



**Global  
Migration  
Lab**

Hosted by  
 Australian  
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Red Cross



**Central  
Tracing  
Agency**

# Towards Safer Journeys:

Migrant women and children's experiences of separation, going missing or dying

**Africa Data Report**







Red Cross of Chad staff and volunteers at the Humanitarian Service Point in Ati, Chad. Image: Laurel Selby/British Red Cross

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#### Contact us

Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab  
Hosted by Australian Red Cross  
and Kenya Red Cross Society

[www.redcross.org.au/globalmigrationlab](http://www.redcross.org.au/globalmigrationlab)  
[globalmigrationlab@redcross.org.au](mailto:globalmigrationlab@redcross.org.au)

#### In partnership with



Cover image: Kenya Red Cross helps displaced people at Dadaab refugee camp connect with their relatives. Image: John Bundt/Kenya Red Cross.



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**Main National Society Contributors:** **Red Cross of Chad:** Cécile Tomemte, Djidda Ahmat Saleh, Ramadji Modeste, Tchoroma Mahamat, Djenade Mamde Issa Gilbert, Hassan Maroua Abakar. **The Gambia Red Cross Society:** Fatou A. Camara, Aliou Jammeh, Musa Suso. **Kenya Red Cross Society:** Joel Wanjau, Timiro Abdinoor, Fredrick Luttah, Mohammed Rajab. **Nigerian Red Cross Society:** Angela Francis, Charity Nwaoha, Benson Agbro, Muktari Amuda, Chinyere Ike, Uchechukwu Okoro, Abdulsalam, Abdullahi Yusuf, Olaitan Bello. **Tanzania Red Cross Society:** Lucrecia Rubandwa, Reginald Mhango, Deus Kabavako, Ally Mugendi.

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The Gambia Red Cross staff and volunteers traveled throughout the country to undertake data collection. Image: Global Migration Lab.



# Executive Summary

## Background

As women and children around the world continue to migrate<sup>1</sup>, many do so under dangerous circumstances that render them vulnerable to violence, exploitation and other risks, including the risk of becoming separated, going missing or dying during their journeys.<sup>2</sup> Despite this reality, and the growing recognition that gender and age shape many aspects of migration, there is little data and analysis that systematically and directly addresses how and why migrant women and children become separated or go missing.<sup>3</sup>

To better understand and respond to this issue, the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (Global Migration Lab) together with the ICRC Central Tracing Agency's Red Cross Red Crescent Missing Persons Centre (Missing Persons Centre) and certain National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies), undertook research with migrants (primarily women, children and young adults), the families of missing migrants and key informants in the Americas, Africa, and Europe. This report focuses on the data collected in Africa from June to December 2024.

The research supports the implementation of the following International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) 2024 Council of Delegates Resolutions: [Protection in the Movement: Improving our collective impact in protecting people](#) (CD/24/R1), [Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030](#) (CD/24/R2), and [Extension until 2030 of the Restoring Family Links Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2020–2025](#) (CD/24/R6).

## Methodology and scope

A comprehensive literature review and consultations with global and regional Movement migration and protection colleagues, as well as National Societies participating in the project, informed the research design. The project tools and protocol were presented to and approved by the Ethics Review Board of the ICRC.

The project employed a qualitative approach, using a combination of (i) semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with migrants (primarily women and young adults that migrated as children); (ii) risk mapping exercises (drawing sessions) with migrant children (aged 8-17) that, in some cases, included individual interviews; (iii) interviews with the relatives of migrants who are missing; and (iv) interviews with key informants.

In accordance with the Movement's strictly humanitarian approach to migration that focuses on migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, irrespective of legal status, type or category, and in line with the Movement's Migration Strategy, research participants included, among others, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless migrants, labour migrants and migrants deemed to be irregular by the public authorities.<sup>4</sup>

In Africa, a total of 82 qualitative interviews with migrants, 22 FGDs with migrants, 11 risk-mapping exercises with children, 55 interviews with relatives of migrants who are missing, and 52 interviews with key informants were conducted by National Societies across 5 countries (Chad, The Gambia, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania).

To support ongoing humanitarian diplomacy efforts, including bilateral confidential dialogue with governments and other concerned parties, certain findings have been intentionally excluded from this public report.

1 International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2024). *Migration Data Portal: Child and Young Migrants*. [Available online](#); United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) (2024). *International Migration Stock 2024 – Key Facts and Figures*. [Available online](#); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2024). *Global Trends: Forced Displacement In 2024*. [Available online](#).

2 See for instance: Dearden, K. and Sánchez Dionis, M. (2020). How a Lack of Data is Perpetuating the Invisibility of Migrant Women's Deaths. *Migration Data Portal*, [Available online](#); IOM (2022). 50,000 Lives Lost During Migration: Analysis of Missing Migrants Project Data 2014–2022. [Available online](#); Pickering, S. and B. Cochrane (2012). 'Irregular Border-Crossing Deaths and Gender: Where, How and Why Women Die Crossing Borders'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 17:27–48; Sánchez Dionis, M. and Dearden, K. (2019). 'Missing Migrants Project data: A global overview', in *Fatal Journeys Volume 4: Missing Migrant Children*. [Available online](#);

3 Foran, S. and Stockwell, J. (2021). *An Exploration of the Gender and Diversity Dimensions of the Separated, Missing and Deceased and the Families Searching for Them* (Internal Report), RCRC Missing Persons Centre: Geneva.

4 [Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030](#)

## Key Findings

Participants in the research primarily included migrants travelling via main migratory routes within East Africa and from Africa to Europe. The most common reasons for migration cited were armed conflict, instability and insecurity; famine; drought; lack of economic opportunities; and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including forced marriage.

Key factors contributing to the risk of migrant women and children going missing or dying in Africa include the conditions of the journey, informal and dangerous modes of transport and lack of access to essential services. The data demonstrate that migrant women and children travelling in small and unseaworthy boats often drown or suffocate when packed into crowded lorries. Journeys through difficult terrain, such as deserts, with inadequate access to services, expose migrants to risks of starvation and dehydration. Childbirth is also dangerous for both mothers and babies with no access to medical care, while lack of food impacts breast milk supply, placing babies at risk of death. The data underscore that children are more vulnerable to death given the weaker state of their bodies and exposure to environmental conditions, health risks (such as communicable disease outbreaks) and natural hazards (like snakes and wild animals).

Actions of authorities may also indirectly contribute to deaths in the region. In addition, kidnapping for ransom and extortion is common in the data, as is SGBV and human trafficking, at the hands of criminal gangs or other armed groups, with migrants often killed when they or their families do not pay a ransom, following their kidnapping.

Separations in the region are associated with armed conflict and the actions of both state and non-state actors. Data show that when armed conflict erupts, children are often forced to flee without their parents and continue their journey alone. Smugglers also separate families when boarding boats to optimize loading or exert control over migrants. Attacks by bandits and criminal gangs en route result in families dispersing in search of safety and becoming separated. Children are also forcibly taken by non-state armed groups for recruitment into militia groups. With respect to the actions of the authorities, detention (especially when children are detained separately from their parents or guardians), and forced returns are all cited as contributing to family separation.

In terms of capacities to mitigate risk, support from international and local actors, as well as support from States, access to information and regular legal status feature in the data. However, in many cases, it is also noted that State actors contribute to increased vulnerabilities and protection risks and that information, while critical, can also enhance risk when it is incorrect and unreliable.

The table below summarizes the most frequently referenced protection risks, factors driving vulnerability and capacities to mitigate risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying for migrant women and children, as identified by participants.

### Most frequently referenced protection risks, vulnerabilities and capacities

No	Protection risks	Vulnerability factors	Capacities
1	Going missing or dying	Age	Support from international actors (such as UN, INGO, RCRC)
2	Lack of access to essential services	Gender	Support from State actors
3	SGBV	Lack of legal status	Access to information
4	Loss of contact	Poverty – lack of financial resources	Support from local actors and networks (such as NGOs, other migrants, NS)
5	Trafficking in persons, forced labour or slavery-like practices	Social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation	Regular legal status



# Recommendations



## To States and Regional Bodies:

To strengthen efforts to prevent and respond to migrant women and children becoming separated, going missing or dying during their journeys, States should:

- 1. Ensure that migrants' rights – including the right to life and the right to family unity – are respected and protected in line with international law.** To achieve this, States should assess whether their migration and asylum laws and policies – including agreements with third countries – create or exacerbate protection risks for migrants, including risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying. This necessitates accounting for the unique needs of migrant women and children, including those who are unaccompanied or separated, in the assessment, formulation and implementation of said laws and policies.
- 2. Guarantee that all migrants, irrespective of their gender, age or legal status, have safe and effective access to essential services without fear of arrest, deportation or detention.** Specific attention should be given to the unique needs of migrant women and children, such as access to sexual and reproductive health services, services for pregnant and nursing women, child-friendly services, and support for victims/survivors of human trafficking and other forms of SGBV. To this end, States should also facilitate (including by providing financial support) the establishment of Humanitarian Services Points<sup>5</sup> along routes, including at borders.
- 3. Enable and facilitate access to means of communication for migrants and their families along migration routes and in any structures where migrants may be placed, including places of reception or detention.** This entails supporting and facilitating the unique role and work of the Movement in the field of tracing and Restoring Family Links (RFL). No restrictions should be imposed on the Movement components in the collection, management and transfer of personal data for tracing missing persons and RFL.<sup>6</sup> The formal integration of RFL services into national migration response frameworks should be enabled, including through cooperation agreements with National Societies, and the establishment of fixed or mobile connectivity points along routes and within detention and reception centres encouraged.
- 4. Ensure that the principle of non-refoulement and the right to asylum are respected in law and in practice and refrain from excessive use of force in border management operations.** State officials encountering migrants at borders and elsewhere should be properly trained in this regard. The training should also address effective implementation of relevant human and child rights legislation, child protection and protection from SGBV, as well as child safeguarding.
- 5. Increase efforts and resources for mechanisms to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing migrants at national and transregional levels.** To this end, standardize national processes to record and manage cases of missing migrants as well as of relevant unidentified human remains, including centralizing relevant information at national level. States should designate national focal points<sup>7</sup> on missing migrants.
- 6. Establish, enable and support search and rescue operations at sea and ensure that search and rescue capacities at land borders are also adequate, particularly in zones known to be prone to accidents.** Migrants in distress, including women and children, should be provided appropriate services and support upon disembarkation. This necessitates accounting for the unique needs of migrant women and children, including those who are unaccompanied or separated, and ensuring trained and qualified staff, including psychosocial and medical support personnel, are present on arrival alongside border authorities.
- 7. Ensure that women and children can access vital documents – such as birth certificates, identity cards and travel documents – easily and affordably.** These documents are crucial for safeguarding migrants' safety, dignity, and well-being, and for enabling access to regular migration pathways. They also often enable migrants to more readily access required services and support upon arrival at their destination.

<sup>5</sup> [Humanitarian Service Points](#) are neutral spaces where migrants can access a wide range of humanitarian support and services, regardless of their migration status and wherever they are on their journeys.

<sup>6</sup> In line with [Resolution 4 - Restoring Family Links while respecting privacy, including as it relates to personal data protection](#) of the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 2019 (33IC/19/R4).

<sup>7</sup> States could draw upon the [network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants that was established in July 2024 as part of the Rabat Process](#) in order to facilitate communication between countries involved in the resolution of cases of missing migrants.

- 8. States and other parties to armed conflict must respect and ensure respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in all circumstances.** As civilians<sup>8</sup>, migrants are covered by the rules of IHL providing protection to the civilian population<sup>9</sup>, including the principle of distinction<sup>10</sup>, proportionality<sup>11</sup> and precautions<sup>12</sup>.



