



**GLOBAL RESEARCH SERIES**  
**GIRLS ON THE MOVE**



Save the Children





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Bosnia & Herzegovina  
Montenegro  
Albania  
Greece  
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Photo: Imrana Kapetanovic / Save the Children

# CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Acronyms</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>8</b>
1.1 Objective	9
1.2 Methodology	10
1.3 Research questions	10
1.4 Regional studies	11
1.5 Challenges and limitations	12
<b>2. BACKGROUND</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>3. FINDINGS</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1 Common trends	19
3.2 Girls on the move in origin: motivations for migration	24
3.3 Girls on the move in transit: planning, risks and resilience	26
3.4 Girls on the move at destination: continued risks and rights violations	29
<b>4. RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>36</b>
4.1 Core recommendations	37
4.2 Recommendations for programming	39
4.3 Recommendations for policymakers	40
4.4 Recommendations for further research	41

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*\* The girls in the pictures in this publication are not the girls interviewed for the study.*

*\*\* With the aim to protect the confidentiality of participants, all names and locations in further text are anonymized.*

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This summary is based upon the regional reports from Southern Africa, Latin America and the Balkans, offering a compilation of findings and recommendations.

Graphic Design: Adèle Prins, [www.prinsdesign.co.za](http://www.prinsdesign.co.za)

Cover Photo: Imrana Kapetanovic / Save the Children



# ACRONYMS

**BiH:** Bosnia and Herzegovina

**DRC:** Democratic Republic of Congo

**LGBTIQ+:** Umbrella term for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning and anyone who does not identify as heterosexual and/or cisgender

**MDI:** The Migration and Displacement Initiative, Save the Children

**SCI:** Save the Children International



## FOREWORD



“  
As gender inequalities increase, girls’ possibilities to fully exercise their rights are further limited and girls on the move are in a particularly vulnerable situation.”

This year has, for most of us, been an exceptional year, where we have had to change our everyday lives. Uncomfortable changes for many, but for some they have been devastating. Hundreds of thousands have lost loved ones and millions of people around the world have lost their jobs, and at the time of writing, the ongoing pandemic has had serious consequences for people in migration all over the world.

We know that those who are already living in vulnerable circumstances are the ones worst affected by the crisis. The pandemic will force even more people away from their homes as they need to find new ways of making a living to survive. At the same time, the pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities, including those based on gender and age. As gender inequalities increase, girls’ possibilities to fully exercise their rights are further limited and girls on the move are in a particularly vulnerable situation.

In this light, the work that we have initiated with this research series, by speaking to girls from around the world about their experiences of leaving their homes, and sometimes also their families, becomes even more important as it makes us better equipped to understand to better understand the challenges ahead and how to deal with them.

Girls on the move tend to fall between the cracks, in research, policy and programmatic approaches. Whereas there is an increasing body of literature dealing with gender and migration, as well as children and migration, few studies focus on the intersection of gender, age and migration and more specifically on girls on the move. During the research, we also found that programmes are not always tailored to the needs that girls on the move have, including overcoming gendered barriers to access services and support. During the work with the report, we met girls involved in child labour as domestic workers in private homes, who were not reached by programme staff focusing on child labour in the streets – which is predominantly male. We also met girls who are mothers and who can seldom access services directed towards children, due to the lack of child care options, although they need these services just as much as other children do.

“  
The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that no child should be discriminated against.”

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that no child should be discriminated against. It also says that states are responsible for ensuring that all children within their jurisdiction have the same rights regardless of their status. Despite this, the girls in this study testify that they are not given access to education, healthcare and other services on equal terms with other children.

Most of the girls we met through these studies were strong-willed; they knew why they were putting themselves at risk, they wanted a life without hunger, violence or conflict and they want to go to school, work and prosper, to be able to take care of themselves and their children. Their stories are complex as they experience agency as well as victimization in their life journeys. Many of the girls planned and saved ahead while others had to leave urgently, but they all had to work out strategies to stay safe and survive during their journeys. They often did so by creating networks with other girls and women.



For me and for Save the Children as a movement there are many important takeaways from this report, among other things, that we need to continue speaking to girls in order to understand their situation and their needs, that a strong gender lens throughout our programming is crucial, and that the strength of being a global organisation is striking when we work together and can paint a bigger picture. It is a troubling picture and it requires us and all other actors to step up to the challenge of improving policy, programming and conditions for girls on the move.

— Helena Thybell  
Secretary General  
Save the Children Sweden

“

Despite this, the girls in this study testify that they are not given access to education, healthcare and other services on equal terms with other children.”



Photo: Nemanja Radovanovic / Save the Children

# 1. INTRODUCTION

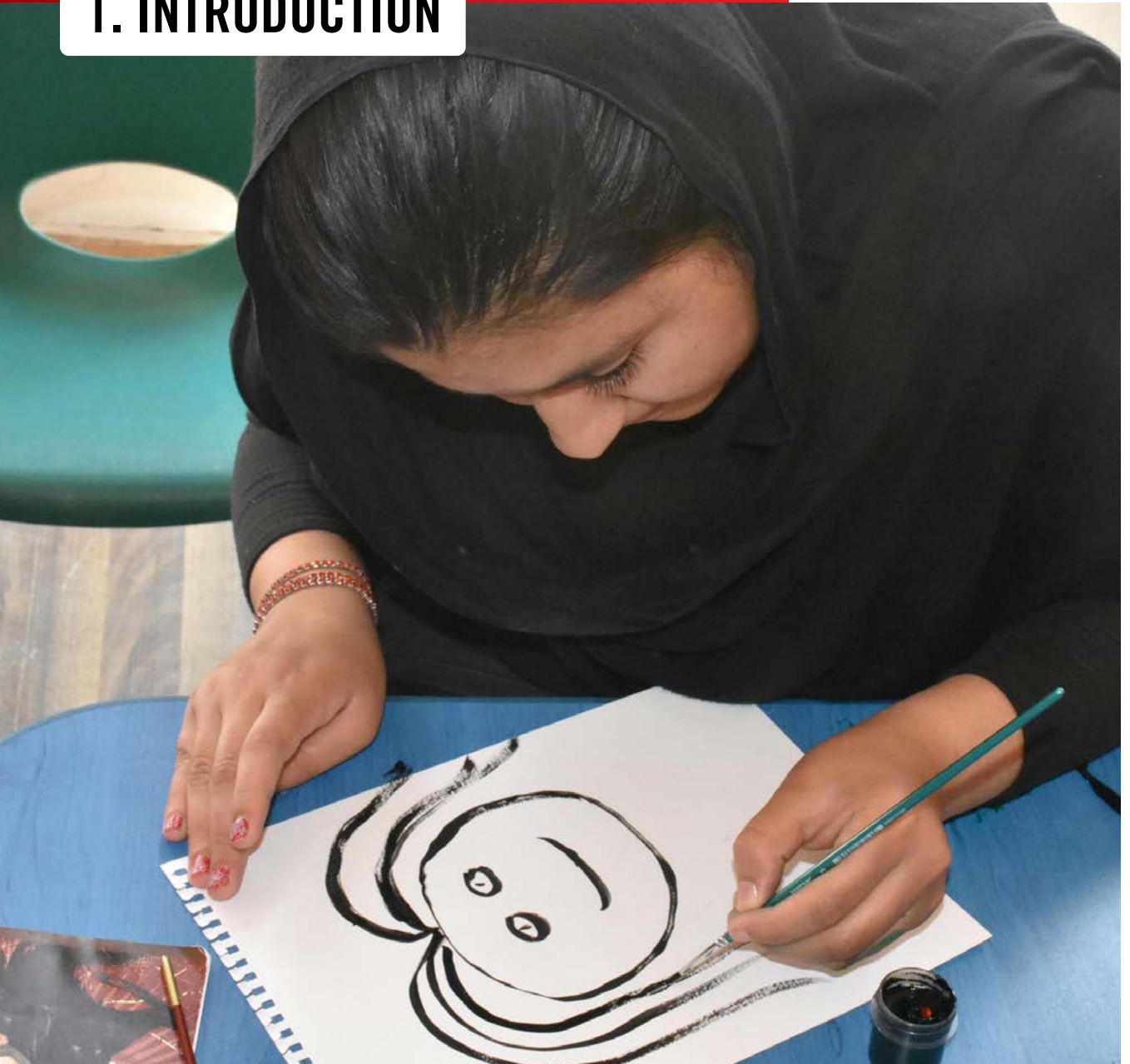


Photo: Tatjana Ristic / Save the Children

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Listening to and learning from children is an essential part of Save the Children's ongoing daily quest to do better for children in the most vulnerable and disadvantaged situations. The importance of taking a participatory approach to understanding what matters in assisting children in migration is borne out of the growing appreciation among migration researchers that migrant-centric research approaches are essential to truly making sense of the changing dynamics of migration patterns, processes and consequences.

