



UNCERTAIN  
PATHWAYS

How gender shapes  
the experiences of  
children on the move

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# The Intersection of childhood, migration and gender

In today's world, millions of children from places all over the globe are leaving home. Crisis – violence, conflict, disasters – drives many of them to flee. Many have endured extreme poverty or poor governance that compromises their well-being and move to claim their right to education, security and safety. Girls and boys – some with their parents and some without – are also migrating to fill labour gaps in the service, care, and agricultural sectors. These migrant and displaced children may be infants or well into adolescence, travelling with family members or on their own. Their migration may be permanent, temporary, cyclical or take far longer than planned. Too many children on the move are facing journeys far too dangerous for a child.

While the specifics of each child's migration are unique, every girl and boy who leaves home is likely to face particular risks and opportunities defined not only by age – and even further shaped by their stage in childhood – but also by gender.





# Raising important questions

Age plays a critical role in a child's migration, but how will gender mediate that experience? Which gender-specific vulnerabilities, needs, and opportunities influence the lives of girls and boys on the move?

This report reviews the existing evidence base – official statistics and quantitative and qualitative studies from the community level to the global level – to shed light on these important questions. Examining the available information not only indicates where and how children on the move need targeted resources, support and protection, but also pinpoints areas needing further investigation.

The interaction of gender, childhood, and migration is a complex and evolving topic with myriad factors to consider. With this in mind, the data and discussion presented here are not intended to be conclusive. By collecting and presenting gender-related issues regarding children and youth across different stages of migration and displacement, this review aims to spark critical conversations and cross-sectoral debate. The goal is to sharpen policies, hone programmes and drive data efforts so that the stories of children on the move are better understood, and in turn, these intensely vulnerable girls and boys are better protected.

## TAXONOMY AND KEY CONCEPTS

This report uses the binary terms 'girl' and 'boy' and related 'she' and 'he' pronouns. Most data (when disaggregation is possible) employ this classification. Analyses of the role of gender identity are largely missing in the evidence base – an important and noteworthy data gap necessitating action.

**Sex** refers to the biological characteristics of being male or female, while **gender** is defined as the socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to individuals on the basis of their assigned sex. Gender is relational and refers not simply to women, men, or gender diverse people but to the relationships between them.

Although the words 'gender' and 'sex' are often used interchangeably, they have different connotations: sex tends to refer to biological differences, while gender more often refers to cultural and social differences and sometimes encompasses a broader range of identities than the binary of male and female.

**Gender identity** refers to a person's perceptions of having a particular gender, which may or may not correspond with their birth sex.

**Intersectionality** is a framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different forms of concurrent and historical discrimination and privilege. These identities include gender, race, ethnicity, disability, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, and age.

**Source:** United Nations Development Group, *Resource Book for Mainstreaming Gender in UN Common Programming at the Country Level*, 2018; United Nations Children's Fund, Strategic Plan Background Paper: Gender-Responsive Programming' (internal document), 2020. UN Women, 'Intersectional Feminism: What it means and why it matters right now', 2020.

# What's in this report?

Starting with a review of the most recent gender data on migration and displacement, *Uncertain Pathways* explores the migration life cycle through a gender lens. Stories from around the world offer a glimpse into the real lives of migrant and displaced children and illustrate the complexities of each phase of migration.

This review documents the available evidence to provide insight into a number of critical questions, **including:**

Available data and research demonstrate that gender plays a pivotal role from the time the decision to leave home is made, and continues to shape experiences and vulnerabilities throughout the child's journey and integration process at the destination. COVID-19 has added another layer of complexity to the lives of children on the move, exacerbating pre-existing insecurities in some dimensions and introducing new ones. Girls in particular are feeling many of these effects acutely, such as gender-based violence.<sup>1</sup>



## CHILDREN ON THE MOVE AND THE DATA

- **How many girls and boys are living outside their country of birth as migrants or refugees? How many have been displaced within their own borders?**
- **Where do the majority of international child migrants live? What is the gender balance among these girls and boys in these countries?**
- **What do the data tell us about unaccompanied children and gender?**



## LEAVING HOME

- **What agency do girls and boys have in the decision to migrate and does this differ by gender?**
- **Are girls and boys motivated to migrate for different reasons?**
- **To what degree do structural factors, such as conflict or climate events, impact girls' and boys' migration differently?**



## LIFE IN TRANSIT

- **Which deprivations are influenced by gender while a child is in transit?**
- **Do girls and boys face similar obstacles as they attempt to reach their destination?**
- **Does their gender intersect with other identities to render them vulnerable to particular harms?**



## NAVIGATING A NEW ENVIRONMENT

- **Do migrant and displaced children experience different hardships and opportunities based on their gender?**
- **How does gender impact a child's assimilation process, including access to school, resources, and services?**

# Data: Vital to transformative protection

As the pandemic continues to devastate the lives of many vulnerable populations, including children who have migrated or been displaced and were already among the world's most insecure, there is a critical need for nuanced information that considers the role of gender in childhood migration. This means more granular, timely data and research that are not only disaggregated by sex and age – enabling analysis of how the migration experience differs for girls and boys in the first and second decades of life – but that also place gender equality as an organizing principle of investigation. These data are vital to gender-transformative programming that supports the well-being of every child and ensures the right resources reach the right children and their families in a meaningful way.

This call for gender-responsive data has been strengthened and reinforced by the

[Sustainable Development Goals](#) and the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#), which highlights the need for data that inform policies and “promote gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls”. Comprehensive age- and sex-disaggregated data and the gender statistics derived from them must aim to capture the differential experiences of girls and boys at all stages of migration including the many ways in which their rights will be violated and where they may face discrimination. Local, national, regional and global efforts are urgently needed to collect these data and address the harmful gender-driven inequities that impact migrant and displaced girls and boys around the world.

**Gender-responsive programming** deliberately responds to the needs of adults and children of different genders, assessing the gendered context and taking measures to actively address specific needs. **Gender-responsive social protection interventions** aim to effectively reach girls, boys, women, and men specifically to achieve gender equality outcomes.

**Gender-transformative programming** explicitly seeks to redress gender inequalities, remove structural barriers and empower disadvantaged populations. Gender-transformative programming aims to address the structural and social root causes of gender inequality and thereby promote more equitable outcomes for children in all their diversity, with specific emphasis on tackling discriminatory norms at all levels (policy, budgetary, community, family and individual, among others). In so doing, it aims both to change overall structures that underpin gender inequality and to contribute to lasting change in individuals' lives.

**Source:** United Nations Population Fund and United Nations Children's Fund, [Technical Note on Gender-Transformative Approaches in the Global Programme to End Child Marriage Phase II: A summary for Practitioners](#), 2019; United Nations Children's Fund, Strategic Plan Background Paper: Gender-Responsive Social Protection, Accelerating Gender Equality Impacts at Scale' (internal document), 2020.



# Every step of the way

Leveraging evidence and knowledge to protect every child on the move forms the backbone of UNICEF's rights-based approach. Too many of these children remain invisible, their needs unmet. Too many of these children see their rights violated in their country of origin, along their travels, and again at their destinations. These violations are taking place in Member States that have made commitments to protect children – and these responsibilities must be upheld.

Evidence-based policies and investments to accompany these girls and boys must be prioritized now. These must not only anticipate harms, vulnerabilities and humanitarian emergencies but also recognize every migrant and displaced child as a rights-holder with agency. Young voices and concerns must be at the forefront of these efforts, ensuring that no child is left behind, no matter who or where they are.



# Key Findings



01

## What We Know: Children on the move and the data

- In 2020, 35.5 million children under the age of 18 were living outside their country of birth; this number includes refugees, asylum seekers and any kind of international migrant. Slightly less than half of them were girls (48 per cent). Boys outnumbered girls by 1.2 million – or 6.7 per cent – the largest difference ever recorded
- At the end of 2020, 10.0 million child refugees were displaced across borders – mostly due to conflict and war. Around 5.1 million were boys and 4.9 million were girls
- Europe is the only region with comprehensive data on unaccompanied child migrants. In 2020, nearly 9 in 10 unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Europe were boys – a gender imbalance that likely points to the heightened perils of the journey for girls
- At the end of 2020, an estimated 23.3 million girls and boys were living in internal displacement due to conflict, violence or natural disasters; 11.3 million were girls and 11.9 million were boys. Many have been living in displacement for years



02

## Challenging Choices: Leaving home

- The degree of children's decision-making over their circumstances, including movement within and across borders, is limited by many factors. Gender often shapes how the decision to leave home is made and influences a child's agency
- Girls and boys may be motivated to move for different reasons
- Women and girls face increased risk of gender-based violence in conflict zones, while boys are at high risk of recruitment and use by armed forces/armed groups
- Girls may migrate as a strategy to delay early marriage; gender discrimination can act as a driver of migration
- Women and children are particularly vulnerable to climate change, which forces millions into involuntary displacement every year
- Growing acceptance of girls' migration suggests shifts in gender norms



03

## A Perilous Journey: Life in transit

- Many children on the move, regardless of gender, will face serious deprivations, but some will be distinctly gendered
- Boys are more likely to migrate longer distances and cross borders than girls, while girls are more likely to migrate internally
- Boys are more likely than girls to travel unaccompanied, but girls may be missing from the data
- Among detected victims of trafficking, girls outnumber boys four to three
- Gender determines the type of trafficking a child is likely to experience
- Immigration detention presents challenges defined by gender



04

## Destination Reached: Navigating a new environment

- A child's capital (social, economic, health, etc.) will influence the degree to which she or he is able to access her or his rights in the host community and integrate successfully
- Gender gaps in education are exacerbated in humanitarian settings, favouring boys
- In the Global North, migrant girls may have better school outcomes than migrant boys, while the reverse is true for boys in the Global South
- The gendered division of labour means many migrant women and girls work in less regulated, less visible, more poorly paid industries, making them vulnerable to exploitation
- Gender norms in the host community will shape children's experiences

# What We Know: **Children on the move and the data**

Every story of migration and displacement is unique – these experiences are fluid, with children often shifting between contexts throughout their journeys. Many refugees, for instance, are first internally displaced before they cross a border. The statistics and definitions used in this report are an essential piece of these stories – but they are incomplete. Many girls’ and boys’ experiences on the move have not yet been captured in the data.





## KEY MIGRATION TERMS

**Migrants** There is no internationally agreed on definition of migrants – usage varies by context and purpose. The International Organization for Migration defines a migrant as “a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons”. For data collection purposes, the United Nations Statistics Division defines an international migrant as “any person who changes his or her country of usual residence”. To calculate the actual number of international migrants, the United Nations Population Division bases its estimates on official statistics on the foreign-born or those with foreign citizenship. Most of these definitions include refugees and asylum seekers, even though persons in these situations will have considerably different reasons for leaving, vulnerabilities, legal status and challenges, etc.

**Displaced persons** have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or place of habitual residence as a result of, or in order to avoid, the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters. This includes internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees.

**Internally displaced persons** (IDPs) have been displaced within their country of usual residence.

**Refugees** are individuals who have been granted protection in another country because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Refugees are defined and protected by international law.

**Asylum seekers** are individuals seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every recognized refugee is initially an asylum seeker.

**Unaccompanied and separated children** have been separated from their parents or primary caregivers. If they are accompanied by other adult relatives, they are considered separated; if no adult relative is with them, they are considered unaccompanied.

**Children on the move** is an umbrella term that describes children who have left home for any reason, including conflict, violence, disasters, lack of opportunities or other threats to their well-being. They can be in transit or have found new residence within their country or outside their country. They may be alone or with a caregiver or parent.

**Source:** International Organization for Migration, *Key Migration Terms*; Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division, *Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration, Revision 1*, 1998; United Nations Population Division, *International Migrant Stock 2019*; UN General Assembly, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 28 July 1951, as modified by the 1967 Protocol*; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Guidelines on Policy and Procedures in Dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum*, UNHCR, p. 1, 1997; International Committee of the Red Cross, et al., *Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children*, p. 13, 2004.

