

A WEB OF INSECURITY

Gendered risks and vulnerabilities for children on the move during the COVID-19 pandemic

INVISIBLE AND FAR FROM HOME

Migrant and displaced children are one of the most fragile populations in the world. These girls and boys have been hit with extra force by COVID-19 and its devastating impacts. Their rights are under serious threat – but data that identify the most vulnerable children among them and the specific deprivations they face are lacking. Many of these children – and girls in particular – are falling through the cracks.

This issue brief surveys the existing literature based on the limited available data – e.g., case studies, small-scale studies – to highlight areas of urgent concern for children on the move as they navigate life during the pandemic, examined through the lens of gender. **Emerging evidence indicates certain gender-specific challenges for migrant and displaced children are intensifying.** Some of these threats predated the virus and are now escalating, others have emerged as a result of COVID-19 and its consequences. But this picture is far from complete.

There is an urgent need to more closely monitor the situation of all children who have left home to keep pace with emerging trends and vulnerabilities.

Investments in data collection methods and improved data availability and quality are crucial.

COVID-19 has led to severe hardship for millions of children and their families. Yet this moment also presents an opportunity to close the data gaps and determine where and how the most vulnerable children have been left unprotected – including those who are migrants, refugees or internally displaced – and position the right resources today to better protect them against future shocks and emergencies.



DISPROPORTIONATE BURDENS OF CARE

Parents around the world are doing their best to protect themselves and their families from exposure to COVID-19. But infection rates have been disproportionately higher among migrant and displaced populations: In a number of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, for instance, the infection risk among migrants is more than twice that of native-born populations; in Saudi Arabia and Singapore, migrants accounted for 75 per cent and 95 per cent of new cases, respectively.¹ Yet many migrants do not have access to adequate testing and health care and have been left out of national vaccine roll-out programmes.²

Migrant women in particular have been at the frontlines of the response to COVID-19. Globally, women account for 70 per cent of the health workforce – many of them are migrants.³ Across OECD countries, 16 per cent of nurses are foreign trained.⁴ Elderly care facilities, which have become epicentres of the outbreak, often rely on working migrant women; countries such as Australia, Canada and the United States report that more than one in five of these employees is a migrant.⁵ Social distancing is not an option in

many of these jobs, and inadequate personal protective equipment has left many women exposed. Many are working longer hours.⁶

The burden carried by working migrant mothers will likely be shared by their daughters. Before the current crisis, girls aged 5 to 14 years were spending an average of 40 per cent more time on unpaid household work than boys of the same age.⁷ Facing today's challenges, many girls will be expected to care for sick family members and pick up additional work in the home.⁸ This not only puts these girls at risk of infection, but also exacerbates the already inequitable distribution of labour at home and limits girls' time for academics, leisure and paid work.

BETTER DATA TO...

- reflect the vital labour participation of migrant women in the national economy
- identify where and how women migrant workers are being left out of social protection mechanisms
- capture the care burden on migrant mothers and daughters in the home

ECONOMIC SHOCKS AND WORKING CHILDREN

By the end of 2021, the number of girls and boys living in monetary-poor households in developing countries could increase by 122 million to 144 million.⁹ Migrant workers and their children will be hit hard by these economic shocks. In low- and middle-income countries, as many as three quarters of migrant women and men work in informal industries such as domestic services, construction and agriculture.¹⁰ The precarious nature of this work – which is often unregulated and irregular and offers little to no social safety net – makes these earners and their children especially susceptible to economic insecurity.

As jobs and incomes are lost, pressure can mount for girls and boys to earn. A one percentage point increase in poverty has been tied to a 0.7 per cent increase in child labour – in many low- and middle-income countries, this uptick can be even greater.¹¹ Experts have warned the pandemic threatens to reverse decades of progress in reducing child labour.

Vulnerable migrant and displaced girls and boys are likely to engage in more child labour, while those already working may be further exploited, deported, or unable to return home due to travel restrictions.