Girls remain relatively absent from migration data and qualitative research, despite their high numbers in migration flows. As girls' experiences remain untold, programmes and policies fail to adapt to meet their needs and protect their rights. Yet, stakes are high for girls on the move. Being children and female, girls experience a significant disadvantage in terms of power, resources, control over their own bodies and access to the public space. This generates greater risks, less access to information and services and less options for safe and legal migration. Still, girls decide or are forced to migrate and demonstrate strong agency and resilience when they do. Girls themselves are the ones best placed to tell researchers and practitioners what their realities look like. As they do, a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of girls on the move will emerge.

The Girls on the Move Initiative is a global series of action research that puts girls at the centre. It has been conducted across different regions within existing Save the Children programmes. Each regional study generates targeted evidence to address knowledge gaps in current literature and programme approaches, and engages Save the Children teams to immediately strengthen ongoing interventions for girls in different stages of migration, notably during transit and arrival. Research for the series was conducted during 2019, in Southern Africa, Latin America and the Balkans. The primary purpose is to recommend evidence-based strategies to improve the relevance and effectiveness of field interventions that target development outcomes for migrant girls.

### 1.1 Objective

The Girls on the Move research series aims to build evidence for programming on how gender norms shape girls' experiences of migration, giving visibility to girls' experiences through their own voices. The studies identify the main drivers for girls to migrate and their experiences in transit and upon arrival, canalizing their agency as well as unpacking protection risks. The studies also focus on assessing the availability and accessibility of gender sensitive and transformative services adapted to girls' needs.



Being children and female, girls experience a significant disadvantage in terms of power, resources, control over their own bodies and access to the public space. ”



The girls on the move research series aims to build evidence for programming on how gender and gender norms shape girls' experiences of migration. ”

“  
It also includes participatory programme review and capacity building with teams directly responsible for implementing programming that reaches girls on the move.”

In total  
Save the Children  
spoke to  
**104**  
girls between the ages of  
**7 and 23**  
years old.

### 1.2 Methodology

The Girls on the Move Initiative is a series of action research. The methodology and emphasis in each individual study vary according to the context, but the research is mostly qualitative. In all regions, it includes literature review, participatory research with girls on the move in countries of origin, in transit and/or at destination. It also includes participatory programme review and capacity building with teams directly responsible for implementing programming that reaches girls on the move.

Listening to and learning from girls themselves has been imperative for all the individual studies, as girls themselves are the ones best placed to describe their own realities and experiences. This necessitated creating opportunities for safe, meaningful and gender sensitive child participation during the research. Permission for consultation was secured from parents, family members or other caregivers, but they were not always present during interviews. In some cases girls were also linked to psychosocial support. In total, Save the Children spoke to 104 girls between the ages of 7 and 23 years old. The research in the Balkans and Greece also included 26 adults who were parents and caregivers, or who had themselves been unaccompanied children, but at the time of the interviews were older. In some cases the girls were consulted through interviews while in others one to two day workshops were conducted.

Moreover, as the main motivation behind the research was to close the gap in existing programming and inform immediate changes to programmatic approaches, a participatory approach with programme staff was also essential. Findings were verified with the contextual expertise of field staff, as first responders on the ground. This approach not only enriched the final report recommendations but informed immediate uptake of findings through facilitated interaction with Save the Children implementing teams.

Each study followed a similar process:



### 1.3 Research questions

Research questions were adapted according to each context, but overall the Girls on the Move Initiative aims to explore the following areas of interest:

- a) Elucidate how gender and gender norms impact girls’ decision-making and motivations to migrate in places of origin;
- b) Unpack protection risks that girls face during transit and upon arrival at destination, and which coping strategies girls employ to navigate, mitigate and respond to these risks;

- c) Identify which sub-populations of girls on the move face the greatest risks. Where do the girls in the most vulnerable circumstances reside, based on the assessment of risks?
- d) Assess the availability of, and barriers to, accessing gender-sensitive services (protection, education, healthcare including sexual and reproductive healthcare) for migrant girls along targeted migration corridors;
- e) Identify protective factors to be strengthened through programming in order to advance gender equality in programme outcomes and better protect and support migrant girls during the different stages of the journey.

“ Further research is necessary to strengthen programming and outcomes for girls on the move in a context-bound way. ”

### 1.4 Regional studies

The Girls on the Move Initiative has, to date, carried out four studies in the following regions:

#### Southern Africa

Southern Africa (Migration from Mozambique and Zambia to South Africa - including refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo.)

#### Latin America

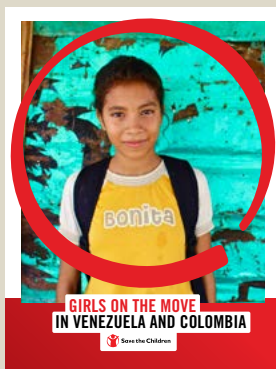
Migration from Venezuela to Colombia

Migration from Central America to Mexico

#### Europe

Migration from a wide range of countries in the Middle East and Sub Saharan Africa to the Balkans

Save the Children hopes that this research series will integrate additional studies, as challenges for girls on the move vary greatly from one context to another. Further research is necessary to strengthen programming and outcomes for girls on the move in a context-bound way.





“  
Some girls had  
fears of exposure  
or arrest  
because of being  
undocumented.”

### 1.5 Challenges and limitations

Different circumstances require different approaches and in a similar way, challenges and limitations have varied according to context. For instance, in some regions consultation has been possible across migration phases, from origin, through transit, to destination. In others, research has focused on some, but not all, of these phases, notably where girls had not yet reached what they perceived as their final destination. In some cases, it has been possible to consult a broad diversity of girls, including girls who are themselves mothers, whereas consultations have been more targeted and limited in others.

Many of the things that the girls had been through in their home countries, while in transit and at destination were difficult and often sensitive for the girls to talk





about. It was therefore essential to build trust and most research teams felt that more time would have been beneficial as the girls did have a lot to share once they started. Moreover, researchers observed that not having mixed age groups could have opened up for discussion on a broader variety of topics, including on issues such as sexual violence.

Some girls had fears of exposure or arrest because of being undocumented and many had a certain guardedness towards the researchers as a protection strategy.

However, it should be noted that despite highly traumatic experiences, many of the girls wanted to tell their stories. This can be exemplified by what happened in the workshop with the Zambian and Congolese girls in the regional study in Southern Africa. Towards the end of the first day, when the researchers realised the extent of distressing and painful experiences among the girls, especially those from the DRC, the girls were asked if it was too difficult for them to share their experiences and if they would prefer to stop telling their stories. They were all very clear in their response – that they did not want to stop and that this was an important process for them.

Some of the unaccompanied girls who were identified were accommodated in specialised shelters, where access to them was restricted to ensure their protection. Interviews required special permits, which restricted the number of interviews.

In some contexts, language was a limitation and challenge. Sometimes the girls and researchers did not speak the same language and it was a challenge to find the right interpreters.



Photo: Marija Jankovic / Save the Children

“ Many of the things that the girls had been through in their home countries, while in transit and at destination were difficult and often sensitive for the girls to talk about. ”

“ Despite highly traumatic experiences, many of the girls wanted to tell their stories. ”

## 2. BACKGROUND



Photo: Nikola Vrzic /  
Save the Children

## 2. BACKGROUND

Save the Children's **global ambition** is that all children survive, learn and are protected by 2030<sup>1</sup>. In order to achieve this goal, Save the Children seeks to accelerate progress for the children who are in the most vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances.

