

# ALONE AND UNSAFE

**Children, migration,  
and sexual and  
gender-based violence**

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**Alone and Unsafe:** Children, migration, and sexual and gender-based violence

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# CONTENTS

DEFINITIONS	5
FOREWORD	6
KEY TAKEAWAYS	8
INTRODUCTION: HARROWING JOURNEYS AND UNSPEAKABLE SUFFERING	10
THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG: SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ABUSE FACED BY CHILDREN WHO MIGRATE ALONE	12
A SCARCITY OF SERVICES AND AN ABUNDANCE OF BARRIERS	18
A CAUSE FOR HOPE? PROMISING PRACTICES OFFER A GLIMPSE OF A BETTER FUTURE	22
RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT WE NEED TO DO BETTER	24
APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY	26

**This report focuses on separated and unaccompanied children who are on the move. All references to children will refer to this particular group of vulnerable children.**



# DEFINITIONS

**CHILD:** A human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child majority is attained earlier.<sup>1</sup>

**CHILD PROTECTION:** The prevention of and response to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence against children.<sup>2</sup>

**SEPARATED CHILDREN:** Children separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary care-giver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members.<sup>3</sup>

**SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE:** An umbrella term for any harmful act that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to people on the basis of their gender. Sexual and gender-based violence is usually a result of gender inequality and abuse of power. It includes but is not limited to sexual violence, domestic violence, trafficking, forced or early marriage, forced prostitution and sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>4</sup>

**UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN:** children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> IFRC. (2013). Child Protection Policy.

<sup>2</sup> Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action. (2012). Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> IFRC and ICRC. (2015). Background Report: Sexual and Gender-based Violence: Joint Action on Prevention & Response.

<sup>5</sup> ICRC. (2004). Inter-agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children. <https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/1101-inter-agency-guiding-principles-unaccompanied-and-separated-children>.



## FOREWORD

At any moment, tens of thousands of migrant girls and boys are alone and unsafe. Whether they are crossing seas or deserts, holed up in displacement camps, navigating urban slums, caught up in trafficking rings or struggling to find sanctuary and opportunity in new communities, **what happens to them on their journey will shape their future and ours for decades to come.**

Sexual abuse, violence and exploitation disproportionately affect children. Few children are as vulnerable as those who are unaccompanied or separated from their families.

**The world is failing these children, who are being exposed to unthinkable deprivation and abuse, including the horrors of sexual and gender-based violence in their countries of origin, transit, and destination.**

Protecting these children is the responsibility of all of us and yet our collective response is chronically inadequate. This is especially true in fragile, hard-to-access, dangerous places, where it is often impossible for desperate children migrating alone to find safety or to access the prevention and response services they need, if they are available at all.

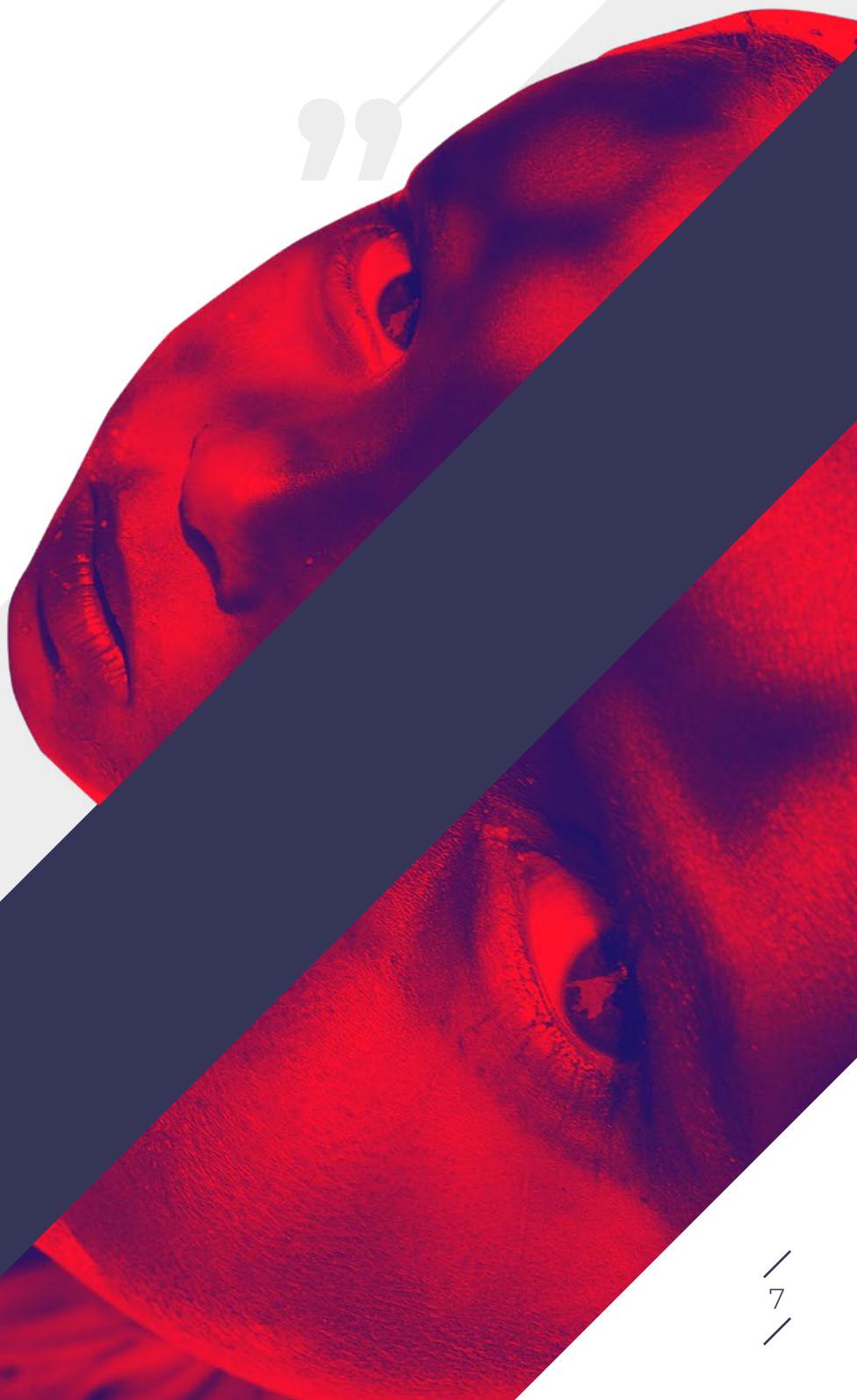
**We all need to do better.** Laws, policies, systems and implementation have to be improved, and there must be a stronger focus on local analysis and on training at all levels globally, if we are to ensure that these vulnerable children are quickly and safely identified and have access to quality health care, psychosocial support, shelter, family tracing, legal and other critical protection and assistance programmes.