Globally, there were an estimated 11.5 million migrant domestic workers in 2013; approximately 8.5 million of them are female.¹² For the many migrant girls

and young women working in domestic care, many of whom are child labourers, COVID-19 has aggravated the conditions of an often exploitative industry that operates outside of labour laws and social protection mechanisms. Past crises have shown these workers are frequently left out of domestic policy responses.¹³

Amid lockdowns and job losses among their employers, many domestic workers are working longer hours for less pay or no pay at all, while also facing a higher risk of gender-based violence.¹⁴ Others have been fired without compensation and, facing border closures and economic constraints, have been trapped in destination countries without housing and income. In countries where social protection systems that included migrants were stronger before the pandemic – such as Canada, Costa Rica and Germany – evidence shows that migrant domestic workers have fared better; those that were unprotected have seen their vulnerabilities worsen.¹⁵

BETTER DATA TO...

- identify migrant and displaced children that are engaged in child labour – who they are, where they are – and how the pandemic is shifting child labour patterns
- represent the contributions of migrant girls and women to the domestic care industry and ensure these workers are not forgotten



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BASIC NEEDS, UNMET

Even before the pandemic, migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons faced great obstacles in securing food, clean water and adequate sanitation, and health care. Millions of migrant and displaced populations live in camps and other overcrowded settings, where access to services and life-saving public health messages about COVID-19 may be limited.

Migrant and displaced women commonly encounter disproportionately high barriers to health care and pertinent health information, facing intersecting constraints like language barriers, fear of navigating the health care system, and restrictive gender roles and norms.¹⁶ In Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, a recent gender analysis showed that lockdowns in camps and host communities limited Rohingya women's and girls' access to COVID-19 related messaging, and they were less aware of COVID-19 risks than men.¹⁷

Gendered deprivations in crisis contexts are likely to worsen given current contractions in health care and clean water and sanitation: In countries where UNICEF has active humanitarian operations, half report a decrease in access to health care among displaced and refugee populations and nearly a quarter said water, hygiene and sanitation services had been disrupted in refugee or displacement camps.¹⁸ Girls will feel the effects of this limited access to safe menstrual hygiene management acutely.

An estimated 80 per cent of refugees and persons internally displaced by conflict live in countries with high levels of acute food insecurity and malnutrition.¹⁹ By the end of 2020, severe hunger was projected to increase globally by 82 per cent from pre-COVID levels.²⁰ Food insecurity has a distinctly gendered dimension: Women and girls account for two in three of those facing chronic hunger.²¹ Some girls may be forced into child marriage or engage in transactional sex as coping mechanisms for food shortages – which may also result in pregnancies – as seen during the Ebola crisis.²² **Migrant, refugee and displaced girls are especially at risk of experiencing hunger and resorting to negative coping strategies, as they face intersecting vulnerabilities as girls and as migrants.**

BETTER DATA TO...

- identify where and how migrant and displaced children are deprived of essential care, basic services and food, ensuring gendered deprivations are captured

ABSENT FROM CLASS

Migrant and displaced children are experiencing the fallout from school closures intensely – with girls at heightened risk of falling behind. In a study of refugees and migrants travelling along mixed migration routes, two in three respondents on the move in North Africa and West Africa, four in five in East Africa, and nearly half of those surveyed in Asia said that since the pandemic began, their children have not received any form of formal education.²³

Internet access and remote learning are out of reach for many migrant and displaced children – in a global survey of UNICEF country offices, 58 per cent reported that remote learning options for vulnerable child populations, including migrant, refugee or internally displaced groups, were inadequate.²⁴ Girls are likely to face even higher hurdles to online learning, grappling with harmful gender norms and safety concerns that may inhibit parents from giving their daughters Internet-enabled phones. The digital gender gap is well documented in developing countries; a recent analysis of information communication technology skills among adolescents in sub-Saharan African countries found that girls struggled to gain the skills needed to engage in digital learning and were at high risk of falling behind boys.²⁵

Vulnerable migrant and displaced children are now at heightened risk of dropping out of school and many girls on the move will never return to the classroom.²⁶ As many as half of all refugee girls in secondary school will not return when schools reopen; in countries where refugee girls' school enrolment is less than 10 per cent – like Ethiopia and Pakistan – all school-age girls are at risk of dropping out permanently.²⁷ Global economic instability is also exacerbating other obstacles to school for marginalized and displaced girls, including child and early marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and increased workloads within and outside the home.²⁸ In 2020, it was estimated that half a million more girls were at risk of child marriage due to COVID-19;²⁹ over the next decade, as many as 10 million more girls are now in danger of becoming child brides.³⁰

BETTER DATA TO . . .

