Towards Safer Journeys:

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

Summary Report

Insights from the Americas, Africa and Europe

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

In partnership with

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

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Glossary of Terms

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

Capacity: Any of the resources and capabilities that are available to individuals, households, and communities to cope with a threat or to resist or mitigate the impact of a threat. Resources can be material or may derive from the way a community is organized. A capacity can include skill sets or the ability to access certain services or move freely to a safer place.[1]

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.[2]

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 disaster 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)".[3]

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.[4]

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.[5]

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.[6]

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).

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1   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.

2   Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2024), Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030. Available online.

3   Protection Advisory Board of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2018), *Protection within the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.* Available online.

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

5   Ibid.

6   Ibid.

Introduction

As women and children around the world continue to migrate[7], 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.[8] Despite this reality, and the growing recognition that gender and age shape many aspects of migration, there is little data and analysis that systematically and directly addresses how and why migrant women and children become separated or go missing.[9]

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 17 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies)[10], undertook qualitative research with migrants, primarily women and children, families of missing migrants and key informants in the Americas, Africa, and Europe.

The purpose of the project was to listen to migrants' perceptions and experiences of threats and risks related to becoming separated, going missing or dying, and to support National Societies to ensure their migration programs and humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy are informed by migrants' voices and expertise.

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.[11] To support ongoing efforts, including bilateral confidential dialogue with governments and other concerned parties,[12] certain findings have been intentionally excluded from this public report. This approach aligns with the Fundamental Principle of Neutrality,[13] and is adopted to strategically create a space for dialogue on the needs of migrants in vulnerable situations.

This 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).

This summary report presents a comparative analysis of key themes in the data, as well as a snapshot of key insights from each region. It complements the detailed regional reports on the datasets from the Americas, Africa and Europe.

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.

Some findings in this report outline risks that affect all migrants, not only women and children. Yet, the lack of data on the specific experiences of migrant women and children during their journeys – combined with the fact that they face heightened risks and linked to age and gender – underscore the importance of sharing their stories. The data are unique in that they represent direct insights and personal stories shared by migrants, primarily women and children and their families, many of whom have been at risk of becoming separated, going missing or dying during their journeys across different regions.

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7   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.

8   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;

9   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.

10 This included National Societies in the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Belgium, Canada, Chad, Chile, Colombia, the Gambia, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Italy, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Panama, and the United Kingdom.

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

12 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.

13 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

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[14], as well as the families of missing migrants.

A comprehensive literature review and consultations with global and regional Movement migration and protection colleagues, as well as participating National Societies, informed the research design. The project tools and protocol were approved by the ICRC Ethics Review Board and participating National Societies undertook training on research ethics and tools, interview techniques – including with children – and the ICRC Minimum Protection Approach[15] prior to data collection.

A qualitative approach to data collection

To gather insights into migrants' lived experience, the project employed a qualitative approach involving 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 total, 818 participants were engaged by National Societies in Argentina, Brazil, Belgium, Canada, Chad, Chile, Colombia, the Gambia, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Italy, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Panama, and the United Kingdom. Data collection took place from June to December 2024.[16]

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

A lens to understanding vulnerabilities and mitigating risks

As in the broader humanitarian sector, this project understands that levels of risk are determined by the intersection of threats and vulnerabilities, mitigated by the capacities of the person at risk (see Figure 1 below). For example, a child's level of risk of going missing might be impacted by the threat of human trafficking and the fact that the child is travelling unaccompanied (a factor enhancing vulnerability), but mitigated by phone contact with family, a capacity that can potentially reduce risk. To understand and mitigate the risks 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[17]

$$\downarrow \text{RISK} \; (\text{Reduce prevalence, Reduce severity of impact}) = \downarrow \text{THREAT} \; (\text{Reduce the threat}) \; \times \; \frac{\downarrow \text{VULNERABILITY (Reduce vulnerability related to the threat)}}{\uparrow \text{CAPACITY (Increase capacities related to the threat)}}$$

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14   Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (2024), Migration Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2024–2030. Available online.

15   ICRC (2019). The Minimum Protection Approach. Available online.

16   This includes 230 interviews with migrants and 46 FGDs with migrants (covering 170 participants), 46 risk-mapping exercises with a total of 205 children, 5 additional interviews with children, 78 interviews with relatives of migrants who are missing and 130 interviews with key informants.