Girls and children on the move are both recognised as priority groups in order to close the gap for children facing the worst outcomes across and within the countries where Save the Children works. Since its inception in 1919, Save the Children has led advocacy and programming that promote upholding children's rights under all circumstances, including during migration and displacement. Girls on the move face intersecting inequalities, due to age, gender *and* migratory status, making them particularly vulnerable to a broad range of rights violations.

At present, very little exists in the way of evidence in contemporary literature and programme evaluations to guide gender-sensitive and transformative programming to improve migrant girls' prospects to survive, learn and be protected. This lack of data and knowledge creates a concern that the risks girls on the move are exposed to, are not adequately identified nor addressed. Children who migrate, are often at risk of not realising their rights, and the risks are compounded for migrant girls. Fully recognising the need for gender-sensitive and transformative approaches is essential to respond to girls' and boys' needs from a child rights perspective.

Save the Children believes that it is essential to identify and address the specific needs of girls and boys, as well as children with non-binary gender identities, if we are to fulfil our vision of a world where every child attains their equal right to survival, protection, development, and participation<sup>2</sup>. This process of gender equality integration, often called gender mainstreaming, drives positive, transformative results for children, and is key to effective and sustainable development<sup>3</sup>. The Girls on the Move Initiative acts on the fact that girls are impacted in ways that require and demand differentiated and gender-specific solutions. These solutions also need to account for the diversity of girls on the move, who are often affected by interconnected inequalities, based on age, ethnicity and dis/ability, among others.

Leveraging our global footprint and expertise as an organisation, this series enables Save the Children to generate knowledge to close the gap for girls who are migrants and displaced. This gains particular relevance during the COVID-19 and post-pandemic time, as gender inequalities are increasing and situations of vulnerability are more pronounced for many women and girls<sup>4</sup>.

### HOW MANY GIRLS ARE ON THE MOVE?

- 18 million girls aged 19 and under crossed international borders, as a result of migration or displacement, in mid-2019.
- One fifth of female migrants are 19 or under in developing countries.
- Sub-Saharan Africa: almost 30% of female migrants are girls on the move, including 2.5 million girls younger than 14. In line with overall trends of the 'feminisation' of migration, there are now more girls than boys on the move in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- Central America: more than 32% of female migrants are younger than 14.
- Greece: Girls make up around 41% of all refugee and migrant children on Greek islands.

Main source: UN DESA, 2019  
<https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>

Source for statistics in Greece: UNHCR, Aegean Islands Weekly Snapshot, 24 February - 1 March 2020

<sup>1</sup> [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15000/pdf/closing\\_the\\_gap\\_-\\_global\\_ambition\\_and\\_2019-21\\_global\\_work\\_plan.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15000/pdf/closing_the_gap_-_global_ambition_and_2019-21_global_work_plan.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/12220/pdf/save\\_the\\_children\\_-\\_gender\\_equality\\_policy\\_june\\_2017.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/12220/pdf/save_the_children_-_gender_equality_policy_june_2017.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Save the Children (2014). Save the Children Gender Equality Program Guidance and Toolkit: Engendering transformational change. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/save-children-gender-equality-program-guidance-and-toolkit-engendering-transformational>

<sup>4</sup> United Nations (2020). Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on Women, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf> Accessed on June 8, 2020.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**Save the Children seeks to advance gender equality in all aspects of our work and across our organisation, guided by the following six principles:**

**1**

### **EQUALITY AS A RIGHT**

Gender equality is an essential component of a child rights approach, and of critical importance in the fulfillment of our organisational mandate. This principle is upheld by international standards articulated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

**2**

### **ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES**

It is critical to identify and work to transform the root causes of gender inequality; this requires addressing discriminatory social norms and institutions that reinforce gender inequalities, as well as advocating for and fostering legislation and policies that promote gender equality.

**3**

### **HOLISTIC APPROACHES**

Acknowledging that gender equality is about relationships, gender transformative approaches require working with whole communities, and at all levels, equally engaging female and male stakeholders in culturally-sensitive gender equality policy and programme work.

**4**

### **MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION**

Girls and boys are active citizens. They must be equally engaged in dialogue around gender equality, and have equitable opportunities to participate in all facets of their lives, including in the promotion of gender equality, within their families, schools, communities and countries.

**5**

### **INDEPENDENT & CROSS CUTTING**

Gender equality is both an independent area of focus, as well as a critical priority across our thematic areas of focus, Global Themes and breakthroughs. Gender equality must be a central focus across our work, as well as across all parts and levels of our organisation.

**6**

### **COLLABORATION & LEARNING**

Integrating gender analysis in our research and work opens up new insights and innovative solutions to development challenges that would not otherwise be possible without a gender equality-focused approach. It is essential to foster and participate in communities of practice, collaborate with organisations and stakeholders working on gender equality, translate what we learn into practice, and to share learnings widely.

Source: Save the Children Gender Equality Policy (2017): Transforming Inequalities, Transforming Lives <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/save-children-gender-equality-policy-transforming-inequalities-transforming-lives>





Photo: Nemanja Radovanovic / Save the Children

“  
Gender equality  
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approach.”

## 3. FINDINGS



Photo: Velija Hasanbegovic /  
Save the Children



## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1 Common trends

Save the Children identified several common trends across regions. References to these trends are present within girl and practitioner narratives, yet they were under-represented within publications and previous research. They invite global programme and policymakers to re-frame our discourse around migration in a more migrant-centric, gender sensitive and intersectional way. They also question popular political and social narratives that seek to flatten the complexity of migration and girls on the move.

- Girls on the move ‘fall between the cracks’ in research, programmes and policies.** Very little evidence exists in contemporary migration literature to guide gender-sensitive programming and policy to improve girls’ prospects to survive, learn and be protected. Research focusing on children on the move often lacks a gender lens, is rarely disaggregated by sex and the specific risks and rights violations affecting migrant girls are not made visible. Similarly, literature focusing on women on the move, often fails to adopt a child rights lens, addressing the specific experiences of girls – particularly young girls. As a consequence, programmes and policies fail to adapt to their needs. To some extent, girls on the move constitute a triple anomaly to hegemonic social orders: as migrants, they are ‘out of place’ in the system of the nation-state; as females they are outside of the domestic domain assigned to them as their ‘natural’ place; and as children they are ‘unprotected’ by the institution of the family. As such, they ‘break’ with norms of childhood, associated with purity, innocence and passivity; of gender, determining ‘appropriate’ ways in which girls should act and respond; and of belonging, determining where to rightfully be and where not. Experience across contexts show that girls on the move tend to be “hidden” from the radar of service providers, policymakers and development practitioners – precisely because they do not fit predominant and stereotypical profiles against which their lives are interpreted. It is important to understand this to increase the possibility of finding ways to work with girls that are sensitive to their complex realities, to their (sometimes deliberate) invisibility and to their right to be heard. Gender, age and migratory status, along with other power differentials, all shape and intersect in the lives of girls on the move, and multiple perspectives, rather than segmented approaches, need to guide researchers, practitioners and policy-makers to account for that reality.
- Girls on the move and their experiences are diverse.** Social categories and identities intersect to shape their lived experiences that are diverse, complex and often push beyond the existing frames and categories used to describe their realities. Factors such as country of origin, language, age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, motherhood and disability intersect with gender and age to influence how girls experience their journey. The girls themselves often struggled to articulate the multiple layers to their stories and the conflicting emotions. Diverse girls bring a diverse set of needs, capabilities, and support networks. Policies and programmes may not reach or effectively support girls if they do not account for this diversity.

“Factors such as country of origin, language, age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, motherhood and disability intersect with gender and age to influence how girls experience their journey.”