- represent how far migrant and displaced children are falling behind in the classroom
- recognize the gender-specific hurdles to learning among migrant and displaced populations

LOOMING SHADOW OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Initial evidence confirms that gender-based violence (GBV) is rising at an alarming rate, an outcome of COVID-19 that has become known as the "shadow pandemic."³⁴ The socioeconomic factors that amplify the risk of being exposed to and severity of GBV are intensifying.³⁵ Before the global spread of COVID-19, GBV was more prevalent among migrant and displaced women and girls than among non-displaced populations.³⁶

Girls on the move are now at heightened risk of being exposed to GBV.³⁷ Emerging evidence is demonstrating an increase in domestic violence and GBV among displaced populations around the world – including, for instance, in 15 countries across West Africa, East Africa, and the Great Lakes region, among Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, and among Rohingya girls in Bangladesh.³⁸

Lockdowns and movement restrictions have made it more difficult for displaced populations to report GBV and access support services, particularly for women and girls.³⁹ Meanwhile, GBV support services and preventative activities have also

been disrupted or irregular as humanitarian workers face restrictions on travel.⁴⁰ As many as 40 million people targeted for assistance in humanitarian response plans – including millions of women and girls who have been internally displaced or affected by conflict – could be deprived of humanitarian services and GBV support because of COVID-19.⁴¹ UNICEF survey data show a 36 per cent reduction in protection services for migrant and displaced children.⁴²

Meanwhile, conflict in some regions has continued throughout the pandemic – and with it, conflict-related sexual violence. Travel restrictions have limited efforts to monitor, report and analyse these rights violations, while also hindering law enforcements' response.⁴³

BETTER DATA TO . . .

- identify where and how the pandemic has exacerbated domestic violence and GBV and pinpoint the most vulnerable migrant and displaced girls



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COUNTRY FOCUS: COVID-19, EDUCATION AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED CHILDREN IN YEMEN

The situation of internally displaced children in Yemen, where one of the world's worst humanitarian crises persists, demonstrates the heavy burden of the pandemic on the lives of children on the move. Harmful pre-existing gender norms mean girls' rights are under serious threat.

An Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre survey showed that 72 per cent of internally displaced persons said COVID-19 had interrupted their children's schooling, compared with 59 per cent of non-displaced persons.³¹ Half of those who had been displaced said their children had been out of school for more than six months, and 42 per cent did not know whether they would ever go back to school. The current global economic downturn has further compounded barriers to education for displaced Yemeni girls and boys.³²

Yemeni girls are likely to feel these interruptions acutely. These girls commonly encounter intense obstacles to getting an education in a context where sons are more commonly sent to school and many girls are forced into child marriage.³³ Facing the additional challenges introduced by COVID-19, the future of many Yemeni girls is at risk.

DANGERS OF TRAFFICKING

Children fleeing crisis may be forced to rely on riskier, more expensive smuggling networks to reach their destinations – placing many girls and boys on the move at risk of abuse, exploitation, debt and trafficking. Rather than limiting migratory movement and decreasing children's susceptibility to trafficking, COVID-related travel restrictions may be pushing trafficking networks further underground. This, combined with disruptions in services, can make identification of trafficking victims more difficult, rendering these child victims even more invisible and vulnerable.⁴⁴

Migrant girls navigating travel today may be especially susceptible to trafficking, given that globally, women and girls comprise two out of three detected victims.⁴⁵

Severe increases in poverty, unemployment and systemic inequalities – some of the root causes of human trafficking – mean many more girls are at risk.⁴⁶ Data on trafficking trends are limited to date, but some front-line organizations working on this issue have reported increased demand for services.⁴⁷ Other evidence has shown that two thirds of countries surveyed reported an increased risk of trafficking due to COVID-19.⁴⁸

While girls are most often trafficked for sexual exploitation, boys are more likely to be trafficked for forced labour, the most commonly detected form in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴⁹

More research is needed to capture the burden carried by boys; for instance, in Europe, though available data show sexual exploitation as the most common form of trafficking, victims of forced labour may be less easily detected.⁵⁰

Data from the first half of 2020 showed that children continued to brave the dangerous route across the Mediterranean Sea, many of them relying on traffickers and smugglers. Of an estimated 6,200 children registered as arrivals over that period, 85 per cent were boys. A third of these children travelled unaccompanied or had been separated from their parents, placing them at heightened risk of violence, harm and exploitation. More than 9 in 10 of these unaccompanied and separated children are boys.⁵¹

BETTER DATA TO . . .