### To Red Cross and Red Crescent actors:

In line with the Movement's Migration Strategy and the Movement's Restoring Family Links Strategy, the Red Cross and Red Crescent actors should:

- 9. Prioritize information provision for migrants on self-protection strategies along migration routes, including how to avoid the risks of separation and going missing.** This should be complemented by information on where and how migrants can access assistance and protection, including RFL services. Information should be provided in various languages and shared via channels used by migrants, including social media and digital platforms, in addition to key points along the route. Child-friendly resources and information are essential.
- 10. Scale up essential services and support provided along migration routes, including gender- and age-sensitive services and RFL services.** Services should account for the unique needs and concerns of migrant women and children, including those who are unaccompanied or separated. This requires ensuring trained and qualified staff, including psychosocial, medical and child-protection personnel, are available, including those with expertise on health and medical care for pregnant and nursing women, scaling up child-friendly approaches and services, and strengthening support for victims/survivors of SGBV and human trafficking. National Societies should safely address protection concerns and conduct safe referrals in line with [RCRC guidelines](#).
- 11. Establish and strengthen awareness activities for migrants on the risks and indicators of human trafficking.** This includes supporting migrants, particularly women and children, to better understand how to identify risks and where and how to seek help if they (or their family members) have experienced or are at risk of human trafficking.
- 12. Ensure that any program or policy designed to prevent migrants becoming separated, going missing or dying is directly informed by the voices and lived experiences of migrant women and children.** Those with lived experience understand the realities of migrants' journeys and have significant knowledge which can, and should, inform the operations of humanitarian organizations. This requires establishing advisory bodies that include migrant voices and creating volunteer and employment opportunities for migrants to actively contribute to efforts that reduce risks along migration routes. This also requires continuous awareness raising amongst other staff and volunteers of the specific risks migrant women and children face along their journeys.
- 13. Engage in evidence-based humanitarian diplomacy and dialogue with States and relevant non-state actors on the specific needs and vulnerabilities of migrant women and children.** This includes highlighting specific protection risks – including family separation, going missing or dying – which are linked to restrictive laws, policies, and practices and possible solutions to prevent and respond to these.

8 For the purposes of the conduct of hostilities, the ICRC considers that all persons who are not members of State armed forces or organized armed groups of a party to the conflict are to be considered civilians. See ICRC, *Interpretative Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law*, Geneva, 2009, p. 27.

9 See Helen Obregon Gieseken, "The Protection of Migrants under International Humanitarian Law", in *International Review of the Red Cross (IRRC)*, Volume 99 (1), April 2017, p. 125. In the context of non-international armed conflicts (NIAC), all persons who are not, or are no longer, directly participating in hostilities are protected under the relevant provisions of IHL, i.e. Common Article 3 to Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II (AP II), as well as the customary IHL rules applicable to NIAC. In addition, adverse distinction in the application of international humanitarian law (IHL) based on race, colour, sex, language, religion or belief, political or other opinion, national or social origin, wealth, birth or other status, or on any other similar criteria is prohibited (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 88).

10 Parties to the conflict must always distinguish between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objective. Attacks must not be directed against civilians unless they are directly participating in hostilities and must only be directed against combatants/fighters and military objectives (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 1). Parties to the conflict have an obligation to ensure that everything feasible is done to verify that targets are military objectives (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 16).

11 In each attack, parties to the conflict must comply with the principle of proportionality. When targeting military objectives, launching an attack is prohibited when it may be expected to cause incidental harm to civilian life or injury to civilians, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 14).

12 Out of the IHL principle of precautions in the attack, even if an attack is directed against a lawful target and complies with the principle of proportionality, all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid or minimize incidental loss of civilian life or injury to civilians (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 15). The parties to the conflict must also take all feasible precautions to protect the civilian population and civilian objects under their control against the effects of attacks (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 22) and thus must, to the extent feasible, remove civilian persons and objects from the vicinity of military objectives (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 24). Furthermore, the use of human shield is prohibited under IHL (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 97).

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## Glossary of terms

The following terminology and related definitions are used in this report.

**Capacity:** Any of the resources and capabilities that are available to individuals, households, and communities to cope with a threat or to resist or mitigate the impact of a threat. Resources can be material or may derive from the way a community is organized. A capacity can include skill sets or the ability to access certain services or move freely to a safer place.<sup>13</sup>

**Fundamental Principles:** the seven Fundamental Principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality provide an ethical, operational and institutional framework for the work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement around the world.

**International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement):** The Movement is a global humanitarian network that consists of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) around the world.

**Migrants:** For this project, and in line with the Movement's strictly humanitarian approach to migration that focuses on migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, irrespective of legal status, type or category and the Movement's Migration Strategy, 'migrants' are people who flee or leave their habitual residence in search of safety, opportunities or better prospects – usually abroad. This includes, among others, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless migrants, labour migrants and migrants deemed to be irregular by the public authorities.<sup>14</sup>

**Missing Person:** The project uses the ICRC definition of a 'missing person' to describe individuals of whom their families have no news or who, on the basis of reliable information, have been reported missing, as a result of an armed conflict – international or non-international – other situations of violence or any other situation (such as disasters or migration) that might require action by a neutral and independent body. A missing person is not automatically presumed to be dead. Many missing persons are found alive. Nevertheless, the notion of missing also encompasses individuals who have perished, but whose bodies have disappeared. Therefore, the clarification of the fate and whereabouts of a missing person might require that human remains are found, properly documented and identified.

**National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies):** National Societies are the backbone of the Movement. Each one is made up of a network of community-based volunteers and staff who, as auxiliaries to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, provide a wide variety of services in accordance with the Fundamental Principles.

**Protection:** The most common definition of protection among humanitarian organizations is the one developed during an ICRC-led workshop, later adopted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee: "... all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. Human Rights Law, International Humanitarian Law, Refugee Law)".<sup>15</sup>

13 ICRC (2024), *Professional Standards for Protection Work: By Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors During Armed Conflict and Other Violence*. [Available online](#).

14 [Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030](#)

15 Protection Advisory Board of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2018), [Protection within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement](#).

**Protection risk:** Actual or potential exposure to violence, coercion or deprivation (deliberate or otherwise). Violence, coercion or deprivation may harm people’s physical or mental well-being, place them in physical danger and/ or violate their rights. The activity causing the risk may be a direct act, measure or policy, but a protection risk may also stem from inaction by a primary duty bearer. Reducing risk involves reducing the level of a threat, reducing relative vulnerability to that threat and/or increasing the capacity of a person or group to resist and/or rebound from a given threat.<sup>16</sup>

**Threat:** A human activity or a product of human activity that results in violence, coercion or deprivation (deliberate or otherwise). A threat can be the perpetrator of such activity (the agent of the threat) or a policy or ethnicity norm (source of threat) that is causing harm.<sup>17</sup>

**Vulnerability:** Characteristics or circumstances of an individual or group or their surrounding physical environment that diminish their ability to anticipate, cope with, resist or recover from the impact of a threat. People differ in their exposure to a threat depending on their social group, gender, ethnicity, age and other factors. Vulnerability is not a fixed or static criterion attached to specific categories of people, and no one is born vulnerable.<sup>18</sup>

**Women and children:** In this report, ‘women’ refers to women (including trans and cis) and ‘children’ refers to people under the age of 18 (including those unaccompanied and separated, and boys, girls or other gender identities).

Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organization
CTA	Central Tracing Agency
ERB	Ethics Review Board
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International non-governmental Organisation
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NS	National Society
PSS	Psychosocial Support
RCRC	Red Cross and Red Crescent
RFL	Restoring Family Links
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
UN	United Nations

16 ICRC (2024), *Professional Standards for Protection Work: By Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors During Armed Conflict and Other Violence*. [Available online](#).

17 Ibid

18 Ibid.

# Background

As women and children around the world continue to migrate<sup>19</sup>, many do so under dangerous circumstances that render them vulnerable to violence, exploitation and other risks, including the risk of becoming separated, going missing or dying during their journeys.<sup>20</sup> Despite this reality, and the growing recognition that gender and age shape many aspects of migration, there is little data and analysis that systematically and directly addresses how and why migrant women and children become separated or go missing.<sup>21</sup>

To better understand and respond to this issue, the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (Global Migration Lab) together with the ICRC Central Tracing Agency's Missing Persons Centre (Missing Persons Centre) and certain National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies), undertook research with migrants (primarily women, children and young adults), the families of missing migrants and key informants in the Americas, Africa, and Europe.

This consolidated regional report focuses on data collected from migrants who have travelled to and through Africa, as well as relatives of missing migrants and key informants in five countries (Chad, The Gambia, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania).

The purpose of the project, and this report, is to learn from the direct narratives of migrants. The data are unique in that they represent insights and personal stories shared by migrants, primarily women and children and their families, many of whom have experienced or been at risk of family separation, going missing or dying. The project was also designed to support National Societies in strengthening their own research capacities and to ensure that the lived experience of migrants informs their operational programs and humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy.

Humanitarian diplomacy, based on data and operational practice, plays a vital role in influencing discussions on sensitive and often politicised topics such as missing and separated migrants.<sup>22</sup> To support ongoing efforts, including bilateral confidential dialogue with governments and other concerned parties,<sup>23</sup> certain findings have been intentionally excluded from this public report. This approach aligns with the Fundamental Principle of Neutrality,<sup>24</sup> and is adopted to strategically create a space for dialogue on the needs of migrants in vulnerable situations.

The project and findings support the implementation of the following International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) 2024 Council of Delegates Resolutions: [Protection in the Movement: Improving our collective impact in protecting people](#) (CD/24/R1), [Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030](#) (CD/24/R2), and [Extension until 2030 of the Restoring Family Links Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2020–2025](#) (CD/24/R6).

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, and in line with the Movement's Fundamental Principle of Neutrality, individual countries are intentionally not referenced. Likewise, countries named in the quotes do not reflect the country where the experience took place, but rather where the data were collected.

19 International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2024). *Migration Data Portal: Child and Young Migrants*. [Available online](#); United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) (2024). *International Migration Stock 2024 – Key Facts and Figures*. [Available online](#); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2024). *Global Trends: Forced Displacement In 2024*. [Available online](#).

20 See for instance: Dearden, K. and Sánchez Dionis, M. (2020). How a Lack of Data is Perpetuating the Invisibility of Migrant Women's Deaths. Migration Data Portal. [Available online](#); IOM (2022). 50,000 Lives Lost During Migration: Analysis of Missing Migrants Project Data 2014–2022. [Available online](#); Pickering, S. and B. Cochrane (2012). 'Irregular Border-Crossing Deaths and Gender: Where, How and Why Women Die Crossing Borders'. *Theoretical Criminology*, 17:27–48; Sánchez Dionis, M. and Dearden, K. (2019). 'Missing Migrants Project data: A global overview', in *Fatal Journeys Volume 4: Missing Migrant Children*. [Available online](#);

21 Foran, S. and Stockwell, J. (2021). *An Exploration of the Gender and Diversity Dimensions of the Separated, Missing and Deceased and the Families Searching for Them* (Internal Report), RCRC Missing Persons Centre: Geneva.

22 Cotroneo, A. and von König, F. (2025). From Commitments to Action on Missing Migrants: the Role of Humanitarian Diplomacy. [Available online](#).

23 International Committee of the Red Cross (2002). ICRC: its Mission and Work. [Available online](#). See also: International Committee of the Red Cross (2012). The International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC's) Confidential Approach. [Available online](#).

24 The seven Fundamental Principles are set out in the Preamble to the Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement adopted by the Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross in Geneva in October 1986, amended in 1951 and 2006. Available at: Statutes of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. [Available online](#).



# Methodology and scope

This report focuses on the data collected from June to December 2024 in Africa, noting that the findings are part of a larger dataset for the project covering migrants' journeys to and through Europe, the Americas and Africa (with more than 800 participants in total).

The project employed a qualitative approach, using a combination of (i) semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with migrants (primarily women and young adults that migrated as children); (ii) risk mapping exercises (drawing sessions) with migrant children (aged 8-17) that, in some cases, included individual interviews; (iii) interviews with the relatives of migrants who are missing; and (iv) interviews with key informants.

National Societies undertook training on research ethics and tools, interview techniques – including with children – and the ICRC Minimum Protection Approach<sup>25</sup> prior to data collection. National Societies provided psychosocial support directly to participants, as needed, and/or had specific referral pathways in place to ensure that participants' needs were met during and/or after the interviews. This was a condition of participation in the project.