17   This figure comes from Global Protection Cluster (2021), Protection Analytical Framework: An Introduction. Available online.

Sexual and gender–based violence (SGBV)

The data from Africa, the Americas and Europe highlight that SGBV is a reality for migrant women and children during their journeys and that the incidence of SGBV is closely linked to the risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying, across the three regions.

> *We have to submit. I could see children being raped. When we threw ourselves in the river, seven men with weapons were waiting for us in some tents… they raped everyone, one by one…*
> —Migrant, Honduras*
>
> * Countries noted in all quotes reflect where the interview was conducted, not where the experience occurred.

The data reveal that SGBV is pervasive (including rape, sexual assault and human trafficking), occurring across all regions, in countries of origin, transit and destination. The main perpetrators of SGBV identified by participants include family members, criminal gangs and smugglers, armed groups and transport operators, demonstrating that migrant women and children are at risk the entire length of their journeys, including upon arrival and at their destination.

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

SGBV is often an initial motivation for migration, with migrant women and children fleeing various forms of abuse, including forced marriage – a common theme in both the data from Africa and Europe. In many instances, the need to seek safety urgently and without access to funds or documents, limits travel route options, compelling migrant women and children to take unsafe and dangerous journeys which increased risks of further harm, including going missing or dying.

> *Children come to escape [forced marriages] … When they come… there is no help. Then [their families] pay the money to take them back. A lot of girls are dying because of this in the camp… they killed themselves… girls also disappear because they don't want to get married… My own husband wanted to kill me, you can see the marks on my face…. But my parents couldn't do anything as he had already paid… That's why some women take those risks, for example, those who came by boat.*
> —Migrant, UK

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Initial separation during journeys – including due to the direct actions of smugglers splitting up families for convenience or to exert control or border officials only permitting some family members to pass – heightens risks of abuse and loss of contact, as women who have been victimised may be too ashamed to reach out to, or be reunited with, their families. Data show SGBV also lead to migrant women being left behind en route, either intentionally by abusive partners or by travel companions due to the need for urgent medical care and the inability to continue the journey.

> *Because [migrant women] 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

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

The data reveal migrant women and children may fear seeking help from authorities because of their irregular status. Likewise, the impunity of non-state actors and limited rule of law that exists across the often rural and remote routes migrants travel increases risks of human trafficking, kidnapping and sexual assault. The data also show that a lack of access to essential services heightens risks, often forcing migrant women to engage in 'survival sex' to meet their basic needs and those of their children, or in women having to 'pay with their bodies' when facing extortion and bribery during their journeys.

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

In the data, human trafficking presents a significant risk across all regions with strong links to separation and/ or going missing. Migrant women and children travelling alone are cited as more vulnerable than men because they are more easily taken by force, or, in the case of children, more easily deceived. While criminal gangs are largely responsible for trafficking, in some instances in the data, authorities may also be connected to trafficking networks. Trafficking specifically related to sexual exploitation is most prominent in the data; however, organ trafficking is also highlighted by participants, particularly in the Americas, as is trafficking of children for forced recruitment by armed groups in Africa. The data also indicate trafficking is not just a risk during the journey but also at the destination, when migrant women and children may have limited social connections, local language skills and access to support and finances.

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

It is important to note that while men and boys also experience SGBV during journeys, the data suggest a gap in knowledge and awareness of the issue and a reluctance among actors – including victims/survivors – to discuss the topic.

Unsafe and deadly migration routes

Data from all regions underscore the reality that when migration is considered the only possibility for accessing safety and/or better opportunities but legal pathways for asylum and regular migration are limited, migrants – including migrant women and children – are more likely to undertake risky journeys, increasing their vulnerability to death, separation, and loss of contact.

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

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

In the data from Europe (where many migrants were travelling from Africa) as well as in the Africa data, incidences of migrant women and children's deaths and going missing are primarily linked to journeys in extreme heat across deserts as well as dangerous sea journeys. In the Americas data, extreme temperatures and varied terrain through mountains and across wild rivers contributes to deaths. These conditions, combined with lack of access to services and exposure to criminal gangs and related threats en route underscore how when migrant women and children are unable to travel through safe and regular routes, risks of separation, going missing or dying increase.

