploitation and violence than those travelling with their families (UNICEF and IOM, 2017:31–32). A secure wall of family, guardians or friends diminishes vulnerabilities. Alone and left to their own devices, children are far more exposed to their surroundings and people who seek to exploit them.

The contextual factors affecting vulnerability also include aspects such as length of travel and the accessibility of child protection, as well as health and water, sanitation and hygiene facilities on the migratory route. Typically, the length of the journey and the number of countries and borders that need to be crossed are critical because these factors deplete economic resources and, given the often-poor living conditions, exacerbate mental and physical health issues (Jervelund et al., 2008; Jonzon, Lindkvist and Johansson, 2015; UNICEF, 2018c). All of these factors crucially influence children's vulnerability, but the limited data available on migrant and forcibly displaced children's access to services and experiences along their journeys make it difficult to determine how they intersect.

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[89] For children travelling with a guardian, parents, siblings, relatives, friends and neighbours were the main groups of people that accompanied the child migrants surveyed in the study. In the sample, the older the children were, the less likely it was that they were accompanied.

[90] See Save the Children and Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (2016) Young and on the Move: Children and youth in mixed migration flows within and from the Horn of Africa. Save the Children, London. Available from https://resourcecentre. savethechildren.net/node/10080/pdf/young_and_on_the_move_sep_2016.pdf (accessed 13 March 2019).

It is important to note that migrant and forcibly displaced children's vulnerability does not end merely because their journey does. Migrants also face risks and vulnerabilities in their intended destination country and, as in the case of the journey, these are manifold and intersect in various ways. The 2018 policy of family separation in the United States has been a severe breach of the rights of the child and unity of the family, leaving children and adults severely exposed and at serious risk of grave psychological wounds for years to come. With many thousands of children ostensibly still separated from their parents by the United States immigration authorities and social services, and with further evidence unable to shed light on the true extent of the policy and the numbers of children in migrant detention (Bolter and Chishti, 2018; Dickerson, 2018; United States Department of Health & Human Services Office of the Inspector General, 2019), the situation lingers on as a tragic example of a fundamental disregard of migrant and forcibly displaced children's well-being (Filges, Montgomery and Kastrup, 2015).

Applications for international protection or migratory case work may take many months or years, during which children often do not have full access to health and educational services or live in uncertainty and fear about being returned to their countries of origin or a third country (UNICEF, 2018c:50; Sallin et al., 2016). In other situations, children and families are forced to live 'underground' because they are undocumented and have little chances of receiving a residence permit. Often such families have no regularized access to health services, school and child protection (Ombudsman for Children in Sweden, 2017a; UNICEF, 2018c:67–69). In countries that do not offer a prospect of some type of residency but instead intend to return children to their home countries or safe third countries, children often opt for a life underground – typically involving petty crime, drug addiction and collusion with criminal networks – in order to avoid deportation and return (Ombudsman for Children in Sweden, 2017b:5, 15, passim).

2.3. Counting uprooted and invisible children

Data and evidence on migrant and forcibly displaced children are poor (IOM GMDAC, 2016). Data and evidence on child vulnerabilities are even poorer. There is a lack of disaggregated, rigorous data that could provide a better understanding of children's vulnerabilities and how they interact and affect not only one another, but also how they are affected by the context of migration. Available data are typically either flow or stock data, that is, data describing the number of people passing through of a given country in a given period (flow data) or the number of people changing their usual residence (stock data) (United Nations Statistical Commission, 2017:10, 16). The vast majority of these data tell us next to nothing about children's vulnerabilities because of poor disaggregation. Only 56 per cent of all (stock) data on refugees is age-disaggregated, while only 77 per cent of the countries and territories reporting migrant stock data include data on age (UNICEF et al., 2018:3). As a result, traditional data on migrant and forcibly displaced children are of little help in improving general understanding of child vulnerabilities. Instead special methods – such as alternative surveys and other quantitative and qualitative data collection efforts – must be used to get a sense of the share of vulnerable children.

Measuring vulnerabilities of migrant and displaced children

Displaced populations and persons in mixed migration movements are by their very nature notoriously difficult to count. In the absence of accurate and timely data on the number of migrant or displaced children, it is often necessary to rely on estimation methods to get a sense of the size of the affected population (Singleton, 2018:334). Data on internally displaced persons (IDPs), for example, in most cases lack disaggregation by age, inter alia (IDMC, 2017:74). UNICEF (2016a:33) estimates the number of children among IDPs by applying the age structure of the national population to the national IDP population. This approach has an underlying assumption that the IDP population is a representative sample of the national population in terms of age

structure. This assumption likely does not hold: often IDP populations are not a random sample but are biased towards a specific regional origin, ethnicity, urban or rural settings and other criteria.