**LGBTIQ+ children report high levels of sexual and other forms of violence in their communities, and high levels of violence during transit.**

## Diversity within girls on the move - the example of Mexico

- **Girls of all ages:** Given the feminisation of migration, girls of all ages travel either accompanied (with family members or caregivers) or as unaccompanied minors throughout the migration corridor.
- **Indigenous girls:** Indigenous girls originate mainly from groups of Mayan descent in Guatemala, and to a lesser extent from other indigenous populations in the region. Girls may also belong to indigenous groups from different parts of Mexico, notably the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas. Indigenous girls may speak Spanish fluently, as a second language, or have limited exposure to Spanish.
- **Afro-Latin American girls:** In a similar way to indigenous girls, Afro-Latina girls originating from Central America, particularly Caribbean Coast, as well as Mexico, may experience higher levels of violence and reduced life opportunities given the systemic racism within the region.
- **African and Haitian girls:** In recent years both Tijuana and Tapachula have seen a formation of both Haitian and African communities. Africans travel through Latin America seeking entrance and asylum within the United States. As an example, in 2013, there were less than 1,000 detected cases of African irregular migrants in Costa Rica. By 2017, that number had spiked to 17,000.
- **LGBTIQ+ children:** LGBTIQ+ children report high levels of sexual and other forms of violence in their communities, and high levels of violence during transit.
- **Girls with disability:** Little information exists on girls on the move with disability. Most descriptions of migrants with disability focus on severe challenges in detention within the US, including examples of separating deaf or mute children, or children with specialised medical needs, from family members. Disability can also occur due to injuries during transit. Save the Children teams encountered girls with limited mobility and mutism. Despite the lack of specific services, the team reported a high level of solidarity and support from peers within shelters for these children.
- **Pregnant girls and mothers:** Travel creates unique threats to pregnant girls, already considered high risk if under 16 years old. Malnutrition during travel, lack of rest, and hygiene issues experienced during travel are often exacerbated within detention contexts. Twenty eight women miscarried in US detention in the last two years. Sexual violence in origin, transit or upon arrival increases the risks of unwanted pregnancies, childbirth and unsafe abortions.
- **Orphaned girls:** High homicide and femicide rates increase the number of children, and therefore of girls, who are missing one or more parents. In a region with high prevalence of female-headed households, ranging from 28 to 34 percent of households within Northern Triangle countries, the death of a mother complicates care arrangements and stresses support networks already overwhelmed by migration.
- **Non-Spanish speakers:** French, Creole, Portuguese and other languages are represented within African migrant communities in Mexico. Families often rely on their girls, many of whom learned Spanish while traveling from South America, as “language brokers.” Language functions as a barrier to effective service delivery, particularly for legal services, and affects indigenous groups.



Photo: Sacha Myers / Save the Children



Photo: Jenn Gardella / Save the Children

“  
Travel creates unique threats to pregnant girls, already considered high risk if under 16 years old.”

“ Narratives on girls’ migration often focus on the detrimental aspects without acknowledging a far more complex reality for girls—that movement generates opportunities as well as risks. ”

“ Using transport services, cross-dressing; taking birth control; or finding a male partner prior to or during travel, travelling in caravans or together with peers or other migrants, emerged as harm reduction strategies. ”

‘One size fits all’ interventions will fail to protect the rights of girls in their diversity. In that sense, one of the most salient findings from several of the regional studies relate to girls’ care work. The vulnerability of girls who become mothers during the course of their migration journeys, and the way in which motherhood and the “burden” of care can increase girls’ invisibility and risk-taking, is clear in the narratives of girls on the move in Southern Africa. In Latin America, the role of Venezuelan girls as caregivers emerge both in origin, where they care for siblings or elder family members, and upon arrival in Colombia, posing important barriers to girls’ access to services and activities due to scheduling or lack of childcare within existing programming.

- **Girls on the move are neither “victims” nor “victors”.** Migrating girls experience agency, empowerment, and opportunity alongside harm, exploitation, and curtailment of freedoms. Narratives on girls’ migration often focus on the detrimental aspects without acknowledging a far more complex reality for girls—that movement generates opportunities as well as risks. Narratives about girls on the move tend to gravitate towards opposite poles. But their stories are far more complex. The ‘girl as victim’ portrayal may hide the agency that girls bring to travel, as well as advantages they gain from leaving their home communities where violence and harmful gender norms are often prevalent. Conversely, the ‘victors’ mentality, while highlighting girls’ agency, may not hold duty-bearers to account in ending structural failures around girls rights to safety, wellbeing, education and health.
- **Girls on the move use various strategies to self-protect and cope with challenges.** Across contexts, factors such as high levels of violence, organised crime, socio-political complexity and gender norms limit girls’ options for self-protection and personal advancement. Within those narrow parameters, evidence of girls’ efforts to self-protect still emerged. First, migration functions as a self-protection strategy. Girls often migrate as a response to immediate threats in their households or community. Many girls flee violence, often on short notice, accepting the unknown risks of travel in favour of the known risks within their communities of origin. Second, using transport services, cross-dressing, taking birth control, or finding a male partner prior to or during travel, traveling in caravans or together with peers or other migrants, also emerged as harm reduction strategies. These strategies may produce mixed results as girls rely on individuals outside their social networks, many of whom experience similar circumstances of vulnerability. Transport services, including *coyotes* in Central America or truck drivers in South Africa, may fulfil their obligation or facilitate assault. Male romantic partners may generate greater safety or intimate partner violence. More research is needed to understand how girls make decisions around risks.





Photo: Andrea Aragon / Save the Children

“**Girls migrate for many different and overlapping reasons, complicating any single narrative about girls’ migration. However, they all want to improve their situation.**”

### **3.2 Girls on the move in origin: motivations for migration**

**Girls migrate for many different and overlapping reasons, complicating any single narrative about girls’ migration.** However, they all want to improve their situation. Girls across regions decide to migrate to escape poverty or immediate threats of violence in the home and the broader community, to work or further their education, to escape political or other forms of oppression, to be reunited with their family or to take on new responsibilities after changes in the family structure.

**Poverty, violence and insecurity come across as particularly important drivers for migration in the girls’ narratives.** Poverty, including acute lack of food, as in the case of Venezuela, is highlighted by girls on the move across regions. For the older girls, poverty also manifests in their inability to continue education and difficulties in finding employment in their countries of origin.

**“We came here because we wanted money. They told us there’s no work in Mozambique, we can only find work in South Africa.”**

– Wendy, 18, Mozambique

**“There are no jobs over there [El Salvador], and I left my home to work and help my mom. It is hard to find a job over there, I work all day and things are expensive and, even if you work all day, money is not enough.”**

– Yessenia, 17, El Salvador

**“We left because of how things are there, we only ate dinner, we didn’t have breakfast or lunch.”**

– Alejandra, 13, Venezuela.

Girls across regions also reported that multiple types of violence, including life-threatening forms of gender-based violence, motivated migration. In some regions, such as Central America, overlapping forms of violence saturated all aspects of the girls’ lives, manifesting in the forms of threats, extortion, kidnapping, conscription, intimate partner violence, sexual violence and femicide. In the Balkans, the push factors identified for families and unaccompanied girls to start the migration journey were complex, but safety and the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence were mentioned as predominant factors in the decision to move. Having daughters often served as an additional motivation for leaving, including to prevent forced marriages, escape domestic violence, or ensure access to education for the girls. Two out of three respondents who came to Serbia from Iran mentioned physical, psychological, and sexual abuse as reasons for leaving their country of origin.

**“The reason we are here is my father. My father was taking drugs and gambled (...) He wanted to sell us, me and my sister, to somebody who was much older, who already had his own family and kids and was giving a lot of money to my father (...) We spoke with my mother and we made the decision. One night we escaped...”**

– Moska, Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece



**“We came from my country because my dad was very violent with my mom. He would beat her up, threaten her, he would also beat me up. So we came from my country, my mom decided to never go back to my country because my dad told her that if she ever came back he was going to kill her.”**

– Jessyca, 9, Honduras.

Insecurity and violence at community and country level are also clear reasons for leaving across all contexts. The interconnections between poverty, violence, insecurity and migration were evident throughout many of the girls’ narratives.

**Most, but not all, girls migrate voluntarily, based on a decision made on their own or with their active involvement.** That holds particularly true for girls on the move interviewed in South Africa, Colombia and Mexico. However, even if few girls seem to feel coerced by others into making the decision to migrate, they often indicate that they made the decision because they felt that they did not have other options. In this way, they exercise some control over their lives, and consider themselves social and economic actors, but they are also limited by external factors.

