



**Global  
Migration  
Lab**

Hosted by



**Central  
Tracing  
Agency**

# Towards Safer Journeys:

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

**Europe Data Report**







For many migrants, the reception centre on Lampedusa off the coast of Sicily is the first stop in Europe. The Italian Red Cross provides essential services to migrants in their first hours after disembarking, treating them with dignity and making them feel safe, heard and reassured. Image: Italian Red Cross

©2025 Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (hosted by Australian Red Cross and Kenya Red Cross Society) and the ICRC Central Tracing Agency's Red Cross Red Crescent Missing Persons Centre.

Any part of this publication may be cited, copied, translated into other languages or adapted to meet local needs without prior permission from the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab or the Red Cross Red Crescent Missing Persons Centre, provided that the source is clearly stated.

Citation: Arias Cubas M., Bhardwaj S., Hoagland N., Robins S., Stockwell J., Mudaliar S., Otieno D., 2025, Towards Safer Journeys: Migrant women and children's experiences of separation, going missing or dying – Europe Data Report, Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab, Sydney and Red Cross Red Crescent Missing Persons Centre, Geneva.

#### Contact us

Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab  
Hosted by Australian Red Cross  
and Kenya Red Cross Society  
[www.redcross.org.au/globalmigrationlab](http://www.redcross.org.au/globalmigrationlab)  
[globalmigrationlab@redcross.org.au](mailto:globalmigrationlab@redcross.org.au)

#### In partnership with



**BritishRedCross**

British Red Cross staff members prepare for interviews during the data collection phase of the project. Image: British Red Cross



## Acknowledgements

**The Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (the Global Migration Lab) and the ICRC Central Tracing Agency's Red Cross Red Crescent Missing Persons Centre (Missing Persons Centre) would like to thank the many people below who worked to make this research project a success.**

**Migrants and their families:** We would like to acknowledge and thank the many migrants, as well as the families of missing migrants, who shared their experiences and perspectives as part of this research, including those who are no longer with us. Their voices are central to this project and represent only a small portion of the many migrants who have faced and who continue to face risks to their safety, dignity and lives every day, along their journeys.

**Report preparation:** This consolidated Europe regional report was coordinated and authored by Magdalena Arias Cubas, Sanjana Bhardwaj, Nicole Hoagland, Simon Robins, Jill Stockwell, Sanushka Mudaliar and Damian Otieno. It is based on country level research from National Societies in Belgium, Greece, Italy and the United Kingdom. Research assistance and administrative support for the report was provided by Lalitha Foster, Moss Cluney, Fiona Cook, Suzanne Grasso, Ruth Amamo, Hafsa Sheikh, Lakshmin Mudaliar and João Pedro Alves. Graphic design: Morning Air Studio.

**Main contributors and national research teams:**

**Belgian Red Cross – French Community:** Delphine

De Bleeker, Louise Dalmasso, Elise Gressier. **British**

**Red Cross:** Vanessa Cowan, Hanan El-Wandi, Susanna

Tamimi. **Hellenic Red Cross:** Thaleia Fonazaki, Simoni

Georgitsi, Bashir Haidari, Maria Liandri. **Italian Red**

**Cross:** Chiara Nigro.

**Volunteer Support:** We would like to make a special note of thanks to the volunteers of the participating National Societies who are not named individually but who contributed their valuable time and effort to this research project, including by reviewing and translating research tools, coordinating logistics, and directly conducting interviews and focus group discussions. Without their work, this research project would not have been possible.

**Institutional support:** We would also like to thank the following people who provided ongoing inputs and support, including by reviewing research tools and report content: Angela Cotroneo, (former) ICRC Global Internal Displacement and Migration Advisor, ICRC Regional Internal Displacement and Migration Advisors (Sarah Klingenberg and Vanessa Iaria), Zita Crener, ICRC Global Protection of Family Links Advisor and ICRC Regional Protection and Family Links Managers. We would also like to recognise the commitment and support of the Leadership of all National Societies involved in this research project.

**Financial Support:** The Global Migration Lab and the Missing Persons Centre would like to thank the ICRC, Australian Red Cross, Danish Red Cross, Kenyan Red Cross Society and Swedish Red Cross whose financial or in-kind support directly contributed to the research and/or publication of this report. The Global Migration Lab would also like to thank the Society of Women Leaders in Australia and the Metamorphic Foundation for their generous support.

Hellenic Red Cross teams on islands such as Lesbos (pictured) support migrants and refugees, providing first aid and medical assistance, conducting psychosocial support activities for children, and providing family reunification services for people in need. Image: Hellenic Red Cross



# Executive Summary

## Background

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

To better understand and respond to this issue, the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (Global Migration Lab) together with the ICRC Central Tracing Agency's Red Cross Red Crescent Missing Persons Centre (Missing Persons Centre) and certain National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies), undertook research with migrants (primarily women, children and young adults), the families of missing migrants and key informants in the Americas, Africa, and Europe. This report focuses on the data collected in Europe 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 accordance with the Movement's strictly humanitarian approach to migration that focuses on migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, irrespective of legal status, and in line with the Movement's Migration Strategy, research participants included, among others, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless migrants, labour migrants and migrants deemed to be irregular by the public authorities.<sup>4</sup>

In Europe, a total of 38 qualitative interviews with migrants, 13 FGDs with migrants, 3 risk-mapping exercises (drawing sessions) with children, 5 interviews with children, 5 interviews with relatives of migrants who are missing, and 23 interviews with key informants were conducted by National Societies across 4 countries (Belgium, Greece, Italy and the UK).

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](#) (CD/24/R2)

## Key Findings

Journeys described by participants primarily included dangerous journeys along the different routes from Africa to Europe. The most common reasons for migration cited were fear of persecution, political instability or insecurity, lack of economic opportunities and, in some instances, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including forced marriage.

The greatest protection risks associated with migrant women and children going missing or dying during their journeys in the data are allegedly attributed to: the actions of authorities, the actions of smugglers (including forced separation of families as they board boats or trucks), migrants' lack of access to essential services (leading to death and/or people being left behind), and migrants' reliance on informal and unsafe modes of transport (e.g. unseaworthy boats and overcrowded trucks).

Instances of smugglers or traffickers directly killing or abusing migrants are evident in the data along routes through North Africa, particularly when families cannot pay ransoms. When travelling through Africa and towards Europe, the data show migrants are also targeted by criminal gangs and armed groups who violently rob them, with women and children being particularly vulnerable to injury, rape and death. The data indicate risks are greatest on sea routes, with increased drownings of women and children due to their inability to swim, women needing to hold onto their children, or being pregnant. Poor boat quality and environmental factors (such as rough seas), as well as lack of access to safety measures, such as life jackets, also contribute to deaths at sea. In addition to travel by sea, land travel presents risks to going missing or dying, including due to injury, exhaustion or thirst, particularly in the desert. Falling off vehicles, as well as being the victims of road traffic accidents are common in the data. Lack of access to essential services is also a critical factor, particularly for children, pregnant women and newborn babies, with many dying due to thirst, starvation, and absence of medical care.

Factors leading to separations include smugglers intentionally splitting up family members for convenience or to exert control, forced returns by authorities as well as lengthy, inaccessible and bureaucratic family reunification processes. Loss of contact often occurs because of theft or confiscation of phones by authorities or others, as well as devices being lost or sold by migrants – for necessities like food – during journeys.

In terms of capacities to mitigate risk, support from international and local actors as well as access to information, support from States and regular legal status feature in the data. However, the data also underscore how fear of authorities can undermine migrant women and children's willingness and ability to seek help and support. As is the case with other regions, while access to information reduces risks, this is only in instances where that information is trustworthy and reliable. Misinformation can, instead, increase risk.