# Children living outside their country of birth

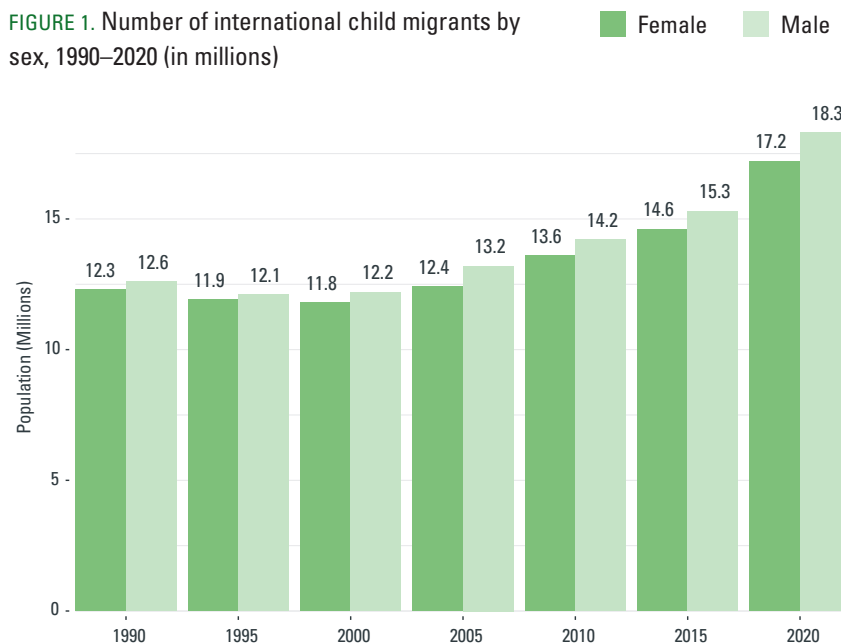
## More children than ever before live outside their country of birth as migrants or refugees – and boys outnumber girls

The number of persons living outside their country of birth or citizenship reached a record high of 281 million in 2020 – representing 3.6 per cent of the global population. Children younger than 18 accounted for 35.5 million of them and over a third, an estimated 13 million, were refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>2</sup>

According to international statistical definitions, anyone living outside of her or his country of birth is regarded as an international migrant, independent from the reason for moving abroad or legal status. This means the data represent a wide range of situations: from planned moves for professional or family reasons to forced movement due to threats to one's well-being to living undocumented and without legal residence permits in precarious conditions to migrants who have attained citizenship of the host country and are well integrated.

Of the 35.5 million international child migrants in 2020, boys outnumbered girls by 1.2 million,<sup>3</sup> or 6.7 per cent – almost double the relative difference seen 20 years ago: In 2000, of 23.9 million international child migrants, the data showed 3.6 per cent more boys than girls (424,000).

FIGURE 1. Number of international child migrants by sex, 1990–2020 (in millions)



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, [Trends in International Migrant Stock: Migrants by age and sex](#), 2020.

## Four in 10 international child migrants live in just 10 countries and comprise a third of all child migrants – many of them refugees

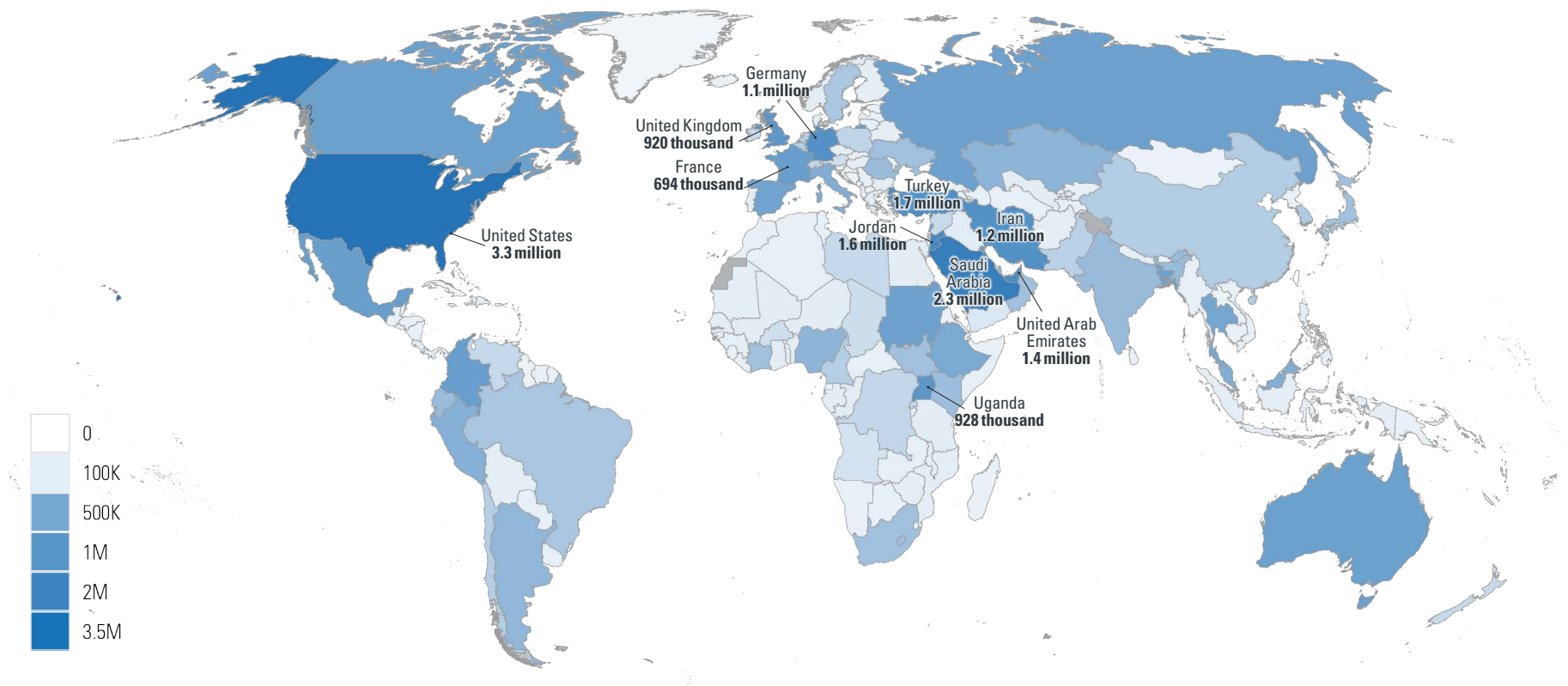
Around two thirds of all international migrants live in high-income countries (65 per cent) and most of the remaining in middle-income countries (31 per cent). Collectively, the 10 countries with the largest numbers host 14.7 million international child migrants – 41 per cent of the global total. In countries like Jordan, Turkey and Uganda, the majority are refugees.

The United States is home to 3.3 million international child migrants. Other countries with at least 1 million child migrants are Saudi Arabia (2.3 million), Turkey (an estimated 1.7 million)\*, Jordan (1.6 million), the United Arab Emirates (1.4 million), Iran (1.2 million), and Germany (1.1 million).

Nearly two thirds of all international migrants in 2020 (including refugees) were born in middle-income countries. Only 13 per cent were born in low-income countries and half of them were refugees or asylum seekers. Most find refuge in a neighbouring country.

\*Value refers to refugee children, who account for the majority of child migrants in Turkey.

FIGURE 2. Number of international child migrants – with the top 10 countries with largest numbers of child migrants highlighted, 2020



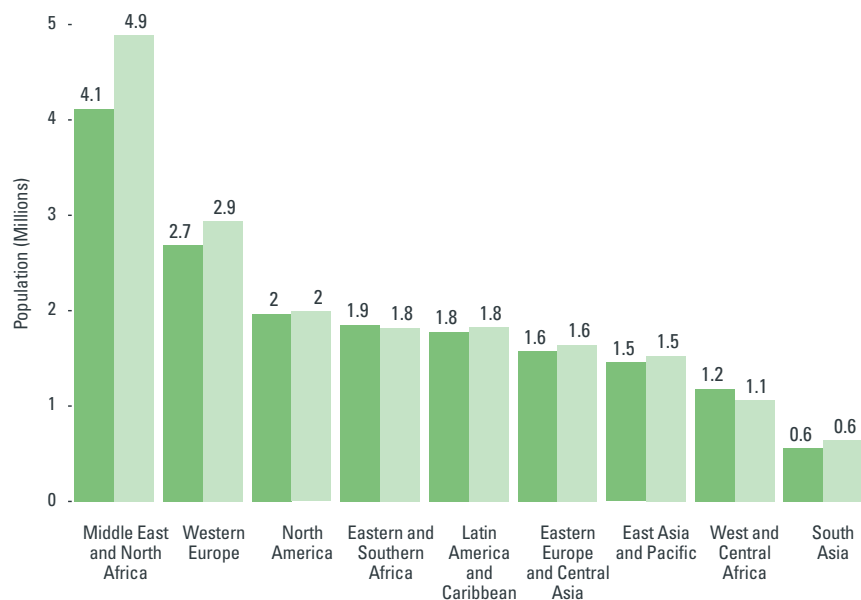
This map does not reflect a position by UNICEF on the legal status of any country or territory or the delimitation of any frontiers.

Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Trends in International Migrant Stock: Migrants by age and sex*, 2020; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2020*, 2021.

## The Middle East and North Africa region is home to the largest number of international child migrants and shows the greatest gender imbalance

Around 9.0 million child migrants lived in the Middle East and North Africa in 2020 – 54.3 per cent were boys. Western Europe also showed a more pronounced gender imbalance, with boys comprising 52.0 per cent of the 5.6 million child migrants. In most other regions, the numbers of boys and girls were more evenly distributed. Girls outnumbered boys in Eastern and Southern Africa (50.4 per cent) and in West and Central Africa (52.7 per cent).

FIGURE 3. Number of international child migrants by region and sex, 2020 (in millions) ■ Female ■ Male



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, [Trends in International Migrant Stock: Migrants by age and sex](#), 2020.

Note: Geographical grouping based on UNICEF regional classifications.

# Forced displacement

## One in 69 children globally – 34.4 million children – were living in forced displacement

At the end of 2020, the world counted 82.4 million persons forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations.<sup>4</sup> This number includes refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons and other groups displaced abroad – but in many cases, these data are neither broken down by age nor sex. Based on available data, it is estimated that children accounted for more than 34.4 million of them. Many of these forced displacements last for years.

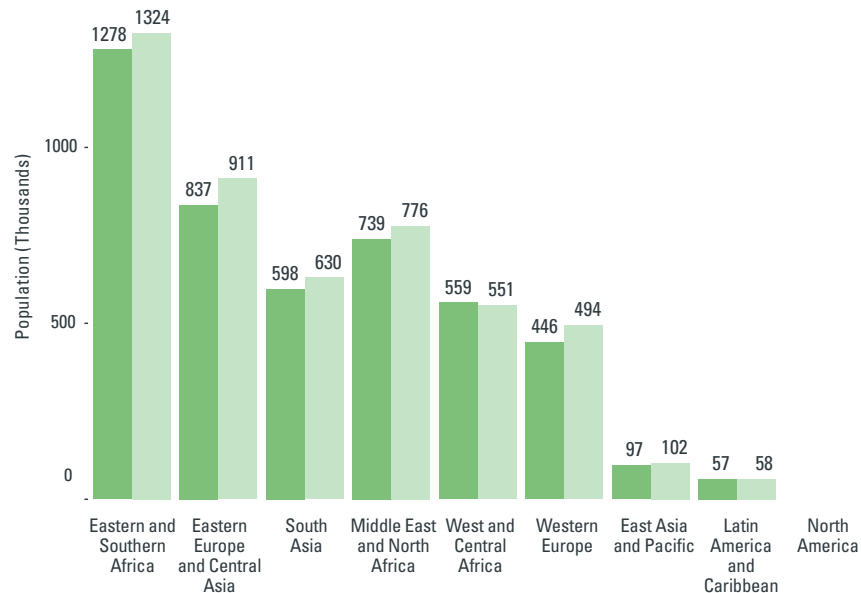


# Child refugees

## Eastern and Southern Africa is home to one quarter of all refugee children in the world

Of the global 10.0 million refugee children (under UNHCR mandate) in 2020,<sup>5</sup> 2.6 million lived in Eastern and Southern Africa. Some 1.7 million children found asylum in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (almost exclusively in Turkey), and another 1.5 million in the Middle East and North Africa. Only around 940,000 refugees under age 18 found refuge in Western Europe, while East Asia and the Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean were home to 200,000 and 115,000 of these children, respectively. In most regions, there were slightly more boys than girls among refugees. No age-disaggregated data were available for North America.