**“We were good until people began following me in the streets and sending messages that they would kill us. That’s when I asked my uncle to take us to my mother [who had already migrated].”**

– Ximena, 11, Honduras

By applying their decision-making power, girls who migrate away from patriarchal communities with traditional gender norms may break family expectations and social norms, and in some cases migration may lead to greater opportunities and improved status for girls. Across contexts, younger girls, travelling with their families, were less involved in the decision-making and sometimes not aware of their final destination or why they had decided to migrate. In the Balkan study, girls were often seemingly absent from decision-making around migration, but sometimes involved in a less obvious way, including through consultation with mothers, and with noticeable differences in agency between younger and older girls, unaccompanied and accompanied girls.

**“I gave a condition to my family, if we are going somewhere where I can get a passport and be able to work, I will go. They respected my opinion.”**

– Nadene, 18, Afghanistan, interviewed in BiH

**“No one asked me, but if they did, I’d say I wanted to leave.”**

– Irem, 11, Iraq, interviewed in Serbia

The research in Serbia indicated that after the decision to start the journey was made, even the older girls were largely excluded from the decision-making processes about the routes and survival strategies.



**In Southern Africa, girls in transit and at destination felt that they had sometimes been somewhat opportunistically deceived by relatives and advisors.**

### **3.3 Girls on the move in transit: planning, risks and resilience**

**Many girls plan their journeys carefully and ask for help from trusted intermediaries.** They also show a relatively high degree of awareness of risks during travel. Nonetheless, for different reasons, few girls understand what their journey will actually entail prior to departing home. In Southern Africa, girls in transit and at destination felt that they had sometimes been somewhat opportunistically deceived by relatives and advisors. This study went on to show how, in many cases, this deception directly resulted in increased vulnerability for girls. In Central America, some girls have fled immediate threats, allowing for little time and preparation prior to travel. Girls however gathered information about routes, geography, checkpoints, and safety *along* their journey, in some cases useful for subsequent attempts to migrate. In the Balkans, girls and their families reported having very little information about the journey ahead of time, and limited access to information during the journey. The girls who were interviewed in Greece said they had no prior knowledge about the risks and one girl said that she would not have embarked on the journey if she had known beforehand. In some cases, families adjusted their routes precisely to avoid gender-specific risks affecting girls.

**“They told us, since we have girls, to go through Bulgaria, others said through Romania, others said that the border police guards rape girls and women so we chose the sea route.”**

– Habib, a father interviewed in Greece, the family travelled by sea to Greece

#### **Across contexts, girls face multiple risks and challenges during transit.**

Some of these risks are new, and some are similar to those encountered within origin communities. Risks range from multiple forms of violence, including gender-based violence, detention, exploitation and denial of basic rights, to a lack of information and knowledge about how and where to access support. Many girls highlight the very tangible physical risks involved in irregular migration. A girl from the DRC, who crossed at the age of seven, remembers digging under the fence and how difficult it was. She notes that she was very scared. Likewise, other Congolese and Zambian girls spoke about the hardship of the travel, of feeling cold, not having food and the fear as they hid at the border. In Central America, many girls reported crossing rivers without knowing how to swim. Venezuelan girls reported intense experiences of hunger, sleeplessness, and discomfort. Given the multiplicity of risks, including robbery and physical and sexual assault, many girls reported rarely sleeping during nights when they did not have safe lodging. Likewise, the route to the Balkans is highly perilous and can be fatal.

**“During the journey we have to be alert all the time, looking around constantly, because you never know.”**

– Ximena, 12, Venezuela.

**“...From Turkey to Greece it was very hard...very hard. Six times we tried to cross from Turkey to Greece...we tried, we tried...and we didn't make it, we stayed four days in the snow. The second time, three days it was raining, we stayed in the rain. (...) Because we were a large group of people, the police caught us. (...) All the things we had with us, they found them, they took them...they took us back to the river, at the border between Turkey- Greece and burned our things in front of us (...) They were wearing masks so we could not see their faces (...) they told us to keep our heads down, whoever moved, they beat (...) The days in the snow were so hard. Imagine being four-five days in the forests, in the snow, with no food, nothing. The last night, when I woke up, I lost my senses, I was frozen. I had frozen and lost my senses from the cold, everyone took off their jacket and put them on me so I would get warm.”**

– Massah, 17, Afghanistan

The girls in Greece said that they could not remember the exact places they passed through and the borders they crossed. This loss of memory might be the result of trauma, intensity of the migration experience, fatigue from the journey, or the detachment from the decision-making process during the journey. They spoke of a general sense of disorientation, frequently saying “I don't know exactly.” The girls had to travel by walking long distances of 10 to 15 hours in harsh weather conditions, facing police brutality, violence and detention under protective custody, often wandering the streets homeless and hungry.

Physical and sexual violence permeates every aspect of transit and is a reality and a constant threat for girls on the move. The majority of girls also spoke about the border crossings, which were perceived as particularly dangerous. In the Balkans, girls highlighted the brutality and violence of the police and border guards. Venezuelan girls pointed at the increased insecurity caused by criminal entities and armed splinter groups at the border. Central American girls highlighted brutal assaults by groups targeting migrants.



**Physical and sexual violence permeates every aspect of transit and is a reality and a constant threat for girls on the move.”**

**“On the train tracks, we were assaulted by eight people. We met two Hondurans and they hit one of them with the machete here [indicates her face]. All my clothes were covered with blood, I had to throw out almost all those clothes. We took the kid they cut so he could get stitches... They took my gold chain and mobile phone. They took everything and told us we had 20 minutes to leave running, and if not, they would kill us. We climbed on the train. So, without any money, we continued, we climbed on the train and the federal police caught us.”**

– Fernanda, 17, El Salvador

**“Right there, in the *trochas* [illegal border crossings between Venezuela and Colombia], they kill people, or they rape them, or they threaten them.”**

– Inés, 12, Venezuela

**“The moment where I felt most fear was at the dining room when those guys asked my friend’s husband to sell us. They would have kidnapped us and who knows what would have happened to us. I felt really scared.”**

– Adriana, 17, Honduras

**“In the *trocha*, my mom saw a boy do something and they cut him. They also raped a little girl.”**

– Rosa, 14, Venezuela.

**Findings across regions also indicate that girls develop coping mechanisms and protection strategies in transit – some of which may backfire.** Across all Girls on the Move studies, complex patterns of risk and protection emerge within girls’ social relationships. The same people who expose girls to risk are often those who girls report as providing protection. Programming that leverages and addresses the complexities of the relationships girls establish with intermediaries could potentially serve migration outcomes for girls on the move. In Southern Africa, girls often rely on the protection of a truck driver to cross multiple borders in one journey. They help them negotiate borders, find food if needed and ensure they meet with the relative or friend that they were making their way to join. In Central America, girls employ guides, also called *coyotes* or *polleros*, to navigate risks and cross the borders. Smugglers were also used by girls and families to reach the Balkans, in this case often entailing extreme risks and danger.

**“I would not say that we jumped the border like other people. All I know is that we were paying and then they will hide us like in the buses they will put us under the chairs whenever we get to the border, I do not even know the borders. We all do not know the borders. But we were hiding inside the bags, underneath the bags and inside the trucks, we were hiding. Because we did not have papers.”**

– Ariel, 20, DRC

**“I went with a guide, one pays for the trip oneself, let’s say that I take you to the border with US\$3,000... he has to find the paths, [help you to] cross a river or take another way.”**

– Yessenia, 17, El Salvador

**“...From the moment I left Afghanistan until I arrived here, the smugglers took advantage of me... Because I was alone with my children, I gave them more money, to take me somewhere safe, so nobody, nobody could bother us... But this didn't change anything. They took my money, all my money, they took also my honour. It was at the borders between Iran and Afghanistan, they raped me. It was the worst that could ever happen to me. He called me and asked 5,000 dollars extra and said that I should not worry, they would take my family across safely, take us somewhere safe. The next morning, he called me again and I was thinking he wants us to start (the journey: our explanation) that's why he called. He closed the door...”**

– Nagham, mother of four children from Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece

**Girls also develop friendships** and strong networks with other girls and women prior to travel and during transit. In the Balkans and Southern Africa, networks of girls and older migrant women played an important protective role for girls in planning and executing migration plans. In some cases, mothers were reported to have helped girls escaping from forced marriages or domestic violence. In Central America, girls had developed strong bonds with other migrant girls during transit and in detention. Girls also sought out other companions for travel as a protective strategy, including male and female peers as well as families. In some contexts, such as the Balkans and Central America, girls and their families decided to travel in big groups, including caravans, to feel safer.