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 cited protection risks, vulnerabilities and capacities

No	Protection risks	Vulnerability factors	Capacities
1	SGBV	Age	Support from international actors (such as UN, INGOs, RCRC)
2	Going missing or dying	Gender	Support from local actors and networks (such as NGOs, NS) and other migrants
3	Involuntary separation of child/children from parent/guardian	Social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation	Access to information
4	Loss of contact	Legal status	Support from State actors
5	Unlawful impediments or restrictions to freedom of movement (including forced returns and actions of smugglers, such as kidnapping for ransom)	Pregnancy	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 Points<sup>5</sup> along routes, including at borders.
- 3. Enable and facilitate access to means of communication for migrants and their families along migration routes and in any structures where migrants may be placed, including places of reception or detention.** This entails supporting and facilitating the unique role and work of the Movement in the field of tracing and Restoring Family Links (RFL). No restrictions should be imposed on the Movement components in the collection, management and transfer of personal data for tracing missing persons and RFL.<sup>6</sup> The formal integration of RFL services into national migration response frameworks should be enabled, including through cooperation agreements with National Societies, and the establishment of fixed or mobile connectivity points along routes and within detention and reception centres encouraged.
- 4. Ensure that the principle of non-refoulement and the right to asylum are respected in law and in practice and refrain from excessive use of force in border management operations.** State officials encountering migrants at borders and elsewhere should be properly trained in this regard. The training should also address effective implementation of relevant human and child rights legislation, child protection and protection from 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 points<sup>7</sup> on missing migrants.
- 6. Establish, enable and support search and rescue operations at sea and ensure that search and rescue capacities at land borders are also adequate, particularly in zones known to be prone to accidents.** Migrants in distress, including women and children, should be provided appropriate services and support upon disembarkation. This necessitates accounting for the unique needs of migrant women and children, including those who are unaccompanied or separated, and ensuring trained and qualified staff, including psychosocial and medical support personnel, are present on arrival alongside border authorities.
- 7. Enhance resettlement, humanitarian admission and other complementary pathways<sup>8</sup> – ensuring equal protection for women and children.** People seeking international protection or other forms of protection should be provided a fair, effective and legally accessible avenue to do so, without being compelled to embark on unsafe journeys.

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

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

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

<sup>8</sup> In this regard, see Red Cross EU Office Recommendations on [Safe pathways to international protection in the EU](#).



## To Red Cross and Red Crescent actors:

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

**8. Prioritize information provision for migrants on self-protection strategies along migration routes, including how to avoid the risks of separation and going missing.**

This should be complemented by information on where and how migrants can access assistance and protection, including RFL services. Information should be provided in various languages and shared via channels used by migrants, including social media and digital platforms, in addition to key points along the route. Child-friendly resources and information are essential.

**9. 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](#).

**10. Establish and strengthen awareness activities for migrants on the risks and indicators of human trafficking.**

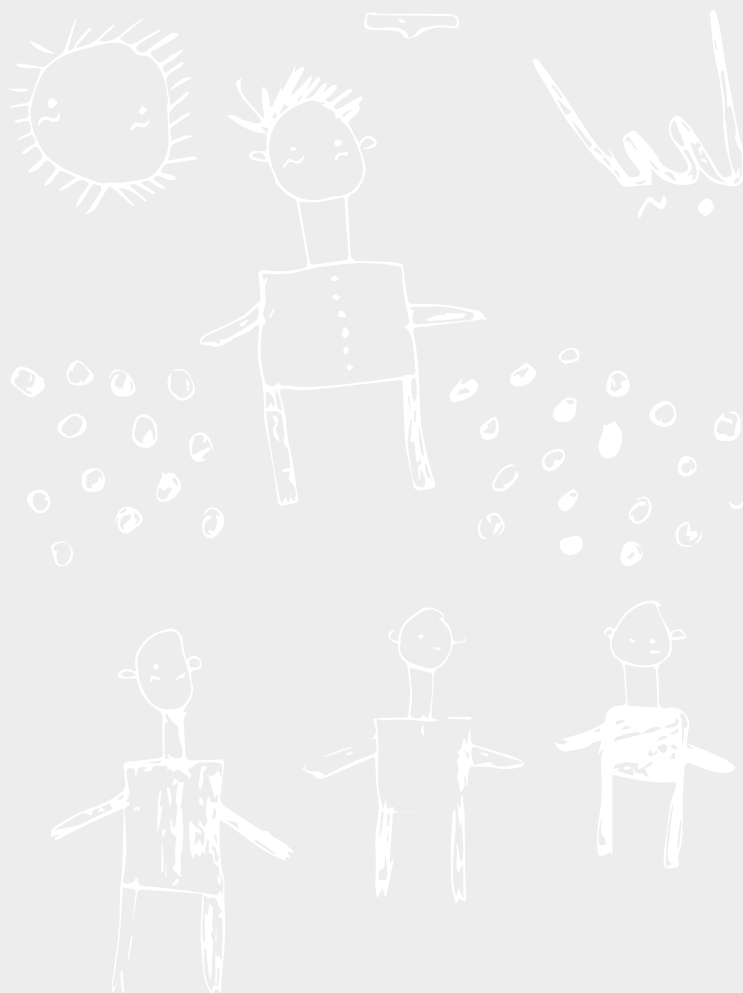
This includes supporting migrants, particularly women and children, to better understand how to identify risks and where and how to seek help if they (or their family members) have experienced or are at risk of human trafficking.

**11. Ensure that any program or policy designed to prevent migrants becoming separated, going missing or dying is directly informed by the voices and lived experiences of migrant women and children.**

Those with lived experience understand the realities of migrants' journeys and have significant knowledge which can, and should, inform the operations of humanitarian organizations. This requires establishing advisory bodies that include migrant voices and creating volunteer and employment opportunities for migrants to actively contribute to efforts that reduce risks along migration routes. This also requires continuous awareness raising amongst other staff and volunteers of the specific risks migrant women and children face along their journeys.

**12. 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.



---

# Contents

Glossary of terms	9
Acronyms	10
<b>Background</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Methodology and scope</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Key findings</b>	<b>14</b>
Key protection risks	14
The interdependence of threats and risks	14
<b>Risk of going missing or dying</b>	<b>15</b>
Role of non-state actors in migrant deaths	15
Modes of transport and the conditions of journey	16
Lack of access to essential services	17
<b>Risks of separation and/or loss of contact</b>	<b>18</b>
Actions of smugglers	18
Personal circumstances and decisions	19
Lack of means of communication and loss of contact	19
<b>Sexual and gender-based violence</b>	<b>20</b>
Human trafficking and sexual violence	20
Family violence	21
<b>Understanding vulnerabilities and mitigating risk</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Regional context</b>	<b>28</b>
State migration practices, laws and policies	28
Red Cross and Red Crescent in action	30
<b>Looking for the missing</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>33</b>



## List of Tables and Figures

Table 1: Data overview	12
Table 2: Most frequently referenced protection risks	14
Table 3: Most frequently referenced vulnerability factors	22
Table 4: Most frequently referenced capacities to mitigate risks	25
Table 5: Providers of support to migrant women and children	25
Figure 1: Protection risk equation	22

## Glossary of terms

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

**Capacity:** Any of the resources and capabilities that are available to individuals, households, and communities to cope with a threat or to resist or mitigate the impact of a threat. Resources can be material or may derive from the way a community is organized. A capacity can include skill sets or the ability to access certain services or move freely to a safer place.<sup>9</sup>

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

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

**Migrants:** For this project, and in line with the Movement's strictly humanitarian approach to migration that focuses on migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, irrespective of legal status, type or category and the Movement's Migration Strategy, 'migrants' are people who flee or leave their habitual residence in search of safety, opportunities or better prospects – usually abroad. This includes, among others, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless migrants, labour migrants and migrants deemed to be irregular by the public authorities.<sup>10</sup>

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

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

**Protection:** The most common definition of protection among humanitarian organizations is the one developed during an ICRC-led workshop, later adopted by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee: "... all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law (i.e. Human Rights Law, International Humanitarian Law, Refugee Law)".<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (2024), *Professional Standards for Protection Work: By Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors During Armed Conflict and Other Violence*. [Available online](#).

<sup>10</sup> [Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030](#) (CD/24/R2)

<sup>11</sup> Protection Advisory Board of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2018), [Protection within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement](#).