In Africa, a total of 82 qualitative interviews with migrants, 22 FGDs with migrants, 11 risk-mapping exercises with children, 55 interviews with relatives of migrants who are missing, and 52 interviews with key informants were conducted by National Societies across the 5 countries. The breakdown per country is in Table 1 below.

In accordance with the Movement's strictly humanitarian approach to migration that focuses on migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, irrespective of legal status, type or category, and in line with the Movement's Migration Strategy, research participants included, among others, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless migrants, labour migrants and migrants deemed to be irregular by the public authorities<sup>26</sup>, as well as the families of missing migrants.

The project specifically focused on the experiences of migrant women and children; however, some interviewees – including young adults as well as the relatives of missing migrants and key informants, were men. In total, 51.0% of participants were women, 18.4% were children and 27.8% were men. The remainder were either undisclosed or were not recorded.

**Table 1: Data overview**

Country	Interviews with migrants	FGDs	Risk mapping exercises (drawing sessions) with groups of children	Interviews with relatives of migrants who are missing	Interviews with key informants
Kenya	10	4	1	13	11
Gambia	21	3	1	19	22
Tanzania	19	7	-	4	3
Chad	14	-	4	10	10
Nigeria	18	8	5	9	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>52</b>

<sup>25</sup> ICRC, [The Minimum Protection Approach](#).

<sup>26</sup> [Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030](#)

This report should be read with an understanding that, in terms of participants, the project did not aim to be representative, and the profile of participants varied from country to country in accordance with national contexts and programming priorities of National Societies. In addition, this report should be read with the understanding that the project was designed – through its qualitative approach and use of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions – to learn from migrant women and children's (and their families') perspectives, hearing their stories told in their own words, about their experiences along migration routes. Such knowledge is complemented by insights from key informants working with migrant women and children in the region. It is also important to note that interview data was coded based on theme rather than according to individual questions, with the aim of better understanding shared experiences across the region. The project purpose and design should be kept in mind when considering the report findings, recognizing its overarching goal to share migrants' stories rather than to draw direct correlations.

## General context: Who is moving and where?

Migration through Africa is complex and dynamic, including both subregional migration within the continent as well as inter-continental migration from Africa to Europe or into the Middle East. Interregional migration routes in the Horn of Africa include the Eastern Route, from the Horn of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula; the Northern Route, from the Horn of Africa and the Sudan towards North Africa and Europe; and the Southern Route, from the Horn of Africa to Southern Africa.<sup>27</sup> In West Africa, the Western Atlantic Route sees migrants embark on boats to the Canary Islands of Spain. On the Western Mediterranean Route to Europe migrants travel from sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa, and the Middle East, often through the Sahel and the Sahara Desert, embarking on boats from Algeria and Morocco towards Spain. The Central Mediterranean Route to Europe covers migrants moving from countries in the Sahel across the Sahara Desert and through Libya and Tunisia where migrants embark on boats towards Italy or Malta.<sup>28</sup>

**Migration through Africa is complex and dynamic, including both subregional migration within the continent as well as inter-continental migration from Africa to Europe or into the Middle East.**

27 International Organization for Migration (IOM) (2025), Key Insights from Route-based Research Along the Main Migratory Routes in East and Horn of Africa. [Available online.](#)

28 Ibid.

A volunteer with the Red Cross of Chad enters an improvised camp in Chad, where Sudanese people have fled conflict. Image: Salomon Dainyoo



# Findings

Participants interviewed primarily included migrants travelling via main migratory routes within East Africa and from Africa to Europe. The most common reasons for migration cited by participants were armed conflict, instability and insecurity; famine, drought and lack of economic opportunities; and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including forced marriage.

## Key protection risks

Despite the vast differences across countries in the region, several key protection concerns common to multiple contexts and routes in Africa are evident in the data. Table 2 below outlines the most frequently referenced protection risks identified by participants for migrant women and children in the region.

**Table 2: Most frequently referenced protection risks**

No	Protection Concern
1	Going missing or dying
2	Lack of access to essential services
3	SGBV
4	Loss of contact
5	Trafficking in persons, forced labour or slavery-like practices

## The interdependence of threats and risks

The report findings discussed below outline how the threats migrant women and children face during their journeys contribute to and increase the risk of becoming separated or going missing or dying. Risks and threats are interdependent: the presence of multiple threats that typically reinforce each other increases the risk. For example, a lack of regular pathways often compels migrants to take more dangerous journeys in efforts to seek safety or reunite with family. Likewise, a lack of money, or an inability to access a visa or plane ticket, limits choices on where and how migrants can travel. In addition, poverty increases risks of trafficking and exploitation, which in turn enhances the risk of separation and going missing. Likewise, armed conflict, a key driver of migration through and from Africa often forces people to flee rapidly with little time to gather essential belongings, including food, clothing, or documents, or coordinate with family in advance, increasing risks of exploitation and separation. Every threat and risk outlined in the report reinforces or exacerbates the risk of family separation and going missing or dying for migrant women and children.

The quotes below are indicative of common experiences of migrant women and children and the intersection of threats faced during migration that increase risks of separation, going missing or dying. Situations relate to migrants facing armed conflict and violence during their journeys, leading to separations and deaths – including children losing their parents; migrants having limited funds or resources and being held for ransom or trafficked by criminal gangs; and migrants experiencing sexual violence and arduous journeys with no access to essential services such as medical care and treatment, increasing the risk of death, particularly for women and children.

“Many children were getting lost moving from one place to another. It was difficult for them. Girls were raped when they were looking for firewood; boys were being beaten.  
—Migrant, Tanzania

“I was raped several times. I got pregnant and I don’t even know who was responsible. I couldn’t abort [the baby] because I didn’t have access to any medicine. While I was pregnant, I was still being trafficked.  
—Migrant, Nigeria

“We are having a lot of challenges on our journey. We did not sleep for two days. We don’t rest. We are just walking. When we arrive here [everyone] [fell] down. We take them to hospital; they all have [malaria]. They even have no appetite to eat. My son even got malaria. We only have the clothes we wear [on our backs]. We don’t have any place to go.  
—Migrant, Kenya

“Too much risk. Especially along the way. Some children have even lost both their parents en route. They’ve been killed.  
—Key Informant, Chad



## Risk of going missing or dying

The data in Africa underscore that migrant women and children face the risk of going missing or dying at various stages of their journeys. The greatest protection risks associated with migrant women and children going missing or dying in the data are allegedly attributed to: the actions of authorities, actions of non-state actors (including smugglers and criminal groups), lack of access to essential services, conditions of the journey/unsafe routes and travelling via informal and precarious modes of transport.

As noted above, to support ongoing humanitarian diplomacy efforts, including bilateral confidential dialogue with governments and other concerned parties, certain findings related to risks of going missing or dying have been intentionally excluded from this public report.

### Actions of non-state actors

The data show the direct actions of non-state actors (including smugglers, criminal gangs, armed groups and militia) contribute to migrant women and children's deaths. It was commonly reported that migrants are killed by smugglers and criminal gangs when they or their families do not pay a ransom, following their kidnapping.

“ They die due to harassment. [Smugglers] demand ransom. If no one gives them [money] they end up killing people. They usually demand absurd amounts of money like 10,000 dollars which people from the refugee camps cannot afford, so they end up getting killed.

—Key Informant, Kenya

In some case migrants are killed to scare others into paying. It was also reported that migrant women are raped by militia and their husbands are killed as punishment for migrating instead of joining their ranks.

“ They also practice a form of kidnapping for ransom: either you pay on the spot or you call on your parents who will send the money; if not, they may even kill you to scare others.

—Migrant, Chad



“ [The militia] will rape women, rob them of their valuables, kill their men if they find any of them moving out of the camp, out of the of the country. They are told, why are you neglecting your country? Where are you going? They take them as captives, kill them later.

—Key Informant, Kenya

The data also shows that young boys were at particular risk of being kidnapped by armed groups for recruitment as child soldiers.

“ [Women and children] mainly lose contact through robbery by bandits, through abduction as well. Boys are more at risk of [armed groups] abduction.

—Migrant, Kenya



A Kenya Red Cross staff member conducts a risk mapping activity (drawing session) with migrant children. Image: Global Migration Lab

In other cases, migrant women were trafficked or enslaved and forced to work under threat of violence or death. In addition, women travelling with children were flagged as particularly vulnerable to violence from armed ‘bandits’, with children’s cries attracting attention to their locations.

“ A lot of women carry children who are susceptible to some dangers like dangerous animals. Children cry a lot. Their cries attract bandits.

—Migrant FGD, Kenya

“ Females are more vulnerable in this regard. They end up been kidnapped. They are held at ransom and their families [back home] have to send monies to them to be released and some of them [are] sold into slavery. They have to work their way out of slavery.

—Key Informant, Nigeria

The data reflect how much of the territory through which migrants pass is not effectively controlled by States, contributing to impunity for non-state actors in regard to their behaviour towards migrants.

“ The journey to the border is fraught with danger, and the arrival itself offers little more security. Crimes, sometimes even murders, are perpetrated by armed and unidentified individuals.

—Migrant, Chad

**Women travelling with children were flagged as particularly vulnerable to violence from armed ‘bandits’, with children’s cries attracting attention to their locations.**

## Lack of access to essential services

Many instances of death of migrant women and children are associated with lack of access to essential services along migration routes. Participants perceived women as being more vulnerable to exhaustion due lack of food and water and the nature of travelling with and having to carry children during journeys. Migrant women are also at risk of death and kidnapping by armed actors when men leave in search of food or help, as well as loss of contact. In general, any separation from their menfolk increases risks to women from other men, including both migrants and others.

*Women go missing mostly in deserts because men ask them to stay while they go to search for food. Upon their return, they would go missing due to harassments faced by the other men who would take them away.*

—Key Informant, The Gambia

The lack of adequate supplies and funds coupled with the nature of migrants' journeys through difficult terrain and on unreliable means of transport, exposes migrant women and children to the risk of hunger and thirst, particularly when vehicles break down and migrants become stranded.

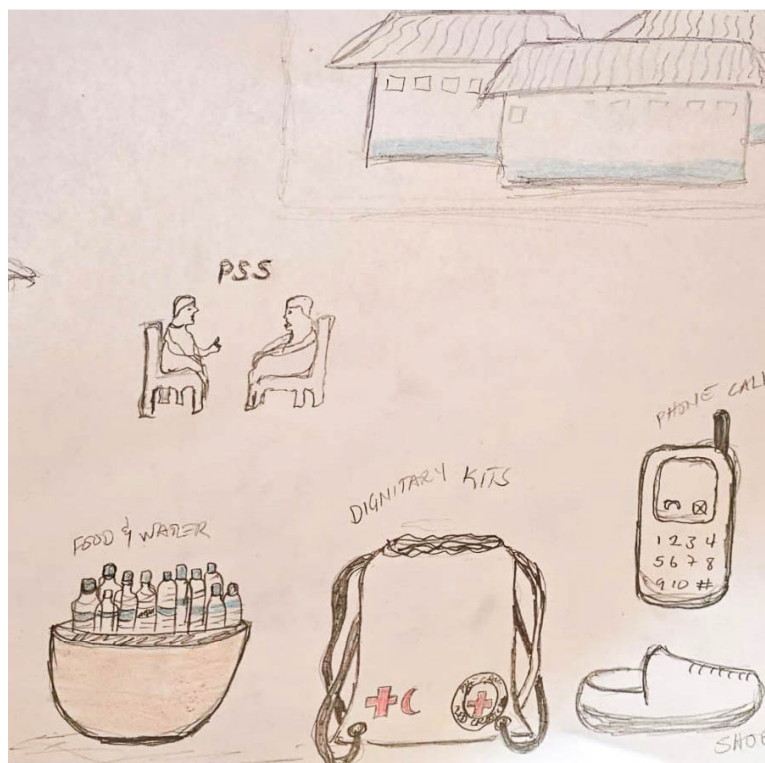
*Some of the vehicles will breakdown, stay stuck on the road for weeks and children and women will die of thirst and hunger. Some of died of attack, and of wild animals attacking.*

—Key Informant, Kenya

Childbirth during the journey is dangerous for both mothers and babies without access to appropriate medical care. Similarly, lack of food impacts breast milk supply for nursing mothers, placing babies at risk of starvation and death.

