



**Global
Migration
Lab**

Hosted by



**Central
Tracing
Agency**

Towards Safer Journeys:

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

Americas Data Report





Panamanian Red Cross provides humanitarian services to migrants, including maternal and child care, basic first aid, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), psychosocial support and support to restore family links and contact. Image: Hennessy Wagner/Panama Red Cross

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A Colombian Red Cross staff member engages with migrant children during a risk mapping exercise (drawing session) as part of the data collection. Image: Colombian Red Cross

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Honduran Red Cross volunteers visit different shelters set up by the local municipality for migrants and provide RFL services. In addition to RFL, psychosocial support and first aid services are also provided. Image: Honduran Red Cross

Executive Summary

Background:

As women and children around the world continue to migrate¹, 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.² 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.³

To better understand and respond to this issue, the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (Global Migration Lab) together with 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 the Americas 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 ICRC Ethics Review Board.

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 the Americas, a total of 116 qualitative interviews with migrants, 17 FGDs with migrants, 32 risk-mapping exercises (drawing sessions) with children, 19 interviews with relatives of migrants who are missing and 55 interviews with key informants were conducted by National Societies across 8 countries (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama).

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.⁴

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

Data in the Americas was collected between June and December 2024. Since then, there have been significant changes to some of the routes travelled by migrants in the region. However, many of the threats, risks and vulnerabilities identified in this report remain the same and still require action to minimise and mitigate the risks of migrant women and children becoming separated, going missing or dying during their journeys.

While most migrants interviewed were originally from South America and often travelling irregularly via land and across rivers within the Americas region, migrants interviewed in Canada primarily included refugees, temporary residents and asylum-seekers from Africa or Europe arriving via air. Journeys described by migrants interviewed from South American countries included travelling north, often across the Darien Gap. Those interviewed also included migrants from Venezuela, among others, moving to or through other countries in the region. Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil were also noted as destination countries in the data for migrants moving within the continent. Fear of persecution and lack of economic opportunities and stability were the main reasons cited for migration in the data.

Across the region, the main factors contributing to migrant women and children going missing or dying during their journeys include physical violence, primarily from smugglers, criminal gangs, and armed groups; environmental conditions, including exposure to extreme temperatures and rough terrain; informal and unsafe modes of transport, such as crowded canoes, buses and trucks; and/or to lack of access to essential services, including food water, shelter and medical care. References to migrant women and children drowning in rivers, falling from fast-moving trucks and experiencing hypothermia and starvation during their journeys are common, as are deaths related to the activity of criminal gangs. Sexual and gender-based

violence (SGBV) features strongly in the data, specifically in relation to family violence, sexual harassment and assault, as well as human trafficking by criminal gangs and armed actors, and instances of survival sex in response to women's economic precarity.

In terms of forced separation, the data outline that fear of authorities may contribute to separations, with families sometimes dispersing at borders and bus terminals. Children, in particular, expressed fear of being separated in these environments. Criminal gangs and smugglers also intentionally separate women and children from men to exert control over them and to facilitate human trafficking. In addition, migrants' phones may be stolen or confiscated by both authorities and non-state actors in some instances, leading to loss of contact.

In terms of capacities to mitigate risk, participants in the Americas cite access to information, support from international actors and local actors, as well as support from States (including for regularisation) and regular legal status as key. However, limited access to reliable information on risks and on how to stay safe during journeys is a challenge, while the financial costs or documentation required for regular migration and/or regularisation are outlined as prohibitive for many migrants.

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, vulnerability factors and capacities

No	Protection risks	Vulnerability factors	Capacities
1	SGBV	Age	Access to information
2	Going missing or dying	Gender	Support from international actors (such as UN, INGO, RCRC)
3	Loss of contact	Social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation	Support from local actors and networks (such as NGOs, NS) and other migrants
4	Involuntary separation of child/ children from parent/guardian	Lack of legal status	Financial resources
5	Lack of access to essential services	Poverty and lack of financial resources	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 on 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 sexual and gender based-violence. To this end, States should also facilitate (including by providing financial support) the establishment of Humanitarian Services Points⁵ 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.⁶ 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 sexual and gender-based violence, 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 points⁷ on missing migrants.
- 6. 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.
- 7. Ensure that regularization processes are inclusive, affordable, consistent and accessible to all – including women and children,** and that migrants are aware of how to engage with the processes and what the necessary requirements are to apply. This entails sharing information through channels and in languages used by migrants and exploring avenues to assist migrants to access and engage in the process, with a focus on the most vulnerable.

⁵ [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.

⁶ 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).

⁷ 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.



To Red Cross and Red Crescent actors:

In support of the aims of the Movement's Migration Strategy and the Movement's Restoring Family Links Strategy, Red Cross and Red Crescent actors should:

8. 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](#).

9. 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.

10. 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 organisations. 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.

11. 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.



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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.⁸

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.⁹

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 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)'.¹⁰

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

9 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2024). [Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030](#)

10 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.¹¹

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.¹²

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.¹³

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/or 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
RCRC	Red Cross and Red Crescent
RFL	Restoring Family Links
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
UN	United Nations

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

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

Background

As women and children around the world migrate continue to migrate¹⁴, 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶

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 report focuses on the data collected in the Americas from June to December 2024.

This regional report focuses on data collected from migrants who have travelled to and through the Americas, as well as relatives of missing migrants and key informants in 8 countries (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama).

The purpose of the project, and this regional 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 during their own journeys. 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.¹⁷ To support ongoing efforts, including bilateral confidential dialogue with governments and other concerned parties,¹⁸ certain findings have been intentionally excluded from this public report. This approach aligns with the Fundamental Principle of Neutrality,¹⁹ and is adopted to strategically create a space for dialogue on the needs of migrants in vulnerable situations.

The research 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.

14 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](#).

15 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](#);

16 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.

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

18 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](#).

19 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 data collected in the Americas between June and December 2024, noting that the findings are part of a larger dataset for the project covering 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.

Participating National Societies undertook training on research ethics and tools, interview techniques –including with children – and the ICRC Minimum Protection Approach²⁰ 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.

In the Americas, a total of 116 qualitative interviews with migrants, 17 FGDs with migrants, 32 risk-mapping exercises (drawing sessions) with children, 19 interviews with relatives of migrants who are missing and 55 interviews with key informants were conducted by National Societies across the 8 countries. A breakdown by 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,²¹ as well as the families of missing migrants.

The research project specifically aimed to focus 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, 54.1% of participants were women, 14.8% were children and 31.1% were men.

Table 1: Data Overview

Country	Interviews with migrants	FGDs with migrants	Risk mapping exercises (drawing sessions) with groups of children	Interviews with relatives of migrants who are missing	Interviews with key informants
Argentina	9	-	-	2	6
Brazil	25	6	6	1	5
Canada	13	-	-	-	9
Chile	10	-	1	-	9
Colombia	21	4	6	2	12
Guatemala	13	1	-	-	-
Honduras	25	6	13	8	11
Panama	-	-	6	5	3
Total	116	17	32	19	55

²⁰ ICRC, [The Minimum Protection Approach](#).

²¹ Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2024). [Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030](#)



An RFL staff member of Argentine Red Cross supports a migrant to re-connect with a loved one on the other end of the phone. Image: Argentine Red Cross

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 in order to inform operational programming and advocacy rather than to draw direct correlations.

General context: Who is moving and where?

Data in the Americas was collected between June and December 2024. Since then, there have been significant changes to some of the routes travelled by migrants in the region. However, many of the threats, risks and vulnerabilities identified in this report remain the same and still require action to minimise and mitigate the risk of migrant women and children becoming separated, going missing or dying during their journeys.

Migration in the Americas commonly occurs both within subregions (such as Central America or South America) and at a continental level, primarily from the south, the Caribbean, and Central America towards Mexico and the United States.²² Venezuelans account for a large portion of migrants from and within South America in recent years, with other significant intraregional movements involving migrants from Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia.²³

22 IOM (2023), Migration Trends in the Americas, [Available online](#).

23 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) (2025), Smuggling and migration in South America: Insights from migrants, [Available online](#); Quarterly Mixed Migration Updates by MMC in the region; and IOM (2023), Movimientos migratorios recientes en América del Sur-Informe Anual 2023 | Portal de Datos sobre Migración. [Available online](#).