The securitisation of migration,[18] including the political construction of migrants as a security issue or threat to stability and living standards, has expanded in recent years, with restrictive migration policies and laws presented as a way to address difficulties in managing migration and/or security concerns.[19] However, a securitisation approach to migration governance – rather than a humanitarian approach, which focuses on migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, irrespective of legal status, type, or category – is linked to real harm experienced by migrant women and children, including abuse and forced separations by different actors. In addition, fear of harm contributes to an environment where migrant women and children in need of life-saving support or assistance do not come forward due to their irregular status and concerns of arrest, detention or deportation.[20]

> *There are a lot of harsh treatments towards migrants. Some victims get injured, some get traumatized. When we were travelling … everyone was running for their lives. Creating more fear brings more harm.*
> —Migrant FGD, Greece

> *I was once a victim of family separation because I was arrested and forcefully brought back [home], leaving my husband [in the other country].*
> —Migrant, FGD, Nigeria

> *I was eight months pregnant… The water is rough… the boat was full of water. Everybody was fighting for life. We lost two ladies. [One was] five months… 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

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18 Securitisation can be described as 'the repositioning of areas of regular politics into the realm of security by increasingly using narratives of threat and danger aimed at justifying the adoption of extraordinary measures' (see Horwood, C. and Frouws, B. (eds) (2019), *Mixed Migration Review 2019: Highlights, Interviews, Essays, Data,* Mixed Migration Centre, Geneva, p. 186). See also Jaskulowski, K. (2018) 'The Securitisation of Migration: Its Limits and Consequences', *International Political Science Review*, 40(5), 710-720.

19 Hoagland N. and Arias Cubas M. (2024), 'Practice versus perception: A discussion of the humanitarian principle of independence in the context of migration'. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 106(925), 223–241. Available online

20 Arias Cubas M., Hoagland N., Mudaliar S. (2022), *Migrants' perspectives: Building trust in humanitarian action*, Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab, Sydney. Available online.

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

Similarly, externalisation[21] may increase risks of separation and of migrant women and children going missing or dying. Some border practices may increase time spent on unseaworthy vessels where migrant women and children are at greater risk of drowning, including due to mothers having to hold their children when a boat capsizes or pregnant women having more limited physical capabilities to swim and survive in a shipwreck. Moreover, in efforts to avoid police and border authorities, the data show families often disperse, and migrants often run toward more remote and dangerous routes – areas where criminal actors frequently operate with impunity. This illustrates how the various threats migrants face during unsafe journeys are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

> 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

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

Migration polices intended to strengthen family unity and support migrants' safety, dignity and rights often involve restrictive, burdensome and/or inaccessible administrative processes and requirements, leading to a gap between policy intention and practical effect. For example, in Europe, complex and lengthy family reunification processes are cited in the data as a direct reason for family separation, with migrants embarking on irregular journeys in efforts to rejoin family members. Participants in the Americas focused on regularization as the most important migration policy to reduce risks of becoming separated and/or going missing or dying, having seen how much safer regular travel is for other migrants on similar journeys. However, just as in Europe, participants in the Americas indicate that the administrative costs and processes associated with existing regularisation policies pose key challenges to their effectiveness.

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21 During the last decade, there has been an increased tendency by some States or regions to transfer and diversify border control and migration management mechanisms to both neighbouring 'transit' countries and to more distant countries with the aim of reducing migration – a process now commonly known as the externalisation of borders or the externalization of international protection. See Hoagland N. and Arias Cubas M. (2024), note 19; see also Crisp, J. (2019), *Externalization and the Erosion of Refugee Protection*, Comparative Network on Refugee Externalisation Policies. Available online. See also Red Cross EU Office (2013), *Shifting Borders: Externalizing Migrants Rights and Vulnerabilities?* Available online.

Separation and loss of contact

Across the three regions, the risk of separation and loss of contact for migrant women and children occurs at all stages of their journeys, including at borders and on arrival.

Across all regions, Participants note that actions to disperse crowds or facilitate security searches may cause fear and may create chaotic environments where migrants flee or scatter in panic, increasing separation risks. Migrants' attempts to evade authorities due to their irregular status or perceived threats of harm from border authorities also contribute to separation, and the risk of migrant women – particularly those who are pregnant – and children being caught up in abuse or violence due to challenges in escaping quickly and/or keeping up with their travel companions.