*I witnessed so many tragic events, [including] the passing away of my siblings – one during childbirth and the other because of a stomachache.*

—Migrant, Nigeria



A drawing from The Gambia Red Cross' risk mapping exercises (drawing sessions) with children. Image: The Gambia Red Cross Society.

*There were families who reported losing young children to starvation, mothers who could not breastfeed their young ones. There are those young ones who do not feed on solid food, they need to be breastfed ... their mothers don't have milk to supplement their breastfeed. The mother cannot breastfeed herself because she is hungry. And these young ones will die of starvation, unfortunately.*

—Key Informant, The Gambia

Lack of access to food and water on arduous journeys which often involve walking or long distances, make children particularly vulnerable to death given the weaker state of their bodies.

*What risks women and their children experience are: for the children, they don't have strength. If you are travelling, and you don't have money. This is a risk. There are certain places you'll be walking for distance and then in the desert ... there's no food or water. And then the women, they don't have that strength. And when hunger comes, it normally affects the younger ones, then the elderly or people and it also affect the women.*

—Migrant, The Gambia





A drawing from Kenya Red Cross' risk mapping activities with migrant children. Image: Global Migration Lab

## Conditions of the journey

Migrant women and children are also vulnerable to going missing or dying due to the conditions of the journey along unsafe routes, including related to environmental and climatic conditions, exposure to health risks (such as communicable disease outbreaks, starvation and thirst) and natural hazards such as snakes and scorpions.

*The Sahel is literally the desert and that is [where migrants are] the most vulnerable. It's a road that is very difficult to take. And it's downright deserted ... that what makes migrants more exposed [to risk] ... It's the presence of armed groups, it's the climatic conditions, it's the weather conditions.*

—Key Informant, Chad

*[Migrants] go through ... active disease outbreaks. When we had an active Ebola outbreak in [one country] a migrant had come [through there]. You find that the same migrants are using the same routes crossing those hotspots.*

—Key Informant, Kenya

*Women face a lot of challenges on the way: thieves are always there waiting to steal. There are also insects like mosquitoes and other animals like scorpions and snakes that bite you when you are sleeping. Hunger and fatigue affect kids a lot.*

—FGD Migrants, Kenya

Children are subject to greater risk from disease – such as malaria – in contexts where medicine and healthcare are unavailable, but also from the dangers presented by wild animals and rough terrain.

*Death is happening sometimes because... they get malaria and then they will spend like three or four days without medicine. You don't have medicine so you can lose your child.*

—Migrant, Kenya

*The roads were not that nice. You could find thorny trees that harm the kids. There are also holes that kids can fall into. The area also had hyenas that took small kids.*

—Key Informant, Kenya

## Unsafe Modes of Transport

Informal and dangerous modes of transport are a significant factor contributing to deaths. This includes migrant women and children travelling in small and unseaworthy boats and drowning when boats capsize, representing perhaps the greatest risk for any migrant travelling by sea, such as when crossing the Mediterranean or travelling from West Africa towards the Canary Islands. Indeed, there were an estimated 2,452 migrant deaths reported in Mediterranean crossings in 2024<sup>29</sup>, with an estimated 9,757 migrants having lost their lives at sea via the Western Atlantic route to Spain that same year.<sup>30</sup> The actual number of migrants who have died or going missing is likely much higher.

*When the boat capsized, the person called home and said these people use this particular boat, but unfortunately they could not make it... It's more than 40 young people that we lost for this year alone.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

There is evidence that women are more likely to drown when boats capsize: they are less likely to be able to swim than men, are more likely to be travelling with children whose safety they will prioritize at their own expense, and if pregnant, will be less able to save themselves.<sup>31</sup> It is also known that women are often made to travel below deck, where it is harder to survive if the boat sinks, but also where they are at risk of suffocation.

*If a boat capsizes in the sea, the deep sea, as women, what can we be able to do? And the children also, they don't have that much strength to defend themselves, you know, to secure themselves from that danger.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

*During our journey there were women who were complaining of losing their children and there were children alone in the boat. According to them, they lose contact when they were running in the road up to the seashore.*  
—Migrant, Tanzania

*We left with a friend in a boat and there were different layers of seats. Lower and upper decks. Unfortunately, she died cause of overcrowded.*  
—Migrant, Gambia

Land travel is also highly dangerous, with migrants packed onto old lorries and trucks often in very poor condition, both in terms of the vehicle used for transport and the existing road infrastructure. These trucks are overcrowded and migrants risk suffocation or falling off, potentially resulting in fatal injuries.

*We met somebody who told me her sister fell from the truck when they were going through the desert ... When people fall down, the truck doesn't stop.*  
—Key Informant, Nigeria

*They are overloading lorries. Hundreds of people, women, children. People's children suffocated there during transport.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

*During the trip, our vehicle is prepared with ropes that you hold on to and in case of a fall, no one stops. The area is dangerous so the one who falls is abandoned on the spot.*  
—Migrant, Chad

29 IOM (2025), *2024 is Deadliest Year on Record for Migrants, New IOM Data Reveals*, [Available online](#).

30 Ca-Minando Fronteras (2024). *Monitoring the Right to Life 2024*. [Available online](#).

31 Pickering, S., & Powell, R. (2017). *Death at sea: Migration and the gendered dimensions of border insecurity*. In *A gendered approach to the Syrian refugee crisis* (pp. 105-124). Routledge., [Available online](#).

## Risks of separation and loss of contact

In the data, the risk of separation is strongly associated with situations of armed conflict and instability: such conditions represent both motivations for migration but also increase the risk of separation during the journey. Non-state actors such as smugglers, criminal gangs, armed groups and militias exacerbate the risk of separation through attacks that force families to flee and disperse in different directions. Such groups also pose significant dangers of other forms of violence during migration, including kidnappings for ransom. Additionally, authorities may contribute to family separations – sometimes unintentionally – through actions such as unplanned repatriation or inadequate accommodation facilities for children on arrival, threatening family integrity when individuals are placed in different locations. In some cases, separation is a result of a family decision, with staged migration taking place, where individuals migrate with the aim of other family members following later.

As noted above, to support ongoing humanitarian diplomacy efforts, including bilateral confidential dialogue with governments and other concerned parties, certain findings related to risks separation have been intentionally excluded from this public report.

### Armed conflict and instability

Fleeing violence and armed conflict is a major driver of migration in the Africa data and a key source of loss of contact or family separation, both at initial stages of migration, as well as during the journey. Children often flee the sound of gunshots or run away during an attack, resulting in separation from their parents due to panic and chaos when rushing to seek safety.

**“** *I am aware that there are children who have gone missing when violence escalates in the countries of origin and the parents go in a different direction, the children go to another direction.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

**“** *Children can run, go to such and such an area and with the fight everyone flees. And that's kind of it ... they won't find each other so quickly.*  
—Key Informant, Tanzania

In addition, conditions of insecurity, lawlessness and impunity along much of the routes travelled by migrants can compound the trauma of already having fled armed conflict or violence, leading migrant women, in some cases, to instinctively run for safety without their children, in an effort to save their lives, underscoring how armed conflict, violence and trauma can contribute to family separation.

**“** *My mother-in-law lost her child; this is because there was no security along the way. Also, my aunt lost her children while migrating and until now has not restored contact. Women lose contact with children when a mother heard a sound of gunshot and started running without children.*  
—Migrant FGD, Tanzania

In large families, it may be hard for parents to collect and flee with all children together. Likewise, if an attack occurs when families are apart – for instance, when children are at school – people may flee independently, risking long-term separation.

**“** *And I think, for example, what happened some years back during bomb blast, lots of people were just running ... it will be difficult for some parents to deal with carrying five kids, three kids or whatever. They may just be able to pick up one or two.*  
—Key Informant, Nigeria

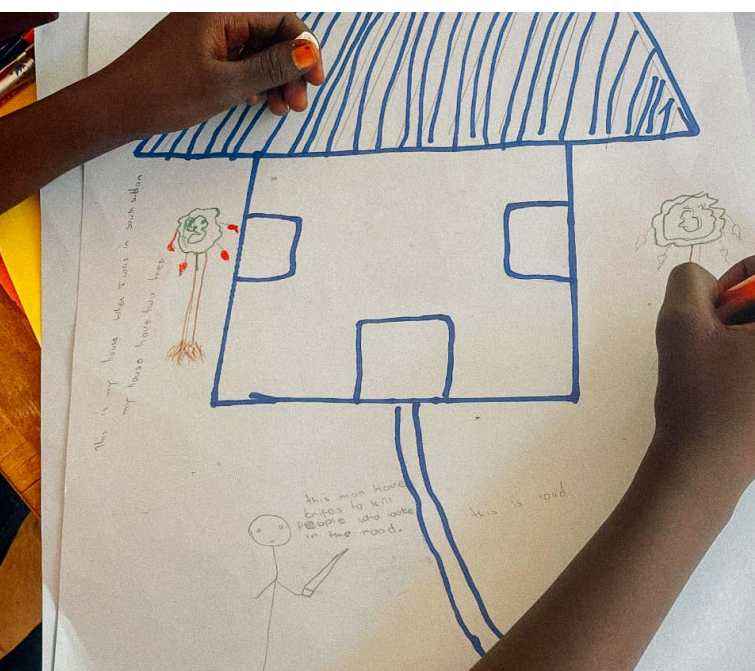




“ The main reason [for separation] is war, conflict, instability. No one will have time to go and look for your other kids at school because the moment there is an outbreak of war. All you would think of is how to save myself. So those with you, those that are reachable, you just take and run with them. How about those that are far from you, like in other regions, in other places, those at schools – there is no time to go and look for them... When there is war or conflict, you just find the shortest route to save yourself, to protect yourself. So, along the line, if your child got missing or your husband disappears, you will not even have the time to go back and look for them.  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

Even when migrants reach the relative safety of a refugee camp, family members may have already been resettled elsewhere, prolonging separation.

“ When there is an unplanned attack people run their separate ways, and they end up separated. There are also instances where people fled in different ways at different times, and by the time a family member is coming to the camp, the family member had been resettled so they end up separated.  
—Migrant, Kenya



A child takes part in a drawing session as part of Kenya Red Cross' data collection. Image: Global Migration Lab

## Actions of non-state actors

The data also show how the actions of non-state actors, including smugglers, criminal gangs and armed groups, contribute directly to separation and loss of contact for migrant women and children. Participants frequently mentioned cases where smugglers would separate families as they were boarding boats to optimize loading. Given the significant risk of boats sinking, this leads to families being separated if family members travelling apart never arrive, a direct consequence of smugglers taking unsafe routes and using unseaworthy boats.

“ Sometimes... [families] may not go together ... because [the smugglers] have a number of people that [they] normally take, or maybe you are going with somebody and that guy was not able to pay his or her own money on time. You paid and you have to move because there's no time. So, this is where the separation comes. This is where the loss of life comes.  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

Attacks by criminal gangs on groups of migrants during their journeys may also lead to the separation of children as people flee and disperse in search of safety, as well as when migrants are kidnapped. In some instances, children are forcibly taken from their parents by armed groups and militia for recruitment as child soldiers.

“ In the middle of the road, the vehicle got stuck then we were attacked by some thieves ... they tortured some of the people ... then they got my brother we lost him, we separated there.  
—Migrant, Nigeria

“ Children are targeted for forced recruitment into the militia group. Some of them are actually kidnapped and disappeared.  
—Key Informant, Kenya

“ The children or women who come to register say that along the way 'we were with my husband or my parents and then we were attacked [by armed groups] and we ran our separate ways.' They came unaccompanied or separated.  
—Key Informant, Kenya





Nigerian Red Cross staff and volunteers with a key informant during the data collection in Katsina State. Image: Global Migration Lab

## Personal decisions or circumstances

While the majority of instances of separation in the data are involuntary, it is important to note that sometimes loss of contact or separation within families is intentional. However, often these decisions are made due to existing stressors or factors limiting choices and opportunities to maintain family unity.