FIGURE 4. Number of child refugees by region and sex, 2020 (in thousands)<sup>6</sup> ■ Female ■ Male



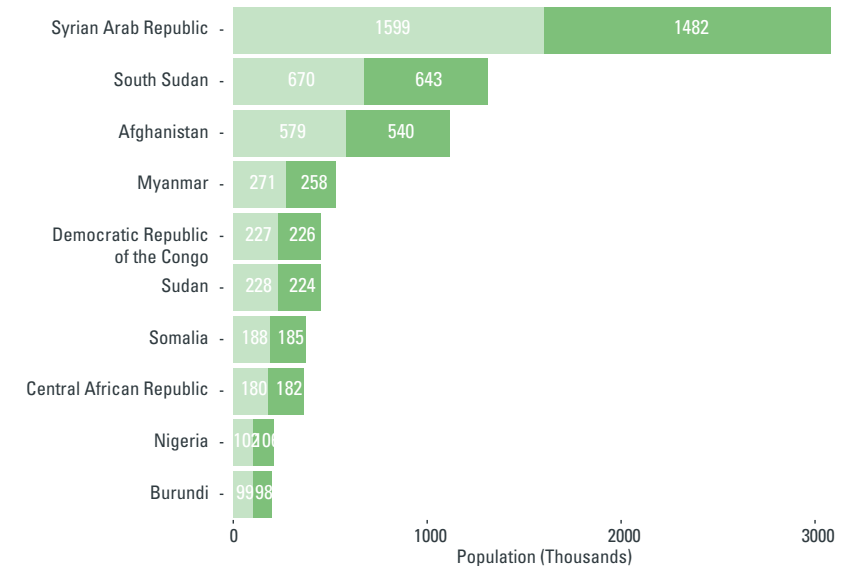
Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2020](#), 2021.

Note: Geographical grouping based on UNICEF regional classifications.

## More than 3 million child refugees fled the Syrian Arab Republic in 2020 – more than twice the number from any other country

Almost one in three of the 10.0 million child refugees in 2020 were from Syria: around 1.6 million boys and 1.5 million girls. Another 1.3 million children left South Sudan as refugees and 1.1 million fled Afghanistan. Collectively, these three countries accounted for more than half of all child refugees (under UNHCR mandate) in 2020.

FIGURE 5. Top 10 countries of origin of child refugees by sex, 2020 (in thousands)

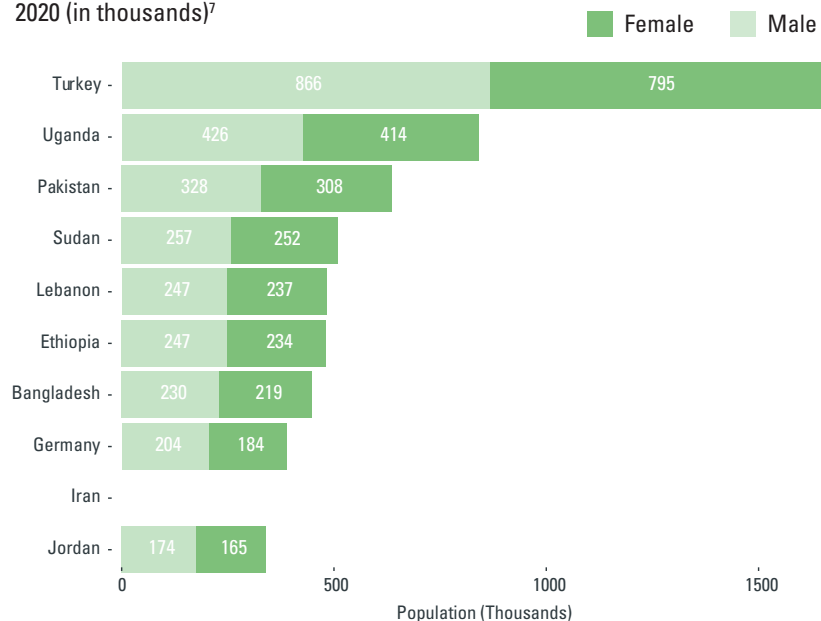


Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2020](#), 2021.

## Turkey hosts by far more refugee girls and boys than any other country

Turkey hosted almost 1.7 million refugee children in 2020, almost all of them from the Syrian Arab Republic. Other countries hosting more than half a million refugee children were Uganda (840,000), Pakistan (636,000), and the Sudan (509,000). Most countries show a balanced sex ratio, with usually only a few more boys than girls.

FIGURE 6. Top 10 countries hosting largest numbers of child refugees by sex, 2020 (in thousands)<sup>7</sup>



**Note:** No sex- and age-disaggregated numbers of refugees are available for Iran. Based on the total number of refugees, between 300,000 and 400,000 child refugees can be expected to live in Iran.

**Source:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [Global Trends: Forced displacement in 2020](#), 2021.

# Unaccompanied children

## The vast majority of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Europe are boys

Children travelling unaccompanied can be found on all migration routes and for a variety of reasons, but data about them are difficult to come by. Reliable numbers are mostly available for specific regional or local situations, such as apprehensions at the US-Mexico border<sup>8</sup> and for asylum-seeking children in Europe.<sup>9</sup>

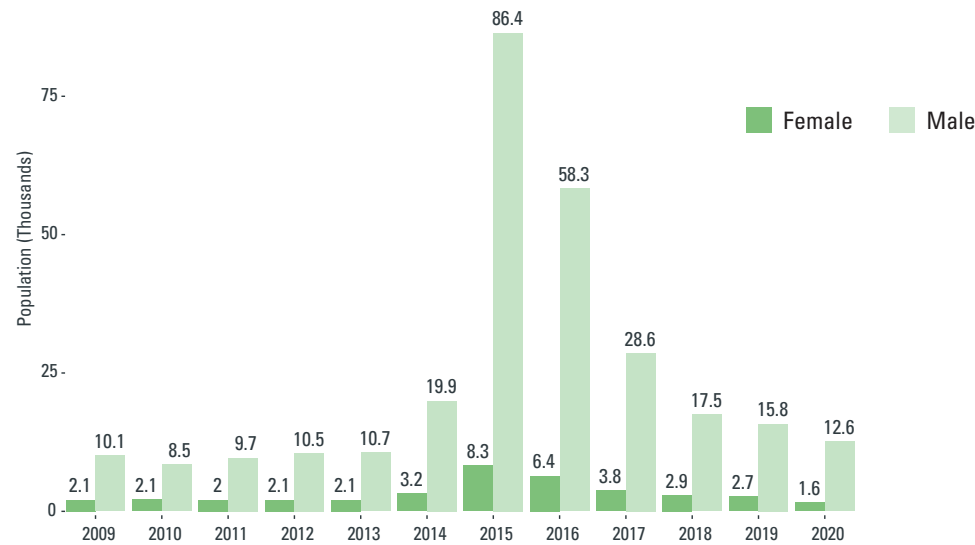
Europe is the only larger geographic region for which detailed information on age and sex of asylum seekers is available. In 2020, of around 147,000 children applying for asylum in 32 European countries,<sup>10</sup> 14,230 were unaccompanied children, of which 89 per cent were boys.

The region saw a peak in the number of applications by unaccompanied minors during the 2015 crisis sparked by the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic. The numbers have since dropped, but remain above the pre-2014 level. Over the last decade, the boy to girl ratio of unaccompanied children ranged from 4:1 during years with overall lower numbers of unaccompanied children to more than 10:1 during the 2015 peak.

## The degree of gender imbalance among unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Europe differs by country of origin – but boys greatly outnumber girls in every one

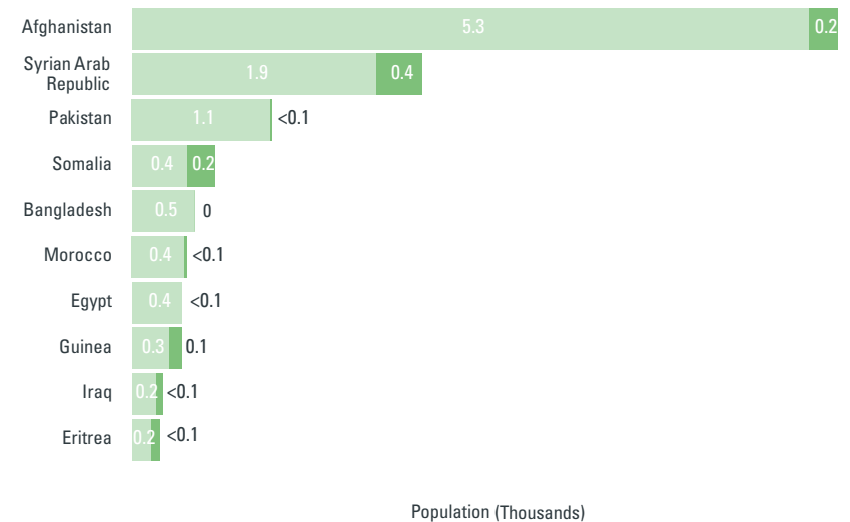
In the top 10 countries of origin of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Europe in 2020, the share of girls ranged from one third to zero. The greatest share of girls was found among children from Somalia (33 per cent), Eritrea (32 per cent), Guinea (26 per cent) and Iraq (26 per cent). The lowest was among children from Bangladesh (none), Pakistan and Egypt (1 per cent each), Afghanistan (4 per cent) and Morocco (5 per cent).

FIGURE 7. Number of asylum-seeking children in Europe considered unaccompanied, by sex, 2009–2020 (in thousands)



Source: Eurostat, Eurostat database, 2021.

FIGURE 8. Top 10 countries of origin with largest number of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in Europe, by sex, 2020 (in thousands)



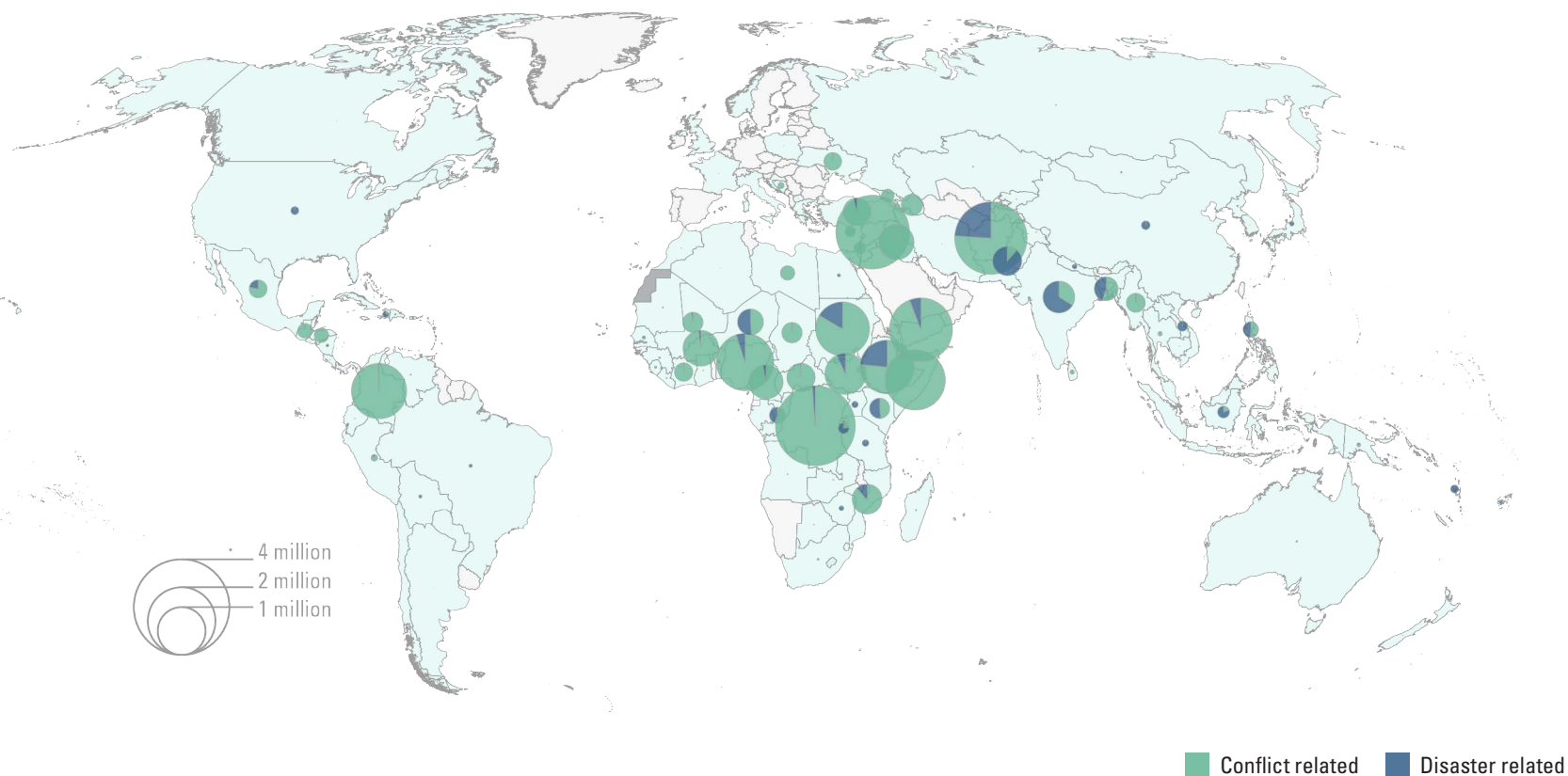
Source: Eurostat, Eurostat database, 2021.