I hope this report will shed light on the challenges unaccompanied children on the move face each day – from the lack of basic services, to the risks of sexual and gender-based violence. The report also offers some innovative and effective approaches to prevention and response that are well worth replicating. It is my hope this report will provide inspiration to governments adopting the Global Concept on Migration to ensure their policies and practices are in the best interests of vulnerable child migrants.

**In the end, we must demand of ourselves and our governments that every unaccompanied and separated migrant child is given the same protection and care that every other child in the world needs and has a right to.** In this regard, governments can be confident of the support of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

**Francesco Rocca**  
President, IFRC

**“...what happens to them on  
their journey will shape  
their future and ours for  
decades to come.**



## KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1

The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is a chance to ensure that all people migrating, especially separated and unaccompanied children, have access to the humanitarian assistance and protection they need. It is **an opportunity the world cannot afford to miss.**

2

The number of children on the move, including those travelling alone, has **grown substantially and alarmingly in the past decade.** There is compelling evidence that a very large proportion of them are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence on their journeys.

3

Protecting unaccompanied and separated girls and boys from sexual and gender-based violence along their entire migratory route and ensuring access to needed services is a **“blind spot” for many governments and humanitarian organizations.** Identification, screening and referral systems for at-risk children and survivors of sexual violence and exploitation must be put in place or upgraded.

4

There is a scarcity of frontline health care and psychosocial service providers in dangerous and remote locations. When these do exist, few have the experience or know-how to work with unaccompanied and separated children or how to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence.

**This lack of capacity poses serious “do no harm” risks.**

## 5

Needs and risks are different for boys and girls migrating alone. **An in-depth gender and diversity analysis is needed to better understand the specific and unique needs** of unaccompanied and separated children at risk of, or suffering from, sexual and gender-based violence including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning/queer, have disabilities, or are in detention.

## 6

Governments and aid groups need to work together to create “humanitarian service points” that are child appropriate and that allow separated and unaccompanied migrant children to access humanitarian assistance, as well as referral services. **These spaces should be “firewalled” from immigration services** in order to ensure children are not too scared to access these services.

## 7

Given the unacceptably high exposure of separated and unaccompanied migrant children to sexual and gender-based violence, not to mention the terrible emotional and mental consequences associated with separation, **governments should ensure that families are kept together during immigration proceedings** and should not detain children or their families as a result of their immigration status.

# INTRODUCTION: HARROWING JOURNEYS AND UNSPEAKABLE SUFFERING

Protracted violent conflicts, devastating climate events, entrenched economic inequality, relentless persecution and crime, and other complex problems with no easy solutions drive millions of people every year to go in search of a safer and more dignified life. Among them are children, some with their families, but many without.

**These children face harrowing journeys and risk unspeakable suffering.**

The number of children on the move, including those traveling alone, has grown substantially and alarmingly in the past decade. In 2017, it was estimated that at least 300,000 unaccompanied and separated child migrants were in transit in 80 countries<sup>6</sup> – **a five-fold increase** from five years earlier. The number of children migrating alone worldwide right now is likely much higher.<sup>7</sup>

In 2017, 60 per cent of the children who arrived in Greece, Italy, Spain and Bulgaria following dangerous and life-threatening journeys were unaccompanied or separated, **nearly double** the figure reported in 2016<sup>8</sup> - another staggering increase, providing a hint at the scale and scope of the problem.

Children on the move are easy prey for abusers, exploiters and traffickers and their vulnerability puts them at high risk of sexual and gender-based violence at every stage of their migratory path. When children are in transit alone, they are at very high risk of being assaulted, sexually abused, raped, trafficked into sexual exploitation or forced into “survival sex”.

This study seeks to improve understanding of the risks and types of sexual and gender-based violence faced by children who migrate on their own, as well as the unfortunate and widespread gaps in protection and assistance for these children. It looks closely at the situation in dangerous or remote locations – places that are fragile, conflict-ridden, underserved and hard to reach, where children may be particularly vulnerable.