Findings

This project interviewed migrants, families of missing migrants and key informants in the countries of Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama. While most migrants interviewed were originally from South America and often travelling irregularly via land and across rivers within the Americas region, migrants interviewed in Canada primarily included refugees, temporary residents and asylum-seekers from Africa or Europe arriving via air.²⁴

Journeys described by migrants interviewed from South American countries included travelling north, often across the Darien Gap. Those interviewed also included migrants from Venezuela, among others, moving to or through other countries in the region. Additionally, Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil were cited as key destination countries for some migrants interviewed. As mentioned, in Canada most migrants interviewed travelled by air from Africa or Europe through regular channels.

The most common reasons for migration cited by participants in the Americas were fear of persecution and lack of economic opportunities and stability. This echoes existing literature noting that, at a continental level in the Americas, the main factors driving migration include economic reasons, as well as those linked to insecurity and political factors.²⁵



A Colombian Red Cross staff member engages with a research participant during data collection. Image: Colombian Red Cross

The most common reasons for migration cited by respondents in the Americas were fear of persecution and lack of economic opportunities and stability.

²⁴ In Canada, research resource limitations restricted interviews to asylum-seekers and temporary residents in one region of the country. While the experiences of these individuals provide valuable insights into the key risks and challenges faced during their migration journeys, they may not reflect the broader experiences of migrants, including those with different legal status. Furthermore, although irregular migration to Canada still occurs, context specific factors including geographic characteristics and certain migration policies result in impacts that may be different than other countries in the Americas where data was collected.

²⁵ Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) (2025), Smuggling and migration in South America: Insights from migrants, [Available online](#); Quarterly Mixed Migration Updates by MMC in the region; and IOM (2023), Movimientos migratorios recientes en América del Sur-Informe Anual 2023 | Portal de Datos sobre Migración. [Available online](#).

Key protection risks

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

Table 2: Most frequently referenced protection risks

Rank	Protection risk
1	SGBV
2	Going missing or dying
3	Loss of contact
4	Involuntary separation of child/children from parent/guardian
5	Lack of access to essential services

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 risks of becoming separated, 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. 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.

They face increased risks of separation, disappearance, or death due to threats such as kidnapping, sexual assault, and robbery – especially when traveling alone. Additionally, lack of food, shelter, and financial resources also heightens their vulnerability to harm.

The quotes below reflect common experiences of migrant women and children and highlight the intersection of threats faced during their journeys. They face increased risks of separation, disappearance, or death due to threats such as kidnapping, sexual assault, and robbery – especially when traveling alone. Additionally, lack of food, shelter, and financial resources also heightens their vulnerability to harm.

When you travel alone, you do not have support and economic resources. When you are offered a job opportunity where they can help your family, you go. I travelled to help my family, my mother. I have children. I had to leave them. Women who are traveling alone and children who are traveling alone are always at greater risk because they can be easily captured ... Many times, migrants are robbed, they take away their documentation, they leave them in the middle of the road, there is misinformation.
—Migrant, Colombia

[Migrant women and children] face a number of risks such as death, assaults, rapes, diseases, malnutrition, [they leave] all the comfort they have had at home to sleep in the bush, drowning in the rivers by the currents, risks of mutilation and harm by criminals.
—Key Informant, Honduras

Thinking about the journey, access to water, dehydration, shelter [are concerns]. [Migrant women and children] are often also very exposed to risks of theft, mistreatment and extortion. Of course, trafficking networks, organised crime networks are increasingly present in different points ...
—Key Informant, Chile

Risk of going missing or dying

The data indicate that migrant women and children in the Americas are at risk of going missing or dying throughout their journeys. The factors most frequently cited by participants as contributing to the risk of going missing or dying relate to:

- physical violence (primarily from smugglers, criminal gangs, armed groups);
- environmental factors (weather, temperature, terrain);
- informal modes of transport (including canoes, buses and lorries); and/or
- lack of access to essential services (food, water and medical care).

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.

Physical violence

Physical violence inflicted by non-state actors, including smugglers, criminal gangs and paramilitary groups, is a dominant theme in the data linked to migrant women and children going missing or dying. This was mentioned by both migrants themselves, as well as key informants. The data show that migrant women and children have been killed directly by these actors and/or physically assaulted during kidnappings:

In one of the groups, a beautiful young woman with blue eyes was migrating. At the time they [were] intercepted [by] a man, a member of the criminal group who asked her for a kiss. She refused several times and then he shot her for refusing and she died.
—Migrant, Guatemala

Migrants are subject to a continuum of violence, including sexual violence, particularly for women and girls, that leads to killings and disappearances in some instances. Human trafficking, kidnapping, abuse linked to extortion, and sexual assault are key forms of violence by non-state actors which participants linked to the deaths and disappearance of migrant woman and children.

Girls disappear[ed]... [criminals] rape them and leave them lying around... It is also dangerous because...the [gangs] walk around with guns... They tried to kidnap some people.
—Migrant FGD, Colombia

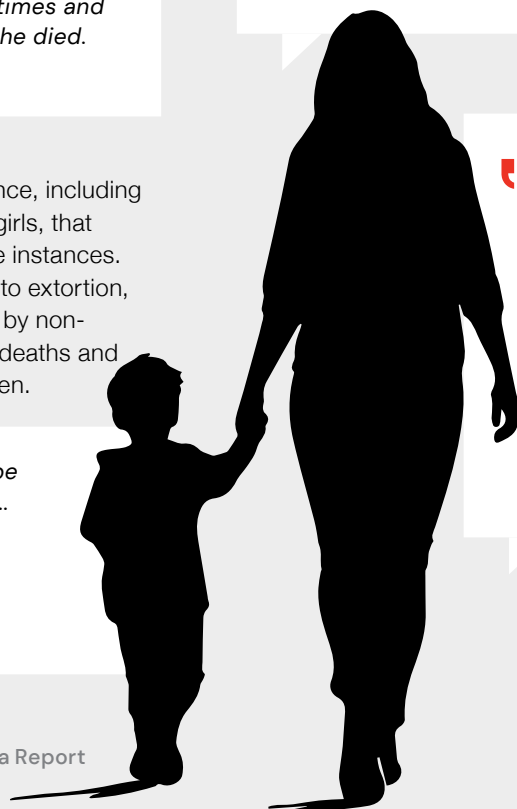
In particular, non-state actors use their power over migrant children and abuse them in spaces that are remote and/or beyond the rule of law, which can lead to their dying and going missing.

One of the young people witnessed the death of children by armed groups [during the journey] and on the border from criminal gangs. This is because if they do not collaborate with kidnappers and extortionists when they cross trails or borders, the [armed groups] kidnap children or kill people.
—Key Informant, Chile

The impunity of non-state actors presents a key threat in relation to sexual violence, kidnapping, death, and extortion towards migrants, notably in remote areas of the journey, including through deserts, dense jungle and swamps, where there is often little oversight by the authorities.

Groups outside the law, armed groups [is a big risk]. If you pass by and one of them likes you, you have to stay there with them. Who is going to know you're there? Who's going to rescue you? To enter irregularly in a separate country implies that they do not know you exist in the country or [know] where you are ... They take you to jungles, more hidden parts, so that's dangerous...because there is no law there ... it's a lawless passage.
—Key Informant, Colombia

The passage through the desert represents an unsafe place ... On the way, [the smugglers] begin to request an extra payment from the parents/guardians and if they do not have money, they threaten to abandon them in the desert.
—Key Informant, Chile



Environmental factors

In many cases, migrant women and children travelling on irregular routes are forced to pass through remote and harsh terrain. Participants raised the role of environmental factors during the journey, including exposure to the elements, and the risks of crossing rivers, jungles, mountains or deserts, in contributing to the deaths of migrant women and children.