# Children displaced within their own country

**Around 23 million children were living in internal displacement at the end of 2020 – with almost 15 million new displacements of girls and boys over the course of the year**

At the end of 2020, an estimated 23.3 million children were living in internal displacement – 20.4 million due to conflict and violence and 2.9 million as a result of natural disasters. Some 14.6 million new displacements<sup>11</sup> of children were counted globally in 2020 – 4.6 million due to conflict and violence and 10 million related to natural disasters.

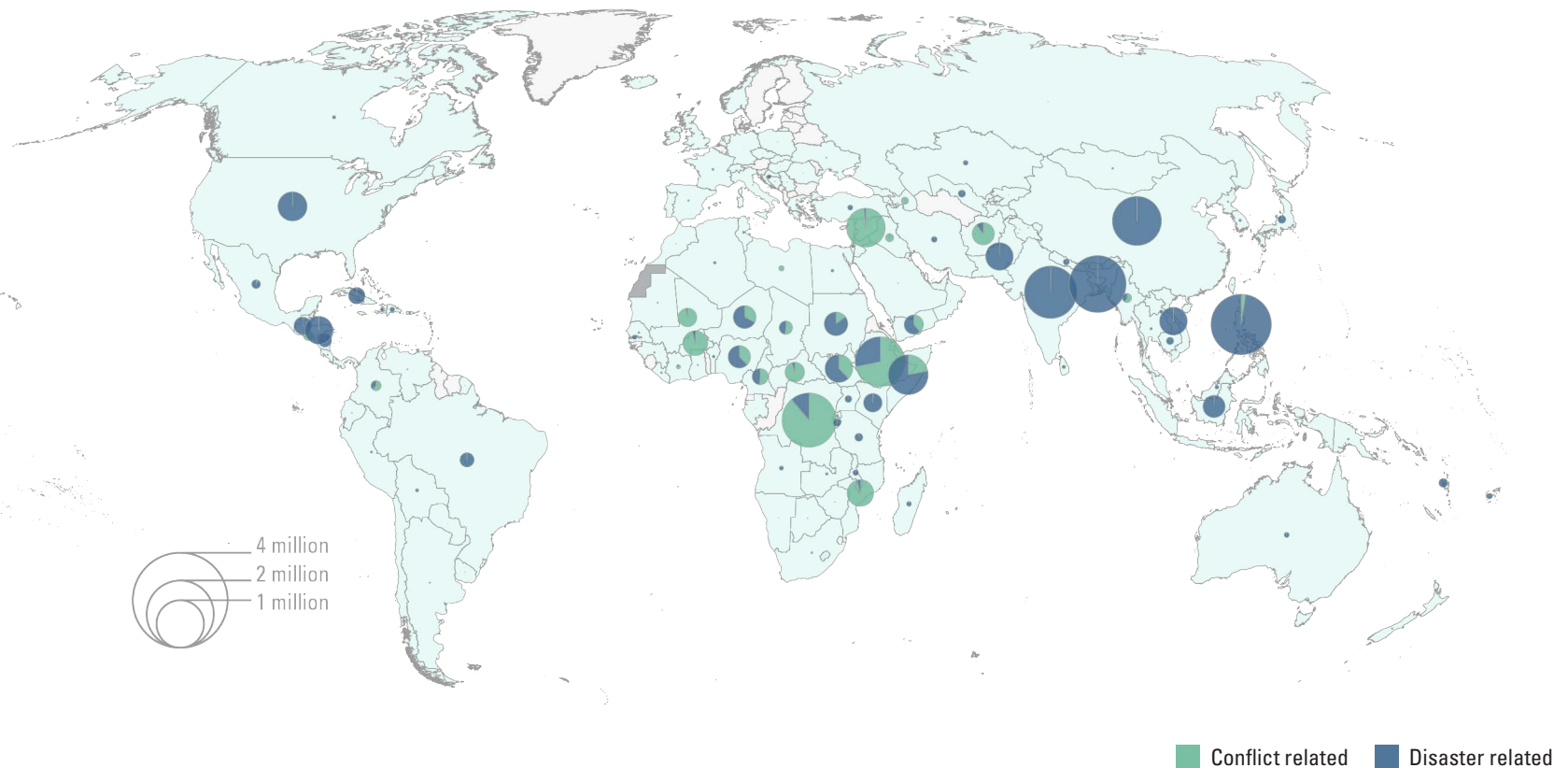
FIGURE 9. Number of internally displaced children (displacement stock) by cause of displacement, 2020



Crises in sub-Saharan Africa were responsible for much of the observed conflict-related internal displacement (accounting for half of displaced children and more than 75 per cent of new displacements globally in 2020). Most displacements due to natural disasters occurred in South Asia and in East Asia and the Pacific (accounting for about 72 per cent of displaced children and around 64 per cent of new displacements globally). In 2020, about 3.4 million new displacements of children were counted in East Asian and Pacific countries alone due to natural disasters. With the climate crisis exacerbating both extreme weather events and slow onset impacts, more children may be displaced due to climatic factors in the coming years.

Since data on internal displacement are only rarely available disaggregated by age or sex, the number of girls and boys is estimated based on the age structure of the national population. However, research shows that this method probably underestimates the true number of children and the share of girls among internally displaced persons.<sup>12</sup>

FIGURE 10. Number of new displacements of children (displacement events) by cause of displacement, 2020



# Challenging Departures: Leaving home

The decision to migrate is rarely straightforward. It often involves an interplay of pressures and incentives, such as the avoidance of risk and rights violations at home and the promise of better schools, new jobs, and family reunification elsewhere. Motivations may be fluid and change once the journey has begun, shifted by opportunities and encounters along the route. COVID-19 is having a profound impact on these choices as it intensifies vulnerabilities for insecure families, including limiting access to school, employment, health care, and humanitarian services. A child's role in the decision to leave and where she or he goes will be intimately tied to age, gender, and the associated gender norms and roles in a community.<sup>13</sup>







## Recognizing a child's agency

Children may have little input into the family's decision to migrate and may be forced to leave as a means of survival, or they may be part of a collective decision-making process. Some may be born during the journey itself. Many girls and boys will leave home without a parent or caregiver. Children may also find themselves pushed or pressured to leave home, as seen among Afghan boys seeking undocumented work in Iran or in Nigerian girls trafficked to Europe. While the degree of a child's agency in the migration decision is often difficult to discern – many will leave home with little means to support their movement – every girl and boy has the right to participate in these life-changing choices and have the appropriate resources to ensure they are protected every step of the way.

Gender can play a pronounced role in migration motivations. A recent study of adolescents aged 13 to 17 on the move in Eastern and Southern Africa, for example, found gendered differences in the choice of destination country. Girls prioritized access to improved medical care (33 per cent of girls vs. 21 per cent of boys), general security (26 per cent of girls vs. 16 per cent of boys), a better social welfare system (24 per cent of girls vs. 21 per cent of boys) and reuniting with family (15 per cent of girls vs. 9 per cent of boys).<sup>14</sup>

**Gender norms** refer to the accepted attributes and characteristics of male and female gendered identity at a particular point in time for a specific society or community. They are the standards and expectations to which gender identity generally conforms, within a range that defines a particular society, culture and community at that point in time. Gender norms are ideas about how men and women should be and act. Internalized early in life, gender norms can establish a life cycle of gender socialization and stereotyping

Source: UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, [Gender Equality: Glossary of terms and concepts](#), 2017.



# Out of harm's way

War, conflict and violence drove many of the 10.0 million children who lived as refugees across borders in 2020. Around 5.1 million were boys and 4.9 million were girls. Conflict zones are dangerous places for children. They may be exposed to violence and harm, abducted, recruited to be used by armed forces or armed groups, or exploited and forced into labour, early marriage, and sexual exploitation. Many boys and young men have left Afghanistan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Eritrea in recent years because of forced or lengthy military recruitment.<sup>15</sup> At the height of the conflict in Somalia, Al-Shabaab fighters entered local schools to abduct boys for fighting and girls for marriage. Girls in Nigeria and South Sudan have cited similar circumstances as reasons for their migration or displacement.<sup>16</sup>

Gender-based violence or conflict-related sexual violence, a common tactic of war, drives many girls and women to migrate. In a survey of girls and women arriving to Europe, one in two reported threats or personal violence as a primary reason for leaving – this included domestic violence, inheritance issues, religious discrimination, sexual orientation or gender identity, opposition to marriages, or threats of persecution.<sup>17</sup>

Migrant and refugee girls are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence in conflict and emergency settings, while also often facing systemic inequality and repressive patriarchal systems. Broken social structures and lack of economic opportunities for men in conflict zones can lead to increased domestic violence in the home. The alarming increase in gender-based violence caused by COVID-19 illustrates how crisis can exacerbate unsafe conditions for girls. These threats to girls' well-being, along with the absence of social protection mechanisms for girls and women, are common drivers of female migration in conflict settings and, in many cases, will persist throughout the cycle of migration.<sup>18</sup>

Although girls and women bear the brunt of gender-based violence in conflict settings, men and boys are also vulnerable to these rights abuses. Studies have reported male experiences of sexual and other forms of violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, against Liberian male combatants, and among Rohingya boys and men before migrating to Bangladesh.<sup>19</sup> Sexual violence against males detained in the Syrian Arab Republic has also been documented.<sup>20</sup> Notably, the data more commonly address conflict-related sexual violence against men, but less is known about the extent to which boys face these violations. The degree to which gender-based violence drives boys in conflict settings to migrate is an area requiring further investigation.

**Gender-based violence** is an umbrella term for any harmful act perpetrated against a person's will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e., gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and other deprivations of liberty. These acts can occur in public or in private.

**Source:** United Nations Children's Fund, '[Gender Dimensions of Violence Against Children and Adolescents](#)', UNICEF, 2020.

Gang-related violence, organized crime, extortion, poverty, and limited access to education and social services are driving hundreds of thousands of families from Central America to seek entry to the United States. Many of these migrants are children. In 2019, 76,020 unaccompanied children and an unknown number of children among 473,682 family members ('family units') were apprehended at the US border with Mexico.<sup>21</sup> The proportion of girls originating from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and arriving to the border on their own is on the rise, increasing from one quarter of all unaccompanied minors in 2012 to one third in 2019.<sup>22</sup> Claudia (not her real name), from Guatemala, was one of them (see *A Child in Focus*, p. 26).

### A CHILD IN FOCUS: **Claudia from Guatemala**

Claudia, 17, lived alone after her parents and siblings migrated to the United States. On the way home from school one afternoon, she was raped and became pregnant. In Guatemala, gender-based violence is a reality for too many girls and women. "If I said anything, [the perpetrators] said something would happen to me because they knew I was alone," she says. Claudia's father managed to hire a smuggler to transport his daughter to the United States. Claudia and her infant travelled for months through Mexico but were abandoned in the Arizona desert and nearly died. They were eventually expelled back to Guatemala under COVID-related measures.<sup>23</sup>



# Disasters and displacement

Natural disasters and climate hazards like hurricanes, earthquakes, rising sea levels, drought and flooding drive millions of children from home each year. Many of these events are slow onset and gradually render an environment uninhabitable – and displacement becomes a necessary coping mechanism. In other scenarios, migration may be temporary until an emergency has subsided.

Environmental catastrophes play a pronounced role in the internal displacement of children. Of the 31 million new internal displacements connected to disasters in 2020 – mostly due to weather-related events such as storms and floods – around 10.0 million involved children.<sup>24</sup> An estimated 1.2 billion people are at risk of displacement by 2050 – children are likely to comprise a sizeable number of them.<sup>25</sup>

The ways in which disasters and childhood migration converge are not yet well understood and detailed data are not widely available. But this intersection is often gendered; the experiences, adaptive capacities, and vulnerabilities of girls and boys can differ greatly. Available data demonstrate that sex and age are significant factors in mortality from natural disasters, with variations by country and type of disaster.<sup>26</sup>

For instance, a higher risk of death due to tsunamis among women than men has been noted,<sup>27</sup> partly due to women having less access to information and appropriate warnings during a crisis or being less likely to know how to swim.<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, women and girls in disaster-prone communities often contribute to climate-sensitive work, such as agricultural production, that meets essential household needs but is not directly linked to control over resources. This means disasters can uniquely compromise women's and girls' agency and their ability to feed themselves or their families, heightening their vulnerabilities to risky livelihoods, sexual exploitation, or child marriage.<sup>29</sup> These gendered dimensions must be reflected in the urgent policies and programmes needed to offset the harmful impacts of disaster displacement.<sup>30</sup>

In Bangladesh, an estimated 19.4 million children are exposed to the consequences of short- and longer-term climate change.<sup>31</sup> Experiences of adolescent girls in the country's Bhola district offer a telling example of the complexities of migration for girls due to climate-induced hardship.