**Protection risk:** Actual or potential exposure to violence, coercion or deprivation (deliberate or otherwise). Violence, coercion or deprivation may harm people’s physical or mental well-being, place them in physical danger and/ or violate their rights. The activity causing the risk may be a direct act, measure or policy, but a protection risk may also stem from inaction by a primary duty bearer. Reducing risk involves reducing the level of a threat, reducing relative vulnerability to that threat and/or increasing the capacity of a person or group to resist and/or rebound from a given threat.<sup>12</sup>

**Threat:** A human activity or a product of human activity that results in violence, coercion or deprivation (deliberate or otherwise). A threat can be the perpetrator of such activity (the agent of the threat) or a policy or ethnicity norm (source of threat) that is causing harm.<sup>13</sup>

**Vulnerability:** Characteristics or circumstances of an individual or group or their surrounding physical environment that diminish their ability to anticipate, cope with, resist or recover from the impact of a threat. People differ in their exposure to a threat depending on their social group, gender, ethnicity, age and other factors. Vulnerability is not a fixed or static criterion attached to specific categories of people, and no one is born vulnerable.<sup>14</sup>

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

Acronyms

CSO	Civil Society Organization
CTA	Central Tracing Agency
ERB	Ethics Review Board
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HSP	Humanitarian Service Point
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
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

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

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

# Background

As women and children around the world continue to migrate<sup>15</sup>, many do so under dangerous circumstances that render them vulnerable to violence, exploitation and other risks, including the risk of becoming separated, going missing or dying during their journeys.<sup>16</sup> Despite this reality, and the growing recognition that gender and age shape many aspects of migration, there is little data and analysis that systematically and directly address how and why migrant women and children become separated or go missing.<sup>17</sup>

To better understand and respond to this issue, the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (Global Migration Lab) together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Central Tracing Agency's (CTA) 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 regional report focuses on data collected between June and December 2024 from migrants who have travelled to and through Europe, as well as relatives of missing migrants and key informants in four countries (Belgium, Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom (UK)).

The purpose of the project, and this report, is to learn from the direct narratives of migrants. The data are unique in that they represent insights and personal stories shared by migrants, primarily women and children and their families, many of whom have experienced or been at risk of family separation, going missing or dying 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.<sup>18</sup> To support ongoing efforts, including bilateral confidential dialogue with governments and other concerned parties,<sup>19</sup> certain findings have been intentionally excluded from this public report. This approach aligns with the Fundamental Principle of Neutrality,<sup>20</sup> and is adopted to strategically create a space for dialogue on the needs of migrants in vulnerable situations.

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).

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.

15 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](#).

16 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](#);

17 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.

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

19 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](#).

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



# Methodology and scope

This report focuses on the data collected from June to December 2024, from migrants and families of missing migrants who have travelled to, and are currently in, Europe, as well as from key informants in the research countries. The findings are part of a larger dataset for the project covering migrants' journeys to and through Europe, the Americas and Africa (with more than 800 participants in total).

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

Participating National Societies undertook training on research ethics and tools, interview techniques – including with children – and the ICRC Minimum Protection Approach<sup>21</sup> prior to data collection. Interview questions were revised through a trauma-informed lens and 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 and discussions.

In Europe, a total of 38 qualitative interviews with migrants, 13 FGDs with migrants, 3 risk-mapping exercises (drawing sessions) with children, 5 interviews with children, 5 interviews with relatives of migrants who are missing, and 23 interviews with key informants were conducted by National Societies across 4 countries. The breakdown per country is outlined in Table 1 below.

In accordance with the Movement's strictly humanitarian approach to migration that focuses on migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, irrespective of legal status, type or category, and in line with the Movement's Migration Strategy, research participants included, among others, asylum seekers, refugees, stateless migrants, labour migrants and migrants deemed to be irregular by the public authorities<sup>22</sup>, 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, 33.3% of participants were women, 38.9% were children and 9.7% were men. The remaining genders were either not recorded or not disclosed.

**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
Belgium	20	-	-	-	5
Greece	-	4	2	2	1
Italy	14	7	1 (and 5 interviews with migrant children)	1	10
UK	4	2	-	2	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3 (and 5 interviews with children)</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>23</b>

<sup>21</sup> ICRC, [The Minimum Protection Approach](#).

<sup>22</sup> [Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030](#) (CD/24/R2)

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 migrants’ (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. It is important to keep the project purpose and design in mind when considering the report findings, recognizing its overarching goal to share migrants’ stories to inform operational programming and advocacy rather than to draw direct correlations.

## General context: Who is moving and where?

Migration to and within Europe is driven by a complex mix of armed conflict, insecurity and economic factors, with significant diversity in terms of who is moving and why, including asylum-seekers, refugees and migrant workers, among others.<sup>23</sup> Migrants come from multiple continents, with including from: north and sub-Saharan Africa, including Morocco, Algeria, Nigeria and The Gambia; the Middle East, notably in recent years, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran; and Central and South Asia, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Migrants from Latin America, including Venezuela and Colombia are also migrating to Europe. There is also migration within Europe, largely from East to West, with populations coming from Ukraine, Albania, Georgia, and other Eastern European states towards states of the European Union (EU).

There are several principle migration routes to and through Europe, including: the Central Mediterranean Route, often from Libya and other North African countries to Italy or Malta; the Western Mediterranean Route from North Africa to Spain, with migrants often transiting through Morocco and Algeria; the West African Atlantic Route which involves boat crossings from West Africa to the Canary Islands; the Eastern Mediterranean Route from the Middle East, Africa and Asia through Türkiye on onward to Greece; and the Western Balkan Route which involves migrants traveling through the Western Balkans region, including countries like Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia, to reach Europe.<sup>24</sup>

23 Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) (2025), Quarterly Migration Updates Q1 2025. [Available online](#).

24 International Organization for Migration (IOM), November 2024. DTM Europe — Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Quarterly Regional Report (July - September 2024). IOM, Vienna.

A reception centre in Tournai, Belgium. Image: Belgian Red Cross





# Key findings

This project interviewed migrants, families of missing migrants and key informants in the countries of Belgium, Greece, Italy and the UK. Journeys described by participants primarily included dangerous journeys along the different routes from Africa to Europe. The most common reasons for migration cited by participants were fear of persecution, political instability or insecurity, lack of economic opportunities and, in some instances, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), including forced marriage.

## Key protection risks

The data outline several key protection risks experienced by migrant women and children, despite vast differences in contexts across countries in Africa (where many migrants interviewed originated from) and en route to Europe. Table 2 below outlines the most frequently referenced protection risks identified by participants for migrant women and children along migration routes to and through Europe.

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

No.	Protection risk
1	SGBV
2	Going missing or dying
3	Involuntary separation of child/children from parent/guardian
4	Loss of contact
5	Unlawful impediments or restrictions to freedom of movement (including forced returns and actions of smugglers, such as kidnapping for ransom)

## The interdependence of threats and risks

The findings discussed below outline how the threats migrant women and children face during their journeys contribute to and increase the risk 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.

The quotes below are indicative of common experiences of migrants interviewed and the intersection of threats faced during their journeys that increase risks of separation, going missing or dying. Situations relate to migrants being trafficked and disappearing as a result; being compelled to travel irregularly and thus at risk of violence and exploitation; and exposure to SGBV, combined with lack of access to essential services while undertaking already dangerous journeys.

*I had to leave [my country] irregularly. It was dangerous to get out because we were travelling irregularly. When we left...sometimes [we were] arrested and imprisoned. We were shot at. I even have side-effects from this, bits of shrapnel. And I had to work. They made me work.*  
—Migrant, Belgium

*My best friend took a journey by road which was very difficult. She went [through East Africa and into North Africa]. The journey [in Africa] lasted 3 months. Several groups of men raped her. She left [North Africa] by boat. The boat broke and she stayed 34 days in the sea before being rescued. Some of her travelling companions died. They didn't have water, and she had to drink her own urine. Now she lives in [Europe]. She still has nightmares. Her journey took one year and now she has flashbacks. She is receiving treatment and has medication to sleep but her experience will never go away. The most difficult thing is that her friends died in front of her. She can't forget this.*  
—Migrant, UK

*It's quite complex and when you think about trafficking, for example, as a specific risk, which definitely interlinks with people going missing more broadly, you know, the majority of victims that are identified are women and 35% detected are children. And yeah, we've had cases where people have gone missing – young people and women specifically.*  
—Key Informant, UK



## Risk of going missing or dying

Migrant women and children face the risk of death at various stages of their journeys. The greatest risks faced, according to participants, occurred on the migratory routes to Europe (i.e. beyond the European Union's (EU) physical territory), in North Africa and in the Mediterranean, all of which are influenced by States' securitization policies and externalization practices with the purpose of curbing irregular migration.