For example, in deserts, participants expressed risks in terms of extreme heat, potential dehydration, being forced to walk long distances and the possibility of migrants losing their way.

She continued to walk in the desert, never finding the [path] ... She saw other people going in the opposite direction and, in the end, she decided to follow them. She [told them] she was lost, and she was pregnant.
—Key Informant, Chile

Many people [are] left lying in the middle of the desert, in the night, with the cold. People do not know where to [go]. He told him to go straight and walk, but to go straight in the middle of the desert is like saying 'go here' if you are out in the middle of the sea. You may reach a point where you start to turn around and you don't even realize it because there is no reference point to guide you.
—Key Informant, Chile

Hypothermia is repeatedly cited as a cause of death for migrant children and babies, in particular, in the data.

I saw a newborn child. When I arrived, the child froze to death.
—Migrant, Chile

[There is] the case of death of women and children due to the low temperatures in some areas of the route, because they sleep on the street due to lack of shelters or tents.
—Migrant, Colombia

Drowning is also frequently cited as a risk where migrants cross rivers with strong currents and are unable to swim. Several reports of children being swept away by currents and drowning were shared.

My nephew when he had to emigrate, migrated through a part of the river and he tells me that it was terrible to see the number of children that are taken away by the river.
—Migrant GFD, Honduras

The Rio Grande and all [the] people who have lost their children because the river has been very strong in the currents.
—Migrant FGD, Brazil

I am afraid of the rivers because my mother and my little brother were taken away by the river and then my little sister.
—Migrant children FGD, Honduras



A child takes part in a drawing session with Colombian Red Cross.
Image: Colombian Red Cross

Modes of transport and conditions of the journey

The data show that informal and dangerous modes of transport contribute to migrant women and children going missing or dying, including travelling on overloaded boats or canoes.

“During the canoe journey, a woman was traveling in the next boat, who was carrying a baby in a carrier, however, when they got up, the baby fell into the river and disappeared.”
—Migrant FGD, Guatemala

“When I got on that canoe, it was scary. I felt like it was flipping around too much. Because there were many people, eleven people in it and it was laden with more suitcases. I was afraid that it was going to turn over.”
—Migrant, Colombia

In addition, migrant women are exposed to risks when travelling on trucks due to the actions of drivers seeking to exploit or harm them, as well as women and children being killed or taken by criminal gangs on trucks. Additionally, when travelling on trucks not designed to carry passengers, there are risks of falling, or of children not being held tightly enough – or not being able to hold on tight enough themselves – to avoid falling off.

“One of the most common dangers is when people get on the trucks because these heavy cargo vehicles are moving and if you don't know how to get on the truck, the vehicle that is on the back of the truck can kill you, the [criminal gangs] also disappear you.”
—Migrant FGD, Colombia

“I think [women] accepting a ride creates a huge [risk] ... I heard on the journey I took, they said look, don't get on the trucks because they rape them. Or maybe, they say, if they don't want anything carnal they kill them.”
—Migrant, Colombia

A lack of access to essential services along migration routes leads to instances of death, particularly for migrant women and children who do not have adequate shelter and are exposed to the elements.

Lack of access to essential services

The data demonstrate how a lack of access to essential services along migration routes leads to instances of death, particularly for migrant women and children who do not have adequate shelter and are exposed to the elements – such as extreme cold (as noted above).

“There was a lady [from Africa] who came, who was denied [access to] shelter and she was left in the cold and she collapsed and died. When that lady came, she came blindly. The [migration] agent didn't tell her such things.”
—Key Informant, Canada

Lack of food and water, particularly in dry and very hot conditions, as well as lack of access to health and medical care contribute to deaths.

“I remember two cases [of death] that were due to more than the weather conditions, because unfortunately ... they were no longer at altitude, but rather tiredness, lack of access to services, lack of access to hydration. They were the causes of those deaths.”
—Key Informant, Chile

The most physically vulnerable, such as pregnant women, those with health conditions and newborn babies (including those born during the journey) are at greatest risk from a lack of health services and medical care during journeys.

“There are pregnant women who have had babies on the road and many times they are not in the conditions to have a birth on the road and many times, because there is inappropriate management, they usually die.”
—Key Informant, Colombia

Risks of separation and/or loss of contact


Like the risk of dying, a risk of separation from family members or travel companions and/or loss of contact for migrant women and children can occur for multiple, often intersecting reasons, including:

- the actions of non-state actors, including smugglers, criminal gangs and paramilitary groups;
- precarious transportation modes, such as trucks and crowded buses;
- the conditions of the journey, notably extreme distances over difficult terrain; and/or
- lack of means of communication while en route, such as losing mobile phones or a lack of reception.

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

Actions of non-state actors

Migrants and key informants repeatedly identified the direct actions of non-state actors as leading to separation and or loss of contact. This includes smugglers intentionally separating women and children from men to more effectively exert control over them.



“ *They put the men in a line totally apart ... because women on their own and children or women with children are more defenceless. So, when you have someone defenceless, you have to submit to what the person tells you no matter what. Meanwhile if a man is there it's more difficult of course.*

—Migrant, Argentina

Criminal gangs also target women and children for human trafficking. The data show that the forced dispersal of groups by smugglers and the confiscation of phones both contribute to separation and loss of contact.

“ *The coyotes (smugglers) take your phone, they don't let you communicate with your family, they separate the children from the parents.*

—Migrant FGD, Guatemala

“ *I did know of a girl who lost contact and unfortunately, we [were forced by the coyotes] to move ahead and she stayed.*

—Migrant FGD, Honduras

Kidnapping by criminal gangs for ransom is frequently mentioned by participants. This may involve migrants being separated from their families until funds are paid, experiencing abuse before being released, and, in some cases, running a real risk of being killed. Such kidnappings, when targeting women and girls, often include rape and sexual violence; however, men and boys are not exempt from experiencing sexual violence.

“ *At the time of passing through [the border] they were asked for 400 dollars, to continue their journey. For people who do not have that amount they kidnapped them until they can [pay] to be reunited. They have to go to their relatives to ask them for the money. They rob them ... and in the desert they want to abuse women, they threaten them with firearms to give them money, and they threaten them or their children. When you arrive, you pay again so as not to be kidnapped.*

—Migrant FGD, Guatemala

“ *I have friends who [were] girls who were kidnapped, raped [along the way]. Men too. In fact, they called us asking for money because they had kidnapped him and they were asking for too many dollars and in fact they raped him and everything.*

—Migrant, Argentina

Personal circumstances and decisions

In some instances, loss of contact or separation is due to deliberate personal choices or decisions made by migrants. This is sometimes related to the reasons for migration (such as leaving family violence), or a conscious family decision for one or more family members to go ahead of others; for example, because some members – such as mothers with young children – cannot travel.

If you have an issue with your family members, and you are hiding yourself, the best thing to do is change the line and disconnect yourself with them, so, when you come to [another country] you still don't have connection with them...
—Migrant, Canada

[My husband] is in [another country] and because of the lack of support or the lack of work that there is here in our city, he was one of those who decided to leave and it has been, well, intense, because he has already been there for several years, several years and the separation has been quite intense because as a couple, as a family, he wants, you want to be there and you can't because he can't leave either.
—Migrant, Argentina

Loss of contact or separation is also due to financial considerations, such as a lack of resources for all family members to travel at the same time. Such decisions may also be a response to what has happened on migrants' journeys, such as not wanting to expose family members to risks of engaging with criminal gangs or smugglers. Ceasing contact is sometimes due to fear among migrants of leading smugglers to their families who might harm or threaten them for unpaid fees.