With river erosion depriving families of their livelihoods, many adolescent girls are migrating to cities alone to work in garment factories. Girls expressed a sense of agency over their decision to migrate, even though they typically had to seek approval from their families and faced much greater social costs than boys for these choices. Girls' independence was highly stigmatized as it was viewed as breaking *purdah*, a practice in some Muslim communities of secluding women from contact with men outside their immediate family. Departing from tradition in this way could raise the cost of a woman's dowry when she intended to marry. These social consequences meant women often delayed migration longer than men, until the point when the climate-induced stress became so extreme that an immediate solution was needed. Less time to plan for their migration resulted in greater risks for some women, such as those who left home without a place to stay and had to temporarily live on the streets.<sup>32</sup>



## A CHILD IN FOCUS: Makhtoom in the Sudan

Migration is playing a defining role in the life of Makhtoom, 15. He has grown up in a camp for internally displaced persons in the Sudan's South Darfur. Last year, Makhtoom achieved a near perfect score on the Grade 8 national exam, the results of which determine a child's prospects for university. "I was determined to get a high grade, so I could achieve my – and my family's – dreams," he says. Makhtoom has set his sights on Columbia University and on becoming a doctor and one day, having the means to take his family out of the camp.<sup>33</sup>

# Accessing their basic rights

Like Makhtoom (see *A Child in Focus*, p. 28), many children migrate to access their rights to economic security and education. Girls may leave home as a means to circumvent restrictive beliefs about gender roles and expectations. While moving internally or crossing borders to earn a wage or go to school may originate from insecurity or scarcity, it can simultaneously offer children upward mobility and economic independence.<sup>34</sup> Temporary child migration – migration for a specific period of time that is not intended to be permanent – can be a rite of passage toward adulthood and even a default option for adolescents, as seen among Afghan boys migrating to Iran and girls in West Africa, who often leave rural areas to find work in nearby towns.<sup>35</sup>

Sex-disaggregated data on the exact number of children on the move for work are lacking, including the large numbers of girls and boys who migrate from rural to urban areas for this reason. In Southeast Asia, more girls are leaving home as demand for female labour in destination countries increases and female migration becomes more socially acceptable and economically necessary.<sup>36</sup> Among rural poor communities in Indonesia and the Philippines, women make up 60 to 75 per cent of workers abroad; adolescent Filipinos, usually girls, often leave home to supplement the family income. Between 2000 and 2012, women made up nearly 9 in 10 of all Cambodians migrating to Malaysia.<sup>37</sup>

# Social norms and harmful practices

Harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and early marriage can drive girls to seek better options in new places. In some contexts, migration can stand in as a socially acceptable alternative to marriage for girls and be used to delay marriage or enhance social status and future marriage prospects.<sup>38</sup> Given that the COVID-19 pandemic has put as many as 10 million more girls at risk of becoming child brides over the next decade,<sup>39</sup> it is critical to more closely examine the dynamics of child marriage and migration – not least because for many girls, their movement may introduce new risks, as seen in Aminata’s story (*see A Child in Focus*, p. 29).

In an analysis of South-South female migration using the OECD Development Centre’s Social Institutions and Gender Index, data showed that women and girls from countries with higher levels of gender discrimination tend to migrate more than those from countries with lower levels of gender discrimination. But in the most gender-restrictive countries, fewer females than males migrate, likely because of power structures that prevent women from making these decisions.<sup>41</sup>

Gender roles, such as responsibilities in the household or expectations around marriage and childbearing, may also limit a girl’s choice to migrate. Girls may be viewed as too vulnerable to travel independently, or as weaker earners than boys. But as more girls in a community leave home on their own, the practice may become more acceptable over time. In Mali, for example, where girls’ migration was once highly stigmatized and associated with sexual exploitation, it is now largely accepted and seen as commonplace.<sup>42</sup>

**LGBTIQ+** stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex. The plus sign is included to represent people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expression, and sex characteristics who identify using other terms. While these terms have increasing global resonance, in different cultures other terms are often used to refer to people who are attracted to people of the same gender, people with gender identities that differ from the sex assigned at birth, people with nonbinary identities and people whose sex characteristics do not fit typical definitions of male and female.

**Source:** Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, [LGBTI Equality: Frequently asked questions](#); UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, [Gender Equality: Glossary of terms and concepts](#), 2017.

## A CHILD IN FOCUS: Aminata from Burkina Faso

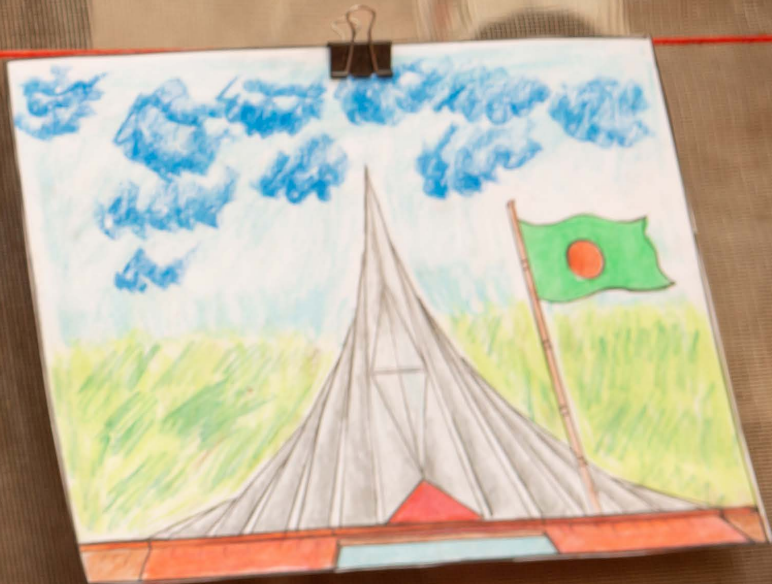
In Burkina Faso, more than half of girls marry before turning 18. Aminata was supposed to be one of them. “He was a man twice my age,” the 16-year-old says of her intended spouse. “But the hardest part was that he was not my choice.” As an alternative to the marriage, she found work as a domestic worker in an urban area and left her rural home alone. But Aminata never received her US\$9 monthly wage and was physically abused by her employer. After she escaped, Aminata found her way to social workers who are helping her reunite with her family.<sup>40</sup>





# Questions of personal freedom

In some cases, gender-based discrimination and rights violations may motivate children to move. LGBTIQ+ people who face high levels of familial or community scrutiny may leave home for places where they can be more anonymous and enjoy more rights.<sup>43</sup> Between January 2014 and February 2015, at least 400 individuals from Uganda – the majority of whom were gay male youth in their late teens and early twenties – sought asylum in Kenya following criminalization of same-sex sexual activity in their home country.<sup>44</sup> The extent to which LGBTIQ+ youth choose to migrate to escape stigma or persecution remains unknown, and more data are needed to identify and support these children – including more intersectional analysis of their reasons for leaving home. Data on migrants with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities are largely missing from the evidence, and sex-disaggregation rarely accounts for individuals with sex designations other than male or female.<sup>45</sup>



# A Perilous Journey: **Life in transit**

A child may migrate internally or across borders, move from a rural community to an urban one, or traverse continents and bodies of water. She or he may travel with family or alone. The journey may involve detention by government authorities or local militias, or protracted periods in camps for internally displaced persons or refugees. Too many children are deprived of access to essential services and exposed to violence, exploitation, and abuse as they travel. Experiences along the way are likely to be influenced by social norms and gender-specific vulnerabilities – girls, for instance, face significant risks of being exposed to gender-based violence.







# Deprived of safety, basic care and school

Yamileth, Yadnoel and Carlos's story (*see A Child in Focus, p. 34*) shows the precarious day-to-day reality for millions of children in transit. Their travels – which in many cases can take months or even years – often mean the end of health and child protection services, proper sanitation and hygiene, access to school, and the nutrition they need to thrive. Many of these deprivations will have a gendered dimension. For instance, 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.<sup>47</sup> Given that women and girls account for two in three of those facing chronic hunger globally, it is likely females in these settings will fare worse than males.<sup>48</sup> With severe hunger around the world now projected to grow by 82 per cent from pre-COVID levels, the well-being of many migrant and displaced girls is at risk.<sup>49</sup> These deprivations may drive some girls to resort to harmful coping mechanisms such as child marriage or transactional sex, as seen during the Ebola crisis.<sup>50</sup>

**Regular migration** occurs in compliance with the laws of the country of origin, transit and destination.

**Irregular migration** describes movement of a person who is not authorized to enter or to stay in a State pursuant to the law of that State and to international agreements to which that State is a party.

**Internal migration** refers to movement within a State for the purpose of establishing a new temporary or permanent residence or because of displacement.

**Source:** International Organization for Migration, [Key Migration Terms](#).



## A CHILD IN FOCUS:

### Yamileth, Yadnoel and Carlos from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela

Yamileth, 18, is walking 1,000 kilometres from Miranda in Venezuela to the Colombian city of Cali, with her two sons, Yadnoel and Carlos. She'll walk for at least a dozen days. The adolescent mother is fortunate to share the journey with 15 family members, including nine children, which helps keep her and her children safe. Many migrants on this route are ill prepared for the intense weather fluctuations and severe cold. "Yesterday it rained so hard that the children got soaked through. They woke up with a cough, but we didn't have time to go to the health centre," Yamileth says. She believes migration will allow her to finish college, which she was unable to afford at home. "I just want to give my children a better life."<sup>46</sup>

# Alone and unprotected

More children today are making the migrant's journey alone – these girls and boys are particularly vulnerable. Migrant and refugee boys are more likely to travel unaccompanied than girls, travel longer distances, and cross borders; girls more typically move within their own country or region.<sup>51</sup> These experiences may be driven by perceptions of safety and gender norms – what is seen as acceptable for one sex versus the other. Family members or other trusted community members may accompany girls on the road, but parents may have more relaxed attitudes about sons travelling alone.<sup>52</sup> Accompanying families are often seen as a protective mechanism for girls, but can also be linked to violence and exploitation as girls may have little say over whom they live with or where they live, in some cases joining families with whom they have no previous relationship.<sup>53</sup>

Significant numbers of children seeking asylum in Europe either embarked on the journey without their families or lost them along the way. An overwhelming majority of the more than 14,000 unaccompanied children seeking asylum in Europe in 2020 were boys (89 per cent).<sup>54</sup> More than half of these boys came from Afghanistan, Morocco, or the Syrian Arab Republic. Travelling alone increases the risk of experiencing abuse, trafficking, and exploitation – in particular for children and youth – and some routes, such as the Central Mediterranean Route through northern Africa, are more dangerous for those travelling alone than others (*see also A Child in Focus, p. 37*).<sup>55</sup> Among unaccompanied children apprehended in the United States in 2020, 68 per cent were boys, mostly from Central America.<sup>56</sup>

Evidence indicates that identifying unaccompanied girls may be particularly challenging and many are absent from the data. For example, an analysis of girls travelling to and through Europe from the Eastern and the Central Mediterranean routes showed that many unaccompanied and separated girls remained undetected by authorities – voluntarily or involuntarily – because they claimed to be over 18 years of age or acted as though they were travelling with a group or family.<sup>57</sup> Because they are absent from official statistics, many of these girls may be missing out on vital services for their health, safety, and protection.

Much attention has been paid to children travelling alone to Europe or the United States but in reality, intra-regional child migration is more frequent. Nearly one in five of the world's migrant children is in Africa, and many are on their own. Few demographic specifics are known about these girls and boys. In South Africa, for instance, boys accounted for approximately 70 per cent of unaccompanied migrant children from Zimbabwe. But these data likely leave out many unaccompanied migrant girls, who remain uncounted because they tend to work in less visible industries, such as domestic care, or have been exposed to sexual exploitation.<sup>58</sup>

**Child trafficking** is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation.

**Smuggling** is the procurement, in order to obtain – directly or indirectly – a financial or other material benefit, of the irregular entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.

**Source:** United Nations, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, 12 December 2000; United Nations, Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, 15 November 2000.