The greatest protection risks associated with migrant women and children going missing or dying during their journeys in the data are allegedly attributed to: actions of authorities, actions of smugglers (including forced separation of families), lack of access to essential services (leading to death and/or people being left behind), and traveling via informal and unsafe modes of transport (such as boats and trucks) which enhances a range of other risks.

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



## Role of non-state actors in migrant deaths

Migrant women and children face substantial risks of dying as a direct result of the actions of smugglers and criminal gangs. The data show that instances of smugglers directly killing or subjecting migrants to ill-treatment, for example, occur along routes through North Africa, when families cannot not pay ransoms. When travelling through Africa and towards Europe, migrants are also considered a target by criminal gangs and armed groups who violently rob them, with women and children being particularly vulnerable, risking injury and death. The limited physical strength of women and children (compared to men) to defend themselves from violence is identified by participants as a key reason behind their increased vulnerability and hence the higher likelihood of going missing or dying.

“ We encounter some people – gangs or rebels maybe – [who] think we have something. Some of them come with the knives. If they come, they will take your phone, some of [us] are stabbed. They have another strategy where they don't attack at daytime, they wait for night. When you want to sleep, they come with dogs to attack.  
—Migrant, Italy

“ Women are more in danger than others. I know a woman with two children. A [smuggler] took the children and killed them in the sea. Women don't have so much power and strength to fight back. That's why they are more vulnerable.  
—Migrant FGD, Greece

“ [The smuggler says] I'll take you to [one country] and then [the next country] ... then when once the boy pays this money to get [there], maybe they make him stop ... And then he is left without money... [they only take] you halfway. You have no more money and when you have no more money the torture begins ...  
—Migrant, Italy

## Modes of transport and conditions of the journey

The data reveal multiple deaths by drowning when migrant women and children travel on often unseaworthy boats to cross the Mediterranean from North Africa, or the Middle East to Europe, or from West Africa to the Canary Islands. Women and children travelling alone, as well as women travelling with children, are at greater risk of death by drowning or going missing at sea. For women travelling with children, or for those who are pregnant, the capacity to swim is often compromised (due to the physical nature of being pregnant or having to carry children in their arms) and thus their ability to survive shipwrecks is reduced. Likewise, many women and children may have never learned to swim, contributing to drowning incidents.

“Often women are not very well [in terms of health] or they do not know [how to] swim in case there is any accident...children, especially babies. But also, there's another thing: sometimes their physical condition is not that strong compared with the men who might have been through different critical or difficult or demanding situations.  
—Key Informant, Greece

Poor boat quality and environmental factors (such as rough seas), as well as lack of access to safety measures, such as life jackets, also contribute to deaths at sea. Women and children may be particularly vulnerable to having their lifejackets stolen, owing to their perceived weakness.

“I was eight months pregnant. Sometimes you will lose your life, not only with the coast guard [on the journey]. The water is rough... the boat was full of water. Everybody was fighting for life. We lost two ladies. [One was] five months pregnant and another one I don't know... You have to have life jackets ... Maybe you are a single woman, or you have children, some of [the other people] will come and hold you to take your life jacket from you.  
—Migrant FGD, Greece

“If everybody has a right to walk into a marine shop and buy a life jacket, this would do a lot to change things ... but [in some countries] they have restrictions because they're saying [they] are trying to stop migrants from accessing the sea, so [they] will not sell life jackets to [us].  
—Migrant, Greece

In addition to travel by sea, the data show land travel also presents risks to going missing or dying, including due to injury, exhaustion or thirst. Migrants travelling by land – especially children – are also at great risk of falling off vehicles during their journeys, as well as being the victims of road traffic accidents.

“There is always talk of pick-up [vans]... [migrants] sit half in, so one foot in, one foot out ... They can put three people in a space like that ... [they also do it] like sardines one on top of the other. And those who fall are finished because the car does not stop. I am sorry for those who fall.  
—Migrant, Italy



British Red Cross staff members prepare for interviews during the data collection phase of the project. Image: British Red Cross

## Lack of access to essential services

A lack of access to essential services is a critical factor linked to risks of dying and/or going missing, particularly for children, pregnant women and newborn babies. Reports of deaths due to malnutrition, thirst, starvation, as well as lack of access to medical care are common in the data.

“ They were in the desert ... and she died of thirst. They were in a car and the tyres punctured. The driver left them to get another car, but several people died of thirst after two days. The driver came back after four days. People went missing. [They were not found when the driver came back].  
—Migrant, Italy

“ The big problem in the sea is also the fact that people don't have food and they can stay there for days. This is a big danger.  
—Migrant, UK

“ Children die every day from malaria [but also] from hunger. They don't have anything to eat. They don't have food... [and] when they have malaria, they go to the hospital [it's too late]. There's nothing they can [do]. They die straight away.  
—Migrant, UK

■ A lack of access to essential services is a critical factor linked to risks of dying and/or going missing, particularly for children, pregnant women and newborn babies.

The data outline how lack of access to first aid and medical treatment creates particular risk on certain journeys given the arduous conditions and harsh environments, such as in dense forests or across deserts, or where snake bites and scorpion stings pose a risk.

“ Because if you're in the bush and you get a snake bite, you have no access to any first aid.  
—Migrant, Belgium

“ One pregnant woman, she [gave birth] and she had to separate from the child in the forest. The child came to [one country] and the mother [had to] stay in [another country] because she [needed] blood and had to go to the hospital.  
—Migrant, Italy



Image: Belgian Red Cross



## Risks of separation and/or loss of contact

Similar to the risk of dying, the risks of separation and/or loss of contact, especially for women and children, can occur at multiple points in a journey because of external factors, such as actions by border authorities, smugglers and traffickers, informal modes of transport and lack of access to essential services, but it can also be the result of personal choice or circumstance. In some cases, family separation can lead to migrants becoming missing as family members might no longer be aware of their whereabouts or fate.

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

### Actions of smugglers

Numerous participants report smugglers as responsible for separating migrant women and children from their families. This can be due to convenience, to fit more people into a boat or a truck, but also to deliberately exert control over and place pressure on women and children to enhance their vulnerability.

“Where smugglers divide mothers and children and put them on different boats is one of the main places where contacts are lost.”  
—Migrant, Belgium

“In some other cases, children arrived here as unaccompanied minors and separated children, but they were travelling with their family, with their parents or one of their parents, and unfortunately, they were separated again by the smugglers into separate lorries.”  
—Key Informant, Italy

This forced separation can take the form of smugglers separating women and children from male travel companions to take advantage of a (real or perceived) absence of protection. This puts women and children at greater risk of abuse and exploitation at the hands of smugglers (and potential traffickers).

“Smugglers would put men together and women with children alone together. So even if it was a woman who left the country with her fiancé, for example, they wouldn't put them together. So, they would lose contact on the way sometimes.”  
—Migrant, Belgium

“[There were] two unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who fled [their country] together.... Smugglers made the older sibling leave the younger sibling behind... Sadly, the younger sibling passed away.”  
—Key Informant, Greece

The data also show that when women travel alone with children, smugglers both use and follow through with threats (including to harm and/or disappear children) to exert control over women, including to facilitate sexual violence and abuse.

“In the third transit country before arriving in the EU, 'dealers' tried to force a woman to sleep with them. She said no. She resisted, [and] they took her son away. [She] has no knowledge of whether he's still alive... Every knock on the door she believes might be news of her son.”  
—Key Informant, UK

“They were threatening that if they hear any child crying or talking, they would leave the child behind. So, she was always travelling with her hand on her son's mouth because she was scared of that.”  
—Migrant, Greece



## Personal circumstances and decisions

Sickness, exhaustion or other conditions such as pregnancy, can also lead families to separate, as some migrants may decide, or feel they have no other option, to sacrifice their family unity so that one or more family members may continue the journey.

*You walk, walk, walk until you die in the bush. No one will wait for you. And especially women and children. They are the most [vulnerable] in everything...*  
—Migrant FGD, Greece

*The reason she separated from her husband in the forest is... the small village only had a small bus, a small car and it cannot take all the people together. She's the first who went, and the husband stayed.*  
—Migrant FGD, Greece

*I heard a story where there were two [young] brothers in the desert. One had no strength left because they walked [so far]. They had no money for transport. They walked a lot and, in the end, the brother couldn't breathe. [He] no longer had strength in the heat... they could no longer wait for him. And then they left him there and continued on the road.*  
—Migrant FGD, Greece

Pregnant women and children are particularly vulnerable to being left behind due to perceptions that they will hold up the group's progress, for example, if they need medical treatment, become injured or are too tired to continue the journey.