One reason seen in the data for migrants ceasing contact with family or choosing to separate, includes staged migration where one family member goes first and the others follow. It was often noted that the male head of household may migrate first, with women and children to follow.

In instances where circumstances prevent all family members joining the head of household, such as where regulations limit the number of children that can be sponsored, the risk of separation is enhanced. Parents may also send their children with an extended family member or other guardian; however, participants noted this can increase risks of harm for the child, if the person entrusted with their care does not look after them.

In situations of armed conflict, however, it was noted that women and children might be sent ahead or migrate first, while men stay behind to protect their home.

“ Sometimes the head of the household, usually a man, will go abroad and then once that person is able to, he will then sponsor the spouse or the children. They will come back to do their sponsorship process. But they are only able to sponsor a spouse and one child [at a time]. Another child [will], stay with relatives.  
—Key Informant, Kenya

“ Among displaced people or refugees during the movements, the men do not leave, they send, they tell their wives and children to leave, and they will stay in the village in the meantime.  
—Key Informant, Chad

**Women and children are noted as being particularly vulnerable to being left behind due to their perceived physical weakness that could slow down others in the group.**

The data show that another reason for separating or ceasing contact with family includes instances of shame associated with victims/survivors of SGBV. In instances where women may have been raped during their journey and/or become pregnant or had a child, they may choose to leave the child behind due to shame. They may also choose not to speak to their family, even after arrival at their destination, for similar reasons.

*Some sell children in exchange for food and as gift as they don't want family [back home] to be aware they've given birth.*  
—Migrant, Nigeria

*There was a woman who came to stay. The woman started calling me cousin. She has 3 daughters, a 5-year-old girl, a girl who she's holding hands with and another she's carrying on her back. The woman had entrusted me with her child. She told me that the girl, cousin, I give her to you ... I haven't heard from her mother since.*  
—Key Informant, Chad

In several instances, migrants had to make difficult choices to leave family members behind who were too weak to continue the journey. Women and children are noted as being particularly vulnerable to being left behind due to their perceived physical weakness that could slow down others in the group.

*Some people would get weak and they would leave them along the way and some people would die. Some people would separate with us. Many of us did not see each other. We ended up joining other groups because we would get missing and get separated.*  
—Migrant, The Gambia

Pregnant women are also flagged as extremely vulnerable to being left behind. Many are forced to withstand dangerous and uncomfortable journeys while experiencing pregnancy symptoms, knowing that there is little help available and that if they cannot keep up, they will become separated.

*There are some pregnant women, any stage of pregnancy that [migrate]. There will be vomiting and those pregnancy signs and all that. It will still be ongoing [during the journey]. They will manage it themselves because everybody is everybody for yourself. Does it mean when somebody is vomiting, you have to wait for the person to probably get better? No. If you fall behind, they are not waiting for you.*  
—Migrant FGD, Nigeria

*I travelled with a pregnant female who gave birth on the bus while crossing [the border]. We had to leave her.*  
—Migrant, Chad

**Pregnant women are also flagged as extremely vulnerable to being left behind. Many are forced to withstand dangerous and uncomfortable journeys while experiencing pregnancy symptoms.**



## Sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against migrant women and girls emerged as a key theme at all stages of the journey across countries of origin, transit and destination, including being a motivating factor for migration. Rape, forced marriage and other forms of sexual violence were highlighted by participants, with perpetrators including authorities, non-state actors and even other migrants or family members. SGBV against men and boys was not widely discussed in the data by migrants, however it was mentioned by key informants.

“Most [women and girls] will face discrimination, gender-based violence, sexual harassment or exploitation, rape, series of rapes. So that is one reasons why most of them lost contact with their family because ... there are people on the way, who instead of asking the girl child [to] pay money, they will use her, like have sex with her and exploit her.  
—Key Informant, Kenya

“We have [S]GBV that faces migrant children even if they are girls or boys, we have physical assault, denial of services, neglect.  
—Key Informant, Kenya

A range of actors, including smugglers, were reported to demand sex when migrants have no money, as payment for services or favours, with the threat of death if they decline.

“The traffickers, the drivers, community members [along the way] ... they rape people, and with no mercy. They will know this is your child. But because the child is a female, they can rape both mother and the child [who are] in the same spot.  
—Migrant FGD, Nigeria

Many women and young girls were reported to have become pregnant during their journeys as a result of rape. This leads to both stigma associated with being a victim/survivor of sexual violence (as noted above) and has health implications, in terms of the impact of such violence and of travelling while pregnant without access to appropriate care.

“The service that a woman needs might not be available in the desert. They might be exploited, they might be raped ... So you can imagine a woman with a very young one moving in the desert in that condition is definitely risky.  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

“We have seen young mothers and young girls ... embark on this journey and before they reach [the end], they are impregnated. So that's a risk because they might lose their life if they refuse to have [sexual] contact with the male counterpart. If, for example, if they're intercepted in some countries and those there wanted to have affairs with them, if they refuse, they might kill them, so they have to accept it. And if they accept, they might be impregnated.  
—Key Informant, Tanzania

In instances where migrants are undocumented or have irregular status, victims/survivors of sexual violence may not seek support, avoiding service providers and authorities.

“The routes are very dangerous and very unsafe and women generally are exposed to being exploited .... And they don't have access to justice where they are because they are hiding from the authorities that can give them justice because they want to go irregularly. They try their best to avoid the authorities.  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

Cases of forced marriage, abuse of children by relatives (including those charged by their parents to accompany children on their migration journey) and instances of family and intimate partner violence were reported at all stages of the journey.

*[Migrant women] have problems based on gender-based violence. They are mistreated. When she leaves, she is stripped of everything. She has nothing in her hands ... it's the race against survival. So, she flees with her children.*  
—Key Informant, Tanzania

*There are also, people saying that even when [migrant women and girls] are in the camps, they fear that their family members could be looking for them because maybe they left when a bride price had been paid for them. So, the parents are looking for them to take them back.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

Forced marriage by armed groups and militia is a dominant theme in the data, with migrant women and children experiencing this or fearing it would occur during their journeys.

*Most of the young girls and boys, they are fleeing forced marriage or even forced recruitment into the militia groups. So, along the route, when they are coming, they are always expressing fear that that might happen.*  
—Key Informant, Nigeria

*They are targeted for forced marriage... There are women who are forcefully taken [by the militia] and are married off or enslaved.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

## Human trafficking

Human trafficking, for both forced labour and sexual exploitation, was highlighted as a key risk associated with becoming separated or going missing, especially for children. The data show that criminal groups target children, even when travelling with their parents.

*[They] snatch children from parents without consent and nothing can be done, or else they lose their lives.*  
—Migrant, Nigeria

A lack of documentation increases vulnerabilities to exploitation and trafficking, since migrants cannot work officially and fear any contact with the authorities or service providers, including with those who might protect them from sexual violence.

*When you enter a foreign jurisdiction without any identity, they can be classified as anything. Some migrants are trapped along the way because of a lack of identity documentation and they are exposed to high risk of being exploited by groups ... there is a high risk of exploitation, trafficking, torturing them, hard labour.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

The data suggest children are also vulnerable in refugee camp settings, especially if unaccompanied.

*Children in the camp ... are at risk of being trafficked. Children are targeted every day. Children cannot play safely. We have received cases of children going missing while playing football at the field. Girls, boys, you know, going missing ... Adolescents and youth are targeted.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

*The most at high risk are the unaccompanied children [who] face many challenges in the camp. They might end up moving out of the camp and they are at risk of being trafficked because they are not accompanied by their families.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

# Understanding vulnerabilities and mitigating risk

As in the broader humanitarian sector, this project understands that levels of risk are determined by the intersection of threats and vulnerabilities, mitigated by the capacities of the person at risk (see Figure 1 below).

For example, a child's level of risk of going missing might be impacted by the threat of human trafficking and the fact that the child is travelling unaccompanied (a factor enhancing vulnerability), but mitigated by phone contact with their family, a capacity that can potentially reduce risk. Therefore, to mitigate the risk of migrant women and children becoming separated or going missing, vulnerability factors need to be considered alongside existing threats and capacities.

**To mitigate the risk of migrant women and children becoming separated or going missing, vulnerability factors need to be considered alongside existing threats and capacities.**

**Figure 1: Protection risk equation<sup>32</sup>**



Table 3 demonstrates the most frequently referenced factors contributing to migrant women and children's vulnerabilities identified by participants.

**Table 3: Most frequently referenced vulnerability factors**

No	Vulnerability factors
1	Age
2	Gender
3	Lack of legal status
4	Poverty – lack of financial resources
5	Social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation

These factors include age and gender<sup>33</sup>; followed by lack of legal status (and therefore the ability to access certain services and support and migration pathways); poverty and lack of financial resources; and social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation (often linked to seeking safety and asylum when fleeing armed conflict and/or persecution or experiencing racism and xenophobia). Additionally, though not listed in the table, several participants pointed to pregnancy as increasing vulnerability. These factors are discussed in more detail below.

<sup>32</sup> This figure comes from a publication of the Global Protection Cluster: Protection Analytical Framework: An Introduction (2021) Global Protection Cluster / USAID.

<sup>33</sup> The data identify risks for women and children that were directly experienced (i.e. when someone is speaking about his/her own experience). It also includes the risks cited by key informants, family members and in focus groups where people talked about experiences of others (that is, they did not directly experience the risk) which demonstrated women and children in vulnerable situations. Thus, the vulnerability factors of age and gender are not based on the type of interviewee (i.e. the fact that more women and children were interviewed in the dataset).



## Age: Children

Children, without the protection and care of appropriate guardians, and particularly those who are unaccompanied, face the greatest risk of going missing or dying. Vulnerabilities increasing this risk for migrant children flagged in the data include a lack of specific support and child-friendly services along journeys, impacts (both physical and mental) of arduous journeys and risks of trafficking.

*They are suffering because it is not easy for a child to come that distance and to stay two days without eating. If you are older, maybe you can last. But for the small ones, you cannot go two or even day without sleeping or without eating.*  
—Migrant, Kenya

Children were reported as being easily deceived and influenced due to their age (into coercive and exploitative situations). Children are used to being told what to do by adults and having decisions made for them by others, which makes them particularly vulnerable to harm at the hands of those with bad intentions who seek to exploit them.

*People use power over them more, especially women, children. Children also cannot make any decision. So, then whatever you tell them, they might think that that is right. At the end they have that risk of missing or they have that risk of dying. At the end, they'll be in the hands of other people.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

Appropriate shelter and accommodation options for children are a critical gap in terms of service provision, with migrant children often staying in police stations for their safety and protection given the lack of alternatives.