- detect the girls and boys who have been victims of trafficking and how the pandemic has impacted trafficking networks
- indicate how migratory routes and patterns are changing, and where and how children are encountering gendered risks



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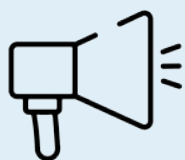
INJUSTICES DEMANDING ACTION

Migrant and displaced populations are intensely vulnerable and must be included in COVID-19 prevention, response and recovery plans. These approaches must be underpinned by quality data that can be disaggregated by age and sex, to ensure the most vulnerable are prioritized and receive the resources they need. **Children on the move, and girls in particular, must not be left even further behind.**

Though the COVID-19 crisis has underscored and exacerbated many pre-existing inequalities that impact migrant and displaced children every

day, it also presents an opportune moment to address these injustices through a gender lens. For instance, positioning women and girls on the move at the centre of both national responses to the crisis and longer-term solutions paves the way to investments that address girls' gendered risks: e.g. lack of financial resources, food and health insecurity, school dropout, child marriage, GBV, and trafficking.

Better data to drive gender-responsive plans of action that support all children on the move are urgently needed to forge a more secure path ahead.



URGENT GENDER-RESPONSIVE ACTIONS FOR CHILDREN ON THE MOVE DURING COVID-19

- Invest in data and improved methodologies to generate reliable data that include gender perspectives
- Identify new, pandemic-driven data needs, ensuring gender is a consideration
- Support data-driven analysis that prioritizes gender equality
- Include migrant and displaced children in COVID-19 preparedness, response, and mitigation efforts, joining forces with relevant local, national and global partners and stakeholders
 - » Ensure women's and girls' equal representation in response planning and decision-making
 - » Engage with organizations that represent adolescent girls, women's rights, and youth
- » Consider gender and intersectional inequalities to ensure all migrant and displaced children are reached
- Guarantee universal access to COVID-19 testing and national vaccine roll-out plans, health care and public health information, safe living conditions, mental health and psychosocial support and other essential services, for all who need them, regardless of status
- Implement education strategies for continued learning for all children – including migrant and displaced children, focusing on girls in particular – and make schools safe, healthy and inclusive environments
- Expand social protections to minimize the economic impact of COVID-19 on families and children
 - » Drive transformative change for equality by addressing the care economy, paid and unpaid
 - » Target women and girls in all efforts to address the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19
- Advocate proactively against xenophobia, stigma and discrimination
- Respect human rights at borders and uphold the prohibitions of collective expulsion and refoulement for all migrants, ensuring safe, dignified returns and reintegration

A CRITICAL NEED FOR DATA

Quality, reliable data are the surest way to fully grasp the extent of COVID-19's damaging effects on children on the move. These data must be collected by improved methodologies that capture gender-diverse populations and intersectional inequalities. Robust data that can be disaggregated by age and sex tell us who and where the most vulnerable children are, and ensure we have the knowledge, tools and resources in place to protect their rights from the moment they leave home.

Data are the backbone of policies and programmes that ensure every migrant and displaced child has the opportunity to thrive. Data allow us to tackle the troubling risks, insecurities and harms faced by children on the move with direction and conviction. Data help us discern particular areas of concern for girls on the move, and where boys need our support. They also tell us where our work has been effective and where we must do better.

The heavy toll of COVID-19 is still unfolding. The time is now to invest in improving data availability and quality to keep pace with these changes and support the unique needs and aspirations of every girl and boy that migrates.



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The **International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC)** is a cross-sectoral, global coalition that advocates for better statistics and data on migrant and forcibly displaced children. IDAC's work promotes the strategic generation, use and analysis of quality data to support evidence-based policymaking that protects and empowers all children on the move.

This is the first in a series of IDAC issue briefs, which leverage available data to raise awareness of pertinent issues impacting the lives of migrant and displaced children.

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IDAC PLEDGES TO...



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