*During the migration process in the forests, for example, if a kid got tired or someone got tired and they sit a little bit, they won't wait for him or her, they will continue. Some of the other family members will continue ... because if they stop or go back to find this person they will lose the path ...*  
—Migrant FGD, Greece

## Lack of means of communication and loss of contact

In many of the situations described by participants, loss of contact is not only a result of separation but also due to the lack of safe and reliable means of communication for migrant women and children.

Mobile phones – and the numbers they contain – are a primary tool to maintain, and regain, contact. Risks associated with the loss of a phone, to theft or confiscation by authorities or others, are paramount in migrants' journeys. The data show that phones may be confiscated by both state and non-state actors. They are also often lost or sold during journeys.

*Because if you go through this route, there's no way that you can escape your phone being taken, your money being taken, any papers that you have will be taken away. So, if you if you memorise one or two numbers of your family whenever you have a chance to, you can get in touch with them.*  
—Migrant FGD, Greece

*I've heard people say that they have had... their family's number stored on their phone, but the police still have their phones, or the police have lost their phones, [or they] lose phones along the way... Some say they lost their phone in water, [or] their phone was broken. And that was the main way that they kept in contact with families.*  
—Key Informant, UK

The inability to remain in contact and communicate with family further exacerbates vulnerability, causing prolonged distress for migrants and families and limiting opportunities for help or rescue. This underscores the importance of ensuring fixed or mobile communication points along migration routes are available for migrants to utilize.

# Sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a dominant theme in the data, affecting migrant women and children at all stages of their journeys. SGBV is often experienced alongside other risks – including the risk of dying or becoming separated. For instance, separation can facilitate the abuse of women and girls, and in turn perpetuate further separation, as victims/survivors are too ashamed to reunite with families. In such cases, women and girls may not want to be found as they do not want their husbands or other relatives to know what has happened to them, especially when they become pregnant as a result.

**“** *I was traumatised. At the end of the day, I was only 17 years old and I'm pregnant. I haven't got any mom, auntie or sister. I don't have a phone. I was just like, in the dark.*  
—Migrant, Belgium

**“** *GBV also involves sexual violence used both as a weapon for ransom but also as a way of dominating the person. Some years back, we did a survey with women arriving by sea, from which it emerged that, unfortunately, about 90% experienced GBV; we expect the same percentage nowadays. Women are subjected to various types of torture, including sexual violence, and many of these women and girls are forced to live with the consequences of this violence for the rest of their lives. In addition to the very serious psychological damage, also with the physical consequences of abuse and violence.*  
—Key Informant, Italy

**“** *Because they have been trafficked or used for bad purpose ... they can't contact anybody. [They] go missing for years so the family think they died.*  
—Migrant, Belgium

## Human trafficking and sexual violence

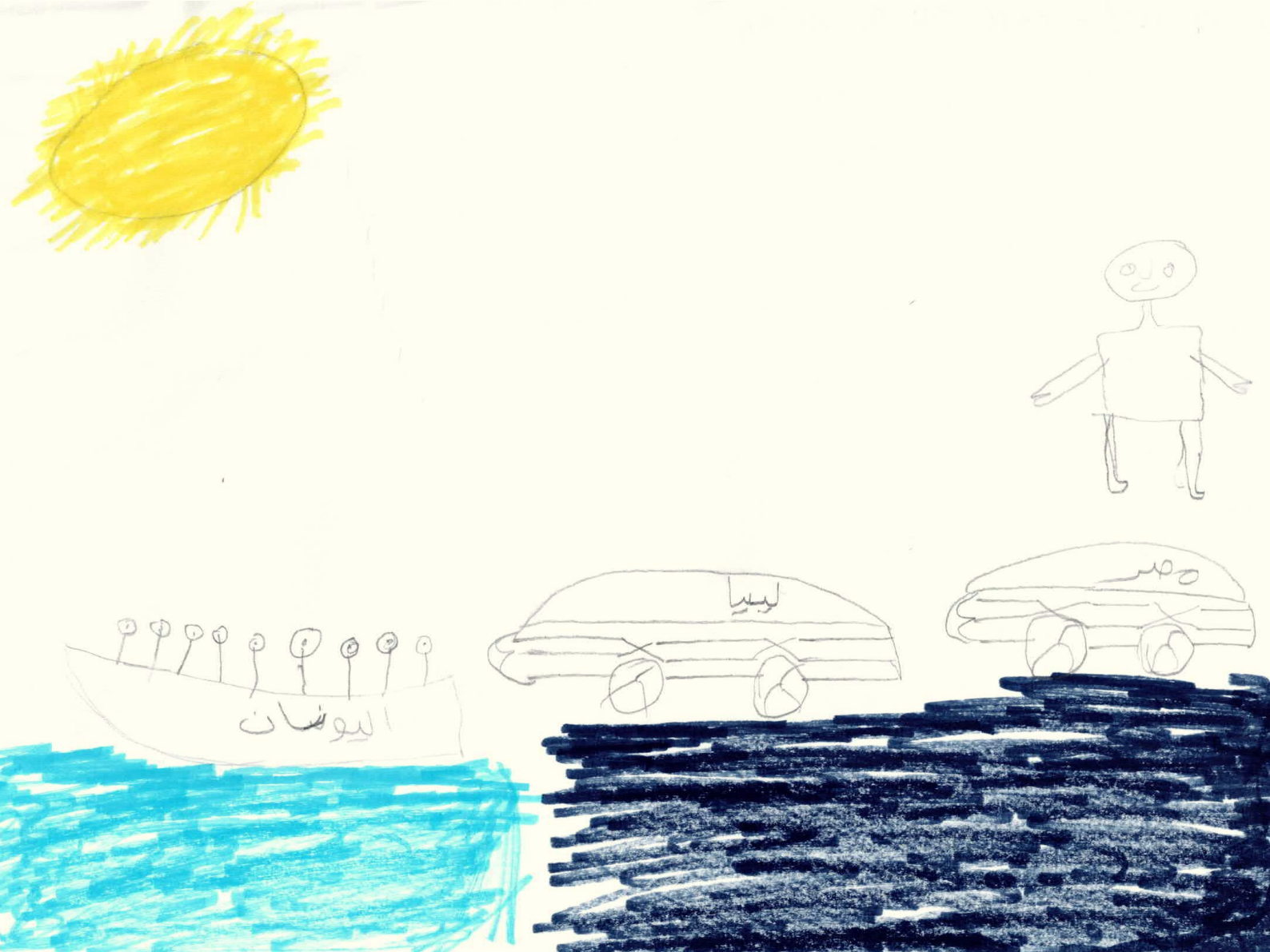
The data show survivors of human trafficking and other forms of sexual violence are at increased risk of becoming separated or going missing. This is either because women and children are disappeared by traffickers and held against their will with no contact with families, or because the shame associated with the abuse inhibits their desire to reconnect with their families, as noted earlier.

**“** *In particular, the risk for women is sexual violence. Women are used both as a method of payment and as a method of intimidation against each other to show the strength of men to other people who travel, particularly in the desert....*  
—Migrant, Greece

**“** *Women separated with their family members and then because they got... abused and they have passed through this very difficult journey... they don't want the family to know about it [...] they don't want to be found by their husbands because they were sexually abused. They are ashamed but they shouldn't be....*  
—Key Informant, Italy







A drawing from a risk mapping exercise with migrant children in Greece. Image: Hellenic Red Cross

## Family violence

Family violence, like other forms of SGBV, impacts migrant women and children at all stages of their journeys. Participants cite it as a reason for migration, as well as a reason for cessation of contact and family separation. Forced marriage is also a key reason for migration. Migration, however, does not always offer safety. In some instances, the data show that a lack of access to services and support, particularly for young girls experiencing family violence and forced marriage, may lead them to go missing or die.

“Marriages are often arranged by families without the agreement of the woman herself so for those reasons, women sometimes [migrate to] escape.

—Key Informant, UK

“Children come to escape [forced marriages] because they hear about the refugee camp. When they come [though], there is no help. Then [their families] pay the money to take them back. A lot of girls now they are dying because of this in the camp... they killed themselves. In the camp, girls also disappear because they don't want to get married. Some kill themselves because their husband has abused them. They fled to the camp and they didn't get any protection ... My own husband wanted to kill me... Every day he was abusing me... But my parents couldn't do anything as he had already paid my parents. That's why some women take those risks, for example those who came by boat.