*Individually they don't have shelter where minors are accommodated and taken care of. Sometimes they are left at the police station, but they did not commit crime.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

*We have a group of children and women who have arrived and there is no facility to accommodate both. The authorities would not want to separate the mother from the children. So they are just given a space where they can stay within the police station.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

**Children, without the protection and care of appropriate guardians, and particularly those who are unaccompanied, face the greatest risk of going missing or dying.**

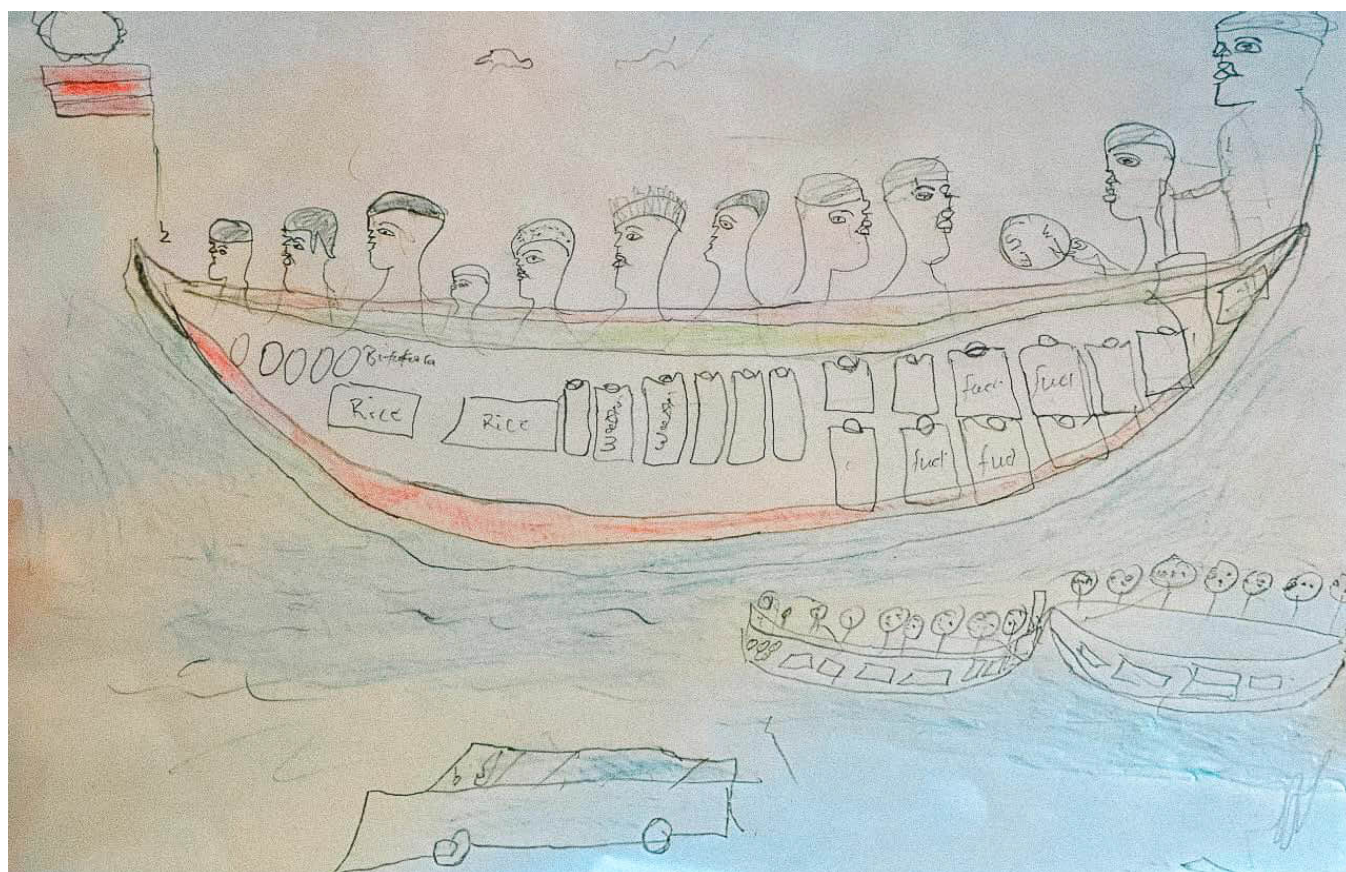
The difficult conditions of the journey can also make children vulnerable as contact with family members can be lost while transiting through countries, leaving children unaccompanied and with no idea how to continue their journey or reconnect with family members. In addition, those entrusted to care for children by their parents may not have their best interests in mind.

*We sometimes get unaccompanied minors that come to the transit centres and they don't know where they are ... they lost contact ... so they joined those who are moving and so they ended up in the camp.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

*We have unaccompanied minors. The most recent case is of three minors currently in our transit centre who were in the company of a relative ... they wanted to go back to their parents and so they left. How they left their country is not very clear to us, but they ended up being facilitated by a truck driver.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

**The difficult conditions of the journey can also make children vulnerable as contact with family members can be lost while transiting through countries ...**

In risk-mapping exercises (drawing sessions) conducted as part of the project, children were invited to share experiences from their journeys and to draw situations along their journeys where they felt safe or unsafe. The dominant themes shared by children in Africa related to armed actors along their journeys as well as risky modes of transport, such as being packed on small boats, as well as the lack of shelter and experience of homelessness during their journeys.



A drawing from The Gambia Red Cross' risk mapping activities with migrant children. Image: Global Migration Lab



## Gender: Women

In the data from Africa, women face specific risks due to their gender. While some of these are outlined in the sections above, it is worth noting that women's economic precarity is cited as increasing risks to abuse and exploitation, including instances of survival sex – exchanging sex to meet their basic survival needs, such as access to food or water for themselves or their children.

“ Some [women] because of hard economic times, they may be forced to engage in prostitution.  
—Key Informant, Kenya

“ If a woman or a child is travelling during the journey, usually they're exposed to different risk factors like sexual exploitation. As a woman you're more vulnerable to sexual exploitation than a man.  
—Key Informant, Nigeria

Entrenched gender norms and structural gender discrimination also increase vulnerabilities. There was a perception that women-headed households, or women travelling without men, were more vulnerable because they did not have a male protector figure.

“ For women headed households, because there is no a male or a protector figure it makes them vulnerable. And secondly, because they are seeking refuge in a place where it's new, so they don't know the culture, they don't know the language, that alone can expose them. And they are not documented for some makes them to be at a greater risk than others.  
—Key Informant, Kenya

The lack of specific support services for women, particularly those who are pregnant, contributes to increased risks of going missing, dying or separation. Pregnant women are at increased risk of health and safety complications, as well as separation, including being left behind given their 'weaker' physical state or needing medical treatment. Even where such services do exist, they are often inaccessible due to migrants' irregular status, lack of financial resources, and limited knowledge and awareness of said services.

“ As a woman in that journey, you just have to improvise. There's nothing. If we needed a pad, a pad will not be coming. Somebody will not go and get it. There's nothing. You are hungry or you needed food. Somebody will not go and bring the food.  
—FGD Migrants, Nigeria

“ I've met people that told me that they gave birth on the way and the baby dies. They end up getting pregnant without care and they die on the way.  
—Key Informant, Gambia

Women who became pregnant during the smuggling process are also at particular risk of going missing or death given the power and control often exerted over them by smugglers or traffickers taking advantage of their vulnerability and exploiting them.

“ The main risk faced are women are not allowed to get pregnant cause it will limit them from doing the prostitution work that was agreed on [in exchange for their smuggling]. A pregnant woman was given bleach to drink to abort the baby. She later lost her life during the process.  
—Migrant, Nigeria



Dadaab refugee camp. Image: Global Migration Lab



## Lack of legal status

Lack of legal status, alongside a lack of identification documents for migrant women and children, contributes to risks of going missing and separation in several ways. The lack of legal status and absence of documentation renders migrant women and children unable to access services and also places them at risk of arrest, detention or deportation if seeking support.

*"We were promised refugee documents [in one country] but we never received any. It prevented us from doing certain activities because they say we were not recognized."*  
—Migrant, Chad

*"There are issues of not having legal documents, hence once they found themselves in other countries they will be arrested, detained and even jailed."*  
—Missing migrant family member, Kenya

As mentioned earlier, an absence of documentation also often compels migrants to travel irregularly through unsafe routes increasing exposure to the threats outlined herein (such as kidnapping, extortion, trafficking, dangerous modes of transport and dangerous terrain).



Kenya Red Cross helps displaced people at Dadaab refugee camp connect with their relatives. Image: John Bundt/Kenya Red Cross

## Poverty and lack of financial resources

Participants frequently discussed women's lack of financial resources and economic precarity as a factor reducing their ability to choose which migratory route to take, driving them into risky and irregular journeys and enhancing the risk of going missing or dying.

*"I considered my safety but there was no money to apply for a visa. No talk of flying, of taking a plane. My mom is just a poor widow with 5 children."*  
—Migrant, Nigeria

*"I had no option. There was no option to choose another [route]. That was the only route that I can go through. The only way I can pass through and I can reach [another country]. Because we have no money for to travel."*  
—Migrant, Kenya

Lack of financial resources also increases migrant women and children's exposure to human trafficking and sexual exploitation along their journeys, as well as being forced to engage in survival sex, as mentioned earlier in this report.

*"You have to have money. You see women are suffering and [smugglers] are using them anyhow, knowing that they don't have the money. If you don't have money, they will be using you anyhow they feel like because if you don't have money they can delay your travelling and then they will use you as wife."*  
—Migrant, The Gambia

*"We faced a lot of challenges trying to cross the border. They used to kill people. It was very difficult. We had no money to manage that, to use a vehicle that time."*  
—Migrant, Nigeria

In some cases, lack of financial resources also prevents migrant women and children from accessing essential services, including medical care, increasing risks of ill-health and death.

*"That's what concerns us because we have young children, we go to hospital. They ask for money. But we don't have any, there's no money. When you don't have the money, they turn you away."*  
—Key Informant, Chad



A staff member from The Gambia Red Cross conducts an interview as part of the data collection. Image: Global Migration Lab.

## Social, ethnic, religious and political affiliation

Social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation was reported as another factor driving vulnerability for migrant women and children. This was in relation to both reasons for migration (i.e. fleeing persecution) or being at risk of going missing or dying during the journey. Instances of racism and xenophobia based on ethnicity and/or nationality were cited, increasing risks of separation when migrants are refused entry into a country or even being at risk of death based on skin colour.

*Even some people they lose their lives. Because... the issue of your colour, skin colour. It will cause you problems ... Maybe your colour will cost you. Maybe your tribe ... [In some countries] if you are brown you are in danger or if you are like black they will say you are in the government. So, your colour and your tribe is the problem.*

—Migrant, Kenya

*The journey is marked by racism: having black skin sometimes means being refused entry, even if you are able to pay. Some justify this exclusion based solely on skin color. In the most brutal cases, this can lead to merciless death or enslavement, forced to work in the fields or behind camels.*

—Migrant, Chad

## Capacities to mitigate risks

Given the vulnerabilities highlighted above, it is important to better understand what capacities contribute to reducing such vulnerabilities and mitigating risks for migrant women and children.

**Table 4: Most frequently referenced capacities to mitigate risks**

No.	Capacity
1	Support from international actors (such as UN, INGO, RCRC)
2	Support from State actors
3	Access to information
4	Support from local actors and networks (such as NS, NGOs, community-based organizations and other migrants)
5	Regular legal status

Table 4 outlines the most frequently referenced capacities related to how migrant women and children keep themselves safe or reduce risks of becoming separated or going missing during their journeys.

## Providers of Support

Table 5 below highlights forms of support that participants identified as helpful to reduce risks for migrant women and children during their journeys. These are outlined according to the type of provider and the forms of support offered.

**Table 5: Providers of support to migrant women and children**

Provider category	Type of support cited by participants
State actors	Transportation, asylum law, legal protection and awareness and training, refugee registration, food distribution, healthcare access, documentation support
International actors (UN agencies and International NGOs)	Financial assistance, reintegration support, food, shelter, WASH assistance, linking and liaising with authorities
Red Cross and Red Crescent	Free telephone communication, food, medical care and medicines, psychological support, information and awareness, non-food items such as blankets, family reunification and Restoring Family Links
Local organizations and support networks (community-based orgs. and local NGOs)	Food distribution, foster care for unaccompanied children, child protection assistance, community engagement and connection
Informal support networks, including other migrants, family members, friends and travel companions	Information and assistance, solidarity while travelling, communication support, knowledge and where to travel, coordination on travel time and routes to avoid militia groups and help plan journeys

Despite authorities in the region having been identified by participants as contributing, in some cases, to risks of separation, going missing or dying, in some instances, participants also referenced state actors as key providers of support, including in terms of transportation, food assistance and help accessing documentation and registration processes, particularly in refugee contexts.

*I felt safe when I reached the border because it was where I started to communicate with my family. We also received support from the embassy by providing us with a bus.*  
—Migrant, The Gambia

*The government has started registering new refugees. Even today new arrivals are registered, they're given identification*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

*Through the National Food Assistance Program is how [migrants] get food. And then maybe through that, free healthcare. We get some documentation that confirms who these people are, because some are sick or [some] have chronic conditions.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

International organizations, including UN agencies and international NGOs were cited by migrants as offering critical support during their journeys, particularly in terms of financial assistance, reintegration support (for returning migrants), food, healthcare and facilitation of communication with family.