# Precarious paths

Around the world, countries are detecting and reporting more victims of trafficking. Since 2004, the share of children among them has almost doubled from 13 to 34 per cent.<sup>59</sup> Women and girls often make up a disproportionate number of victims of trafficking, yet many are unable to access information about their legal rights or entitlements, including where and how to access services, and information about potential gendered risks they may experience on the journey, such as trafficking, labour exploitation, unethical recruitment practices and sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>60</sup>

Girls and boys may be trafficked within their own countries or when trying to cross borders. Many children travelling alone and using irregular channels rely on smugglers, despite the risks of potentially being exploited and trafficked, but because of the illicit nature of both the smuggling and trafficking industries, the number of children doing so is unknown.<sup>61</sup> Smuggling and trafficking networks are often highly connected: Europol estimates that 20 per cent of suspected smugglers have links to human trafficking.<sup>62</sup> Climate-related events can act as a threat multiplier to human trafficking; data suggest that human trafficking may increase by around 20 to 30 per cent during these disasters, disproportionately affecting women and girls, who comprise the majority of detected trafficking victims.<sup>63</sup> Though COVID-related restrictions have curtailed travel around the world, smuggling by land and sea continues (see box, *Colliding dangers of COVID-19 and human trafficking*, p. 39).

Among detected victims of trafficking in 2018, about one third were children. The share of boys among detected victims has risen over the years but girls still outnumber boys four to three. The percentage of girls among all detected victims varies by region, with Central America and the Caribbean showing the highest percentage of detected girls at around 40 per cent, compared to boys' share of 8 per cent. In sub-Saharan Africa, children accounted for the majority of detected victims (59 per cent) with both sexes bearing the burden almost equally.<sup>64</sup> This picture however, is far from complete as many child victims of trafficking are never identified and thus missing from the data.

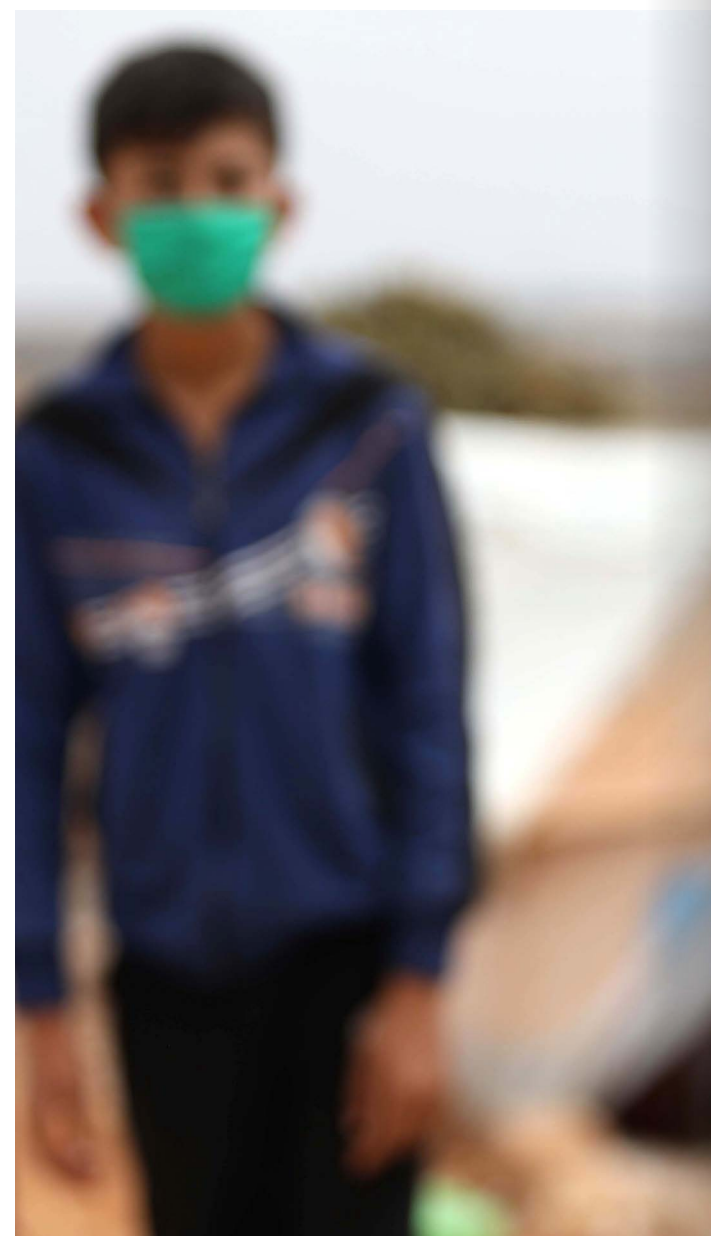


### A CHILD IN FOCUS: **Ibrahim, Mohamed and Abdul in Agadez**

The Niger's Agadez region has become a hub for smugglers and traffickers who prey on unaccompanied children and young people who have left volatile security and economic situations in sub-Saharan Africa. Many are desperate for food, shelter and security, like Ibrahim and Mohamed, both 17. They reported being robbed, arrested and tortured after leaving home in the Gambia. From Agadez, the boys hope to be smuggled to Libya or Algeria, and one day, to Europe. "Returning home isn't an option," Ibrahim says. Another adolescent in Agadez, Abdul, fled the conflict in Darfur with a group of friends in 2018, determined to reach Europe. But in Libya, the group was abducted by armed men. "They killed one of my friends and took the rest of us to a house and forced us to work [in the fields]. It was hell," Abdul says. He is now seeking asylum in Agadez.<sup>70</sup>

Gender plays a role in the type of trafficking a child will experience. Three of four trafficked girls are trafficked for sexual exploitation – the form most reported in the Americas, Europe, East Asia and the Pacific – while boys are more likely to be trafficked for forced labour, the most commonly detected form of trafficking in sub-Saharan Africa. Improved detection methods and an expanded definition of trafficking to include labour exploitation are shedding light on the burden carried by boys but more investment is needed. For instance in Europe, although available data show sexual exploitation as the most common form of trafficking, victims of forced labour may be less easily detected.<sup>65</sup>

Conditions for children who are smuggled and/or trafficked are often dire – and may even turn deadly, as told through the eyes of Ibrahim, Mohamed and Abdul (see *A Child in Focus*, p. 37). Sexual and physical abuse is common among both sexes, as seen along the Central Mediterranean Migration Route. In 2016, more than 28,223 children travelled this route through Libya seeking safety in Europe – 9 in 10 of them alone. More than three quarters of surveyed adolescents and youth on this route reported exploitation and most said they performed work or other activities against their will.<sup>66</sup> Data from 2019 showed that nearly all girls reported experiencing sexual violence during their journeys across the Mediterranean – some who would experience the added rights violation of an unwanted pregnancy – and girls are at high risk of being trafficked, as seen between Nigeria and Italy.<sup>67</sup> Sexual violence is so pervasive in some scenarios that females may prepare for it. For instance, Eritrean women anticipating travel to Libya report seeking contraceptives beforehand to prevent unwanted pregnancy in case of rape.<sup>68</sup> Less is known about boys' experiences of sexual violence due to a fear of reporting due to stigma, shame, and misconceptions of what constitutes sexual violence against boys, but evidence is growing that it may be pervasive.<sup>69</sup>





## Colliding dangers of COVID-19 and human trafficking

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased levels of poverty, unemployment, and systemic inequalities – some of the root causes of human trafficking. Countries facing prolonged unemployment also show significant increases in detected trafficking victims, as seen during economic shocks like the 2008 financial crisis.<sup>71</sup>

Restrictions on regular migration threaten to push trafficking networks further underground, potentially forcing children fleeing violence, persecution, and conflict to rely on riskier, more expensive smuggling networks to reach their destinations. This threatens to expose migrant girls and boys to greater levels of abuse, exploitation, debt, and trafficking.<sup>72</sup> Initial evidence from Mediterranean migration routes suggests that migrant flows are continuing, despite lockdown measures in numerous countries.<sup>73</sup>

In places where mobility restrictions have severely decreased irregular movements across borders, historical evidence shows that reductions are often followed by major increases. Though the COVID-19 pandemic led to temporary decreases in irregular migration at the US-Mexico border, demand for smuggling services in Central America and Mexico continued;<sup>74</sup> 2021 data show that the number of border apprehensions has continued to climb – including an increasing number involving unaccompanied children.<sup>75</sup> Some frontline organizations working on human trafficking have reported increased demand for services; Polaris, for example, reported that the daily number of labour trafficking and exploitation situations reported to the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline doubled over a six-month period in 2020.<sup>76</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic stands to have a major impact on the human trafficking industry and its victims and it is unlikely children will be spared many of the ill effects.



## A CHILD IN FOCUS: Central American adolescents held by immigration authorities

A 15-year-old Honduran boy interviewed by UNICEF describes his time in detention in Mexico, where he was held with adults rather than children. “The immigrant officers don’t care if we can communicate with our families. They don’t care if you call, eat, sleep, are sick. They don’t care about anything,” he reported. A 17-year-old girl from El Salvador noted the presence of gangs in detention centres. “If the gang members liked a woman, they took her into their cell and the immigration police officers did not say anything about it, they just let them do it.”<sup>79</sup>

**Note:** These children’s stories were published in February 2019. In November 2020, the Mexican Government updated its immigration law to prohibit the holding of migrant children in immigration detention centres.

# Dangers of being detained

In more than 100 countries, girls and boys on the migration journey are being held by immigration authorities, with hundreds of thousands of children being detained each year.<sup>77</sup> In these centres, both girls and boys are likely to face violence, abuse, and unsafe living conditions (see *A Child in Focus*, p. 40). Torture, extortion, forced labour, and sexual violence – gross human rights violations with grave impacts on short- and long-term physical and mental health – are common.<sup>78</sup> Regardless of the conditions in which children are held, detention has a profound and negative impact on child health and development. This damage can occur even if the detention is of relatively short duration and carried out in so-called child-friendly facilities.

Boys seem to be at greater risk of being detained than girls;<sup>80</sup> this may be because authorities are more likely to perceive males as a security threat or because more boys travel alone. But some data show that girls spend more days in detention than boys. Nearly one in five children travelling the 4,000-kilometre Southern Route from the Horn of Africa towards South Africa are detained, with girls spending an average of 27 days in detention compared to 17 days for boys.<sup>81</sup>

Little is known about how factors such as sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability influence girls’ and boys’ detention. But these experiences must be captured. For instance, available research suggests that LGBTIQ+ migrant adults are particularly vulnerable to targeted acts of violence, sexual assault, and other forms of identity-based harassment by detainees and facility staff – LGBTIQ+ children are likely to face similar challenges.<sup>82</sup>



# Risks of camp settings

Many refugee and migrant children spend time in camps for refugees or internally displaced persons. These stays may be temporary or continue for years (*see also part 4, Destination Reached, p. 42*). Women and girls may encounter a range of gender-based inequalities in these settings. Refugee women commonly face high barriers to health care and may miss out on public health information, grappling with language barriers, fear of navigating the health care system, and restrictive gender roles and norms.<sup>83</sup> In Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar, lockdowns in camps and host communities resulted in limited access to COVID-19-related messaging among Rohingya women and girls, and they were less aware of COVID-19 risks than men.<sup>84</sup>

Data from the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya show that girls and young, single or unmarried women face an elevated risk of violence due to gender inequalities that are heightened in displacement as well as by the presence of militaries, assignment to less secure housing structures, and curtailed access to services and social networks.<sup>85</sup> As many as three quarters of women in camp settings report mental or physical health issues linked to their living conditions.<sup>86</sup> Many women are also reluctant to seek help or may not have access to support services.

While girls are disproportionately exposed to gender-based violence – and incidents are almost certainly far more common than the data show – sexual violence against boys is also likely underreported. Sexual violence against Congolese, Somali and South Sudanese refugee boys and adolescents in Kenya has been widely reported.<sup>87</sup> In Jordan, Lebanon, and the Kurdistan region of Iraq, sexual violence against Syrian refugee boys in both camp and non-camp settings was found to be common and often perpetrated by older boys and men. This may be due to multiple factors, such as the value placed on girls' virginity. Many Syrian boys were engaged in child labour, with employers reportedly withholding wages or refusing to give boys jobs unless they performed sexual favours. Refugee boys' age, precarious legal status, and limited employment options render them vulnerable to this type of exploitation.<sup>88</sup>

Although the risks to children in refugee camps cannot be overstated, camp experiences can also positively shift social structures and pervasive gender inequalities, such as by offering more equitable access to school for girls. In some cases, traditional gendered roles are being reimaged and redefined.<sup>89</sup> In Ethiopia, adolescent South Sudanese girls in refugee camps who participated in a life skills programme were more likely to value prolonged schooling and delayed marriage and more than twice as likely to have friends of their own age than girls who did not join the programme.<sup>90</sup>

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# Destination Reached: **Navigating a new environment**

Children will simultaneously encounter hurdles and exciting opportunities once they have reached their new home – a time of transition that will likely be demanding and intense, no matter if their migration is temporary or permanent. They will need to build new lives and routines, enrol in schools and potentially catch up on lost time in the classroom, start jobs, and forge support networks, often adjusting to different cultures, languages and social norms. Many will start out with little social capital and few assets and the road to safety and security may be long. Gender will continue to shape these aspects as children adjust.