It was common to rob or rape women on [irregular] border crossings; for example, there was a case of a woman who had been robbed with her children at the [irregular] crossing, and to avoid this type of situation of lack of protection she decided to send her children without means of communication by bus to [another city], where she lost them.
—Key Informant, Colombia

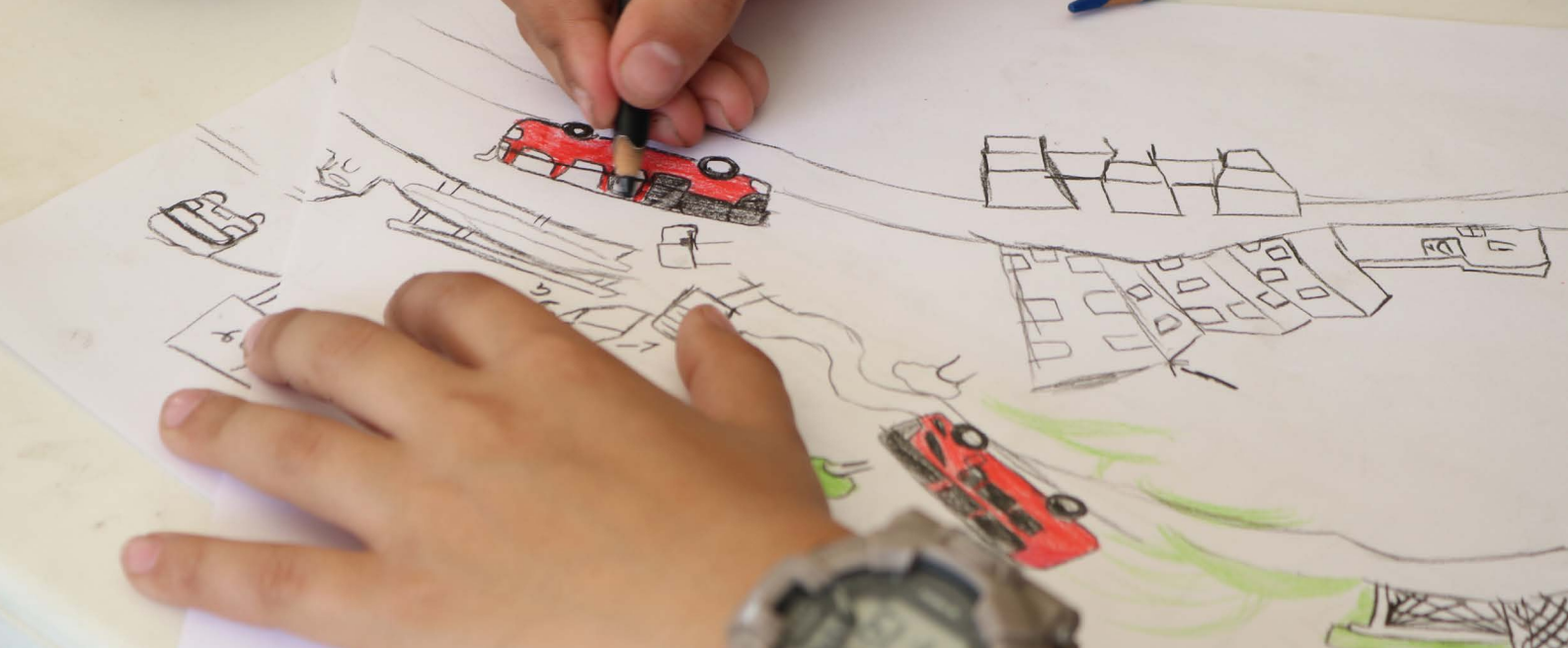
Participants also describe how women may be forced to make the tough decision to leave children behind due to difficulty of travel, economic precarity and the perception that children could be better looked after or protected elsewhere.

[Some] mothers have abandoned their children due to the difficulty of the situation of migrating, the economic situation – they have no way to pay rent, a night or two and they have not found a job. Mothers opting to leave the children so that a foundation or [welfare agency] can give them a better future.
—Migrant FGD, Colombia

It is important to note, however, that such instances of intentional loss of contact or voluntary separation remain far less frequent in the data than experiences of forced separation or loss of contact due to external factors beyond migrants' control.



Participants also describe how women may be forced to make the tough decision to leave children behind due to difficulty of travel, economic precarity and the perception that children could be better looked after or protected elsewhere.



A child takes part in a drawing session with Colombian Red Cross. Image: Colombian Red Cross

Modes of transport and conditions of the journey

Informal and precarious modes of transport, such as the trucks most migrants travel on and the often long and arduous journeys on foot (such as through the Darién Gap), contribute to separation, with migrant women and children being left behind due to their fatigue and inability to continue. Migrant narratives in the data indicate gendered decision-making with migrant women sometimes choosing not to travel on overcrowded trucks for fear of separation, and male migrants sometimes harbouring the belief that other family members, friends or companions will look after their children if they go on ahead, with the hope of reconnecting with their family after finding help or support.

In moments of fatigue is where abandonment is seen. Men also leave women behind with their children on the migratory road. On other occasions several women do not get on the trucks with their partner because of the risk of losing their children, causing separation.
—Migrant, Colombia

Migrant women face more challenges in keeping up with groups due to their responsibilities to carry children alongside their luggage, and also risk becoming separated when boarding or riding trucks during the migration journey.

Notably, migrant women face more challenges in keeping up with groups due to their responsibilities to carry children alongside their luggage, and also risk becoming separated when boarding or riding trucks during the migration journey.

The greatest risks are the passes through the Darién because when there is rain [and] the passage becomes very difficult. Women [travelling alone] with children are more vulnerable since the weight of the child and the suitcases make it difficult to climb mountains.
—Migrant, Honduras

You are walking and suddenly someone who was behind you simply disappears. That happens a lot on the trails. All the time because sometimes there are only queues for some and then contact is lost. You have to run sometimes to get on the [truck] and not everyone can, this also causes separation. A lady lost her children on the trail. The criminal gangs also disappear people.
—Migrant FGD, Guatemala

Such risks emerge directly from the financial challenges migrants face that prevent them using more regular means of transport. The dependence on strangers driving trucks, for example, also exposes women and girls to risks of sexual and other forms of violence, or to abandonment in remote areas (as outlined further below).

Lack of means of communication

Mobile phones, smartphones and wireless internet are key forms of communication for migrants to maintain and/or re-establish contact during their journeys. Loss of contact may occur when migrants' phones are lost, stolen or confiscated by various actors or even sold (for funds to continue their journeys or meet their basic needs such as food).

When I was traveling, the guards [in one country] took [the cell phones] and threw them into the river. Most broke them and threw them, took them away.

—Migrant, Argentina

Maintenance of contact demands both a device, such as a phone, and access to numbers which could be lost if they are not written down and only stored on a confiscated or lost device. Lack of infrastructure along the journey, including mobile phone network coverage, an absence of wireless internet and/or lack of access to electricity/power to charge phones, contributes to loss of contact.

We couldn't maintain contact throughout. There are parts that are completely without signal, without anything, it doesn't matter what telephone you have. There are parts that are jungle without [reception]. And when you arrive in another country without the phone line and without Wi-Fi, you're totally disconnected from everything ... We did not exist literally.

—Migrant, Argentina

Instances of discrimination, racism and xenophobia contribute to risks of going missing or becoming separated as migrants are refused passage through borders or denied transportation tickets due to their appearance or nationality.

Xenophobia, racism and discrimination

Discrimination, racism and xenophobia are experienced by migrant women and children both en route and in places of destination. The data show that instances of discrimination, racism and xenophobia contribute to risks of going missing or becoming separated as migrants are refused passage through borders or denied transportation tickets due to their appearance or nationality.

At the terminal [in one country] they threw us out, because [they said] they don't help [people from our country] ... They threw us out on the street with our bags and everything ... they got the police and everything and they took us out of there.

—Migrant, Colombia

In some cases, migrants face discrimination due to their sexual orientation, including being prevented from travelling to certain areas or being taken advantage of and placed at risk due to their isolation.

A young woman comments that [people who are gay] are quite vulnerable people. She tells the case of her brother who is gay. They do not want him in some places, and he has suffered discrimination along the way.

—Migrant FGD, Colombia

[People with diverse] sexual orientation also quite vulnerable people on the road. They are exposed to human trafficking, gender-based violence ... physical violence, [but also] people take advantage of them. [We had people] tell us that they feel alone and when they see a person, they do not consider their protection [or the] risk. They just [join] that person.