The study also identifies actions that are urgently needed, by governments and humanitarian organizations, to better protect and assist children migrating on their own and reduce the risk of sexual and gender-based violence, as called for in the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

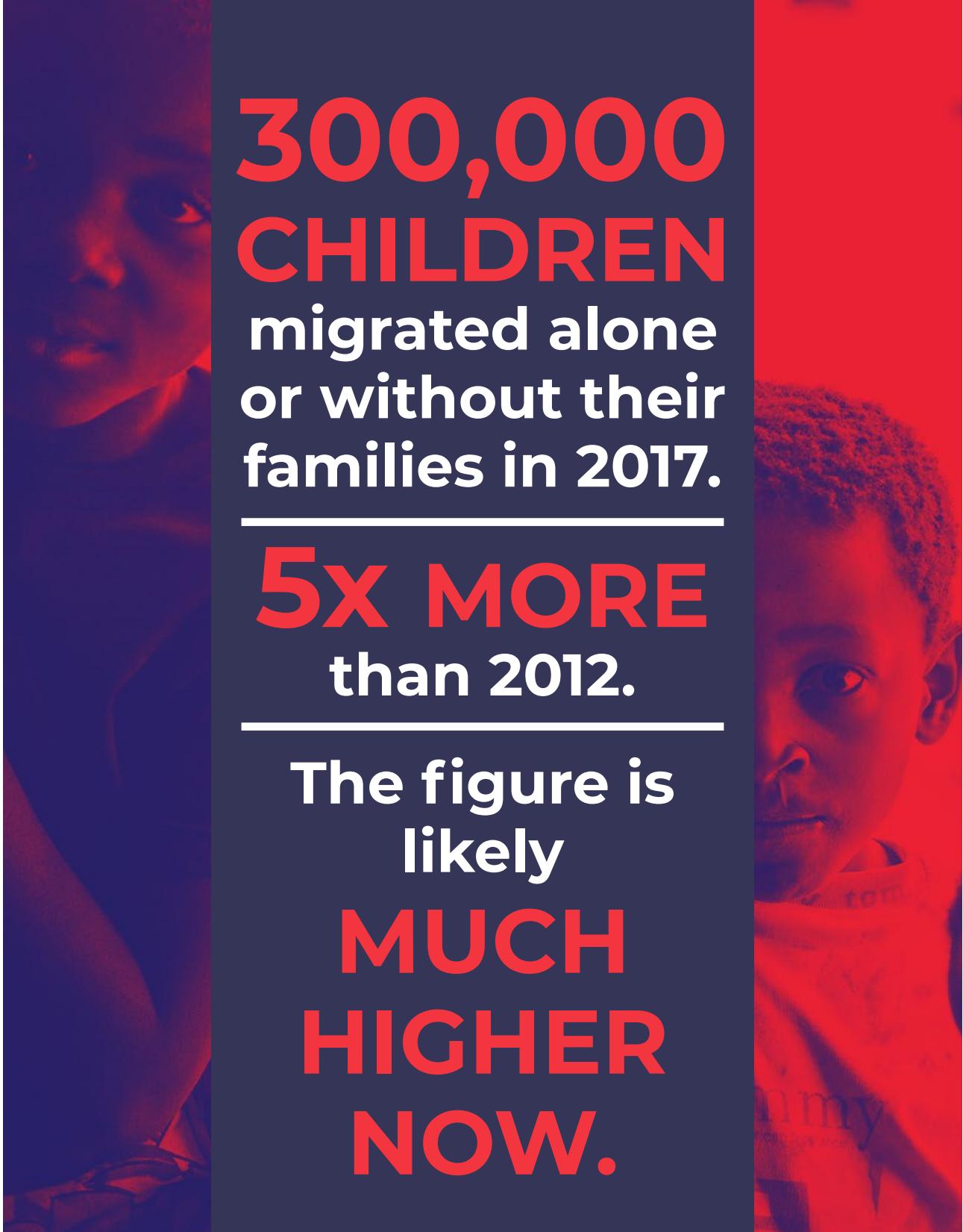
The study draws on interviews with specialists from a number of humanitarian agencies, an extensive literature review, and research missions to Afghanistan, Honduras, Niger and Turkey. Importantly it also draws heavily on the experience of Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers and staff in Benin, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Indonesia and Zimbabwe.



## THE GLOBAL COMPACT FOR SAFE, ORDERLY AND REGULAR MIGRATION COMMITS STATES TO:

...provide migrants in a situation of vulnerability, regardless of their migration status, with necessary support at all stages of migration, through identification and assistance, as well as protection of their human rights, in particular in cases related to ... **children, especially those unaccompanied or separated** from their families ... victims of violence, **including sexual and gender-based violence** ...;

Protect unaccompanied and separated children at all stages of migration through the establishment of specialized procedures for their identification, referral, care and family reunification, and provide access to their rights to health, education, legal assistance and to be heard in administrative and judicial proceedings, including by appointing a guardian, as essential means to address their particular vulnerabilities and discrimination, **protect them from all forms of violence**, and provide access to sustainable solutions that are in their best interests.



**300,000  
CHILDREN  
migrated alone  
or without their  
families in 2017.**

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**5x MORE  
than 2012.**

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**The figure is  
likely  
MUCH  
HIGHER  
NOW.**

<sup>6</sup> UNICEF. (2017). A Child is a Child: Protecting Children on the Move from Violence, Abuse and Exploitation. [https://www.unicef.org/publications/index\\_95956.html](https://www.unicef.org/publications/index_95956.html).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR, UNICEF & IOM (2017). Refugee and Migrant Children in Europe: Overview of Trends in 2017. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/63435.pdf>.

# THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG: SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ABUSE FACED BY CHILDREN WHO MIGRATE ALONE

Hopelessness, fear and a yearning for a safer and better future lead many children to embark on journeys that put them in danger, particularly of sexual and gender-based violence. Unfortunately, there is a significant data gap on the extent of such violence towards child migrants and even less information about those who travel alone, given that separated and unaccompanied children are less likely to come forward to seek help and support.

But a number of reports in recent years—coupled with insights from humanitarian teams supporting child migrants on the front lines—shed critical light on the problem. We may not have the full picture – but the part of it that we do have is chilling. For many children, sexual and gender-based violence is a spectre that haunts all stages of their migration journey.

## Sexual and gender-based violence before migrants leave

Many children who migrate report experiencing sexual and gender-based violence in their countries of origin and cite such abuse and violence as a reason for leaving.

A recent study of 100 case files of separated children now living in Ireland<sup>9</sup> found that 45 per cent of them had been survivors of violence, with 32 per cent reporting being victims of sexual assault. Almost 60 per cent of girls reported sexual or other forms of violence.

Sexual violence within the family is also a push factor for children to leave<sup>10</sup>. In another study, interviews with 100 migrant children who traveled alone to the United Kingdom revealed that more than one-third of them reported experiencing sexual violence at home, before they took flight<sup>11</sup>.

An exploratory study of 19 unaccompanied child migrants in Italy from countries in north and sub-Saharan Africa found that all respondents to a self-administered questionnaire reported being physically and psychologically abused at least once in their life and more than half were sexually abused before or during their migration.<sup>12</sup>

Research in Central America found that unaccompanied girls flee their country because “maras,” the local street gangs, were recruiting them to smuggle and sell drugs in their home countries, using sexual assault as a means of forcing them into compliance. In Honduras, girls as young as nine years old have been victims of gang rape. Unaccompanied girls also cited their fear of sexual assault and rape as a significant motivating factor for fleeing.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Abunimah, A., & Blower, S. (2010). The Circumstances and Needs of Separated Children Seeking Asylum in Ireland. *Child Care in Practice*, 16(2), 129–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575270903482799>.

<sup>10</sup> Bhabha, J., Bohne, C., Digidiki, V., Donger, E., Frounfelker, R., Glenn, J., and Seervai, S. (2016). Children on the Move: An Urgent Human Rights and Child Protection Priority. Harvard FXB Center for Health and Human Rights.

<sup>11</sup> Thornton, C. P., & Veenema, T. G. (2015). Children Seeking Refuge: A Review of the Escalating Humanitarian Crisis of Child Sexual Abuse and HIV/AIDS in Latin America. *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care*, 26(4), 432–442.

<sup>12</sup> Longobardi, C., Veronesi, T. G., & Prino, L. E. (2017). Abuses, Resilience, Behavioural Problems and Post-traumatic Stress Symptoms Among Unaccompanied Migrant Minors: An Italian Cross-sectional Exploratory Study. *Psychiatria i Psychologia Kliniczna*, 17(2), 87–92.

<sup>13</sup> Women's Refugee Commission. (2015). *Forced From Home: The Lost Boys and Girls of Central America*. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/component/zdocs/document?id=844-forced-from-home-the-lost-boys-and-girls-of-central-america>.

**I will not forget the day when rebels entered my village. They beat and killed people and raped women and girls openly before setting the village on fire. My father was one of those that got killed by the rebels. I fled Congo, leaving my family behind. My fears and sad memories are still fresh.**

"Jonas" escaped alone and found refuge in a camp in neighboring Zambia. He came to the attention of the Zambian Red Cross' Tracing Team, which has opened a family tracing case for him.



## Sexual and gender-based violence along migration paths

Some routes are more perilous than others for all migrants and irregular paths tend to pose graver risks. Regardless of the path taken, it is clear from published reports that when children resort to unsafe routes, and are traveling without the protection of caring adults, they are at significantly increased risk of suffering sexual and gender-based violence by ill-intentioned smugglers and other unscrupulous actors, being sold into labour or sex exploitation by traffickers or forced into “survival sex” to gain passage, shelter, sustenance or money for onward journeys.



### THE MAISONS CLOSES OF AGADEZ, NIGER<sup>14</sup>

A steady stream of migrants arrive in Agadez, Niger each week and a steady stream leave. They are among an exodus of mostly young West Africans who risk their lives crossing the Sahara Desert to reach Europe—many succumbing to forced labour and prostitution along the way and upon arrival.

Many unaccompanied adolescent girls traveling through Niger, many of them coming from Nigeria, look to the local **maisons closes** (brothels) to get the money they need to continue their journey to Europe.

In Agadez, women and girls in the brothels typically earn around three dollars per client, much of which goes to local madams, in exchange for room and board during the weeks or months they stay in the desert city.<sup>15</sup>

Red Cross volunteers are among very few aid workers allowed to give support inside the brothels because they are known and trusted by the local communities. In order to alleviate the suffering and abuses, they have created a programme that includes psychosocial support, information on hygiene and health issues, first aid and referrals to health structures when necessary.

“We are known to the communities and have their trust and confidence, which is why the madams who run the brothels allow us to enter to provide care and information, and to offer support. For many, we are their only avenue for care,” said one Niger Red Cross volunteer.