*[The organization] provides financial support. It tries to see if migrants who are separated or if they are missing and they are found anywhere and they want to come back to their country of origin. They provide them with financial support by providing transportation, getting them back to their country of origin with communication and contact with the authorities.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

*If you migrate from war and you come to another country, then you have some services from UN.*  
—Migrant, Kenya



Local organizations and community-based groups and networks also offer critical support and assistance to migrants. This includes food and accommodation assistance, but also financial support and community connection activities.

*Some travelled alone, others with family members or groups. [They] relied heavily on external financial support from churches, well-wishers, family.*  
—Migrant FGD, Kenya

Alongside community networks and local organization, informal networks established by migrants during the journey are also forms of information and support, including information on the whereabouts of family members.

*The boat capsized, and only 25 people survived. [Another migrant] sent me a video of the survivors. He also confirmed that [my relative] and his friend, who shared the same name, did not make it.*  
—Missing migrant family member, The Gambia

*We were together with other people that made so many gains [on the route]. I was encouraged to travel from our discussions with them. I received privileged information which made my journey easier and successful.*  
—Migrant, Nigeria

*Sometimes fishermen or rescue teams update us on the deaths since they come across floating bodies in the sea.*  
—Key Informant, Chad

Drivers were also referenced as key supporters, helping to coordinate transportation at times when armed groups or militia were not on the roads.

*Also the drivers coordinate with other drivers on the road to make for safe passage.*  
—Migrant FGD, Kenya

## Role of information

Information can help to reduce the risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying. It can include information on where and how to access services and the phone numbers of family and other important contacts that can both reduce vulnerability and ensure family contact is maintained.

*Because I know that I'm taking a very risky journey, I have that consideration. And then I went with my ID. All the contacts that I needed, I wrote it and then I attached it with my phone and then my ID behind my phone, behind the jacket.*  
—Migrant, The Gambia

Migrants and key informants noted information prior to and during planning migration as a necessary strategy for self-protection and safety.

*100 percent anyone who is taught [information on self-protection messaging] is better than the one who doesn't know .... Any rash decisions to migrate to another country, this kind of migration is the one that leads to death leading to separation.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

Friends and social media, including Facebook and TikTok, are a key source of information as are digital tools like Google maps.

*The source of information that gave me the courage to travel and then the planning of the travelling is my friends. And then they advised me to have the money that I should travel with and then the documents that I will be needed and then the way I should travel.*  
—Migrant, The Gambia



Kenya Red Cross helps displaced people at Dadaab refugee camp connect with their relatives. Image: John Bundt/Kenya Red Cross

The most useful type of information cited by participants related to opportunities for work and information on where and what dangers existed, with the most trusted sources being family and friends who had previously migrated.

*The source of information was my friend who came [one year ago] and he told that I should go to [this city] to do different jobs which will help me to earn money... I used my smartphone to communicate with my friend, so it was very helpful for me. The most useful information tells you where to pass and where the meeting point is.*

—Migrant, Tanzania

*The information that the militia are present on the road during the day and in their hideouts at night helped them plan their journey. This information has been useful and ensured them of their safety.*

—Migrant FGD, Kenya

**Regular legal status facilitates access to many essential services in countries, as well as the ability to seek employment. It also means that migrant women and children can seek out help from authorities without fear or arrest, deportation or detention ...**

## Regular legal status

Legal status is an important contributor to migrant women and children's safety. Regular legal status facilitates access to many essential services in countries, as well as the ability to seek employment. It also means that migrant women and children can seek out help from authorities without fear or arrest, deportation or detention and opens safer channels for migration, as migrants can avoid the risks they face on irregular journeys. In the data, key processes cited by participants included the registration of refugees to enable free movement and access to employment.

*Be it registration or a [special] card, [we provide this] in terms of giving them the legal status. [It allows] travels outside the camp, travel outside the country. If they need work permit, we give them work permit class.*

—Key Informant, Kenya

*The way we register refugees is called asylum procedures. The moment that they step into the territory from the border, they would be referred to the office here. Everything is highlighted in our Standard Operating Procedures... You'll be registered. Everything, all details will be entered and they will produce an attestation. So that document will avail free movement within the country.*

—Key Informant, The Gambia

# Regional context

## Migration laws and polices

Significant efforts at the African level have been carried out so far to address the issue of missing migrants, including the adoption of the [Resolution 486](#) by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACPR), the Meeting of States and Other Stakeholders along the North/West African Migration Routes to Discuss a Joint Approach on Missing Migrants (including clear recommendations) organized in Tunis in 2022.

In the Africa data, key informants mentioned how existing regional agreements enabled movement within some parts of the continent. In addition, given the presence of large refugee camps in the region, participants cited registration processes to assist refugees as initiatives to reduce the risk of migrants going missing or dying.

“ *People who leave from neighbouring countries just come by public transport. And from West Africa, it's the same thing. Generally, there are countries that have agreements. There is no visa, they have cooperation agreements, so people [can move as they want] with their passports, their identity documents.*  
—Key Informant, Chad

However, despite free movement protocols being important in enabling people to easily move across borders, in some cases, migrants are still compelled to take irregular migration routes, a situation that continues to present risks to migrant women and children's safety. Likewise, refugee camps are not necessarily a safe environment for women and children, with risks of trafficking and issues of SGBV violence discussed by participants.

“ *They have the scenario where children have arrived in the camp and then they go missing from the camp or they arrive in the transit centre and then they go missing.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

“ *[Migrant children] from neighbouring countries who come to the camp and also unaccompanied children who are separated. Maybe they are living with relatives, but they are not living with their biological parents. They are at risk of abuse. We have GBV that faces migrant children, we have physical assault, denial of services, neglect.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

## Red Cross and Red Crescent in Action

In this dynamic and complex environment, Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) actors have a critical role to play in continuing to support migrants in vulnerable situations and working to reduce harm, address risks and enhance capacity and at the same time to not encourage, prevent or dissuade migration.

The role of RCRC actors features strongly in the data in terms of supporting migrant women and children to maintain communication with their families and addressing risks of separation and loss of contact. While the prominence of RCRC actors is not surprising given the design of the project, participants, it was noted that the communication services (including mobile phones and internet) provided by National Societies along migration routes were critical to preventing loss of contact. Restoring Family Links (RFL) services were also cited as essential to preventing migrants from becoming separated and restoring contact with the missing.

“ *Internet communication for migrants is very important. I am a frequent user of the free Red Cross internet but I haven't accessed it in over two months. I humbly request for reinstatement of this important service for our reconnection with families.*  
—Migrant, Tanzania

“ *The only organization where we get information on family separation and support is the Red Cross and ICRC. They reconnect us to our lost families that went missing during our migration even if it is 30 years later and the family is in another country.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

“ *[Along the route], the Red Cross was providing free telephone services to maintain family linkages.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

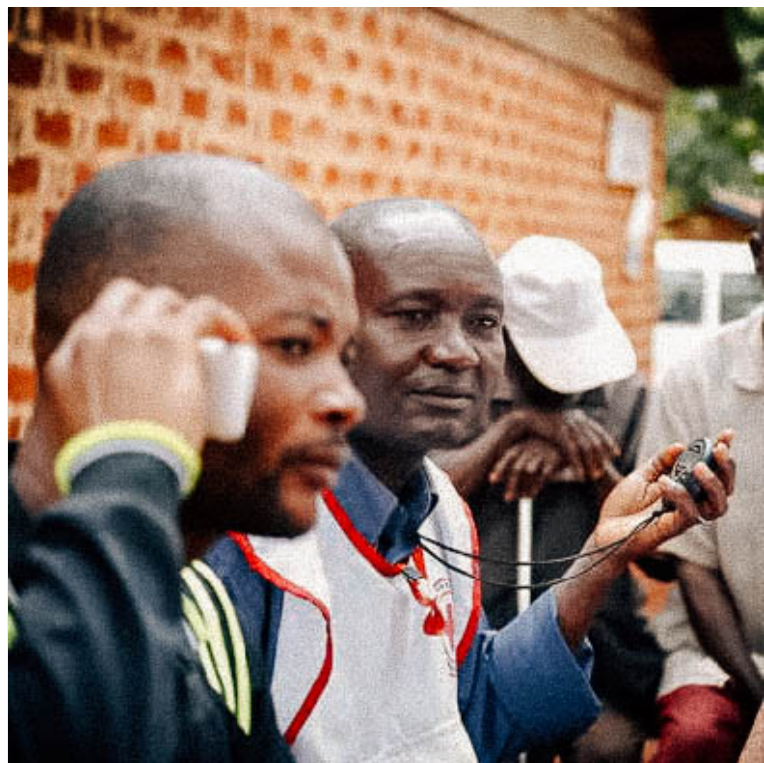
RCRC actors were also noted as critical first responders and one of the few organizations consistently available to provide support at all stages of migrants' journeys, including psychosocial support (PSS). PSS was underscored as an essential service for migrants experiencing trauma and suffering abuse and exploitation, as well as those who had experienced family separation or loss of loved ones during their journeys.

*They also provide psychological support... because some of these migrants were depressed so they would have been able to provide that counselling for them as well.*  
—Missing migrant family member, The Gambia

Temporary shelter was referenced as a key service, helping to maintain family unity and safety, particularly for women and children during transit and upon arrival.

*Red Cross will be the first to be there. They will provide temporary shelter with their tents. They will give sanitary materials, they give mattresses. So, they are very good in humanitarian response, emergency response before we arrive, they will be the first on the ground to provide that immediate or emergency assistance to our [government].*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

**RCRC actors were also noted as critical first responders and one of the few organizations consistently available to provide support at all stages of migrants' journeys, including psychosocial support (PSS).**



Tanzania Red Cross Society's Restoring Family Links (RFL) program supports refugees to find their loved ones in Nyarugusu refugee camp. Image: Khamar Kashoro/Tanzania Red Cross Society

While RCRC was commended for being a trusted actor by migrants, as well as by States – including in the provision of detention monitoring services – it was suggested that more could be done to increase awareness of services provided by RCRC and strengthen outreach to migrants along their journeys, as well as in places of detention.

*Red Cross have that balanced approach. They have that very trusted approach. We need to be aware of where Red Cross is and how we contact them in all the jurisdictions that young people normally take. That information is very important. And the other way that Red Cross can help also is to help in the tracing of missing migrants ... A public institution might find it difficult because of the protocols, but Red Cross is everywhere. And secondly, migrants that are in detention, whether they have trials, what they are there for, whether they have access to justice, people need to be aware that they are there. This is something I think Red Cross can definitely help by visiting detention centres and prisons.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia



# Looking for the missing

The data in Africa demonstrate that migrants often have limited capacity and avenues to search for missing family members during their journey, particularly if they are detained themselves or also separated from family. Similarly, the families and relatives of missing migrants in places of origin often have limited capacity and avenues to search for and locate their missing loved ones.

*“ She was informed that her sister fled but she did not search for them because she did not have the ability to search for them while in prison. When she was released from jail, she did not wish to stay and search but preferred to flee the country for safety. When she arrived [here], she initiated the search with the Red Cross to try and locate her loved ones... She has also attempted search on social media e.g. Facebook but with no success. —Missing migrant family member, Kenya*

Lack of finances was cited as a challenge to searching for missing migrants, as was the clandestine and irregular nature of movement. This creates challenges in locating the missing because there is no record of where people moved or who crossed which border.

*“ She attempted to ask other people, her family, and neighbours although she could not do a lot about it. She did not manage to report to the authorities due to a lack of time and opportunity considering that they were running for safety. She cannot conduct the search due to lack of funds to search. —Missing migrant family member, Kenya*

*“ We don't know whether he's alive, whether he's dead. There was no communication, so I was worried. Not knowing even where he is. We are never getting the money that we asked, we were looking for it, we were not having, we are refugees, we already donated everything, that food and everything, we are not saving money anywhere, so it was very hard to ask everybody to help. —Missing migrant family member, Kenya*

**Sometimes migrants have experienced so much trauma during their journeys that the state of their mental health prevents them from engaging with service providers to locate family ...**

Those seeking loved ones missing in migration are often unaware not only of where their family member might have gone missing, but also of how to inquire with authorities or others in those States about the missing.