—Key Informant, Chile

Sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a dominant theme in the data affecting migrant women and girls. Perpetrators include family members and intimate partners, as well as a range of actors with whom migrants are forced to engage along migration routes, including criminal gangs and smugglers, who subject them to violence, sexual assault and trafficking. The data show that risks of SGBV are present at all stages of the journey: from place of origin, where it can be a motivation for migration, on departure, in transit and even on or after arrival at a destination, for example when staying in temporary accommodation while seeking asylum.

“ Sexual harassment [is a risk] ... because I have been raped and got pregnant. And now I am here and pregnant.
—Migrant, Canada

“ The main risk for our migrant women is gender-based violence... Most women travel with people who are not fathers of their children. These men always represent a superior authority, which makes the woman subject to the decisions he makes for her. When the woman wants to go back or say ‘OK I can’t continue here’, then the man acts violently. That’s the greatest risk... And, in fact, it is also the children involved.
—Key Informant, Chile

Family violence

Family violence continues throughout migrants’ journeys – from origin to destination. Family violence is also linked to instances of family separation, including women being left behind following violence, or women migrating separately to escape violence, as outlined the data.

“ When we came there was another couple as well. I don’t know what happened because at a certain point they separated, but he beat her up ... he left her disfigured. We had to take her to the hospital, and she was left behind.
—Migrant, Argentina

Family violence does not just include physical violence, but also economic violence, where men in the family often control funds during travel or force women (and children) to work. Both migrants and key informants mentioned economic violence and women’s economic precarity as key risks.

“ We can also speak about the proportion of economic violence, because obviously for a family in transit, they are not at their best economic moment, but it is still the man who manages the money. There is also a very strong and very marked issue of economic violence, where the women are the ones who end up working. For example, we have identified many women who work in street businesses, yes, some of them have benefited from the project. But who manages the money of the home of these nuclear families? It’s the men. So, there is very strong, structural, economic violence.
—Key Informant, Colombia

Where family violence is the reason for migration, women can be particularly vulnerable and have no option but to travel irregularly due to challenges in accessing financial resources as well as their own documents.

“ We accompanied the women who are fleeing situations of violence who suddenly have an irregular income because they had no other possibility even to look for their documents at home. [They are denied] assistance and care. The reason, the regularity or irregularity of migration is much lower than the driving cause, which may be a situation of violence.
—Key Informant, Chile



Sexual violence

The data underscore that sexual violence is a common experience among migrant women and children during their journeys. Perpetrators of sexual violence include many actors, such as criminal gangs and smugglers, armed groups and transport/truck drivers, as well as other migrants.

The road was not easy, they were robbed. People who do not have money, [they] rape them. To check them, they strip them naked. They check inside their female reproductive system [to see] if they have hidden money.
—Migrant, Guatemala

A key factor to going missing and/or becoming separated included reports that truck and taxi drivers abandon women along the road after sexually assaulting them.

And one of the greatest risks [along the journey] for woman is the sexual abuse that you see. In many places, truck drivers offer you a ride, but when you get on there what they want is to abuse you ... and if you don't want you to be with them, they want to leave you in the middle of the road in the darkest place, because they don't even look for a closer place to let you out, but throw you out [in the middle of nowhere].
—Migrant, Brazil

Sexual violence, including rape, against children is reported (particularly among migrants crossing the Darién Gap) as a common risk during journeys.

Of course, women and children, we cannot defend ourselves. The organizations do not take into account our voice. They do not listen to us. The cases of rape occur more in the Darién. We have to submit. I could see children being raped. When we threw ourselves in the river, 7 men with weapons were waiting for us in some tents where it was clear when they raped all one by one, inside of them, [there was] one little girl of about 13 years old.
—Migrant, Honduras

Vulnerability to sexual violence emerges from how women and girls are compelled to travel. For example, when travelling irregularly, they have little option but to take whatever transport they can find—transport often driven by men, and often in regions that are isolated and outside the rule of law or far from support.

A friend of my sister's told me they went through the Darien and she was with her daughter. In every one of those passages, there were only men there, armed, and in three sections they kissed the daughter and touched her. And they said, come on, you come and kiss me. I like you and they kissed her and touched her, groped her ... And what can you do as a mother? Nothing. In fact, she said, don't do it, do it to me, to me, and the guy said no, not you, I don't like you, I like her. And who [is] going to rescue them? No one. Because everyone is going on their way, along their route, no one is coming because no one is going to expose themselves to risk for you..
—Migrant, Colombia

In general, vulnerability to sexual violence emerges from how women and girls are compelled to travel. For example, when travelling irregularly, they have little option but to take whatever transport they can find – transport often driven by men, and often in regions that are isolated and outside the rule of law or far from support. Migrant women are more vulnerable to sexual violence because of their economic precarity and having less funds available to use during the journey (if they did not have money to pay, they would have to pay with their bodies – something which was not mentioned as being the case for men).

If you don't have something of value, you have to give up your body. You have to prostitute yourself.
—Migrant, Brazil

Migrant women and children experience sexual violence from various actors due to impunity along their routes, with migrants expressing a sense of fear and lack of safety throughout their journeys.

Human trafficking

Human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, in particular, is mentioned as a key risk for migrant women and children during their journeys, one linked to separations, disappearances and loss of contact. Women and children travelling alone are cited as the most vulnerable, with criminal gangs targeting them and criminal cartels deliberately separating women from the men with whom they are travelling to facilitate trafficking.

The coyotes (smugglers) who also travel along the trails... are aware of people who are traveling alone to take advantage of them.
—Migrant, Argentina

Participants also shared reports of ‘attractive’ women and girls being singled out and separated (including by criminal gangs) for the purpose of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

My mother had been helping a girl. My mom says she was beautiful, she said she was so pretty, this girl. She tried not to put make up on, not to attract attention. But all the same they called her aside. And when they were going to pass, she said that they put her aside with the children ... I told her, ‘come with all the grey hairs you can, don’t dress up’. And precisely for that reason, not to attract attention, but she tells me that she and the other girl were put in a separate line. Other people, I don’t know who these people were, said you go through this line and my mother tells me that she made it through and she did not see them again. She did not see them anymore. She followed the route, she didn’t see them and tells me that there are these poor girls, 18, 19, 20 years of age.
—Migrant, Argentina

Human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, in particular, is mentioned as a key risk for migrant women and children during their journeys.



Guatemalan Red Cross provides humanitarian assistance to migrants such as pre-hospital care, psychosocial support, distribution of safe drinking water, delivery of hygiene kits and reestablishment of contact between family members (by means of free telephone calls). Image: Andrés Lemus/Guatemalan Red Cross

In addition, in the data, criminal gangs often seek to deceive migrants, posing as doctors and people offering support, creating challenges for migrants in terms of who they can trust. Women and children in need of medical treatment from doctors may be even more at risk than male counterparts during the journey.

At the border, there are people or cartels that pose as doctors and security or integration agents of the country to separate women from men, for the purpose of human trafficking.
—Key Informant, Argentina

Organ trafficking is also mentioned as a common form of trafficking among migrants, including children, reportedly leading to disappearances and death.

They take children a lot ... to traffic the organs. They take them and they open them up, removed all the organs inside and then left them at home – thrown in black bags ... I had information about organ trafficking, about how many children they stole, how many children ...you couldn’t imagine.
—Key Informant, Colombia

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 equation²⁶



Table 3 demonstrates the most frequently referenced factors contributing to migrant women and children's vulnerabilities to becoming separated or going missing, as identified by participants in the Americas. These factors include – to the greatest extent – age and gender²⁷, followed by social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation (linked to seeking safety and asylum when fleeing conflict and/or persecution); lack of legal status (and therefore the inability to access certain services and support and migration pathways); and poverty and lack of access to income or financial resources.