—Migrant, UK

# 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 (as seen in Figure 1).

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

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

**Figure 1: Protection risk equation<sup>25</sup>**



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 Europe.

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

No	Vulnerability factor
1	Age
2	Gender
3	Social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation
4	Lack of legal status
5	Pregnancy

These factors include age and gender<sup>26</sup>; social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation (linked to seeking safety and asylum when fleeing conflict and/or persecution as well as racism and xenophobia); lack of legal status (and therefore the ability to access certain services and support and migration pathways); and pregnancy (particularly in relation to physical demands of arduous journeys and the limited ability to move quickly when in danger). These factors and some of their intersections with age and gender are discussed further below.

<sup>25</sup> This figure comes from a publication of the Global Protection Cluster: Protection Analytical Framework: An Introduction (2021) Global Protection Cluster / USAID.

<sup>26</sup> Women and children were identified to be the most vulnerable by the key informants and family members interviewed. 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

Travelling alone, without the protection of adults or guardians, is frequently reported as enhancing the vulnerability of children, including to violence, abuse and exploitation – threats that link to separation and going missing or dying.

*“Quite a few young people that I work with, they came here, but they came with their younger sibling as well. So, they were maybe two children travelling together, trying to keep each other safe and to get food and water. And clearly that would put them more at risk of human trafficking just because they’re more vulnerable as being children on their own.”*  
—Key Informant, Italy

The data indicate that sometimes children travel ahead of other family members. Sometimes siblings also travel together, putting an immense responsibility on the shoulders of the eldest. It is also reported that because children do not have the same strength and physical capabilities as adults, they may be left behind during arduous journeys. Additionally, they may be easily deceived and tricked into trafficking situations due to their limited knowledge and experience.

*“When I think about minors it is because of their age, their (in)ability to understand the risks around them. Under a certain age, their ability to process information, to consider risks, what is safe, what is not safe [is limited]. There is a reason why there are legal guardians for children.”*  
—Key Informant, Belgium

*“[Children] are very desirable and profitable for organized crime to work as a sex slave or to work as in different factories...they are profitable and the gangs are aware of that and that put them in more of a difficult situation, as well as the factor that the children are not capable of defending themselves or running away or being able to take themselves out of that situation.”*  
—Key Informant, UK

The data also show that children who are unaccompanied may sometimes travel with other adults who do not have their best interests in mind, leaving them vulnerable to abuse, exploitation or abandonment during the journey.

*“The risks that [children] tend to experience is that they are separated from their families, and they remove phones from them. They are entrusted with adults they do not know. They could be abusive to them. They could be abandoned on the way. So, they’re left on their own in order to survive and they potentially may be at risk of adults that they may try to trust in their journey and they’re not to be trusted.”*  
—Key Informant, Belgium

## Gender: Women

Discrimination against women and structural or cultural bias are reported in the data as increasing women’s vulnerabilities at all stages of their journeys. For instance, the risk of SGBV is not only a factor compelling women to migrate, but also a common risk faced while travelling, as well as in countries of destination.

*“[Women are] inferior, they are a property, they are not as important as... the other side of the gender that identifies as men. They are less physically stronger, they are more vulnerable and they are just a property which makes them... essentially at risk because of a component of cultural and historical entrenched understanding of what is a woman.”*  
—Key Informant, UK

Like children, migrant women are particularly vulnerable to trafficking and sexual exploitation during their journeys. The data indicate this is linked to women travelling alone without male companions or wider support networks, as well as the obligations and responsibilities women face in providing for, and looking after, their children.

*“For the women, they face a lot of challenges because sometimes you need help with your children and for you to get this help, maybe you have to be exploited by the men.”*  
—Migrant FGD, Greece



## Social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation

In terms of social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation, the data outline instances of racism and xenophobia, both along migration routes (from Africa and the Middle East) and at the destination in Europe. Discrimination creates challenges in accessing services, as well as in terms of migrants' health and well-being both en route and at the destination.

*In fact, they [in some countries in Africa], they don't like black people even though they are black [themselves], but apart from that they don't like black people. They openly tell us that their home here is not our home. [They tell us] to return home. If you don't go back to us, you're going to see what happens to you.*  
—Migrant, Belgium

## Lack of legal status

A key challenge arising directly from a lack of legal status and lack of visa authorisations is that migrants find themselves compelled to travel irregularly, enhancing risks in multiple ways. Lack of legal status is also associated with migrants being unable or unwilling to seek out help and support, due to fear of arrest, detention or deportation, even when experiencing violence and abuse, exacerbating the impacts of trauma and violence.

*Migrants don't want to go to authorities because they think authorities will send them back, even if they get abused. Because they are there 'illegally.'*  
—Migrant FGD, Greece

Lack of access to documents also contributes to family separation, wherein some family members have documents, but others do not, preventing mothers from travelling with their children when seeking safety abroad, for example.

*When the war started...basically [the families] only brought the children because the mothers didn't have passports. And all families who are sitting here, the children are only here, but the mothers are still there in [Africa] because haven't got passports.*  
—Key Informant, UK

## Pregnancy

Being pregnant increases women's – and their children's – vulnerabilities, with participants noting pregnant women have additional health needs and are also less able to flee from danger or avoid separation from their other children, given their physical condition. These circumstances contribute to separation, going missing and dying.

*It is dangerous for women and children when they walk in the bushes/forest. Many of them walk for many days. If you have a baby and cannot run as fast as others, no one will help you and that is why many children have gone missing, they become separated from others.*  
—Migrant, Greece

*My husband and I separated from the others. I was 8 months pregnant. We were in the forest [for] almost one week ... There was no food, no water ... I was exhausted. I said I need to go...I am tired, if they push me back, no problem. If I find help, I'll come for you... I moved from [the forest] and saw an old man and ... I demonstrate to him that I'm pregnant, I'm not feeling good, I need help ... The ambulance came for me, but when I told them my husband [was in the forest] they said they will [get him] later ... They took me to the hospital ... they had to do surgery instantly because the baby was not OK... Nobody was there. I was depressed, with so many complications after the surgery ... I was in the hospital, I was crying for my husband ...*  
—Migrant, Italy

**Discrimination creates challenges in accessing services, as well as in terms of migrants' health and well-being both en route and at the destination.**

## Capacities to mitigate risks

Given the vulnerabilities highlighted above by participants, it is important to better understand the capacities and opportunities that contribute to reducing such vulnerabilities and mitigating risks along migrant women and children's journeys.

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

No	Capacity
1	Support from international actors (such as UN, INGOs)
2	Support from local actors and networks (such as NGOs, NS and other migrants)
3	Access to information
4	Support from State actors
5	Regular legal status

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



Yvoir Pierre Bleu reception center serves as a reference point on gender-related matters (including LGBTQIA+). It also provides support to women who are survivors of gender-based violence and as a helpdesk for other Belgian Red Cross reception centers seeking guidance on gender-related questions. Image: Belgian Red Cross

## Providers of Support

**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)	Medical care, emergency support (including food and other non-food items, child protection services; support to help find family members
State actors	Search and rescue operations at sea, childcare and employment assistance, alternative care arrangements for unaccompanied children
Red Cross and Red Crescent	Food, shelter, humanitarian service points, legal aid, psychosocial support (PSS), health services, Restoring Family Links support
Local organizations and support networks (community-based orgs. and local NGOs)	Counselling and trauma support, case management and social work support, information dissemination on where and how to access help, safe spaces for women and children, legal assistance, accommodation assistance.
Informal support networks, including other migrants, family members, friends and travel companions	Information on which routes to travel, guidance on staying together as a group, travel coordination, assistance in sharing food, information, communication resources

Table 5 highlights various forms of support that participants identified as helpful to migrant women and children during their journeys. These are outlined according to the type of provider and the forms of support offered, as cited by participants. The data underscore the importance of service provision along migration routes to reduce risks of family separation, going missing or dying for migrant women and children.

Local organizations and support networks contribute to migrant women and children's capacity to mitigate risks. These include community groups, faith-based organizations and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) providing access to cash, transport, accommodation and legal assistance, as well as counselling and psychosocial support.