Additional drivers of separation vary to some extent in each region. In the Europe data, both the action of authorities, in terms of border processes, and the actions of smugglers are dominant, whereas, in the Americas, family separations often result from the actions of criminal gangs or non-state armed groups (including due to trafficking, kidnapping and forced recruitment). In Africa, armed conflict often results in separation when families fleeing for safety in crisis situations are not able to stay together, both at the outset of their journey and when being caught up in armed conflict while travelling.

Across the data in Europe, the Americas and Africa, family or group separation consistently occurs because smugglers divide groups during transport. Smugglers[22] separate families to exert power and control over women and children, to facilitate human trafficking, as well as for convenience (i.e. fitting migrants into various transport options). In the Americas and in Europe data, smugglers threatened to harm and/or separate children to exert control over mothers.

Recording an interview as part of data collection in Colombia.
Image: Colombian Red Cross

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22   It is important to distinguish between human trafficking and smuggling of migrants. From a legal point of view, the key element of human trafficking is its purpose, namely exploitation. However, it can be complex to distinguish between the two in practice. Even though smuggling of migrants is often understood as a transactional agreement between two parties who consent, it is important to note that migrant smuggling also happens under often dangerous and degrading conditions and may, in some instances, imply means of coercion, fraud or force. Smuggled migrants can also easily become victims of trafficking in transit or at their destination. See: IFRC (2017), Action to Assist and Protect Trafficked Persons, Guidance for European National Societies on Assistance and Protection to Victims of Human Trafficking.

> *When people are running to escape from the threat of security forces, it is very simple for someone to be separated from loved ones while running in a different direction and in the process the person may well go missing.*
> —Migrant, Tanzania

> *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

In all three regions, the dangerous conditions of the journey and modes of transport also contribute to separation. Attacks by bandits or criminal gangs en route cause separation of women and children when migrants are running for safety. Migrants – particularly pregnant women or young children – are left behind due to exhaustion or injury and an inability to continue or keep up with the pace of the group. Likewise, traveling on precarious modes of transport, such as crowded buses or lorries creates risks of family separation, both when attempting to board fast-moving vehicles but also due to risks of falling off during the ride and being left behind.

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

> *In the middle of the road, the vehicle got stuck then we were attacked by some thieves … they [abused] some of the people … then they got my brother we lost him, we separated there …*
> —Migrant, Nigeria

While most cases of separation in the data are forced, separation is not always unplanned: there are situations where migrant women and/or children may decide to travel independently and/or separate from family members during their journeys. In some cases, one family member might migrate ahead for administrative, health or financial reasons in a staged migration plan. The data show that, sometimes, parents are forced to make difficult choices to separate from their older children and send them with other relatives to enable them to focus on younger children during their journey. The risk, as well as the consequences of SGBV, are also cited as reasons women and/or children choose to migrate alone. But, even when separation is planned, a lack of access to funds, services and support often limits migrants' choices and families' abilities to remain safe and together.

The data also show clear evidence of how and why migrant women and children may be unable (or, in some instances, unwilling) to communicate with family members during their journeys. Reasons for loss of contact include lack of network coverage (for mobile phones and digital communication tools), forced separation (for reasons outlined above), confiscation of phones by authorities and/or smugglers, and intentional cessation of contact due to personal circumstances, including SGBV.

Often, families or groups travelling together share one phone and if that phone is lost or stolen, the entire family or group loses the capacity to maintain contact. Children often do not have phones but are advised to memorise the phone numbers of family members when travelling in case of separation. To mitigate the risk of loss of contact, some participants cited carrying additional SIM cards to use when purchasing phones during their journey, having been informed by other migrants that phones are often stolen or lost en route. The limited number of phones within groups or families as well as children's reliance on others' phones demonstrates an increased risk of loss of contact for migrant children when travelling.

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

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

Lack of access to essential services

Across all regions, the lack of access to essential services, including access to food, shelter, healthcare, information – particularly about risks along routes and or support for maintaining and restoring family links, increases risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying for migrant women and children.

> *I witnessed so many tragic events, [including] the passing away of my siblings—one during childbirth and the other because of a stomach ache.*
> —Migrant, Nigeria

The lack of access to essential services resulted in the deaths of migrant women and children during their journeys, most prominently from starvation, dehydration, medical emergencies and hypothermia. These causes of death are direct consequences of migrant women and children's inability to access to food, water, appropriate clothing and shelter and medical care during their journeys. The data suggest women are particularly vulnerable to exhaustion and death due to the physical toll of the journey and nature of travelling alone with children and needing to carry them and their belongings. Across all regions, pregnant women are at significant risk of death in childbirth due to lack of access to appropriate medical treatment. Newborn babies and infants also face greater risk given limited milk and/or formula supplies (including when mothers are unable to breastfeed) and exposure to extreme environmental and climatic conditions while travelling.