Table 3: Most frequently referenced vulnerability factors

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

Other factors apparent in the data collected in the Americas which drive migrants' vulnerability to becoming separated or going missing, include sexual identity, lack of family, support networks and/or travel companions during the journey, ill-health and lack of knowledge or information. It is clear from the data that all vulnerabilities intersect, potentially reinforcing each other. These factors and their intersections with age and gender are discussed further below.

²⁶ This figure comes from a publication of the Global Protection Cluster: Protection Analytical Framework: An Introduction (2021) Global Protection Cluster / USAID.

²⁷ The data identifies 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 travelling alone are at particular risk of forced recruitment and trafficking for both sexual and labour exploitation by criminal gangs. Participants cited instances of children disappearing due to forced recruitment in border areas.

They told us on one occasion that at the borders, the groups are in charge of recruiting minors. They recruit them. They take them away and then they don't hear from them again.
—Key Informant, Colombia

[There is] the risk of forced recruitment... it's a border area... At the stop there are many criminal groups and gangs [involved] in prostitution. Criminal groups ... need minors to recruit. They are exposed to robbery, gender-based violence, risk of trafficking.
—Migrant, Argentina

Children are cited as particularly vulnerable to risks of separation, going missing or dying, due to their naivete, level of trust in others and ability to be deceived and coerced more easily than adults. The fact that children who are unaccompanied have to travel with strangers also increases their vulnerability.

Children are [at most risk] because they are innocent. Children see any [candy] and they can be deceived sometimes ... As a parent you tell children that anyone who offers anything, don't go with them because they can take them to sell their organs, to put them in the guerrilla, to involve them in crime.
—Key Informant, Chile

There is ... all this trafficking of children. The child trusts them; they tell him, 'Come on, I'm going to help you' and from one moment to the next they took the child to another place, deceived him and he disappeared.
—Key Informant, Colombia

The fact that children's needs and abilities differ from adults and that in many instances children's needs are not accounted for during migration journeys by adults travelling with them is also identified as increasing vulnerability, even within their family. Participants discussed the multiple ways that the needs of children are not met by adults with whom they are travelling:

[The adults] are not always aware of the needs of children. Of course, children can be hungry, they are sleepy, they are tired. And adults want to get there; it's not like it's such an extreme issue [for them]. Where, of course, children are exposed to much more, greater impact.
—Key Informant, Chile

Children, because of their size or their innocence [are most at risk] ... They can be easily deceived with a candy or a game, a phone. You lend a phone, now a child can be taken wherever he wants.
—Migrant, Colombia



Children participate in a drawing session with Colombian Red Cross staff and volunteers. Image: Colombian Red Cross

A dominant theme from the perspectives of children is fear, including fear of separation from parents at bus terminals and checkpoints due to the chaotic environment; fear related to travel on buses at high speeds and on unsafe roads, and fear of being kidnapped, robbed or killed during the journey.

In risk-mapping exercises (drawing sessions) conducted as part of the data collection, children were invited to share experiences from their journeys and to draw situations encountered on their journeys where they felt safe or unsafe. Across locations, a dominant theme from the perspectives of children is fear, including fear of separation from parents at bus terminals and checkpoints due to the chaotic environment, fear related to travel on buses at high speeds and on unsafe roads, and fear of being kidnapped, robbed or killed during the journey. The data show how the chaos and confusion of large movements of people puts children at risk of separation during migration journeys, with children voicing their concerns in the quotes below.

When we left the terminal, I was afraid that I would get lost or that I would be robbed, because there were many people around screaming and I was afraid to be separated from my mother and sisters.
—Child migrant, Argentina

At the checkpoints... it is dangerous because there were many people there who wanted to pass first and it was disorderly. Anywhere you can get lost, especially in places where the stops are made, because there are many people wanting to go to the bathroom and wanting to buy food at the same time.
—Child migrant, Chile

[Checkpoints] are dangerous because there are people who are passing through and that is risky because they can kidnap us or harm us.
—Child migrant, Colombia

Gender

The data underscore how gender heightens risk, with migrant women and girls being particularly vulnerable to trafficking and sexual exploitation during their journeys. This is linked to women travelling alone without male companions or wider support networks, as well as the obligations and responsibilities women face to provide for and look after their children.

For women and children... a lot of the struggle is the resources, like getting those resources to them. If it's a mother who just had a newborn. How is she getting to her doctor appointment? Who's taking care of her safety or how? How is she keeping herself safe or her child safe?
—Migrant, Canada

Travelling alone is not highly recommended... The same if you have children, even less so. You have to travel with several people or with a husband or with another relative, but alone with children, it is not recommended. It is not recommended traveling with children without a support network, without being with another representative or family members, or people who support you. They can be risk of sexual abuse, human trafficking, murders, kidnapping. Those are the biggest risks that women face.
—Key Informant, Colombia

In addition, as outlined in other parts of the report, women's physical health and stamina, particularly when pregnant, can impact their ability to keep up with the group when travelling, increasing risks of separation. Additionally, the lack of access to targeted health services for pregnant and lactating women increases risks of harm and death for both mothers and their babies.

The data also suggest that those who identify as transgender are particularly vulnerable, with personal testimony underlining the increased risk, including due to the absence of safety while travelling among groups of women or men.

A trans woman is very, very exposed to violence [on the journey], I dare say. I say this personally. Much more than women ... A trans woman is very vulnerable. She is vulnerable everywhere. She is vulnerable around men. She is vulnerable around women. She is vulnerable around the State ...
—Key Informant, Colombia

Social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation

The data indicate that social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation is linked to vulnerabilities, both in relation to the reasons for migration (i.e. fleeing persecution), or being at risk during the journey.

“ One of the young women comments that when she passed through [one country] with her family and also in [a second country] she suffered from xenophobia, because of her hair type and skin colour. She says: ‘If you are very pretty or meet the beauty standard, they invite you to prostitute yourself’.

—Migrant FGD, Colombia

“ I’ve heard of [one city]: ‘Oh no, don’t go there, if you’re [from a certain country], you don’t go. There is a conflict there between the groups.’ Apparently they disappear them. I’ve heard that you should never go there.

—Migrant, Colombia

As mentioned above, racism and xenophobia based on ethnicity and/or nationality is frequently cited, increasing risks of separation, with people refused entry or onward travel at checkpoints or border crossings.



Image: Colombian Red Cross

Lack of legal status

Lack of legal status, alongside a lack of documents, contributes to risks of going missing and separation for migrant women and children. An absence of documentation renders migrant women and children unable to participate in regularization processes and programs. Absence of documentation also 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).

“ If it wasn’t for not having the documentation, they could enter directly, they would not have to do this circuit that is very risky because they are exposed to the [dangerous terrain], right? Also trafficking networks, organized crime networks that happen on those paths. But of course, we know that this journey is made on foot [because of their status].

—Key Informant, Chile

Likewise, lack of legal status (and absence of documentation) prevents migrant women and children from accessing essential services such as medical care, increasing risks of death.

“ Many [children] have entered through unauthorized passage and by working irregularly they are closed to [and cannot access] all benefits.

—Key Informant, Chile

“ If the person entered here with an irregular immigration status, does not have a regularization document, [they] cannot access health[care].

—Key Informant, Colombia

The issue of statelessness for migrant children is also apparent in the data, with families undertaking journeys across various countries for various periods of time, with children being born in different countries and without access to appropriate registration processes or documentation. This creates current and future challenges in terms of access to services, support and migration pathways.

“ [Some] come with a child who was born in Venezuela, then they have a Peruvian [child] and then they arrived here, and they have Chilean or Argentine or Ecuadorian children as well. It’s like a diversity of trajectories in their displacement.

—Key Informant, Chile

Poverty and lack of financial resources

Participants frequently discussed women's lack of financial independence and economic precarity and how that increases vulnerabilities to exploitation during migration journeys and limits their choice in terms of which route to take.

“ *Women are victims of sexual exploitation networks, which could be the most serious exposure in cases of single-parent families. For example, we have known of situations, of sex for survival. In these routes, where they do not have resources and where there is no institutional presence for protection. So, yes, children and women are much more exposed we believe.*
—Key Informant, Chile

The data reveal many instances of women engaging in ‘survival sex’ – exchanging sex to meet their basic survival needs, such as access to food or water for themselves or their children. Participants also described instances of migrant women being forced to work as sex workers/in prostitution and disappearing in this context.