### A CHILD IN FOCUS:

## Suthida from Myanmar

Suthida Lungkoo was born in Myanmar's Shan State, a place long associated with conflict and an illicit drug-producing industry. Three years ago, at age 11, her family migrated to Chiang Mai, Thailand, hoping to find a better life. Suthida's family of seven lives in a 16-square-meter (around 170 square feet) apartment, but to afford it, everyone in the family must work. So far, Suthida is managing the duelling pressures of school and work well. She attends Grade 5 at a local mobile school until 3:30pm, before beginning a 12-hour shift at a restaurant. She earns about US\$10 per day. "I get only about two hours' sleep a night, but I don't feel tired or sleepy at school," she says. Her dedication and positive attitude are clearly paying off. The now 14-year-old ranks fourth of the 21 students in her class. "If I were in Shan State, I could only have studied until Prathom 5 (5th Grade). Here, I can also do a lot more activities with my friends. Back at home, there's not much for us to do." One day, Suthida hopes her hard work will translate into a career as an engineer.<sup>91</sup>

# Right to education

Migration impacts children's learning in complex ways, as Suthida's story shows (see *A Child in Focus*, p. 44). Some will see a boost in their learning opportunities, while others may experience a decline. In non-conflict settings in developing countries, girls who leave rural areas for urban settings achieve a higher education level on average than their rural counterparts who have not migrated.<sup>92</sup> But if employment is what drives her migration, a girl may struggle to balance school and a job; for instance, among girls performing paid domestic work in Ecuador, a third dropped out of school,<sup>93</sup> and in Jakarta, just over half of girls from rural areas working in domestic care had a primary education.<sup>94</sup>

Gender can intersect with other social characteristics, including race and ethnicity, to influence achievement gaps between girls and boys. Migrant and refugee girls in the Global North typically have better school outcomes than boys. These gaps may grow over time. Among black and Hispanic migrants in the United States for instance, second generation migrant boys had poorer grades than first generation boys, but the reverse was true for girls. These trends may be due in part to the prejudice and systemic racism experienced by migrant black and Hispanic boys in the school system though more research is needed in this area.<sup>95</sup>

In refugee camps and humanitarian settings, evidence suggests that girls generally face greater obstacles to realizing their right to learn than boys. Internally displaced and refugee girls are less likely to attend school than boys and in conflict settings, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys.<sup>96</sup> In the Dadaab refugee camp, among children aged 3 to 5, 48 per cent of girls attended preschool compared to 62 per cent of boys, and among adolescents aged 14 to 17, just 7 per cent of girls were in school versus 22 per cent of boys. This may be due in part to safety concerns for girls for reasons ranging from a lack of sex-segregated latrines to few female teachers in these settings, particularly in cultures that require adolescent girls to be taught by women.<sup>97</sup> Attitudes regarding girls' education, the risk of gender-based violence, and forced marriage are also shown to limit girls' school outcomes in displacement settings.<sup>98</sup>

Gender-based violence and harmful practices in displacement settings may contribute to educational disparities along gender lines, with girls specifically targeted by armed groups that oppose girls' education.<sup>99</sup> In Lebanon, protection hurdles to schooling such as long distances and lack of transportation make Syrian female refugees more vulnerable to school drop-out and child marriage.<sup>100</sup>

Many parents in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh stopped girls from attending school once they began menstruating due to the prevalence of sexual violence.<sup>101</sup>

Migrant and displaced children of both sexes will face significant challenges in continuing their education. The effect of COVID-19 on school closures has further threatened equitable access to education among these groups, with online learning an unrealistic option for many children. In sub-Saharan Africa, where over 26 per cent of the world's refugee population resides, 9 of 10 learners do not have household computers and 82 per cent lack Internet access.<sup>102</sup> Based on a sampling from 10 countries, it has been estimated that as many as half of all secondary school-age refugee girls may not return to the classroom once schools reopen.<sup>103</sup> Evidence from past crises, such as the Ebola outbreak, show that marginalized girls are less likely to return to school after closures than boys, facing heightened obstacles such as adolescent pregnancy, child marriage and increased household duties.<sup>104</sup>

# Seeking economic security

Girls and boys tend to migrate for different types of jobs and encounter different conditions at work – many of these outcomes will track with patterns defined by gender. Globally, girls typically migrate for unskilled occupations, such as domestic or care work, service sector jobs, entertainment, or the manufacturing industry, particularly the garment industry.<sup>105</sup> Employers often recruit these girls with the promise of work conditions far better than they will experience once they arrive. High rates of abuse and exploitation have been documented in these largely unregulated sectors that heighten girls' vulnerability and impede upon their rights. For instance, employers may seek to control reproductive health, as seen among adolescent girls and young women working in factories in Honduras forced to take contraceptive pills and advised to have an abortion if they became pregnant.<sup>106</sup> Temporary female migrant workers at garment and footwear factories in Taiwan, Malaysia and Thailand were frequently required to take pregnancy tests and, in some cases, also forced to take contraception.<sup>107</sup>

The industries more commonly available to unskilled boys (e.g., construction, mining and agriculture) are relatively more visible, better regulated, and better paid than female-dominated sectors, but many migrant boys face dangerous conditions and are often poorly paid.<sup>108</sup> Boys are also likely to take odd jobs, working in repair shops and garages, or hawking and scavenging.<sup>109</sup> Much of this work will put boys in harm's way. Among Syrian child refugees in Jordan, as many as half are working; the vast majority are boys, who face tremendous pressure to provide for their families. These boys are at high risk of sexual exploitation, but many are afraid to disclose instances of sexual abuse in the workplace.<sup>110</sup>

Many children who migrate independently and internationally for work are likely to have an irregular migration status, which can expose them to exploitative conditions and make them reluctant to call the police or ask for help. Working children on the move are often severely underpaid; this may be even more pronounced among girls, as seen in Bangladesh, China, Thailand and Viet Nam.<sup>111</sup>

Protecting children in the workplace is essential to upholding their rights. But the agency and sense of opportunity that may have motivated them to migrate in the first place must also be recognized. Employment can offer a route to better incomes and economic empowerment, improve family status (particularly if sending remittances), and allow children to hone skills they may not have been able to develop at home. This may especially be true for girls, who may see their self-esteem and sense of autonomy improve.



## Domestic workers and COVID-19

The informal jobs commonly performed by migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, combined with their irregular status and limited access to social protection, expose these groups to intense vulnerabilities at work. The economic fallout due to COVID-19 is exacerbating these concerns, as seen among migrant girls working in domestic care, already a precarious and often exploitative industry. The migratory experiences of migrant domestic workers are largely unseen.<sup>112</sup> Among live-in care providers, for instance, lockdowns have meant increased working hours as employers stay home and demand constant assistance. Additional time quarantined with employers may expose these girls to more gender-based violence. Some employers have stopped paying live-in domestic workers due to financial constraints. Migrant girls in these situations may be unable to return home due to travel restrictions.<sup>113</sup>

Female migrant domestic workers also face a heightened risk of contracting COVID-19. They may be expected to take care of sick household members or engage in errands outside the home and have little decision-making power about social distancing measures. With limited mobility, female migrant domestic workers also face difficulty accessing testing or treatment without support from their employers.<sup>114</sup> Other migrant domestic workers have lost their jobs because of the pandemic.<sup>115</sup> In India, tens of millions of internal migrant domestic workers were dismissed with no means of supporting themselves, many unable to afford a train ticket home.<sup>116</sup>

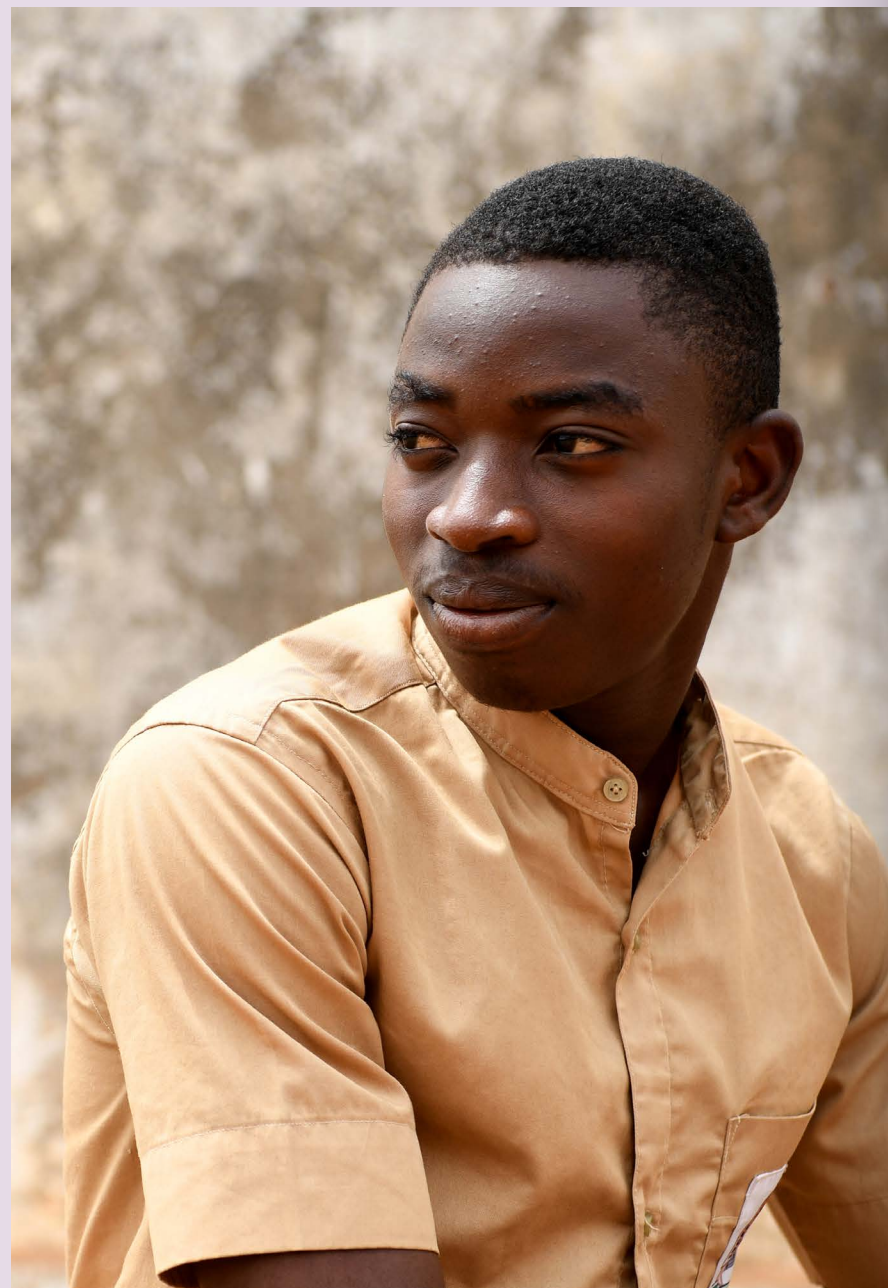
Vulnerable populations around the world are being hit with intensity by the pandemic and its socioeconomic consequences – and for millions of working migrant children, their fragile security is diminishing further.

# Sending money home

In 2019, migrant workers sent US\$554 billion dollars to family members in low- and middle-income countries. But the COVID-19 pandemic, which has taken a great toll on migrant workers,<sup>117</sup> is expected to slash this vital lifeline for many vulnerable families by about 20 per cent in 2020. Remittances are essential to the health and schooling of many children back home, particularly girls; these funds have been linked to closing the gender gap in school, improving girls' health, and decreasing child labour.<sup>118</sup>

While sex- and age-disaggregated data on working children who send money back home are scarce, patterns among adult migrants suggest gender plays a role in remittance patterns. Overall, male and female migrants tend to send the same amount of money, but because females are typically paid less, this means they remit a larger percentage of their income.<sup>119</sup> Women tend to remit smaller amounts, more consistently, for longer periods of time than men.<sup>120</sup> Altruism, strong family ties, concerns for the welfare of the household, and a strong sense of obligation for the financial and material support of the family play a role in this pattern among women. Women are also more likely to rely on informal transfer methods, often limited by a lack of financial literacy and formal documentation typically required by banks. This is because feminized work sectors are more likely to be informal.<sup>121</sup>

Gendered expectations and norms likely play a role in the remittance behaviours of children, particularly among adolescents. Girls in some contexts may face greater pressure to remit than boys. Filipino families, for instance, were more likely to send daughters away to work than sons because they believed daughters would more reliably send remittances home.<sup>122</sup> In other contexts, the eldest daughter may be expected to migrate for work and send money home to support siblings in school.<sup>123</sup> Boys, on the other hand, may be more inclined to save money in order to forge marriage prospects.<sup>124</sup>





# Integration encounters

Migrant children will experience social integration differently than adults, but gendered expectations, attitudes and roles in host communities continue to take place. Girls and boys alike may be recovering from the stress and trauma of their migration and appropriate support may not be available to them. Simultaneously, they may grapple with new challenges in host communities including stigma, marginalization, discrimination, and xenophobia. In contexts where host communities exoticize and hypersexualize migrant women, for instance, migrant adolescent girls may be at further risk of sexual violence.<sup>125</sup> While girls may encounter harmful gender-driven practices in their new environment, the reverse may also be true in cases where a girl's migration protects her from discriminatory practices in her place of origin.