*My [family member] took all the children, my sister, my niece, and then himself. And they ran to the church. And the Catholic people were the one who sent them to the camp. The Church give them money.... That's how they escaped. They would have been dead by now.*  
—Migrant, UK

Migrant associations (diaspora groups of migrants who organize by nationality in other countries) were also highlighted as important avenues for support and solidarity, particularly on arrival.

*When I arrived, I already found an association created by my compatriots who lived [there] before me. And in [that province], the association was just a grouping of people, to share ideas to promote [our] culture through sport, dance, clothes. When I arrived, they integrated me into the association.*  
—Migrant, Italy

In terms of informal support networks, including other migrants and travel companions, participants noted travelling as a group as a strategy to stay safe, as well as having a leader or guide within the group to follow during long journeys. Support networks are often created by migrants during the journey and maintained until arrival.

*Sometimes [migrants] meet in the countries where they make the stops, they get to know each other, they create a friendship, a collaboration. And then sometimes they continue all the way to Europe.*  
—Migrant FGD, Italy

International actors, including UN agencies and international NGOs, also offer critical support during migrants' journeys, particularly in terms of information, medical care, food, addressing child protection concerns and assisting to locate friends and family.

*And different actors, humanitarian actors... have been providing rescue activities, psychological first aid relief and transportation to accommodation centres within the island.*  
—Key Informant, Greece

To a lesser extent, State actors were mentioned as a provider of support; however, despite being mentioned less frequently, the support provided is critical in saving migrants' lives and protecting their dignity, including performing search and rescue operations at sea, finding alternative care arrangements for unaccompanied children and offering childcare and employment support to migrant women.

*Then we tried another place to go to the sea. We stayed in the sea for two days. Then there was a [navy] ship that came and actually rescued us.*  
—Migrant, UK

*A law has been filed [that] provides for foster care instead of [taking migrant children] to [migration] centres ... entrusting them to families. This is because in addition to foster care, it could also be adoption by [local] families so that [children] can then also have continuity after the age of maturity.*  
—Key Informant, Italy

*I decided to go to the job centre. I was crying like a baby and the lady said are you OK my dear? I told her [what made] me upset. She said, it's fine, there's this new system, we will look for childcare for you. So, we'll be paying extra hours. You go do your course. I was very, very happy like never before. So, I decided to continue. I did my course for six months.*  
—Migrant, UK



## Role of information

Information is crucial to addressing the risks migrant women and children face during their journeys. The data suggest that lack of knowledge on where and how to access support during journeys, and a lack of understanding of self-protection strategies drives vulnerabilities, increasing the risk of migrant women and children becoming separated, going missing or dying. The provision of information was outlined as a capacity that can help to address such vulnerabilities.

*To reduce vulnerability, knowledge should be increased, self-respect should be increased, and self-protection methods and knowledge should be passed down from woman to woman. We need to inform ourselves on [...] ways to become economically independent and how not to be a victim of deception or sexual violence.*  
—Migrant, Italy

*The lack of information on who [migrants] can trust and who they can't trust, and lack of connections as well as not being able to escape certain situations are the key [risk] factors.*  
—Key Informant, UK

*It's about providing tools and being resourced. Enable [migrant women and children] to have this information ... Migrants should have that information in relevant language and in a relevant way that people can understand. Make sure [migrants] are empowered on what's safe, not safe. Leaflets, brochures for information, tools. With pictures, not words for new arrivals.*  
—Key Informant, Italy

Key information sources for migrants highlighted in the data include social media, digital tools and information from other migrants (including family and friends) who have previously travelled. Indeed, it was suggested that information campaigns by service providers should make better use of social and digital platforms to reach migrants and share critical information.

Participants cited that access to information on where and how to access services and self-protection messaging on how to stay safe can contribute to preventing separation, going missing and dying; however, providing information is not enough, it needs to be combined with action from States to protect migrant women and children in vulnerable situations.

*I do think it's helpful to provide things where you can sort of give people awareness of ways they can protect themselves. Look out for these sort of warning signs, like the general warning signs of what a trafficker might say to someone. But ultimately, I do think that the responsibility is not with the individual. I think you can protect yourself fully and someone can still completely exploit you and harm you. I do think that the responsibility is it is on the State to protect people.*  
—Key Informant, UK



# Regional context

## State migration practices, laws and policies

In the last years, significant efforts at European and EU levels have been carried out to address the issue of missing migrants, including the recent adoption of a resolution by the Council of Europe on this issue<sup>27</sup>, the initiatives around that topic undertaken within the Rabat process<sup>28</sup> (migration dialogue between the EU and West/North Africa) and the DG HOME interest to support EU Member States' capacity building on the search and identification of missing and deceased migrants. At the State level there have also been recent examples of successful cooperation that led to the identification of deceased migrants.

However, despite these efforts, the limited availability of safe and legal pathways<sup>29</sup> for migration and asylum as well as support to third countries in the management of national borders often compel migrants to rely on longer and more dangerous routes, thus increasing their vulnerability.

Migrants often have to go through countries experiencing armed conflict or other situations of violence, or through hostile environments, such as seas, deserts and other remote areas. Migrants often may hide along the route, for example, out of fear of being caught and detained, making them further invisible. Such invisibility, intended by migrants as a self-protection strategy, increases vulnerability, rendering migrants more isolated and exposed to various threats and risks. The clandestine nature of such journeys increases risks. At the root of many risks that migrant women and children face during their journeys is the fact that they are unable to travel through regular channels; indeed, the many risks outlined in this report result from migrants being compelled to use irregular routes.

*It was the only route. Because I don't have the passport or documents to get across the border.*

—Migrant, Greece

Similarly, States' border policies and practices may contribute to increased risks of harm for migrant women and children. While European States have the right to regulate migration within and across their territories, this right is not absolute. European State policies, regulations and practice must always uphold migrants' rights and reflect international and European law and, when applicable, EU law. This includes upholding migrants' right to life, the prohibition of refoulement as well as the prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

*There are a lot of harsh treatments towards migrants. Some victims get injured, some get traumatized. When we were travelling to [one country], everyone was running for their lives. Creating more fear brings more harm.*

—Migrant FGD, Greece

**Migrants often may hide along the route, for example, out of fear of being caught and detained, making them further invisible. Such invisibility, intended by migrants as a self-protection strategy, increases vulnerability, rendering migrants more isolated and exposed to various threats and risks.**

27 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – A call to clarify their fate, Resolution 2569 (2024).

28 In 2022, the members of the Rabat process, have included two points on family separation and missing migrants in the Process Action plan followed by the setting-up of a network of national focal points for missing migrants in July 2024. Here is the summary of the [first](#), [second](#) and [third](#) meeting of the Network of National Focal Points on Missing Migrants. [Here](#) is the summary of the Thematic Meeting on missing migrants organized in Banjul on the 9th and 10th July 2025.

29 In this regard, see Red Cross EU Office Recommendations on [Safe pathways to international protection in the EU](#).



The family reunification process in Europe, especially in the EU, can be long and complex, compelling migrants to opt for travelling through irregular routes to reunite with their relatives in Europe, often heightening risks of going missing or dying.

In addition, complex and delayed family reunification procedures can contribute to prolonged separation as well as irregular migration.<sup>30</sup> The family reunification process in Europe, especially in the EU, can be long and complex, compelling migrants to opt for travelling through irregular routes to reunite with their relatives in Europe, often heightening risks of going missing or dying.

*So, for example, if the person needs to wait for family reunification for three, four or five years and maybe it gets rejected in the end, this person will choose the “easy” way, which is the [irregular] way.*  
—Migrant FGD, UK

*There are the children [overseas] whose parents are here, asking for their family reunification, who are hindered. [They] wait a year, a year and a half... the boys get fed up, they leave.*  
—Key Informant, Italy

Children alone in Europe or overseas who take irregular migration journeys to their destination country due to slow family reunification processes are far more vulnerable, underscoring the importance of migration processes that uphold and protect family unity in a timely manner.

30 Ibid.

A Belgian Red Cross reception centre in Tournai, Belgium. This mural, created by students from an art school in Tournai, depicts migratory birds as a symbol of movement, connection, and the vital importance of protecting nature. Image: Belgian Red Cross





## 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 and the Movement's principled approach to migration, this means being ready and available to meet migrants' humanitarian assistance and protection needs, irrespective of status, along migration routes, and reinforcing migrants' capacities to protect themselves. 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, across deserts, on land and sea and along certain routes). It also means readily sharing and providing self-protection messaging, remaining independent, 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 highlighted the critical role RCRC actors in the region 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 Points<sup>31</sup> and knowing where people are moving in order to step in and offer humanitarian assistance and protection.