“ *You hear very often about women who have sex for survival. They work as a prostitute ... and people say ‘oh we know that she already went to a party, but she didn’t come back and no one knows anything else about what happened to her’. In other words, she is known to have left. But no one, well, managed to identify, well, what happened to that person.*
—Key Informant, Brazil

Capacities to mitigate risk

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

Table 4 outlines the most frequently referenced capacities when participants were asked how migrants keep themselves safe or reduce risks to becoming separated or going missing during their journeys.

Table 4: Most frequently referenced capacities to mitigate risk

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

The Honduran Red Cross, with the support of partners, including an IFRC Emergency Appeal, provide services to migrants crossing the country's southern border, including healthcare, protection and information, at a Humanitarian Service Point. Image: Maria Victoria Langman/IFRC



For many migrants the most reliable source of information that can aid their journey is that of people they trust, like family and friends who have travelled the route before and who can both make them aware of threats on the road and point them towards safer options.

Role of information

Information as a capacity can mean knowledge about where and how to access services. It can include the phone numbers of family and other important contacts that can both reduce vulnerability and ensure family contact is maintained.

I have accustomed [my daughter] to always memorize the phone numbers or write it in the notebook, write it where both her father's and mine.
—Migrant, Colombia

The data note that for many migrants the most reliable sources of information are family and friends who have travelled before and who can inform them of threats and risks and provide advice on how to stay safe. This can include people they meet along the journey, where social media can be an important way to share experiences.

My sister was the only one who kept giving me pointers of course. It's because she was already there ... she had already travelled.
—Migrant, Brazil

We inform ourselves through friends who have already passed the routes. It has been useful for us to prepare and that is why we do not leave until we have enough [money]. We have to pay small taxes on the way. WhatsApp messages are the most effective to communicate.
—Migrant, Colombia

If I don't have a phone, I don't have the number, I'll get on Facebook. If you have Facebook and search, contact someone else who will send you a number.
—Migrant FGD, Brazil



A Colombian Red Cross staff interviews a research participant as part of the data collection. Image: Colombian Red Cross

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.

Table 5: Providers of support to migrant women and children

Provider category	Type of support cited by participants
International organizations (UN agencies and International NGOs)	Temporary shelter, food, guidance for safe travel, medical care, relocation support, psychosocial support, WASH services, protection workshops (e.g., trafficking prevention, gender-based violence, children's rights).
Red Cross and Red Crescent	Protection training, psychosocial support, communication services, Restoring Family Links, and family tracing, settlement assistance, first aid and emergency response support.
Local organizations and support networks (community-based orgs. and local NGOs)	Employment and social assistance, integration support, medical referrals, care for children and adolescents, travel guidance, food distribution, material support for pregnant women (diaper bags, formula milk donations), cultural activities with children.
Informal support networks, including other migrants, family members, friends and travel companions	Information on risks along routes, and specific risks; tips on how to stay safe, details on where and how to travel and why; input on how much money to bring; assistance during the journey including sharing food, phones, etc.

International organizations, including UN agencies and international NGOs, are cited by migrants as offering critical support during their journeys, particularly in terms of information, medical care and temporary shelter.

Local organizations and support networks, including those established along the way, are key factors contributing to migrant women and children's capacity to mitigate risks. These actors, including community groups and local NGOs, provide temporary shelter, medical support, and specific services and supplies for pregnant women and children.

Local organizations and support networks, including those established along the way, are key factors contributing to migrant women and children's capacity to mitigate risks.

There are also shelters that are located on the border and help you with the tickets for your flight or bus. They give you cards to buy clothes – especially for people in street situations.
—Migrant FGD, Brazil

The food bank for the migrant population is done weekly. Mainly pregnant women come. There is like a support network. You get diaper bags. There is a pediatrician who is donating medical samples of formula milk.
—Migrant, Canada

In terms of informal support networks, travelling as a group, either with friends and family who left home together, or with those met on the route with whom friendships and trust have been built, is a key strategy for migrants to keep themselves safe, particularly for women and children. Despite the risk sometimes presented (particularly for children) of traveling with strangers, migrants frequently note that finding solidarity with other migrants on the route can be a source of strength and safety. Often, unrelated migrants form groups to travel, as do several families who come together to look after one another and the children among them.

I was lucky enough to find girls who made a group to always stay together. If we slept, we slept [in a group] together or one of them kept watch or something like that. We never left each other
—Migrant, Argentina

On some occasions we see groups of families or single women with children who know each other inside the shelters and relate so much that they recognize themselves as 'family', but not because they really are, because when they compare the documents, they do not have the same surnames or any blood ties.
—Key Informant, Colombia

When you go on the road you get good people and bad people and sometimes your weapon is a group and the best thing is always to be accompanied in a group. It is what protects the children and women the most.
—Migrant, Colombia

Reliance on informal support networks at the community and individual level is also frequently mentioned as a way in which migrants keep safe, however this is often based on the goodwill of strangers and chance interactions during journeys, rather than any systematic strategy.

Financial resources

Migrants interviewed convey how access to financial capital and wealth prior to, and during, journeys contribute to mitigating risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying. Prior to departure, access to funds enables families to travel together, minimizing risks of separation. Access to funds also paves the way for regularization where, as discussed in the next section, costs can be prohibitive. In addition, with financial capital, migrants have more options in terms of which modes of transport they can take, choosing to fly to another country with a visa, versus boarding a boat.

During the journey – through both regular and irregular pathways – access to money enables migrants to continue onward when faced with extortion at checkpoints or kidnapping and ransom situations by criminal gangs and smugglers.

They beat him, they blindfolded him without food, without water, without anything. The brother had to pay ransom and they released him and let him go on his way again to his family.
—Migrant FGD, Colombia

Every stretch that you walk there is a person – they could be the guerrilla ... you have to pay them you have to pay and continue and then you go through. There are several places, several stations there where you have to pay.
—Migrant, Colombia

Migrant women indicate that access to funds also reduces risks of sexual violence and harm during their journeys and that the absence of money increases their vulnerabilities.

They took 50000 pesos from me to let me pass, but it was small price to pay because one of those illegal individuals could have taken a liking to me...
—Migrant, Colombia

We don't have the money to pay. We don't have anything to pay with. We don't have the object of value ... to negotiate. How do we make ourselves vulnerable? Do we become vulnerable because we have no way to face these risks? We are practically with our hands tied.
—Migrant, Brazil

Regular legal status

As discussed further in the section below, legal status is an important element in migrant women and children's safety. Regular status facilitates access to many services in countries, as well as the ability to seek employment, potentially reducing migrants' lack of financial independence and economic precarity. It also means that migrant women and children can seek out help from authorities without fear or arrest, deportation or detention and it sometimes opens safer channels for migration as migrants can avoid the risks faced on irregular journeys.

“ *The day I went to migrate, I went with the children, because thank God I was able to regularize the children with the humanitarian visa.*
—Migrant, Chile

“ *Legally to go is better because it happened to me. Many years ago when I didn't have a passport I could no longer transport myself... now thank God that they gave us those permits ... I can have many, many benefits in the sense that I can travel by plane or right here in the country and I am respected for that.*
—Migrant, Colombia

Yet, and as noted in previous sections, even migrants with documentation can be subject to extortion at borders or face other forms of discrimination.

Regular status facilitates access to many services in countries, as well as the ability to seek employment, potentially reducing migrants' lack of financial independence and economic precarity.

A focus group discussion conducted as part of the data collection. Image: Colombian Red Cross

Regional context

State migration laws, policies and practices

In the Americas, data show regularization policies have a positive impact on mitigating risks of migrants going missing or becoming separated, including by facilitating access to essential services and regular travel routes. However, the data also demonstrate that there are caveats. For example, for many migrants in the Americas, the regularization process (and the documents needed to apply) is too expensive for entire families, meaning only certain family members access this avenue. Regularization programs can also be finite in terms of duration, leading to challenges as more people continue to arrive in countries where some family members may have regular status and others do not.