Girls who migrate for domestic work and marriage are considered particularly vulnerable to persistent feelings of loneliness and a lack of belonging, especially in cases where their movement is highly restricted, as captured in Hope's experiences (*see A Child in Focus*, p. 50). A study on adolescent migrant girls in India found that girls who migrated for marriage and lived with their husband and in-laws often faced limits in their movement and social activity. Compared to non-migrant married girls who often found opportunities to visit their natal families, migrant girls living with their in-laws had less external social support.<sup>126</sup>

In some contexts, migration or displacement can lead to shifts in attitudes and beliefs about appropriate gender roles for migrant girls and boys.<sup>128</sup> For example, refugee men and boys may grow to accept the fact that they can no longer be the protector or provider for their family while women and girls may enjoy new freedom, gain new skills, and improve their self-esteem, autonomy, and social standing.<sup>129</sup> In a study of an internally displaced community from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, forced displacement of the entire community led to breakdowns in social structures that fundamentally shifted communal attitudes and beliefs about gender roles. Before displacement, the community was highly patriarchal and repressive toward women and girls. After displacement, new living and working arrangements, opportunities for girls' education, and differing attitudes in the host population transformed these gender roles. Specifically, more girls began attending school; women began to work wage jobs; women and girls reported fewer cases of domestic violence; and both girls and boys began to marry later.<sup>130</sup>



### A CHILD IN FOCUS: **Hope from Bangladesh**

After being forced to marry a much older Bangladeshi man at age 16, Hope (not her real name) had to join him in Italy after her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. But life in Rome proved to be not only isolating but also dangerous. Hope's husband forbade her to leave his tiny flat, confiscated her phone and documents, and became physically and sexually abusive. Eventually, Hope managed to run away, and family friends living in Rome facilitated her return to Bangladesh. But as a young woman who refused to stay with her husband, she was stigmatized by her home community and isolated once again. Hope returned to Italy and, after many challenges, including poor access to social support services, she began to move forward: First, a UNICEF partner ensured she was able to take advantage of gender-based violence response services, and then, she enrolled in a UNICEF-supported programme that equips vulnerable adolescents and youth with entrepreneurial skills. Now, at age 21, she is trying to build a new life on her own in Italy, with a new community of peers.<sup>127</sup>

# New communities

Migrant children will need to rebuild their social support systems, while also navigating new cultural and linguistic challenges. These challenges will be influenced by a range of personal circumstances, such as age, sex, legal status, education, health, access to extended family or social connections, and the host community's attitudes towards migrants. Many factors will influence a child's ability to build social capital in host communities.

This capital (or the lack thereof) may determine much of a child's well-being after migration, such as access to school and health services, employment, and child protective services like hotlines and shelters. Indian adolescent girls who migrated internally from rural to urban areas where extended family members lived benefited from practical support, assistance with finding housing, and more choices to make social connections.<sup>131</sup> Among young labour migrants in Viet Nam, a vast majority (8 in 10 boys, 9 in 10 girls) used relatives in destination areas to find employment.<sup>132</sup> Because migrant boys are more likely to migrate longer distances and internationally, they may be less likely to benefit from the social support family connections may provide – an important consideration for the millions of boys migrating alone.

While much has been written about migrant children's vulnerabilities in their new homes, they will also have much to gain, as seen in Maria and Yusuf's migration to Turkey (see *A Child in Focus*, p. 52). Girls and boys may experience a stronger sense of family unity and cultural identity. They may build social networks through peers, communities, and schools that were previously absent from their lives. And they may access innovative social services and resilience-focused interventions, as seen in some high-income countries, that will change perspectives and shift gender dynamics.<sup>133</sup>

By the time they reach their destination, children who have migrated have come a very long way. We must ensure their dreams of building a better life are not forgotten.





#### A CHILD IN FOCUS:

### Maria and Yusuf from the Syrian Arab Republic

Maria, 13, and Yusuf, 10, fled violence in Syria to build a new life in Turkey. Both lost their fathers to war. In 2020, Turkey was home to the largest number of refugee girls and boys in the world, estimated at over 1.7 million – most from Syria. For many of these children, language barriers coupled with time missed in the classroom, make learning in Turkish schools a challenge and more than 400,000 are out of school. Maria described feeling “sad and lonely” because she could not make Turkish friends. She recently graduated from a Turkish language course that aims to help refugee girls and boys integrate into their communities and local schools.

“I feel really proud now as I’m able to help my mother translate many things in Turkish, especially at the supermarket as she can get a bit mixed up with the food labels,” she says, giggling.

Yusuf shares a similar experience. Before migrating, he had never been to school. Learning Turkish has given the boy new confidence; he now feels able to help his mother navigate their new life, and dreams of becoming an interpreter.<sup>134</sup>



## When the journey leads back home

There are many reasons a child migrant's journey might end where it began. Return may be voluntary, as in the case of temporary employment. Some migrations will be unsuccessful. Data on the total number of migrants forced to return home are scarce, as many of these processes operate outside of formal procedures.<sup>135</sup> COVID-19 has introduced new challenges for girls and boys on the move, leaving many stranded at borders or forcibly returned to the dangerous environments they had fled.

Children who have migrated can return with new ideas, attitudes, and perspectives on social norms that may challenge gender structures and social patterns.<sup>136</sup> Many girls and boys will have gained more autonomy during their migration experience, including economic independence in some cases. Some women returning home – for instance, as seen among Dominican and Sri Lankan female populations – have set up businesses or microenterprises.<sup>137</sup> After spending time in the United Kingdom, Pakistani migrant men and women were more likely to hold more liberal views of women's roles in

society and reported greater levels of task sharing within the household.<sup>138</sup> But in other situations, restrictive societies may be less inclined to adjust.

Children who return may face stigma and discrimination, particularly among those deported or who were unsuccessful in reaching their destination. These experiences may be gendered as well, as seen in El Salvador where girls sent home from the United States are often stigmatized or seen as tainted, with the assumption that they were sexually assaulted on the migration journey.<sup>139</sup> In Afghanistan, friends, families and acquaintances may invest in a young man's migration journey with the expectations to be paid back and to benefit from the migration. If the migration is unsuccessful, the child may face stigma and shame.<sup>140</sup> Deported girls and boys may feel a strong sense of disconnection or exile from their home communities, which can lead to depression and feelings of hopelessness and in some cases, result in a cycle of re-migration.<sup>141</sup>

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# A Brighter Path Ahead: **Critical questions, critical investments**

Right now, girls and boys around the globe are leaving their homes, some accompanied by their families, others departing alone. Many are forced into this life-changing journey. Many are in transit, sometimes for periods much longer than anticipated. And many are acclimatizing to new realities – in foreign countries or within their own borders, in camps or detention centres, or in new jobs or classrooms.

But how many? How old are they? Why have they left, and where are they going? How will they get there? How long will they stay? What opportunities, challenges and deprivations will they face, and how will these vary by their age group? To what extent will their sex, sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as gender norms, influence these answers? Where do a child's other identities – e.g., religion, language, nationality, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status and class – fit into these complex dynamics?



While the available evidence reviewed here leaves no doubt that gender must be considered when answering these questions, the data are also critically limited. This means the full picture of how girls and boys on the move are navigating their migration differently based on their age and sex and other intersecting identities remains unclear.

Focused examination to drive deeper insights is urgently needed so that the rights of all migrant and displaced children are upheld from the moment they leave home. To tackle the complexities involved in migration and displacement through a gender lens, innovative data collection and analysis must be matched with discussion, debate and collaboration among key stakeholders. These efforts might include collecting data on the multitude of reasons children and young adults migrate and analysing how these reasons differ by sex and age – including how experiences shift from early childhood through adolescence; investing in data systems to better measure the number of internally displaced children by sex and age; and supporting citizen-generated data to better understand gaps in service provisions for girls and boys on the move. The perspectives of girls and boys who have migrated or been displaced must also be prioritized in these efforts.

## Considering the role of gender from the start

The role of young voices in the decision-making process and the way in which gender norms influence family negotiations needs closer analysis. Available evidence suggests that the gendered expectations families, communities and societies place on girls and boys influences their decision to migrate. But in which contexts do these gendered expectations trigger the decision to migrate, and by whom? We know too little to provide girls and boys with the support they need at this critical juncture.

Some of the drivers that motivate children to leave will be intimately tied to their sex, age, sexual orientation and gender identity, such as gender-based violence. How many have left home due to gender-specific forms of persecution, discrimination and violence? Data on how child marriage impacts the decision to migrate itself – or how many children consider migration as an alternative to marriage but do not (or cannot) migrate – are limited. More data are needed to capture the extent to which gender-based rights violations shape the decision for girls, boys and sexual minority groups to migrate.

## Geographic blind spots

To date, we know more about the stories of children moving from the Global South to the Global North (e.g., the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia) than about children migrating internally or regionally. However, girls and boys travelling within their country's borders or the same region account for most children on the move. Millions are fleeing climate-related disasters, an area of increasing urgency necessitating a data-driven approach that is both age and gender responsive. And more information is needed about the internal movement of girls and boys for reasons intimately tied to their sex and gender, such as to escape narrow gender roles or sexual discrimination or to continue an education that they would otherwise have to stop.

In contexts around the world, patterns of female migration are often missing from the data. Where data are available, they show that many migration routes are heavily gendered; the overwhelming majority of unaccompanied and separated children arriving in Europe to claim asylum are boys for example, while internal migration in many countries is female driven. How do gendered expectations, gendered assessments of the risks of migration, and migration policies work together? While some available evidence is presented in this report, the unique and specific circumstances of these movements – whether internal, regional or international – must be better understood.



## Severity of rights violations

Children on the move are facing gross violations of their human rights, many of which persist across the migration journey and continue once a destination has been reached. But the scale of these harms is mostly unknown and data are scarce. An unknown number of migrant and displaced children are trafficked, smuggled, or detained. Many are living in transit centres, camps and informal settlements without safety and security. Many remain invisible and uncounted and therefore, unprotected.

More evidence is needed to grasp the scale of these unacceptable harms and to comprehend the gendered risks and vulnerabilities these children encounter as migrants. The ways in which gender interacts with other factors, such as sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability status, must be better understood. Wherever the journey ends – the intended destination, somewhere else, or back home – and whether girls and boys stay within their own country's borders or cross them, more insight is needed into the gender-specific experiences of social integration, including where children's rights are being violated.

## COVID-19, emergencies, and gender-responsive interventions

The socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic – limited access to school and health care, communities being excluded from the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, rising rates of poverty and child labour, increasing reports of gender-based violence, prolonged restrictions on travel – are affecting girls and boys on the move disproportionately. Newly intensified deprivations are a harsh reminder of just how vulnerable these children are. The pandemic's consequences for migrant and displaced children necessitates close and urgent examination, including which combination of age- and gender-responsive interventions protect against today's crisis and prepare for future shocks and emergencies.

## The way forward

Though data on the gendered dimensions of child migration are sparse, this report highlights the need for gender and intersectional analyses when examining the vulnerabilities and needs of migrant and displaced children around the world. It is evident that support to children on the move must be gender responsive. Gender-transformative programming that supports all children hinges on robust knowledge, innovative analysis and critical debate.

Efforts to expand gender data on children on the move must think beyond quantitative data. While critical, quantitative data alone are insufficient and do not fully represent the complex realities of migration and displacement during childhood. With informed consent, qualitative methodologies – including focus group discussions, life histories and key informant interviews – provide an essential platform for girls and boys to share their stories, while participatory research methods, in which children are co-investigators of the issues they deem most essential, hold stakeholders accountable for ensuring that no child on the move is left behind.

Closing the data gaps is essential to achieving a forward-facing, rights-based approach to child migration and hinges upon local, national, regional and global collaboration, in addition to cooperation between communities, governments, NGOs, and civil society partners. Most importantly, young voices must stand at the centre of our efforts to protect every girl and boy that leaves home, no matter the circumstances.

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