The Niger Red Cross estimates that there are 150 brothels in the Agadez region and describe conditions in them as unhealthy, unsanitary and precarious. The girls and women often require medical care and psychosocial assistance, sometimes as a result of sexually transmitted infections, sexual assaults, beatings and other violence incurred during transit through Niger. Health services, including prevention and response services for sexual violence, are extremely limited, and largely inaccessible for the women and girls, as it is for most other migrants.

In many cases, these women and girls are in a perilous situation and in many cases are afraid of seeking support from the authorities. Abuses by the authorities themselves have also been reported.

Some 30 Red Cross volunteers in the Agadez region have been trained to help the girls process their experiences of violence and abuse, understand the risks of prostitution and unsafe migration, and make safer choices during onward journeys. The Niger Red Cross also helps restore family links with those who want to reconnect with their families or return home.

Studies show that sexual and gender-based violence is experienced by both migrating boys and girls, but at different levels, in different contexts and in varying forms.

One survey of 15 male and 15 female unaccompanied adolescents from Central America found that both girls and boys were targets of kidnapping, murder and abandonment. In a similar finding, 29 per cent of unaccompanied children interviewed reported experiencing some form of abuse in transit to the United States, largely at the hands of “coyotes” — smugglers who are paid to help children cross the Mexican border into the US. These abuses included kidnapping, forced labour, and a range of violence, including rape. Another study in the United Kingdom found that agents or those who brought unaccompanied migrant boys and girls to Scotland, and associates of agents, often sexually abused and assaulted these children.<sup>18</sup>

**There is significant evidence demonstrating pervasive and chronic sexual and gender-based violence against girls and women on migration routes the world over.**

In 2010, Amnesty International found that an astonishing six out of ten Central American migrant women and girls were raped while on the move in Mexico.<sup>19</sup> A more recent report, specific to children, would suggest a similar scenario exists today, noting that Central American girls are frequently targets of rape by their smugglers en route to the US border.

A 2017 study on unaccompanied and separated girls who recently arrived in Italy underscores that girls are suffering sexual exploitation, sexual assault, trafficking and survival sex throughout their entire journey.<sup>20</sup>

There is evidence that women and girls are aware of the high risk of sexual assault and exploitation prior to undertaking dangerous journeys, and take some precautions. Specifically, some girls take birth control pills as a preventative measure to avoid pregnancy in case of sexual violence.<sup>21</sup> One study found that women and girls from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia who passed through Sudan sought out emergency contraception to take with them on their journey to Libya in fearful anticipation of sexual and gender-based violence, including survival sex.<sup>22</sup>

Child migrants, including those traveling alone, are also being detained in many countries, often in inhumane conditions, solely based on their immigration status. Not only is this practice in disregard of international legal standards,<sup>23</sup> it exposes them to sexual and gender-based violence<sup>24</sup> by guards<sup>25</sup> and adult detainees.<sup>26</sup> A number of experts interviewed for this report warned that sexual assault against boys in detention facilities, in particular, is under-reported.

Children who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning/queer (LGBTQ) may be at even higher risk. Many of the people who contributed to this report highlighted the increased difficulties LGBTQ children face when trying to reunite with their families. There can be a low tolerance and acceptance among families for these children, and cultural norms can pose barriers. In addition, sexual and gender-based violence against transgender children is likely under-reported and unrecognized.

There is no simple answer, but political willingness to act is a start. More time and resources are needed than short term humanitarian responses allow. Furthermore, short funding cycles can damage efforts to tackle deeper gender inequality and power issues that are essential to change social norms and behaviour.



## Sexual and gender-based violence in countries of asylum and destination

The risks of sexual and gender-based violence do not abate once arriving in a second or third country. In fact, new forms of exploitation and abuse manifest where protective services are overstretched or non-existent in places where migrant children land.<sup>27</sup>

In Greece, 24 people who contributed to this study together described a long list of factors that have increased the chances of unaccompanied children falling victim to sexual violence,<sup>28</sup> including shortages of living spaces in Greece that force children to cohabit with adults in crowded settings, and a general lack of safety and security at the facilities, including poor lighting. The lack of safe housing options has led many unaccompanied migrant



“With our intervention in schools, the teachers referred us to boys and girls that they called “unbearable children”. The majority of these children are returned children or children with migrant parents. These boys and girls have frequent school absences, learning problems and also adaptation problems. I knew a girl who even tried to commit suicide because she said her parents were not with her and they were not supporting her after they migrated, she was living now only with her stepfather and apparently her stepfather was abusing her. When I realized this situation, I discussed with the girl the need to report but the girl was too afraid of doing it. I said to her: it is my responsibility for your own well-being, later I went with the principal and the school started a legal process.

Coordinator, Emotional Recovery for Returned Children Project, Honduran Red Cross

children in Greece to move to informal encampments where they are exposed to an even greater range of risks, including, for boys, being sexually abused and exploited by older men for money.<sup>29</sup>

Onward journeys to other European countries have not brought an end to the dangers young migrants face. Indeed, a UNICEF study found threats to their safety have been “incessant” in countries like France, where children have struggled to benefit from protection mechanisms.<sup>30</sup>

A study based on interviews with unaccompanied children from Horn of Africa countries who migrated to the United Kingdom found 72 per cent of respondents experienced more than one incident of sexual violence upon arrival.<sup>31</sup> The majority of these incidents happened in their first 12 months in the United Kingdom. The cited perpetrators varied from female caregivers to young men living in the same facilities and other asylum seekers. There is also evidence that LGBTQ migrants have encountered threats of extortion and sexual exploitation when they arrive in Europe.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Berger Cardoso, J. (2018). Running to Stand Still: Trauma Symptoms, Coping Strategies, and Substance use Behaviors in Unaccompanied Migrant Youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.04.018>.