Disaggregated data on fatalities during migration movements are equally problematic. IOM's Missing Migrants Project tracks deaths and disappearances of migrants along mixed migration routes worldwide using a variety of sources, including official records, reports by news agencies or NGOs, and testimonies of survivors and others (IOM, 2017c:1–21). In most cases, only total numbers of reported cases or incidents are known and there are hardly any data on the number of children. This, in particular, applies in the case of migrants who drown and disappear on their passage over the Mediterranean Sea, one of the deadliest migration routes worldwide. UNICEF estimates the number of children among the recorded fatalities by applying the demographic information of migrants arriving safely at the destination using the same routes at similar times. UNICEF controls for the specific route (Western, Central or Eastern Mediterranean) and the month of the journey. Having better data on child fatalities would inform further research on vulnerabilities and previously unknown threats.

Since 2014, IOM has conducted the Flow Monitoring Survey (FMS), an extensive survey that sheds light on potential exploitation and abuse of migrants, providing a hitherto unavailable resource to understand vulnerabilities and the way they intersect. Through a variety of indicators, the survey has allowed for detailed analysis, including cross-tabulations and regression models providing insights into how determining factors of vulnerability interact, and thus shed better light on vulnerability (UNICEF and IOM, 2017; IOM, 2017b). At the time of writing, however, the FMS includes only a few indicators of exploitation and abuse, including unpaid labour, deprivation of freedom of movement, forced marriage and violence and abuse, leaving many of the points discussed above unanswered (IOM, 2017b).

Text box 5.   Unrecorded deaths, as recounted by Nigerian child and youth returnees from Libya

Mohamed Zaki and Lorenza Rossi [91]

There is a general dearth of information, data and statistics on migrant fatalities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Red Crescent Societies, coastguards and international actors have made impressive improvements in the documentation of migration-related deaths along the Mediterranean coast and large-scale incidents on land,[92] A few ongoing qualitative studies and surveys of migrants have indicated gaps in knowledge on smaller incidents. These studies and surveys are typically not focused on collection of information on abuse and death, however such information is revealed by survey participants as they describe their migration journeys.

One such study is a recent joint pilot project conducted by the Mixed Migration Hub (MHub),[93] IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM)[94] and the Harvard François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights.[95] The study was launched in Nigeria in July 2018 to examine and to better understand the experiences of

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[92] Such as the lorry accident in February 2018, near Bani Walid, which resulted in the deaths of over 19 migrant and refugees. See www.iom.int/news/un-migration-agency-assists-survivors-migrants-perish-libya-truck-accident (accessed 13 March 2019).

[93] See www.mixedmigrationhub.org (accessed 13 March 2019).

[94] See www.globaldtm.info (accessed 13 March 2019).

[95] See https://fxb.harvard.edu (accessed 13 March 2019).

children and youth who had recently returned from Libya with the help of IOM's Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) programme. The survey team interviewed a total of 121 children and youth between the ages of 17 and 28 in the states of Edo, Lagos, Delta and Ondo. The main purpose of the pilot project, as well as the larger study, is to investigate the participants' experiences post-return and the societal, familial and governmental readiness to support their reintegration. In order to collect a complete picture of their migratory and return experiences, the children and youth were asked general questions about their main reasons for migrating, as well as their travel arrangements, their experiences en-route and in Libya and their reasons for return. The findings from the pilot will inform the design of larger study that will be conducted in five countries in West and Central Africa and the Horn of Africa.

Case Study

John was interviewed in Edo State in southern Nigeria. Nineteen years old at the time of interview, he had left Nigeria a year and a half earlier, just before his eighteenth birthday, in search of a better life. He had trouble finding a job and earning enough to live in Nigeria and hoped he could change that by making it to Germany. Despite independently making the decision to migrate, his parents expected that he would be able to send money to support them back in Nigeria. He set off on his own, travelling through, and stopping briefly, in the Niger. En route to Libya, he was captured by a gang, which detained him and subjected him to regular beatings in an effort to extort money from him or his family back in the Nigeria. Asked about his experiences in Libya, he said, '**No rest of mind in Libya. The Arab men used to come to kill us for fun. They would use you to work in their farm, in exchange of cigarettes. If you refuse they would beat or kill you. It was a horrible experience.**'