**“My sister and mother are my biggest support.”**

– Leila, 20, Syria, interviewed in Serbia

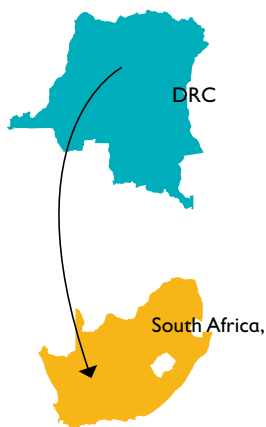
### **3.4 Girls on the move at destination: continued risks and right violations**

**Girls migrate dreaming of a better future and, in some cases recognise improvements in their situation upon arrival, but also continued risks.**

Venezuelan girls particularly highlight the improved access to basic goods, including being able to eat three meals a day in Colombia. However, girls on the move across contexts also highlight severe challenges and risks, as part of their daily lives. Lack of education and health services, lack of appropriate housing, fear for their safety, difficulties in accessing decent work and exposure to multiple forms of violence and xenophobia are reported by girls.

**“When we reached Samos, they took me to the camp. Sleep and food were awful. First, I was in a tent, then in a container. There were police outside but no security. People opened the door in the middle of the night. We were 15 girls in one container.”**

– Itimad, Kuwait, interviewed in Greece



**Lack of documentation emerged as a critical factor shaping the migration experiences and migration outcomes for most of the girls who participated.**

Across contexts, it obstructs access to services, such as healthcare and education, and causes high levels of anxiety and fear. Documentation – or lack of documentation – directly and critically shapes every aspect of the girls’ migration experience. It determines the risks faced on a journey, how borders are crossed, who the girls meet, who helps them, who exploits them and the challenges faced in the host country. In South Africa, many of the younger girls, particularly from the DRC, had little idea about what documents they required and how to get them. They had not pre-planned their journeys, but had been forced to run from their homes and therefore arrived unprepared and not knowing how to make things work. For Venezuelan girls in Colombia, even if aware of the requirements, proper documentation was often unavailable in their home country. In the Balkans, some girls had been robbed of all their belongings along the route, and others were reluctant to confirm if they had identity documents with them. This may be due to factors such as the fear of being registered as an asylum seeker in a country they have not considered as the destination, fear that the police will take or destroy their documents, or the identity documents having been seized by smugglers to control payments. While girls with documents also face discrimination, stigma and xenophobia in many different circumstances, for those without documents, these issues were significantly heightened. For some of the girls in South Africa, it meant that they did not leave the house, for others that they had to map out their daily lives around safe and unsafe spaces. Adolescent mothers face the additional challenge of obtaining documentation for their young children, which became particularly clear in the case of migrant girls in South Africa.

**“We want to study, but they tell us we are not allowed to because we are Venezuelans.”**

– Yanire, 16, Venezuela

**“We can’t get to school because we don’t have the paper.”**

– Faith, 14, Zambia

**Lack of documentation often translates into lack of access to services.**

Girls across contexts highlight difficulties in accessing both education and healthcare. In Colombia, despite the government’s commitment to provide education to Venezuelan children, girls reported not being able to access, due to over-crowded schools, Venezuelan students lacking certificates of previous studies, girls’ own mobility, and the failure of schools to comply with national statutes. In Serbia and BiH, there was also a gap in access to learning when comparing to boys on the move, and fewer or no activities or schooling were available to older girls in comparison to younger girls in these two countries. Still, girls across contexts identified schools as safe spaces and many indicated a strong desire to continue studying.



Serbia

**“I have completed primary school and two years of medical secondary school. I was supposed to be a midwife. No one has offered us anything here regarding the continuation of our education. They have, for my younger brothers who are in elementary school, but for my sister and me they haven’t. All I have learned is on a standstill.”**

– Saba, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia



### Case study: How lack of pre-migration information can impact legal status

Rachel (aged 10) and Genoria (aged 18), two sisters from the DRC who had travelled alone to South Africa to find their grandmother described how, although people from their local community put money together for them to travel to South Africa after their parents were killed in the war in DRC, no one had discussed documentation.



*Genoria's drawing of her father's death in DRC*

Genoria explained that the girls could not go to Home Affairs to claim asylum seeker status as they had no papers – not even their birth certificates. She also told us that her younger sister, Rachel should be on the grandmother's asylum application due to her age but that they had been told they needed a birth certificate to do this. She wondered, "if I go to the embassy if I just give my name and the hospital I was born maybe they can help."

**My father was killed when he was cutting wood and bringing it on the river and my mother went to look for him and she did not come back. So we sell things for the house. In the area where we are staying with people, we also ask them keep the money, I think I was fourteen. No one said about papers and Rachel and I were too young so we did not know.**

– Genoria, 18, DRC



**Documentation – or lack of documentation – directly and critically shapes every aspect of the girls' migration experience. ”**



**In South Africa, girls described being mistreated in government clinics and charged upfront for care.**

Similarly, girls identify barriers to accessing healthcare. In South Africa, girls described being mistreated in government clinics and charged upfront for care. In particular, they highlighted challenges when accessing reproductive and maternal healthcare, including neglect and abuse when giving birth. Given the fact that many of the girls interviewed had become mothers at a young age, these challenges are concerning. The girls also felt that there is a clear difference in terms of healthcare needs and access for girls and boys. Being a migrant girl comes with gendered implications, which may further restrict access to health, education and other essential services - more so than for migrant boys of the same age. In Colombia and the Balkans, girls also highlighted restrictions in accessing healthcare.

**“If we get sick, they don’t receive us at the hospital because we need to have a Colombian identity card, so I can’t go to the hospital. If I get sick, we need to buy medicines. I haven’t gotten sick so far. I just had the flu, but that’s all.”**

– Lorena, 15, Venezuela



Photo: Jenn Gardella / Save the Children

Girls also highlight difficulties in accessing decent work. Poverty, one of the key drivers behind girls’ migration in the first place, continued to be a dire reality for girls on the move upon arrival in host countries. Across contexts, the lack of access to decent work, also increases the risks of sexual exploitation.

**Girls on the move report a constant threat of violence in host countries.**

Girls on the move, often recognise violence as one of the reasons for migrating in the first place, they highlight continued exposure to multiple forms of violence in the host countries. For Venezuelan girls in Colombia, different forms of gender-based violence, including intimate partner and sexual violence, continued to restrict girls’ liberty of movement and access to the public space. Living in make-shift settlements, girls reported being afraid to go out at night and lacking access to safe toilets or hygiene facilities. For migrant adolescent girls, with family members far away and limited social networks in the host country, situations of intimate partner violence may rapidly escalate. Social isolation may be further compounded if they have children of their own. Lack of support services and limited information for survivors puts girls on the move at even further risk and, when services are available, many are still unlikely to seek support or report incidences of violence, given their irregular status and fear of deportation. In South Africa, girls on the move not only reported neighbourhood or interpersonal violence, but it was also clear from interviews that violence against the girls is often perpetrated by officials of the state. Similarly, girls in the Balkans also highlighted violence from the police and smugglers, along with reports of sexual violence in the camps.

**“Men when they get here they become rough because they can mistreat you, they know you have nowhere to go. But in Mozambique they know you have relatives, you have neighbours that care, so it’s different, yes.”**

– Girl, 18, Mozambique



Photo: Nikola Vrzic / Save the Children

“

For Venezuelan girls in Colombia, different forms of gender-based violence, including intimate partner and sexual violence, continued to restrict girls' liberty of movement and access to the public space. Living in make-shift settlements, girls reported being afraid to go out at night and lacking access to safe toilets or hygiene facilities. ”





Photo: Salvador Zuleta / Save the Children

“

For instance, explaining why it was difficult to go to school, the girls mentioned instances of islamophobia, racism and xenophobia.”