> *Children die every day from malaria [but also] from hunger. They don't have anything to eat… [and] when they have malaria, they go to the hospital [it's too late] … They die straight away.*
> —Migrant, UK

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

Lack of access to essential services is also linked to separations, with migrant women and children being left behind during journeys because they need medical assistance or are too exhausted – due to lack of food and water – to keep up with the pace of the group. In some instances, men separate to travel ahead with the hope of finding help. In other cases, pregnant women leave their family in search of medical care.

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

> *In moments of fatigue is where abandonment is seen. Men also leave women behind with their children on the migratory road.*
> —Migrant, Colombia

The data suggest any separation from men in their group increases risks for migrant women and children. For example, women and children are at heightened risk of kidnapping by armed actors when men leave in search of food or other support, and women are at increased risk of sexual violence from other men.

> *I was raped several times. I got pregnant and I don't even know who was responsible. I couldn't abort [the baby] because I didn't have access to any medicine.*
> —Migrant, Nigeria

Lack of access to essential services is also linked to SGBV, driving women into risky situations, including sexual exploitation, to meet their and their children's basic needs. Many women and young girls also become pregnant during their journeys because of rape. This leads to immediate health risks associated with traveling while pregnant (and without access to appropriate medical care) as well as long-term stigma experienced by survivors of SGBV.

… lack of access to trusted information on how to stay safe and reduce risks and on where and how to access other essential services during migration drives vulnerability to becoming separated, going missing or dying.

Lack of access to means of communication – either due to the actions of authorities or smugglers confiscating or stealing migrants' phones or due to the lack of internet or telephone service along journeys – also impacts migrant women and children's ability to keep in touch with family and enhances loss of contact, directly resulting in migrants' going missing. The lack of access to essential services along routes also forces migrants to sell their phones in order to buy necessities like food and water instead of maintaining contact with family. Indeed, migrants interviewed refer to using the Restoring Family Links (RFL) services provided by National Societies along routes (including, but not only, access to free phone calls, battery charging and wi-fi), highlighting the critical role of these services in preventing loss of contact.

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

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

Lastly, lack of access to trusted information on how to stay safe and reduce risks and on where and how to access other essential services during migration drives vulnerability to becoming separated, going missing or dying. Similarly, a lack of access to reliable information about potential risks along routes increases migrants' exposure to threats such as human trafficking and makes planning safer journeys more difficult. The most common and trusted source of information cited by migrants in the data is that of family and friends who have previously travelled, underscoring the importance of working with migrant communities and networks to design information resources to support migrants to stay safe during their journeys. National Societies were also noted as key players in providing trusted information. Crucially though, the provision of information to migrants, both before and during their journeys, must confront the fact that decisions – be it to leave, which route to take, or how to travel – are often made spontaneously, with little planning and with limited choice.
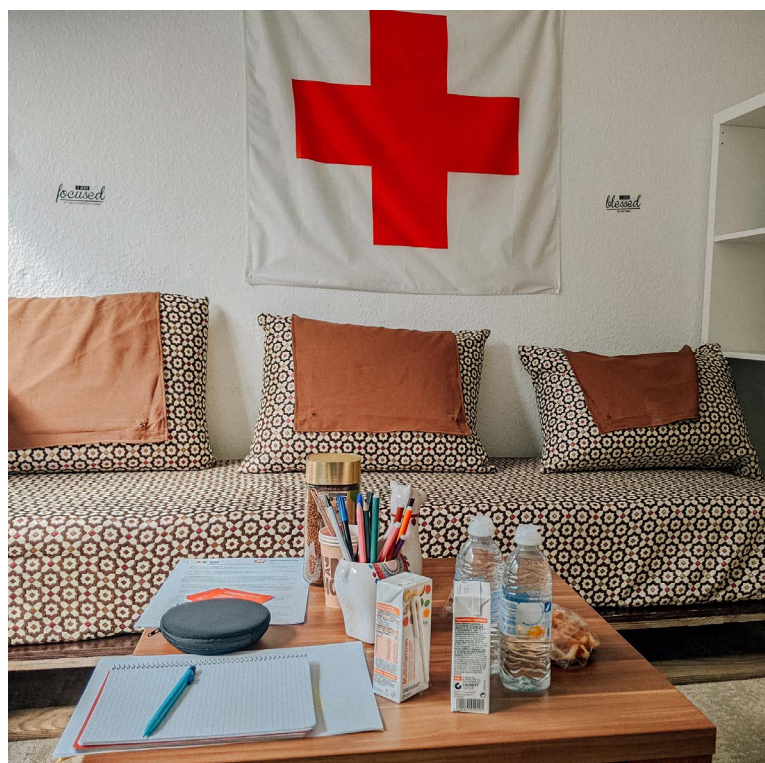
Yvoir Pierre Bleu reception center serves as a reference point on gender-related matters (including LGBTQIA+). It also provides support to women who are survivors of gender-based violence and as a helpdesk for other Belgian Red Cross reception centers seeking guidance on gender-related questions. Image: Belgian Red Cross