The questionnaire did not ask participants about any fatalities they may have witnessed on their way to Libya or in Libya itself; however, 27 separate instances involving a migrant's or migrants' death were mentioned, unprompted, during the interviews. The characteristics of the deaths described by the participants seem to be the kind that regularly go unreported and undocumented: killings of one or two people at a time, at the hands of smugglers and traffickers, or in transportation accidents. It is very unlikely that these reports would have been reported to local authorities and/or drawn media and/or NGO attention.[96]

Case Study

Rene was twenty years old at the time of his interview in Delta State. He left Nigeria in November of 2016, when he was eighteen. He decided to migrate so that he could earn enough money to help support his family. He set off from his home in Nigeria with the aim of reaching Europe. It took him two months to travel through the Niger and into Libya, where he became stranded. He recounted being beaten and abused along the way and confessed that he felt like returning home even before setting foot in Libya because '**the suffering was becoming too much**.' Describing his experience in Libya, he said, '**We woke up to see dead bodies around us at certain points**.'

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[96] All the names in the case studies were changed in order to maintain the anonymity of respondents.

The fact that such deaths go unrecorded is deeply troubling for two reasons. Firstly, it means that the number of migrant fatalities is drastically underestimated in the MENA region. Secondly, with the recent and successful political efforts to deter onward migration from Libya across the Mediterranean Sea towards Europe, many more refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants are becoming trapped in the country, and policy decisions are being made without an accurate understanding of the level of risk to migrants in Libya.

The reports of fatalities that punctuate the interviews conducted for the pilot study raise crucial ethical questions about how best to approach this type of information. The need to improve research ability to capture and document fatalities in order to better grasp the true level of risk to migrants must be weighed against the possible harm to the survey respondents.[97] The excerpts of interviews included here demonstrate how these young people reported killings and fatalities in their interviews; for the most part, they made general references that cannot be linked to specific incidents or provide enough context for such fatalities to be entered into IOM's Missing Migrants Project database. Moving forward, there needs to be further discussion about the ethical and methodological questions, how best to approach situations such as these, in which people volunteer some information without the detail about specific incidents.

Case Study

Jane was twenty-two years old when she was interviewed in Edo State. She left Nigeria in January 2016, a few weeks before she turned 20. She left Nigeria because she couldn't find work and hoped to find better living conditions elsewhere. As with many other migrants, her family expected that she would be able to help them financially. It took her a week to reach Libya, and on the way, somewhere after Kano State in Nigeria, the smugglers stopped the truck and threatened to abandon her and the other migrants unless they each paid an additional amount. Speaking about her experience in Libya, she said, '**While in Libya, I was only eating left-over food. I couldn't get enough sleep. I was cleaning all rooms in a five-story building alone every day. I was malnourished and had severe back pains. I saw people dying and could not help them.**'

Other measures of vulnerabilities specific to children

Trafficking research offers some insights into the vulnerabilities of children more generally, given that it concerns not only migrant and forcibly displaced children. CTDC data account for five different kinds of trafficking, as well as a series of means of control that can shed light on the ways in which children's vulnerability can be exploited or perpetuated (IOM and Polaris, 2018:4-5). As shown above, however, migrant and forcibly displaced children typically face distinct risks and vulnerabilities unrelated to trafficking and thus are not necessarily captured by the CTDC, despite the fact that irregularly travelling children are particularly vulnerable to trafficking in one way or another on their journeys. That said, there is no comprehensive evidence that migrants are more vulnerable to trafficking than non-migrants, and more research into the conditions under which trafficking occurs is necessary.

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[97] The team of enumerators were specifically instructed not to probe into potentially traumatic experiences.

Apart from large-scale quantitative data sets, considerable qualitative research has been done, often corroborating quantitative evidence. A UNICEF and REACH report (2017:3–4), for example, largely supported the findings of the FMS along the Central Mediterranean route from Africa to Europe. The report found, for example, that the length of children's journeys often resulted in the necessity to work and thus children's exposure to exploitation. Sexual exploitation has also surfaced as a common experience during the journeys of African migrants interviewed throughout Europe (Iacono, 2014; Country Information Service of the Finnish Immigration Service, 2015; Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat and Save the Children, 2016:43–46). Similar vulnerabilities were identified by research in the Horn of Africa and Somaliland (Ali, 2016:8; UNICEF, 2018b).