<sup>17</sup> Musalo, K., & Ceriani Cernadas, P. (Eds.). (2015). *Childhood and Migration in Central and North America: Causes, Policies, Practices and Challenges*. Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, UC Hastings.

<sup>18</sup> Hopkins, P. E., & Hill, M. (2008). Pre-flight Experiences and Migration Stories: The Accounts of Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children. *Children's Geographies*, 6(3), 257–268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280802183981>.

<sup>19</sup> Amnesty International. (2010). *Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico*. Amnesty International London.

<sup>20</sup> Ribul, M. (2017). An Exploration of the Mental Health Impact of Violence on Female Unaccompanied Refugee Minors and the Associated Psychological Needs: A Mixed Methods Study of the Italian Context (Master's of Global Health Thesis). Universitat de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain.

<sup>21</sup> PBS. (2014, March 31). Women Crossing the U.S. Border Face Sexual Assault with Little Protection. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/facing-risk-rape-migrant-women-prepare-birth-control>.

<sup>22</sup> UNICEF. (2017b). *A Deadly Journey for Children: The Central Mediterranean Migration Route (Child Alert)*. New York: UNICEF.

<sup>23</sup> UNICEF. (2018). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. <https://www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/crc.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Save the Children. (2011). *Leaving Home: Voice of Children on the Move*. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/leaving-home-voices-children-move>.

<sup>25</sup> UNICEF. (2017). *A Deadly Journey for Children*. [https://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_94941.html](https://www.unicef.org/media/media_94941.html).

<sup>26</sup> For instance: UNHCR. (2016). *Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Europe*. <http://www.unhcr.org/ngo-consultations/ngo-consultations-2016/Europe-Bureau-Briefing-Note.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Mixed Migration Platform. (2017). *Underage, Undocumented and Alone (Briefing Paper No. 6)*. Amman, Jordan: Mixed Migration Platform; Temin, M., Montgomery, M. R., Engebretsen, S., & Barker, K. M. (2013). *Girls on the Move: Adolescent Girls and Migration in the Developing World. A Girls Count Report on Adolescent Girls*. Population Council; and UNICEF. (2016). *Neither Safe nor Sound: Unaccompanied Children on the Coastline of the English Channel and the North Sea*. Paris: UNICEF France.

<sup>28</sup> Digidiki, V., & Bhabha, J. (2018). *Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Greece: Identifying Risk Factors and Gaps in Services during the European Migration Crisis*.

<sup>29</sup> Digidiki, V. (2016, December 17). *A Harsh New Reality: Transactional Sex Among Refugee Minors as a Means of Survival in Greece*. Retrieved August 18, 2018, from <https://fxb.harvard.edu/2016/12/17/a-harsh-new-reality-transactional-sex-among-refugee-minors-as-a-means-of-survival-in-greece/>; and Freccero, J., Biswas, D., Whiting, A., Alrabe, K., & Seelinger, K. T. (2017). *Sexual Exploitation of Unaccompanied Migrant and Refugee Boys in Greece: Approaches to Prevention*. *PLoS Medicine*, 14(11). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002438>.

<sup>30</sup> UNICEF. (2016). *Neither Safe nor Sound: Unaccompanied Children on the Coastline of the English Channel and the North Sea*. Paris: UNICEF France.

<sup>31</sup> Lay, M., & Papadopoulos, I. (2009). *Sexual Maltreatment of Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Minors from the Horn of Africa: A Mixed Method Study Focusing on Vulnerability and Prevention*. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 33(10), 728–738. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chab.2009.05.003>.

<sup>32</sup> Brun, D. (2017). *Men and Boys in Displacement: Assistance and Protection Challenges for Unaccompanied Boys and Men in Refugee Contexts (CARE: Gender in emergencies)*. CARE, Promundo.

## A SCARCITY OF SERVICES AND AN ABUNDANCE OF BARRIERS

The villages, towns and cities that dot many irregular migration routes around the world tend to have factors in common that increase the risk of sexual and gender-based violence — remoteness, instability, poor security, inadequate health infrastructure and unspecialized, weak or non-existent sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response services. This section looks at some of the main factors that governments and humanitarian organizations can address.

### Nowhere to go and no-one who can help

Research findings and expert contributors to this report agree that, unsurprisingly, there is a lack of sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response services in dangerous or remote areas. When programmes are available, their quality is usually poor. Furthermore, these are rarely designed to support people on the move and are generally not designed for children, let alone those who have no family support.

### Slow, uncoordinated, and uninformed responses

Efforts to identify and protect children can be slow to emerge at the beginning of a migration crisis. Indeed, many contributors to this study said that, by the time such systems were in place, at-risk children had usually moved on or disappeared from the view of formal support systems or, tragically, had already fallen victim to exploitation and abuse.

Aid agencies can contribute to the problem. A lack of effective coordination between humanitarian groups and with governments undermines efforts to quickly put in place an effective response. Too often, humanitarian agencies work in isolation and promote different approaches.

In addition, while the assessment tools used by humanitarians often capture the number of migrant children travelling alone, they are not designed to detect or predict the specific risks that these children face.

