

Beyond borders: Mitigating risks of separation, going missing and dying for migrant women and children through improved migration laws, policies and practices

I. Introduction

Migrants, particularly women and children, face significant risks to their safety, dignity and well-being during their journeys, including risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying. These risks are not only associated with the nature of their journeys across challenging topography or perilous sea routes but can be exacerbated by restrictive migration laws and policies which may prevent access to humanitarian assistance and protection.

The securitisation of migration¹, including the political construction of migrants as a 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 concerns². Similarly, externalisation – the tendency of 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 – has increased over the last decade³.

New research led by the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab, in collaboration with 17 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in Europe, the Americas and Africa, and involving over 800 participants, highlights how the actions of various actors, conditions of the journey and existing migration laws, policies and practices have the potential to either contribute to or mitigate the risks of becoming separated, going missing or dying for migrant women and children.

This brief builds on that research and explores how restrictive migration policies, including those associated with securitization and externalization, can undermine the safety, dignity and well-being of migrants, including women and children, during their journeys.

II. Migration policies and exposure to threats

The research underscores that 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 migrants in need of life-saving support or assistance may not come forward due to fears of arrest, detention or deportation⁴.

¹Securitisation 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.

²Hoagland 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](#).

³See Hoagland N. and Arias Cubas M. (2024), note 2; 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](#).

⁴Arias Cubas M., Hoagland N., Mudaliar S. (2022), *Migrants’ perspectives: Building trust in humanitarian action*, Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab, Sydney. [Available online](#).

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 women and children – may be more likely to undertake risky journeys, increasing their vulnerability to death, separation, and going missing. Likewise, support to third countries in the management of national borders – including migration enforcement measures – can often compel migrants to rely on long and more dangerous routes, further enhancing their vulnerability. Migrants may also tend to hide along routes, for example, out of fear of being caught and detained, making them further invisible. Such invisibility, intended as a self-protection strategy, renders migrants more isolated and exposed to greater threats.

Furthermore, migration policies 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. This gap can also impact migrants' decisions on when and how to migrate. For example, complex and lengthy family reunification processes are cited as a direct reason in the research for family separation, with migrants embarking on irregular journeys in efforts to rejoin family members. Similarly, the potential benefits of existing regularisation programs may be hindered by administrative costs and bureaucratic processes that limit the ability of the most vulnerable –including women and children– to access these programs.

The research demonstrates the interdependent risks and threats experienced by migrant women and children due to their irregular status during their journeys. These relate to conditions of the journey and a lack of access to essential services, as well as exposure to the actions of various actors, including smugglers, criminal gangs and non-state armed groups. Migrants often travel through countries experiencing armed conflict or other situations of violence, or through hostile environments, such as seas, deserts and other remote areas. They are often compelled to travel in dangerous and informal modes of transportation on their journeys, including on unseaworthy boats and in crowded lorries, increasing the risk of death. In the research, poor vessels and harsh sea conditions as well as the lack of protective gear such as life jackets contributed to migrant women and children's deaths, as did exposure to extreme temperatures across deserts and mountains. The conditions of the journey, combined with a lack of access to essential services along the way, frequently led to dehydration, starvation and hypothermia.

Moreover, the research outlines how the actions of non-state actors along the dangerous and often remote journeys migrant women and children take contribute to risks of separation, going missing and dying and expose migrants to significant harm. Across all regions in the research, smugglers often separated migrant women and children from other family members or travel companions, both to optimize loading of vehicles and boats, and to more effectively exert control, including to facilitate human trafficking. This forced separation contributed to loss of contact and heightened risks of going missing. Migrants are often targeted by criminal gangs who attack and rob them, with women and children being particularly vulnerable to injury, rape, and death. Kidnapping for ransom is also a critical threat evident in the research, with migrant women and children abused and even killed when their families cannot pay the ransom.

III. Gender and age dimensions

The research underscores how gender and age impact the risks faced by migrants during their journeys and the importance of considering and accounting for the unique needs of migrant women and children in both migration laws, policies and practices and in the provision of humanitarian assistance and protection.

Migrant women and children face overlapping risks during their journeys, including related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), a lack of access to essential services and economic precarity. Supporting migrant women and children requires both an immediate and long-term protection response. Protection in this context goes beyond physical safety. It includes legal protection, accountability mechanisms, the broader promotion of human rights and access to essential services such as healthcare and education.

SGBV is a key protection risk outlined in the research. It occurs at all stages of migration journeys in situations of vulnerability and includes sexual violence, family violence, forced marriage and human trafficking, among other forms. SGBV is both a motivation for migration, including for migrants taking risky journeys to seek safety – often quickly and without access to necessary documents or financial means to travel via regular routes – as well as a reason for separation and cessation of contact during journeys. Migrant women and children are susceptible to rape and other forms of sexual violence and, in many instances, may not seek help or assistance due to fear of arrest, detention or deportation, as well as due to shame. This shame also contributes to the risk of prolonged separation from other family members, increasing risks of going missing.

In addition to SGBV, the research underlines that migrant women and children are particularly vulnerable to starvation, dehydration and physical exhaustion during their journeys, factors contributing to both deaths and separation, including when they are left behind due to an inability to keep up with the group. For women, carrying children during the journey can hinder their ability to stay safe and alive, including by increasing physical exhaustion, as well as inhibiting their ability to move quickly away from danger – such as in armed conflict or when attacked by gangs – or to swim when boats capsize. Being pregnant, as well as giving birth along the journey also increases risks of death for migrant women and newborn babies, primarily due to lack of access to relevant medical care. The research also suggests gendered decision-making occurs during journeys, with men sometimes leaving women and children behind in search of food or further assistance, or women and children migrating ahead while men remain behind to look after the home and belongings in times of armed conflict. In general, the data indicates that migrant women and children are more vulnerable to threats when traveling without men, increasing risks of violence, abuse and exploitation. Children, too, face unique threats because of their age, particularly when unaccompanied or separated, with heightened exposure to risks of trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

IV. Recommendations for action

The research demonstrates that securitization and externalization and an absence of protection for migrant women and children contributes to increased risks of separation, going missing or dying. This underscores the importance of a principled humanitarian approach to migration that focuses on migrants' needs and vulnerabilities, irrespective of legal status, type or category.

To further mitigate risks of separation, going missing and dying and reduce threats to migrant women and children's safety, dignity and well-being, States and regional bodies should:

- Uphold the right to life and family unity. States should 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.
- Ensure 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. State officials should receive adequate training on human rights, child protection and prevention of SGBV.
- 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.
- Increase efforts and resources for mechanisms to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing migrants at national and trans-regional 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 points⁵ on missing migrants.
- Listen and respond to migrant voices: Policies and/or programs aimed at keeping migrants from becoming separated, lost or dead need to be guided first and foremost by the voices and lived experiences of migrants. Their perspective and experience are key to developing effective and humane solutions.
- Create an enabling environment for humanitarian action: States should create a conducive environment for humanitarian actors to operate effectively in providing humanitarian assistance and protection to migrants in vulnerable situations. To this end, States should facilitate (including by providing financial support) the establishment of Humanitarian Services Points⁶ along routes, including at borders. This also entails supporting and facilitating the unique role and work of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in the field of tracing and Restoring Family Links (RFL).

⁵States 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.

⁶Humanitarian 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.