Whether data on children are collected using quantitative or qualitative methods, special safeguards and protections must be in place. UNICEF (2015a, 2015b, 2016a) has produced a series of minimum quality and ethical requirements that must be guaranteed during data collection. Generally speaking, the principle of "do no harm," ensuring the protection of the interviewee, must always be upheld; interviewers must have training in child-sensitive interview methods; and special protections must always be in place for children below the age of 14. These safeguards are necessary not only because children are particularly vulnerable, but also given the often highly sensitive questions and the concomitant danger that they will cause individuals to relive trauma experienced on the journey. Further, States, agencies and NGOs must use utmost care and data protection when using and storing sensitive survey and interview data in order to protect children and not exacerbate their vulnerabilities.[98] These special safeguards make collection, analysis and storage of data on migrant and forcibly displaced children more arduous and costly. As a result, there are far less data available on children compared with adults, and this contributes to a limited understanding of vulnerability. Whatever data are available often focus on journeys and vulnerabilities travelling toward the Global North, which provides for an inherent (often Eurocentric) bias to the data and subsequent analysis.

2.4. Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter has sharpened the contours of vulnerability as a complex analytical concept, as it is becoming increasingly important in various areas including international law. As we have shown, the available data and evidence base on the vulnerability of migrant and forcibly displaced children are meagre and fragmented, thus thwarting efforts to develop a profound systematization of the many aspects and determining factors. The result is that the international community is struggling to adequately protect this particularly vulnerable group.

In December 2018, world leaders made a decisive step and recognized the importance of addressing the vulnerabilities of all migrants and refugees with the adoption of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees (United Nations, 2018). Both include specific provisions on children and at the very centre of the compacts – and more broadly speaking, of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda – is the need for better data, without which neither States nor the international community will be able to meet the ambitious goals. The same is the case when it comes to adequately protecting and empowering vulnerable children, coordinating emergency responses and developing desperately needed evidence-based policies and programmes.

In the interest of galvanizing action for global compact objectives and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UNICEF et al. (2018:5–7) issued a joint Call to Action with five key recommendations in 2018. The recommendations detail how better data can support the protection of migrant and forcibly displaced children, including preventing children from going missing and providing a

98 See Chapter 4 for further discussion of ethical considerations when researching topics relating to missing migrant children.

better understanding of children's vulnerabilities in home, transit and destination countries. As States work to operationalize the global compacts and meet the SDGs, these recommendations can function as a guide towards the bare minimum actions needed in the realm of data and evidence.

The recommendations include:

(a) **Disaggregate data by age and sex**. Data on children should be further disaggregated by: standard age categories, from early childhood to adolescence; other demographic and socioeconomic characteristics like disability, education level and whether they live with their parents; and migration status.

(b) **Cover key issues relating to children affected by migration and displacement**. Migration and displacement data should include information on regular and irregular flows, human trafficking, the economic impacts of migration and refugee movements, the needs of migrants, refugees and host communities, as well as qualitative and longitudinal data on the impact of return and reintegration. Ensuring the well-being of children on the move also requires data on access to essential services such as education, health, nutrition, water and sanitation and child protection, as well as on unaccompanied and separated children, family reunification and children left behind by migrating parents.

(c) **Make better use of existing data, and share it.** More migration- and asylum-related data collection is under way than is commonly noted. Often, States collect data but do not analyse it sufficiently – nor do they share all of their data with other national agencies or countries. Currently, there are few internationally recognized mechanisms for countries or agencies to share information on migrant and forcibly displaced children.

(d) **Coordinate data efforts within countries and across borders.** Ensuring the well-being of children who move across borders or are internally displaced is an immense task that requires governments and other actors to work together. Data are key, especially information on child protection and services. Yet data often remain scattered among countries – and, within them, among agencies and ministries that do not necessarily work together.

(e) **Make special efforts to collect and analyse data on children.** Children are among the most vulnerable migrants and refugees, yet are often overlooked in data efforts. Countries and international agencies should develop a research agenda to understand and address the issues that migrant and forcibly displaced children face. A child perspective should be incorporated into all stages, from devising methods for data collection to data processing and analysis.

Achieving the goals of these recommendations requires partnerships at the national and international levels and between agencies and offices, as well as financial and technical investments. The multiple good practices and projects already in existence – whether they are aimed at improving available data or protecting migrant and forcibly displaced children – show that success is possible (UNICEF 2018a:22–23, 2017c) – success that ultimately benefits communities, economies and nations, and can help ensure that children's fundamental rights to survival and development are fulfilled.

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