We understand that there is a reunification type of visa, but not all of them can apply for these types of visas. Not everyone has the money to get a passport. Not everyone has the money to get the visa ...
—Key Informant, Colombia

Accessing the necessary documents for regularization can be a challenge if migrants do not have these from their home country, including access to birth certificates or national ID cards, with financial and bureaucratic challenges for many. In cases where children (or adults) have no birth certificates, there are limited options to travel via regular channels or to regularize their status.

There are many children who are clearly not up to date with their documentation with a visa. [They] have entered through unauthorized passage ...
—Key Informant, Chile

But we know that there are many limitations for children, adolescents, for example ... to obtain their regularization due to the lack of access to documentation from their country of origin, among other issues.
—Key Informant, Chile

The data show a distinction between the dangers of irregular pathways and channels and the relative safety of regular routes. In the Americas there is a clear contrast between migrants that had access to safe and legal pathways, and those that did not in terms of the risks to their safety, dignity and well-being.

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.

In line with the Movement's Migration Strategy, this means being ready and available to meet migrants' humanitarian assistance and protection needs, irrespective of status, along migration routes. It includes being present, in particular, where large groups of people in vulnerable situations are moving and where risks of separation, going missing or dying are high (such as at borders and across deserts). It also demands remaining independent, and centring humanitarian principles, prioritizing the most vulnerable and understanding the unique risks and vulnerabilities experienced by migrant women and children during their journeys while advocating for the safety, dignity and well-being of all migrants.

Participants in the research highlight the critical role RCRC actors play in supporting migrant women and children to stay safe and connected with family members. This includes being present along migratory routes, operating humanitarian service points²⁸ and knowing where people are to be able to step in and offer humanitarian assistance and protection.

There are people who arrive at the border and sell their phones to be able to eat, to be able to survive, to pay for a bathroom, so it is complicated. So those people sell everything so they can move on and continue to survive. How are they going to communicate without a telephone if the Red Cross did not exist?
—Migrant, Brazil

The Red Cross must be more present at strategic points closest to the jungle in order to respond to the needs of the people. Improve the services it already provides and provide care to all people who need it.
—Migrant, Guatemala

²⁸ [Humanitarian Service Points](#) (HSPs) are "are safe, welcoming and strategically located spaces where migrants and displaced people can access reliable support from Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies." HSPs provide humanitarian assistance based solely on the principle of humanity and independently of government and other influence. They can also safely refer migrants to more specialized assistance if they require support with more complex needs.

Looking for the missing

The data suggest family members searching for loved ones who are missing in migration have limited avenues to do so. Interviews suggest that attempts to locate family members through official channels in the region are largely unsuccessful. Investigations are challenging due to cross-border issues related to jurisdictional bureaucracy and cultural barriers, as well as challenges in finding consistent information about people's journeys prior to going missing, including from companion travellers or even embassies.

“ *There is a relative of my husband [who is 17]. She mysteriously disappeared. She went out with the boyfriend, but no one knows. The complaint was filed. The Prosecutor's Office filed the relevant complaints [in that country]. Nobody knows, nobody knows.*
—Key Informant, Colombia

“ *I did an investigation; I called the Embassy. And the Embassy says that they helped him leave because he didn't have a visa or something like that, with help from the [another] Embassy they took him out of [the country]. And at the same time, I got a call from [another country], from the Consulate, who said he entered on April 13 of the same year. I couldn't verify if it was true because I didn't have the means.*
—Missing migrant's relative, Argentina

A particular challenge relates to the fact that migrants may share identity documents among themselves during their journeys to facilitate border crossings. This creates confusion and misinformation in identifying people particularly when documentation is found on a body that belongs to another person and is otherwise not identified.

“ *In many of these cases, since migrants do not have a regular migratory situation, they borrow the identity card of another person with a regular situation in order to cross, which makes it complex to identify the bodies and creates confusion because the identification document belongs to another person. In addition to [the real] owner [of the ID] is afraid of being questioned when indicating to the authorities that they lent their documentation to the person deceased.*
—Key Informant, Chile

The data show that migrants use informal channels such as WhatsApp groups and social media to learn about missing or deceased friends or relatives, but in many cases are unable to find any significant information. Migrants also reference linking with international organizations and RCRC in searching for family members.

“ *Sometimes the 'complete' lifeless bodies appear, others decapitated. More than the institutions themselves, social networks are used by the mourners to connect with people in similar situations. It generally works to locate people, although sometimes they definitely do not appear.*
—Key Informant, Colombia

The limited ability to identify migrants who go missing or have died along journeys was raised by several participants, underscoring issues related to gaps in forensic identification as well as dead body management standards. A noted gap is support by States for the repatriation of remains of deceased migrants, with respondent sentiments reflecting lack of resources and delays as key challenges for migrant families when engaging with States in efforts to repatriate remains. However, it was noted that often community members come together to support the repatriation in cases where a death has occurred.

“ *We don't even know who they are ... It is terrible. Like the worst side of all this. It is the saddest situation. Because many times, apart from death which is terrible, there are a lot of issues around their bodies. They come to nothing because they are not salvageable. Neither in one country nor in the other, because then who recognizes them? The medical service? Legal? What if they are recognized. Maybe there aren't the resources to return them to their country.*
—Key Informant, Chile

Conclusions

This research in the Americas – complemented by similar research in Africa and Europe – outlines key reasons as to why migrant women and children are at risk of becoming separated or going missing on their journeys, as well as significant protection risks and factors that increase their vulnerability.

Risks of becoming separated or going missing are linked to direct actions of both state and non-state actors in the Americas, such as forced separation tactics and violence and abuse, as well as indirect actions, such as generating fear which creates panic and leads families to flee and disperse, or results in migrants seeking to hide from or evade authorities, even when in need of safety and protection. Criminal gangs are a dominant source of threats, including on arrival, during journeys and upon return, exerting high levels of control along irregular routes.

Additionally, the report demonstrates the continuous threat of SGBV, including human trafficking, at all stages of migrant women and children's journeys. The data provide insights as to how this can contribute to separation and going missing and/or dying, as well as the result of direct acts of harm and violence and the ensuing choices made by migrants to travel separately. The report also highlights the varied and dangerous journeys that migrant women and children take, both together and alone, through unsafe areas and hazardous terrain, and the challenges in accessing essential and life-saving services and support while travelling that often result in death.

While regularisation is a welcome practice in the region, it remains inaccessible to many migrants, including women and children, with the data demonstrating that a securitization approach to migration heightens risks for migrant women and children, underlining the need for continued advocacy for a humanitarian approach that upholds migrants' safety, dignity and well-being and accounts for the unique vulnerabilities and needs of women and children, irrespective of 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 the Americas working to prevent migrant women and children from becoming separated or going missing, the following recommendations are put forward.



To States and regional bodies:

To strengthen efforts to prevent and respond to migrant women and children becoming separated, going missing or dying on 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 sexual and gender based-violence. To this end, States should also facilitate (including by providing financial support) the establishment of Humanitarian Services Points²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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 sexual and gender-based violence, 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 points³¹ on missing migrants.
- 6. 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.
- 7. Ensure that regularization processes are inclusive, affordable, consistent and accessible to all – including women and children,** and that migrants are aware of how to engage with the processes and what the necessary requirements are to apply. This entails sharing information through channels and in languages used by migrants and exploring avenues to assist migrants to access and engage in the process, with a focus on the most vulnerable.

²⁹ [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.

³⁰ 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).

³¹ 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.



To Red Cross and Red Crescent actors:

In support of the aims of the Movement's Migration Strategy and the Movement's Restoring Family Links Strategy, Red Cross and Red Crescent actors should:

8. 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](#).

9. 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.

10. 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 organisations. 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.

11. 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.



A child takes part in a drawing session with Colombian Red Cross. Image: Colombian Red Cross



Global Migration Lab

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