Regional snapshots

Using the protection equation lens described above, the Tables in this section summarize the most referenced protection risks, vulnerability factors and capacities to mitigate risk outlined by participants in each region. For more information and explanation of this data, please refer to the detailed regional reports for the Americas, Africa and Europe.

The Americas[23]

The project interviewed participants in Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama. While most migrants interviewed were from South America and travelling irregularly via land and across rivers within the region, some also travelled by air. In addition, migrants interviewed in Canada primarily included refugees, temporary residents and asylum-seekers from Africa or Europe arriving via air. Journeys described by migrants interviewed from South American countries included travelling north towards Mexico and the USA, often crossing the Darién Gap. Those interviewed also included migrants from Venezuela moving into or through neighbouring countries, such as Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Chile. Additionally, Argentina, Bolivia and Brazil were cited as destination countries for some migrants interviewed from South America. The most common reasons for migration cited by participants in the Americas were fear of persecution and lack of economic opportunities and stability.

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

Most Referenced Protection Risk:
Sexual and gender–based violence

Most Referenced Vulnerability Factor:
Age

Most Referenced Capacity:
Access to information

Table 1: Americas data - Most frequently referenced protection risks, vulnerabilities and capacities

No	Protection risks	Vulnerability factors	Capacities
1	SGBV	Age	Access to information
2	Going missing or dying	Gender	Support from international actors (such as UN, INGO, RCRC)
3	Loss of contact	Social, ethnic, religious or political affiliation	Support from local actors and networks (such as NGO, NS, other migrants)
4	Involuntary separation of child/children from parent/guardian	Lack of legal status	Financial resources
5	Lack of access to essential services	Poverty and lack of financial resources	Regular legal status

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

Africa

The project interviewed participants in Chad, the Gambia, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania. Participants primarily included migrants travelling via main migratory routes from Africa to Europe as well as subregional migration within East Africa. The most common reasons for migration cited by participants were armed conflict, instability and insecurity; famine, drought and lack of economic opportunities; and SGBV, including forced marriage.

> The most common reasons for migration cited by participants were armed conflict, instability and insecurity; famine, drought and lack of economic opportunities; and SGBV, including forced marriage.
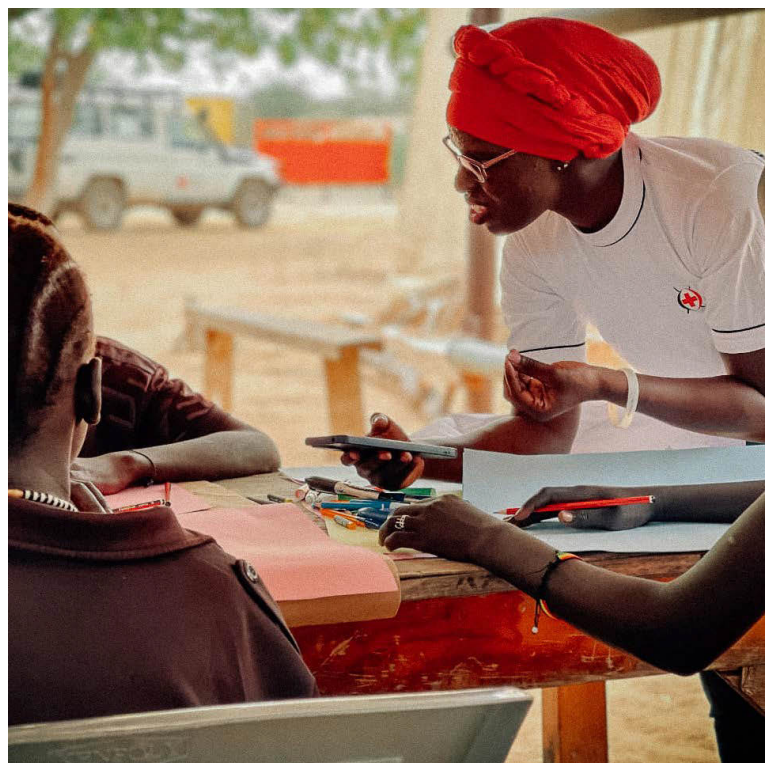
A Kenya Red Cross staff member conducts a risk mapping activity with migrant children. Image: Global Migration Lab