Very little information is gathered about the specific and varying threats that girls and boys face. This is a crucial gap as the level of risk varies greatly depending on the local context. For example, in Greece<sup>33</sup> and Afghanistan<sup>34</sup> the risk of sexual and gender-based violence is highest among boys, whereas in Niger<sup>35</sup>, Honduras<sup>36</sup> and Libya<sup>37</sup> the risk is highest for girls.

In general, girls are most at risk. A result of this is that the little services that do exist are often geared exclusively towards them. This in itself is a significant oversight given that boys make up a majority, often a large majority, of unaccompanied and separated children.<sup>38</sup> This study found that the risk of sexual and gender-based violence against boys is a particular blind spot for communities, humanitarian agencies, and governments, driven in large part by local cultural beliefs, practices and expectations about male gender norms. In addition, adolescent boys can be seen as a threat not subject to child rights.<sup>39</sup> These perceptions further isolate boys and restrict their access to prevention and response services.

Finally, where specialized services do exist, there are numerous barriers that prevent vulnerable children from using them. Chief among these is the often legitimate fear that, by coming forward for support, children will be seized by immigration services and sent back to the dangerous places they have fought so hard to escape.

All these issues become even more complex when crises cross national borders – unfortunately a defining feature of migration. However, practical steps can improve cross-border protection. For instance, governments and aid groups can provide children with information about sexual and gender-based violence, and about the services that are available to them.

## **Unaware of the risks and unable to defend themselves**

Information about sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response services that are available can be transformative for migrant children. However, this precious information is also incredibly rare.

One recent study estimated that only 20 per cent of migrating children knew what exploitation was, and that less than half of this group felt that they were adequately informed about the dangers and risks of migration, including trafficking and sexual violence. Fewer than four in ten of the children surveyed felt they were prepared to protect themselves from these dangers.<sup>40</sup>

Another issue is that information on safe migration is rarely made available in child-friendly forms, and children are seldom given meaningful opportunities to help design such information.<sup>41</sup>

## **Untrained and on the frontline**

A major problem cited by contributors to this report is a lack of training for health and psychosocial service providers in sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response and other specialized approaches.

Few health and psychosocial support providers in dangerous or remote locations have the necessary skills or tools to talk to children about any sensitive problems, let alone abuse and violence. This was a point repeatedly underlined by contributors to this study, who noted that in the absence of trusting relationships with service providers, unaccompanied children may stop seeking support altogether.

This problem is typically compounded by a lack of quality referral services, or a lack of information about the services that may be available for migrants generally, and in particular for children.

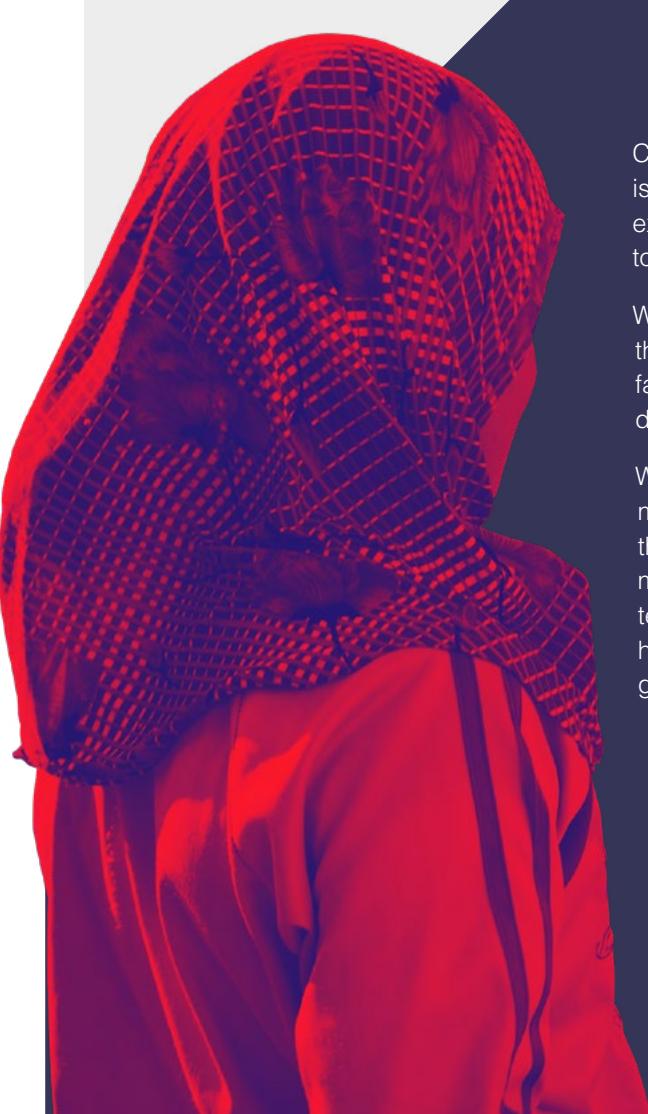
**... in the absence of trusting relationships with service providers, unaccompanied children may stop seeking support altogether.**

## CHILD MARRIAGE AMONG MIGRANT GIRLS IN TURKEY<sup>42</sup>

Child marriage among Syrian refugee children is a growing issue in Turkey. The Turkish Red Crescent, through its extensive community presence, is at the forefront of efforts to protect and support at-risk girls.

Where a marriage is planned but the girl is not yet married, the Red Crescent holds meetings with the child and her family to explain the impact of child marriage on the child's development, health and well-being.