*“ We tried calling the friend that was there with him. But that one also was in prison. We could not have access, we could not have any way to contact or access anyone that we could ask about his whereabouts. We were just praying and hoping that he was safe and he would surface someday. —Missing migrant's family member, The Gambia*

Sometimes migrants have experienced so much trauma during their journeys that the state of their mental health prevents them from engaging with service providers to locate family, in addition to the stated fears of migrants with irregular status engaging with authorities. It was also noted that in some cases, people do not want to be found and do not want to (re)connect with their family.

*“ Some [migrants] are in a mental state that they cannot even tell you the story. Yes, they don't even remember any name [of anyone] because of their health condition. They don't they cannot remember anything ... you don't have any mechanism to trace families because they cannot explain themselves. It's very hard. —Key Informant, The Gambia*

Key informants highlighted challenges in terms of porous borders and understanding where and how migrants are moving and going missing along routes. The absence of systematic registration of missing migrants as well as the lack of documentation and the irregular nature of the migration presents difficulties in collecting relevant data to respond to cases of missing migrants.

*The gap is mostly data. It's difficult to know the number of people that are moving out ... we have very porous borders. We have very few official borders where you can be recorded. You can move around in different ways in and out of the country ... And the other challenge is lack of enough information about the number of missing migrants because we are coming to do something on that ... We don't know the route they took, We don't know whether it's by sea or by land or whatever. And because they are not documented, they don't carry documentation, it's difficult to trace them.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

The data outlined that the identification of deceased migrants, as well as registration of deaths, creates challenges in identifying the missing. In many cases, bodies are never recovered – such as those who die in the desert or in shipwrecks in the Mediterranean and where bodies are never found. Where bodies are recovered, jurisdictional challenges and bureaucratic barriers exist in terms of identifying human remains and repatriating them.

*Some are missing, some have been recovered and have been buried. That is for the ones that are reported. There are death certificates to confirm. But if they have not been recovered or identified... it's a matter of jurisdiction. If somebody disappeared in a foreign sovereign country, it's difficult for [local] authorities to go and trace their remains there and also issues of security, insecurity.*  
—Key Informant, Kenya

In many contexts there is a lack of appropriate procedures related to forensic identification and deceased body management standards, also due to security risks for the relevant authorities to access certain areas where migrant remains may be located. In many cases authorities do not have access to the relevant data or have not centralised it in a way that it can be accessed to search for a particular case. The identification of migrants' recovered remains is also problematic.

*Not long ago we had to bury one of our fellow migrants. They called me to say he was ill. By the time I got there, he was already dead, so we put him in the morgue, and then I went and presented my papers, called a few groups, and they came to bury him without identifying him.*  
—Key Informant, Chad

*The dead bodies have not been recovered because when the boat capsized the dead body remained in the sea, they could not access the dead bodies and then the dead bodies were not brought back to the country for burial.*  
—Key Informant, The Gambia

**The absence of systematic registration of missing migrants as well as the lack of documentation and the irregular nature of the migration presents difficulties in collecting relevant data to respond to cases of missing migrants.**

# Conclusions

This research outlines key reasons as to why and how migrant women and children become separated, go missing or die during their journeys to and within Africa, as well as significant protection risks and factors that increase the vulnerability of migrant women and children during their journeys.

It is evident in the data that the actions of both state and non-state actors allegedly may contribute to risks of becoming separated and going missing for migrant women and children, with armed conflict and violence being a key risk in the region. Additionally, the report demonstrates the risks faced by migrant women and children to SGBV at all stages of their journey, including forced marriage and human trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes. It also highlights the varied and dangerous journeys that migrant women and children are compelled to take – across land and sea, through unsafe routes and the challenges in accessing essential and life-saving services and support while travelling that often result in death.

It is clear from the data that a securitization approach and the externalization of migration policies contribute to heightened risks for migrant women and children, underlining the paramount importance of needing to ensure a humanitarian approach to migration that mitigates risks of harm and upholds migrants' safety, dignity and well-being, no matter where they are and irrespective of their status.





# Recommendations

Based on the direct insights, experiences and learnings from migrant women and children and the relatives and families of migrants who have gone missing, as well as the experience of the Movement and key informants interviewed in Africa working to prevent migrant women and children from becoming separated or going missing, the following recommendations are put forward.



## States and regional bodies:

To strengthen efforts to prevent and respond to migrant women and children becoming separated, going missing or dying during their journeys, States should:

- 1. Ensure that migrants' rights – including the right to life and the right to family unity – are respected and protected in line with international law.** To achieve this, States should assess whether their migration and asylum laws and policies – including agreements with third countries – create or exacerbate protection risks for migrants, including risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying. This necessitates accounting for the unique needs of migrant women and children, including those who are unaccompanied or separated, in the assessment, formulation and implementation of said laws and policies.
- 2. Guarantee that all migrants, irrespective of their gender, age or legal status, have safe and effective access to essential services without fear of arrest, deportation or detention.** Specific attention should be given to the unique needs of migrant women and children, such as access to sexual and reproductive health services, services for pregnant and nursing women, child-friendly services, and support for victims/survivors of human trafficking and other forms of SGBV. To this end, States should also facilitate (including by providing financial support) the establishment of Humanitarian Services Points<sup>34</sup> along routes, including at borders.
- 3. Enable and facilitate access to means of communication for migrants and their families along migration routes and in any structures where migrants may be placed, including places of reception or detention.** This entails supporting and facilitating the unique role and work of the Movement in the field of tracing and Restoring Family Links (RFL). No restrictions should be imposed on the Movement components in the collection, management and transfer of personal data for tracing missing persons and RFL.<sup>35</sup> The formal integration of RFL services into national migration response frameworks should be enabled, including through cooperation agreements with National Societies, and the establishment of fixed or mobile connectivity points along routes and within detention and reception centres encouraged.
- 4. Ensure that the principle of non-refoulement and the right to asylum are respected in law and in practice and refrain from excessive use of force in border management operations.** State officials encountering migrants at borders and elsewhere should be properly trained in this regard. The training should also address effective implementation of relevant human and child rights legislation, child protection and protection from SGBV, as well as child safeguarding.
- 5. Increase efforts and resources for mechanisms to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing migrants at national and transregional levels.** To this end, standardize national processes to record and manage cases of missing migrants as well as of relevant unidentified human remains, including centralizing relevant information at national level. States should designate national focal points<sup>36</sup> on missing migrants.
- 6. Establish, enable and support search and rescue operations at sea and ensure that search and rescue capacities at land borders are also adequate, particularly in zones known to be prone to accidents.** Migrants in distress, including women and children, should be provided appropriate services and support upon disembarkation. This necessitates accounting for the unique needs of migrant women and children, including those who are unaccompanied or separated, and ensuring trained and qualified staff, including psychosocial and medical support personnel, are present on arrival alongside border authorities.
- 7. Ensure that women and children can access vital documents – such as birth certificates, identification cards and travel documents – easily and affordably.** These documents are crucial for safeguarding migrants' safety, dignity, and well-being, and for enabling access to regular migration pathways. They also often enable migrants to more readily access required services and support upon arrival at their destination.

<sup>34</sup> [Humanitarian Service Points](#) are neutral spaces where migrants can access a wide range of humanitarian support and services, regardless of their migration status and wherever they are on their journeys.

<sup>35</sup> In line with [Resolution 4 - Restoring Family Links while respecting privacy, including as it relates to personal data protection](#) of the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in 2019 (33IC/19/R4).

<sup>36</sup> States could draw upon the [network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants that was established in July 2024 as part of the Rabat Process](#) in order to facilitate communication between countries involved in the resolution of cases of missing migrants.

- 8. States and other parties to armed conflict must respect and ensure respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in all circumstances.** As civilians<sup>37</sup>, migrants are covered by the rules of IHL providing protection to the civilian population<sup>38</sup>, including the principle of distinction<sup>39</sup>, proportionality<sup>40</sup> and precautions<sup>41</sup>.



## To Red Cross and Red Crescent actors:

In line with the Movement's Migration Strategy and the Movement's Restoring Family Links Strategy, the Red Cross and Red Crescent actors should:

- 9. Prioritize information provision for migrants on self-protection strategies along migration routes, including how to avoid the risks of separation and going missing.** This should be complemented by information on where and how migrants can access assistance and protection, including RFL services. Information should be provided in various languages and shared via channels used by migrants, including social media and digital platforms, in addition to key points along the route. Child-friendly resources and information are essential.
- 10. Scale up essential services and support provided along migration routes, including gender- and age-sensitive services and RFL services.** Services should account for the unique needs and concerns of migrant women and children, including those who are unaccompanied or separated. This requires ensuring trained and qualified staff, including psychosocial, medical and child-protection personnel, are available, including those with expertise on health and medical care for pregnant and nursing women, scaling up child-friendly approaches and services, and strengthening support for victims/survivors of SGBV and human trafficking. National Societies should safely address protection concerns and conduct safe referrals in line with [RCRC guidelines](#).
- 11. Establish and strengthen awareness activities for migrants on the risks and indicators of human trafficking.** This includes supporting migrants, particularly women and children, to better understand how to identify risks and where and how to seek help if they (or their family members) have experienced or are at risk of human trafficking.
- 12. Ensure that any program or policy designed to prevent migrants becoming separated, going missing or dying is directly informed by the voices and lived experiences of migrant women and children.** Those with lived experience understand the realities of migrants' journeys and have significant knowledge which can, and should, inform the operations of humanitarian organizations. This requires establishing advisory bodies that include migrant voices and creating volunteer and employment opportunities for migrants to actively contribute to efforts that reduce risks along migration routes. This also requires continuous awareness raising amongst other staff and volunteers of the specific risks migrant women and children face along their journeys.
- 13. Engage in evidence-based humanitarian diplomacy and dialogue with States and relevant non-state actors on the specific needs and vulnerabilities of migrant women and children.** This includes highlighting specific protection risks – including family separation, going missing or dying – which are linked to restrictive laws, policies, and practices and possible solutions to prevent and respond to these.

37 For the purposes of the conduct of hostilities, the ICRC considers that all persons who are not members of State armed forces or organized armed groups of a party to the conflict are to be considered civilians. See ICRC, *Interpretative Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities under International Humanitarian Law*, Geneva, 2009, p. 27.

38 See Helen Obregon Gieseken, "The Protection of Migrants under International Humanitarian Law", in *International Review of the Red Cross (IRRC)*, Volume 99 (1), April 2017, p. 125. In the context of non-international armed conflicts (NIAC), all persons who are not, or are no longer, directly participating in hostilities are protected under the relevant provisions of IHL, i.e. Common Article 3 to Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II (AP II), as well as the customary IHL rules applicable to NIAC. In addition, adverse distinction in the application of international humanitarian law (IHL) based on race, colour, sex, language, religion or belief, political or other opinion, national or social origin, wealth, birth or other status, or on any other similar criteria is prohibited (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 88).

39 Parties to the conflict must always distinguish between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objective. Attacks must not be directed against civilians unless they are directly participating in hostilities and must only be directed against combatants/fighters and military objectives (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 1). Parties to the conflict have an obligation to ensure that everything feasible is done to verify that targets are military objectives (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 16).

40 In each attack, parties to the conflict must comply with the principle of proportionality. When targeting military objectives, launching an attack is prohibited when it may be expected to cause incidental harm to civilian life or injury to civilians, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 14).

41 Out of the IHL principle of precautions in the attack, even if an attack is directed against a lawful target and complies with the principle of proportionality, all feasible precautions must be taken to avoid or minimize incidental loss of civilian life or injury to civilians (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 15). The parties to the conflict must also take all feasible precautions to protect the civilian population and civilian objects under their control against the effects of attacks (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 22) and thus must, to the extent feasible, remove civilian persons and objects from the vicinity of military objectives (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 24). Furthermore, the use of human shield is prohibited under IHL (ICRC, IHL Database, Customary IHL, Rule 97).





A Restoring Family Links (RFL) volunteer at a Humanitarian Service Point in Ati, Chad. Image: Laurel Selby/British Red Cross





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