**“On the island, at Moria, this thing happened, very violent, very violent...  
the worst thing that could happen, in my mind I never thought that in  
Europe something like this could happen.”**

– Moska, Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece

### **Girls on the move also report experiencing high levels of xenophobia.**

In South Africa, the constant threat of violence and xenophobia kept girls “underground”, even when they were likely to be granted asylum. In Colombia, sexual stereotyping of Venezuelan girls and women throughout the region, exacerbates protection risks and complicates social integration, especially in school environments, where sexualized stereotyping by peers as well as some male teachers resulted in girls experiencing schools as places where they could not feel safe. Similarly, in the Balkan study, girls highlighted that instances of xenophobia from the local community, compounded by the lack of support and cultural misconceptions by NGOs and public servants, serve as barriers to their social inclusion. For instance, explaining why it was difficult to go to school, the girls mentioned instances of islamophobia, racism and xenophobia. There is a dire need to urgently and seriously consider strategies to promote tolerance, alleviate tension between host communities and migrants, prevent violence against migrant girls and address xenophobic attitudes among authorities interacting with child migrant populations.

**Across contexts, there are many examples of girls demonstrating agency and resilience in the face of adversity.** Although they did not, and perhaps could not have anticipated many of the hardships they faced once in host countries, many girls had worked out plans based on what they needed to do, and with a future orientation of studying, earning money and making life better. The findings also show that girls support each other. In South Africa, the study highlights how Mozambican and Zambian girls developed strong support networks, as did Central American girls in detention in Southern Mexico. The girls in Greek shelters also relied on and created networks of support among each other, developing relationships and friendships that sometimes last long after they have left the shelters. A very interesting finding from this study concerned the importance of a specific bond between mothers and daughters in all stages of the migration journey, during planning and decision making. This bond often also served as one of the most important protective factors for the girls, and also strengthened the girls’ resilience during the journey. Support was less evident with the Congolese girls in South Africa. Their situations, which were generally more desperate and difficult, meant that they focused on themselves and were unable to lean on others. A similar situation was found among Venezuelan girls in Colombia.



**In South Africa, the study highlights how Mozambican and Zambian girls developed strong support networks, as did Central American girls in detention in Southern Mexico.**



## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS



Photo: Nikola Vrzic / Save the Children

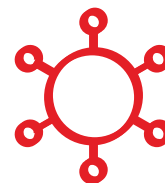


## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Core recommendations

The findings of the global research series on girls on the move should be read as a call to civil society and duty bearers to step up to fulfil the rights of girls on the move. The overall recommendation to all child rights actors is to reflect critically on the way in which we approach the work with girls in the context of mobility. It is essential that we understand the policies and social norms that shape the contexts in which girls on the move are left to pursue the realisation of their rights.

- **Listen to, and learn from, girls.** They are the ones best placed to tell us about their experiences. Girls must have a say in what they think would best support them, increase their chances of moving safely and ensure that their rights are respected. Listening to and learning from girls refers to a range of activities including age and gender-sensitive monitoring and evaluation; informal conversations and listening sessions; rapid situational analyses; consultations; and formal qualitative and quantitative research. These girl-centric processes ensure that programme and policy decisions stem from information that is current, specific, and relevant to girls. Girls on the move provide real-time information and explain how they cope. Save the Children and other actors can then build from what girls are saying and already doing.
- **Make gender analysis a prerequisite in research, programming and advocacy.** For interventions targeting children on the move to address the needs and protect the rights of all children, a thorough intersectional gender analysis needs to guide programmatic and advocacy efforts. If such an analysis is neglected, girls on the move may continue to “fall between the cracks”, as interventions fail to adopt gender-sensitive or transformative strategies. As a minimum standard, gender and age disaggregated data should be used across research, policy and advocacy to allow decision-makers and practitioners to identify gaps and trends.
- **Recognise the diversity of girls on the move.** Girls on the move have a diverse set of needs, capabilities, and support networks. Policies and programmes may not reach or effectively support girls if they do not account for this diversity. Programmes should consider how factors such as age, language, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, motherhood, care structures, and familial arrangements generate specific needs for girls or affect how girls access existing services. Save the Children has identified the need to enhance programming for adolescent girls; young mothers, pregnant girls, married girls, girls with childcare responsibilities; survivors of gender-based violence – and particularly victims of sexual exploitation; girls living in the street; girls with disabilities and girls suffering from complex traumas. There is also a need to strengthen programming for LGBTIQ+ children. However, interventions for girls on the move need to be context-bound and efforts to adapt programming should account for the specific factors and inequalities which may generate risks, access barriers and rights violations in each setting.



Girls on the move have a diverse set of needs, capabilities, and support networks.”



There is also a need to strengthen programming for LGBTIQ+ children.”

Photo: Nikala Vrzic / Save the Children



“  
Girls on the move deal with xenophobia and violence on a constant basis, not only as a threat, but in many instances in its full force as a daily reality and accepted part of what it takes to interact in the host country.”

Measures such as translation, child care, or making the facilities accessible for children with disabilities can significantly increase accessibility for more diverse groups of girls on the move.

- **Shift the narrative of girls as either ‘victims’ or ‘victors.’** Their identities and lives are far more complex. The ‘girl as victim’ portrayal may hide the agency that girls bring to mobility, as well as the advantages they could potentially gain from leaving home communities where violence and harmful social norms may be prevalent. Conversely, the ‘victors’ mentality, while highlighting girls’ agency, may not hold duty-bearers to account in ending structural failures on girl’s rights. Policy and programmatic interventions for girls on the move need to recognise the complexity and multiple layers that shape girls’ migration experiences, building upon their resilience and agency, while also addressing the risks and rights violations that they face.
- **Consider gender-based violence prevention and response as a core aspect of programming and policy that targets children.** The prevalence of multiple forms of gender-based violence as a daily reality for girls who participated in this research, as well as its broadly cited eminence in secondary literature, needs to inform the approach of any intervention aiming to improve the situation for girls on the move, regardless of thematic sector. Programming and policy should target men and boys, as well as girls and women, for the prevention of gender-based violence in origin communities; promote access to information about existing services for survivors while in transit; and increase availability and access of these services along the route as well as in destination countries. Social networks of girls can also be strengthened to increase support and provide strategies for mitigating risks related to gender-based violence.
- **Address xenophobia.** Girls on the move deal with xenophobia and violence on a constant basis, not only as a threat, but in many instances in its full force as a daily reality and accepted part of what it takes to interact in the host country. Some expressions of xenophobia are clearly gendered, increasing the specific risks girls on the move face. Policy as well as programmatic efforts need to urgently consider strategies to promote tolerance, alleviate tension between host communities and children and adults on the move, prevent violence against migrant girls, and address xenophobic attitudes among authorities and other actors interacting with children on the move.

## 4.2 Recommendations for programming

- **Prepare and equip girls on the move.** Long-term efforts entail investigating the drivers of migration in countries of origin, including gender- and age specific drivers, and investing in creating and promoting safe, regular and legal pathways to destination. However, shorter encounters, awareness-raising, information, and peer learning sessions could also reach girls with information and harm-reduction strategies. While short courses cannot guarantee safety, they can enhance girls' existing self-protection strategies. Peer learning strategies or technology may be an effective way to share information in an emotionally accessible way. Such preparation could link to existing efforts to reduce irregular migration, while providing girls with the information to decide if migration is in their best interest. Content could include mapping risks, information about public and civil society actors, contact information for family reunification and an overview of existing policies that could impact girls on the move.
- **Create programmes that build on peer-to-peer support or intergenerational solidarity among women and girls.** This will enable them to create networks to formulate their needs and advocate better for their rights. Involve mothers and sisters in programme activities targeting girls, including psychosocial support and education. Develop targeted information materials that build upon and encourage the solidarity and exchange between women and girls.
- **Integrate child care as part of programming and target young caregivers.** Parenthood and sibling-care responsibilities keep girls within the home, increasing girls' invisibility and limiting their access to important services and programming. Save the Children has begun to integrate childcare functions into programming, making it accessible to a broader range of children, including girls who are mothers and girls responsible for child care. Such efforts should be examined for replicability with a broader range of contexts.
- **Engage a broad variety of stakeholders.** Engaging actors beyond the "usual suspects" to promote awareness and understanding of the rights of girls on the move and their realities could strengthen positive outcomes for girls on the move. Such efforts could include enlisting support of actors that girls themselves decide to engage with, such as transport unions and truck drivers in the Southern African context, through targeted mobilisation and behaviour change.
- **Provide girls-only safe spaces to strengthen girls' empowerment, support networks and skills:** Girls need safe spaces characterised by the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence and abuse. Girls' clubs, life skills programmes, or other types of girl-centred activities provide girls with a safe space, trained mentors, guided peer learning and age-appropriate skills acquisition in transit and at destination. Health services, including sexual and reproductive health and psychosocial support, should also be made available.