Most Referenced Protection Risk:
Going missing or dying

Most Referenced Vulnerability Factor:
Age

Most Referenced Capacity:
Support from international actors

Table 2: Africa data - Most frequently referenced protection risks, vulnerabilities and capacities

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

Europe

The project interviewed participants in Belgium, Greece, Italy and the United Kingdom. Journeys described primarily included dangerous journeys across the main migratory 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, SGBV, including forced marriage.

> The most common reasons for migration cited were fear of persecution, political instability or insecurity, lack of economic opportunities and, in some instances, SGBV, including forced marriage.

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

Most Referenced Protection Risk:
Sexual and gender-based violence

Most Referenced Vulnerability Factor:
Age

Most Referenced Capacity:
Support from international actors

Table 3: Europe data - Most frequently referenced protection risks, vulnerabilities and capacities

No	Protection risks	Vulnerability factors	Capacities
1	SGBV	Age	Support from international actors (such as UN, INGO, RCRC)
2	Going missing or dying	Gender	Support from local actors and networks (such as NGOs, NS, other migrants)
3	Involuntary separation of child/children from parent/guardian	Social, ethic, 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

Based on the direct insights, experiences and learnings from migrants and their families, as well as the insights from key informants who contributed to this research, as well as the experience of Red Cross and Red Crescent actors in the regions, the following key 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 during their journeys, States should:

1. **Ensure that migrants' rights – including the right to life and the right to family unity – are respected and protected in line with international law.** To achieve this, States should assess whether their migration and asylum laws and policies – including agreements with third countries – create or exacerbate protection risks for migrants, including risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying. This necessitates accounting for the unique needs of migrant women and children, including those who are unaccompanied or separated, in the assessment, formulation and implementation of said laws and policies.

2. **Guarantee that all migrants, irrespective of their gender, age or legal status, have safe and effective access to essential services without fear of arrest, deportation or detention.** Specific attention should be given to the unique needs of migrant women and children, such as access to sexual and reproductive health services, services for pregnant and nursing women, child-friendly services, and support for victims/survivors of human trafficking and other forms of SGBV. To this end, States should also facilitate (including by providing financial support) the establishment of Humanitarian Services Points[24] 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.[25] The formal integration of RFL services into national migration response frameworks should be enabled, including through cooperation agreements with National Societies, and the establishment of fixed or mobile connectivity points along routes and within detention and reception centres encouraged.

4. **Ensure that the principle of non-refoulement and the right to asylum are respected in law and in practice and refrain from excessive use of force in border management operations.** State officials encountering migrants at borders and elsewhere should be properly trained in this regard. The training should also address effective implementation of relevant human and child rights legislation, child protection and protection from SGBV, as well as child safeguarding.

5. **Increase efforts and resources for mechanisms to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing migrants at national and transregional levels.** To this end, standardize national processes to record and manage cases of missing migrants as well as of relevant unidentified human remains, including centralizing relevant information at national level. States should designate national focal points[26] on missing migrants.

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24 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.

25 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).

26 States could draw upon the network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants that was established in July 2024 as part of the Rabat Process in order to facilitate communication between countries involved in the resolution of cases of missing migrants.

To Red Cross and Red Crescent actors:

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

6. **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.

7. **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.

8. **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.

9. **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.

Acknowledgements

Migrant children participate in a drawing session as part of Colombian Red Cross' data collection activities in 2024. Image: Colombian Red Cross Society

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