*Knowing that the Red Cross exists all along the route, that [migrants] can contact Red Cross on site... I was thinking of the Humanitarian Service Points because these are really specific identifiable points for people on the road. And that can be... the link for recovery phone calls and searches in some cases. The idea is that [Humanitarian Service Points] should be on all axes, for all countries of passage. So that's what makes [it] safer...*

—Key Informant, Belgium

Participants also outlined key ways RCRC actors could strengthen their prevention activities to reduce the risk of migrant women and children becoming separated and/or going missing and dying. Many of the suggestions focused on increasing opportunities for communication by migrants along routes, such as hotlines for those who are lost, providing information and services on migrants' rights, and offering more restoring family links (RFL) and tracing opportunities along routes. For this to happen, however, National Societies need to be enabled by their authorities to increase RFL capacities along migratory routes, including at Humanitarian Service Points.

*If the Red Cross can have a number to help people who got lost in the forest or the people who take the small boat or the sea, it can help...*

—Migrant FGD, Greece

*I think if there are more services [at humanitarian service points]: information made for migrant, on the procedures, the resources, the associations, their rights and so on.*

—Key Informant, Italy

*It is thus essential for authorities across Europe (especially the EU via migration-related funds) to provide the needed funding to components of the Red Cross to be able to provide essential services, including restoring family links services, along the migratory routes.*

—Key Informant, Belgium

*[Red Cross should provide] more support [along the] routes that we know people take. It's only when they reach the [destination] that they can access to support like the family tracing services. [There should be] more support along the way.*

—Migrant, UK

31 [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 interviews with relatives of migrant women and children who are missing provide unique insights into the barriers and challenges to locating family members. These include difficulties in the identification of migrants (including deceased bodies) that arise from:

- An absence of documentation, both in terms of documentation found on recovered bodies and documentation of where a migrant has travelled before going missing. It is noted that often migrants themselves may not know where they are in their journeys when following the directions of smugglers and thus cannot articulate their location to family members when (re)establishing contact.
- A failure to retrieve bodies, such as when migrants drown when boats capsize and bodies are never recovered from the sea and a failure to systematically record their identities.
- Challenges families of the missing face in accessing authorities, including those in Europe, who may have information about deceased migrants, including relevant data concerning human remains.
- Cross-border and cross-jurisdictional issues in the search process and challenges linked to forensic identification including the provision of antemortem data.
- The financial and administrative costs as well as lack of official documentation associated with travelling to identify and/ or recover family members who may have died.

*There are very complicated, lengthy processes and that are very inhumane because family members, and that's enshrined in the Geneva Conventions, families are entitled to know what happened to their family members... but they are unable to confirm whether it is their relatives because they are unable to provide the DNA sample. They cannot physically go and identify their family relatives wherever they are in the world.*  
—Key Informant, Belgium

*You know, many people that I work with have had information that their family member has passed away, but they don't know where... That's why they contact us to find out if we can find out the burial place or the grave.*  
—Key Informant, UK

Another key challenge evident in the data refers to the fact that, given the arduous and often traumatic journeys taken, migrants are often in shock on arrival may have difficulties recalling information. They may also continue on with their journey before any organisation has collected their testimony if/when they are in a better state to share important information. This underscores the need for first responders to enhance their understanding of the experiences of migrants and to be better equipped to gather information from people who have experienced trauma.

*[In the context of people missing at sea, we are] often not [able] to fully reconstruct the stories and identities of these people. Also, because the survivors, when they arrive... are in such a state of shock that it is not possible to immediately rebuild the family bond. They need an intervention, then a moment of recovery. Also, because people do not stay [in the country] or they tend to move, then it is really difficult to be able to reconstruct everything, the whole path and identity of a person.*  
—Key Informant, Greece

It should also be noted that the trauma associated with the forced separation or disappearance of family members – particularly in the case of unaccompanied children or parents who have lost contact with their children – has a profound psychosocial impact on those searching for their relatives. For this reason, integrating psychosocial support services (PSS) in reception and protection programs, in coordination with RFL activities, should be a key consideration.

# Conclusions

This report outlines key reasons as to why migrant women and children are at high risk of becoming separated or going missing on their journeys to and within Europe, as well as the significant protection risks and factors that increase the vulnerability of migrant women and children during their journeys.

It is evident in the data that the actions of both state and non-state actors allegedly may contribute to risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying for migrant women and children. This includes indirect actions such as generating fear which creates panic and leads families to flee and separate or results in migrants seeking to hide from, or evade authorities, even when in need of safety and protection.

Additionally, the report demonstrates the risks faced by migrant women and children to SGBV at all stages of their journeys and provides insights as to how this can contribute to and/or prolong separation and going missing and/or dying, including due to feelings of shame, as well as direct acts of harm and violence and choices to migrate separately as a result. The report also highlights the varied and dangerous journeys that migrant women and children take, both together and alone, through unsafe routes and the challenges in accessing essential and life-saving services and support that often result in death.

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





# Recommendations

Based on the direct insights, experiences and learnings from migrant women and children and the relatives and families of migrants who have gone missing, as well as the experience of the Movement and key informants interviewed in Europe 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 Points<sup>32</sup> along routes, including at borders.
- 3. Enable and facilitate access to means of communication for migrants and their families along migration routes and in any structures where migrants may be placed, including places of reception or detention.** This entails supporting and facilitating the unique role and work of the Movement in the field of tracing and Restoring Family Links (RFL). No restrictions should be imposed on the Movement components in the collection, management and transfer of personal data for tracing missing persons and RFL.<sup>33</sup> The formal integration of RFL services into national migration response frameworks should be enabled, including through cooperation agreements with National Societies, and the establishment of fixed or mobile connectivity points along routes and within detention and reception centres encouraged.
- 4. Ensure that the principle of non-refoulement and the right to asylum are respected in law and in practice and refrain from excessive use of force in border management operations.** State officials encountering migrants at borders and elsewhere should be properly trained in this regard. The training should also address effective implementation of relevant human and child rights legislation, child protection and protection from 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 points<sup>34</sup> on missing migrants.
- 6. Establish, enable and support search and rescue operations at sea and ensure that search and rescue capacities at land borders are also adequate, particularly in zones known to be prone to accidents.** Migrants in distress, including women and children, should be provided appropriate services and support upon disembarkation. This necessitates accounting for the unique needs of migrant women and children, including those who are unaccompanied or separated, and ensuring trained and qualified staff, including psychosocial and medical support personnel, are present on arrival alongside border authorities.
- 7. Enhance resettlement, humanitarian admission and other complementary pathways<sup>35</sup> – ensuring equal protection for women and children.** People seeking international protection or other forms of protection should be provided a fair, effective and legally accessible avenue to do so, without being compelled to embark on unsafe journeys.

<sup>32</sup> [Humanitarian Service Points](#) are neutral spaces where migrants can access a wide range of humanitarian support and services, regardless of their migration status and wherever they are on their journeys.

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

<sup>34</sup> States could draw upon the [network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants that was established in July 2024 as part of the Rabat Process](#) in order to facilitate communication between countries involved in the resolution of cases of missing migrants.

<sup>35</sup> In this regard, see Red Cross EU Office Recommendations on [Safe pathways to international protection in the EU](#).



## To Red Cross and Red Crescent actors:

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

- 8. Prioritize information provision for migrants on self-protection strategies along migration routes, including how to avoid the risks of separation and going missing.** This should be complemented by information on where and how migrants can access assistance and protection, including RFL services. Information should be provided in various languages and shared via channels used by migrants, including social media and digital platforms, in addition to key points along the route. Child-friendly resources and information are essential.
- 9. 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](#).
- 10. 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.
- 11. 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.
- 12. 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 British Red Cross staff member during the data collection phase of the project. Image: British Red Cross





# Global Migration Lab

Hosted by



# Central Tracing Agency

©2025 Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (hosted by Australian Red Cross and Kenya Red Cross Society) and the ICRC Central Tracing Agency's Red Cross Red Crescent Missing Persons Centre.

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