“  
Efforts entail investing in creating and promoting safe, regular and legal pathways to destination.”



“  
Girls need safe spaces characterized by the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence and abuse.”



“  
Consistent and strong advocacy focused on the protection of migrant girls from exploitation, not just trafficking, is vital and has to draw on solid evidence that captures the complexity of girls crossing borders.”

- Focus on seeking out those girls in the most vulnerable circumstances, attending to their diversity, i.e. girls who are mothers or have other caregiving responsibilities;
- Ensure interventions are accessible and relevant for girls on the move, and target service providers and duty bearers whose paths intersect those of girls on the move;

- **Develop and offer positive parenting to parents on the move.** Positive parenting programmes that strengthen parent capacity to protect children and reduce abuse within the household have been shown effective at improving parent-child communication and play a protective role for children, even in low-income or conflict-affected contexts.<sup>5</sup> Globally, parenting programmes often integrate issues such as financial literacy, reproductive and sexual health, and other topics aiming at addressing root causes that limit parents from performing a protective role. Moreover, parenting programmes should to a greater extent involve men as equitable caregivers and include specific modules related to gender equality. Such efforts have proven to benefit children, women and men themselves.

#### 4.3 Recommendations for policymakers

- **Advocate for the protection of undocumented girls on the move and hold authorities accountable to realise their rights.** Children's rights need to be upheld under all circumstances, including during migration and displacement, even if undocumented.
- **Challenge state policies aimed at further restricting migration and making legal entry into a country harder as they increase the risks that girls face while on the move.** The findings are clear that the more barriers girls face to enter a country legally the more risks they face, which can lead to rights violations such as trafficking, smuggling and sexual exploitation. Therefore, policies that focus on 'protection from trafficking' to justify further migration restrictions actually make girls less safe as they move. They can also increase the risks of trafficking as girls seek more clandestine ways of moving across borders. Consistent and strong advocacy focused on the protection of girls on the move from exploitation, not just trafficking, is vital and has to draw on solid evidence that captures the complexity of girls crossing borders.
- **Ensure effective access to asylum procedures and promote durable solutions for girls on the move and their families.** This entails, among other measures, ensuring that asylum processes are age and gender sensitive, responding to the specific needs and rights violations faced by girls on the move. Effective asylum protection for gender-based prosecution is one example of such measures, aligning with the Guidelines on International

<sup>5</sup> Puffer, Eve S., Annan, J., Sim, A. L., Salhi, C., & Betancourt, T. S. (2017). The impact of a family skills training intervention among Burmese migrant families in Thailand: A randomized controlled trial. PLOS ONE, 12(3), e0172611. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0172611>



Photo: Save the Children





“Effective asylum protection for gender-based prosecution is one example of such measures, aligning with the Guidelines on International Protection on Gender-Related Persecution within the context of Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, as well as subsequent interpretative UNHCR guidelines and doctrine.”

Protection on Gender-Related Persecution within the context of Article 1A (2) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, as well as subsequent interpretative UNHCR guidelines and doctrine. It also entails supporting successful integration models, such as opportunities to join the workforce and independent living for the families, and access to permanent residency permits.

- **Improve child protection procedures upon identification at the borders.** This entails ensuring that border police have the capacity to safeguard girls on the move in a gender-sensitive way in line with child safeguarding protocols. Establish connections with relevant bodies for child protection and improve standard operating procedures to immediately involve child protection authorities in all cases involving children. Monitor authority actors in contact with girls on the move to ensure compliance with laws and procedures.
- **Ensure effective access to age and gender-sensitive information about children’s rights, support services and legal options in countries of transit and destination.** Map information exchange within refugee and migrant communities and invest in building trust to be able to provide information, raise awareness about risks of travelling irregularly and counter misinformation spread by smugglers or other refugees and migrants.
- **Ensure access to health services,** including maternal, pre-natal and mental health services as well as sexual and reproductive health and psychosocial support activities to address the effects of the traumatic journey but also of living under harsh conditions, in detention centres or in refugee camps.
- **Ensure accountability for human rights violations affecting girls on the move by ensuring age-appropriate and gender sensitive reporting mechanisms.** Moreover, promote the collection of data on children on the move disaggregated by sex, age, parental status, location and ethnicity to provide evidence for quality research and ensure evidence-based advocacy.

#### 4.4 Recommendations for further research

Further research is needed to fully understand the complex realities of girls on the move, including more in-depth analysis around some of the issues surfaced by the regional studies conducted as part of this series. For instance, investigating the strategies of girls travelling under different circumstances; such as girls travelling with peers or girls who are pregnant and how these circumstances influence how they mitigate risks or what routes they choose. Further research related to girls on the move could target:

- **Risk, Coping Strategies, Self-Protection, and Learning** (for girls in transit, repatriated, or girls who have attempted more than one journey): How do girls understand the difference between risks in their communities of origin and transit? What action did girls take to prevent harm? What did they begin







What would they have wanted to know prior to travel? ”



Where did girls get information, prior to and during journey? ”

doing differently as the journey progressed? What would they have wanted to know prior to travel?

- **Information-sharing prior to and during travel:** Where did girls get information, prior to and during journey? Was it accurate? What information would they share with peers from home communities? What information did girls traveling wish they had prior to leaving?
- **Caregiving:** Do girls experience abuse or exploitation within caregiving situations? Does gender or age influence degree of care received? If so, how does it influence their decisions to migrate? How do families determine who acts as caregiver? What caregiving roles do girls themselves play and how does it impact their situation in origin, transit and upon arrival?
- **Decision-making:** Were girls with close friends or peers who migrated more likely to travel? Did family members suggest to girls that they should migrate? If girls drove the decision-making, how did they convince others to go with them?
- **Accompaniment:** What factors do girls and their families consider when figuring out who to travel with? How do girls make decisions about who to travel with? How have girls experienced travel with other groups of young people?
- **Lack of documents:** What are the reasons for refugee and migrant girls and their families frequently being without their documents? Initial findings in this series suggest that there are multiple reasons, including not having documents to start with or hiding documents for fear of being robbed of them or documented in the “wrong” place. Further research is also needed to analyse how the lack of documents affect access to services.
- **Sexual exploitation and the body as basis for transaction:** Throughout the Girls on the Move studies, girls’ bodies often become a basis for transaction, in context-specific ways. These include, among others, trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation; trading sex for basic needs and resources and child marriage or unions with men, often older than the girls themselves, in order to secure safety or financial stability. Confirming the scope and scale of these practices remains a global challenge, including how coercion and agency may, in some cases, interact, and should be further researched.



## GLOBAL RESEARCH SERIES: GIRLS ON THE MOVE

### SUMMARY

The Girls on the Move Initiative is a global series of **action research** conducted across different regions within existing Save the Children programmes. Each regional study generates targeted evidence to address knowledge gaps in current literature and programme approaches, and engages Save the Children teams to **immediately strengthen ongoing interventions for girls** in different stages of migration, notably during transit and arrival. The methodology and emphasis vary according to the context, but the research is mostly qualitative. In all contexts, the methodology includes **literature review, participatory research** with girls on the move in countries of origin, in transit and/or at destination, participatory **programme review and capacity building** with country and regional office teams directly responsible for implementing programming that reaches girls on the move. Through this initiative, we hope to cultivate a more nuanced understanding within and beyond Save the Children of how gender impacts the experiences and outcomes for children in migration and displacement. The research reports are published as a series with a global summary that presents interventions for quick uptake to accelerate our collective ability to seek out and reach girls on the move and achieve **Ambition 2030**.

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Find our other reports on children on the move at the Resource Centre,  
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/girls-move-research-series>