When the Red Crescent finds a girl who has already been married, a process is triggered that includes a referral to the Ministry of Labour, Social Services, and Family; and meetings with the girl, her spouse, and her in-laws to determine what options are available. Volunteers also offer household visits to provide psychosocial support to the girl and her children if she has any.



<sup>33</sup> Digidiki, V., & Bhabha, J. (2018). Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Greece: Identifying Risk Factors and Gaps in Services during the European Migration Crisis.

<sup>34</sup> IFRC. (2018). Smart Practices for Protecting Unaccompanied and Separated Children from SGBV through Access to Health and PSS in Last Mile Locations: Afghanistan. IFRC.

<sup>35</sup> IFRC. (2018). Smart Practices for Protecting Unaccompanied and Separated Children from SGBV through Access to Health and PSS in Last Mile Locations: Niger. IFRC.

<sup>36</sup> Women's Refugee Commission. (2015). Forced From Home: The Lost Boys and Girls of Central America. <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/component/zdocs/document?id=844-forced-from-home-the-lost-boys-and-girls-of-central-america>.

<sup>37</sup> UNICEF. (2017b). A Deadly Journey for Children: The Central Mediterranean Migration Route (Child Alert). New York: UNICEF.

<sup>38</sup> UNICEF. (2018). Overview: Working with Men and Boy Survivors of Sexual Violence. UNICEF.

<sup>39</sup> Bhabha, J. (2014). Child Migration and Human Rights in a Global Age. Princeton University Press.

<sup>40</sup> Bhabha, J., Bohne, C., Digidiki, V., Donger, E., Frounfelker, R., Glenn, J., and Seervai, S. (2016). Children on the Move: An Urgent Human Rights and Child Protection Priority. Harvard FXB Center for Health and Human Rights.

<sup>41</sup> IFRC. (2018). Smart Practices for Protecting Unaccompanied and Separated Children from SGBV through Access to Health and PSS in Last Mile Locations: Afghanistan. IFRC.

<sup>42</sup> Turkish Red Crescent, & IFRC. (2018). Smart Practices for Protecting Unaccompanied and Separated Children from SGBV through Access to Health and PSS in Last Mile Locations: Turkey. IFRC.



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# A CAUSE FOR HOPE? PROMISING PRACTICES OFFER A GLIMPSE OF A BETTER FUTURE

Evidence of the scale of sexual and gender-based violence against migrant children is incomplete and often anecdotal. However, taken together, the evidence available shows that is almost certainly very high. Those trying to help acknowledge that the overall response to this hidden emergency is weak at many levels. However, there are a number of efforts around the world that give cause for hope and that could, with sufficient funding, be brought to scale.

## Tapping community-level knowledge to identify children in need

The first essential step to preventing sexual and gender-based violence against children, or providing them with assistance, is identifying those at risk and those in need of help. Only once they are identified can they be referred for assistance.

How might this work in practice? In Ethiopia, the Red Cross has supported other actors operating in hard-to-access parts of the country to create child protection referral mechanisms. For example, bus drivers have been trained to identify unaccompanied and separated children and to link them to local child protection mechanisms.<sup>43</sup>

In Honduras, the Red Cross trains volunteers to provide psychosocial support to returning migrant children, and to identify high risk cases of children that need referral to specialized services of medical and mental health. The Red Cross provides psychosocial support to thousands of boys and girls aged between seven and 18 years old in four of the country's departments.<sup>44</sup>

In Luxembourg, the Red Cross supports reception centres with dedicated spaces for unaccompanied and separated children. It also runs a home for them. Professional social workers and psychosocial support experts are appointed to work with the children, ensuring that children are in contact with appropriate government and legal authorities, are prepared for meetings with authorities, and are accompanied to meetings when needed.<sup>45</sup>

## Bridging the information gap

In an effort to bridge the information gap outlined above, a number of organizations are using different approaches across a range of technologies to reach migrant children with information about the risks they could face. In China, the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour and the project to Prevent Trafficking in Girls and Young Women for Labour Exploitation printed more than 1 million brochures for young female migrants, and included information on transport, accommodation, and agencies that provide legitimate work.<sup>46</sup>

In India, The Childline India Foundation and the Government create a toll-free telephone service for child migrants. The service received 23 million calls between 2010-2012, 62 per cent of which were from children aged between 11-18, and two-thirds of which were boys.<sup>47</sup>

In Honduras, the Red Cross works with parents, teachers and children through schools to develop guidelines to educate children on safe migration practices.<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, the use of machine learning has successfully been used in some high-income countries to better predict children at risk of needing support from social services. Where strict ethical standards are in place and potential biases are accounted for, this model might hold promise for helping to forecast groups of children at risk of becoming separated and where additional protective support can be implemented as part of disaster preparedness programming.

"The thing we most need is information. Information about dangers, information about available assistance, about processes and about legal issues and how to get documentation. Any 12-year-old can use a mobile phone. We need an app in all relevant languages that has this information." Gerald from Cameroon, who travelled as an unaccompanied minor to Italy.

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## Ensuring services exist through community-based interventions

Community-based interventions including with non-traditional partners like local bus drivers and taxi drivers show some promise. In Thailand, PLAN International is experimenting in screening and training local tuk-tuk drivers who receive vouchers to take people to health facilities and then are reimbursed by PLAN. This type of approach could be replicated for migrant children in dangerous or remote locations.

In Honduras, the government with support from local NGOs, runs Attention Centres for returning migrants. In the city of Belén<sup>49</sup> the Attention Centre is designated to receive migrant children returning by land from Mexico and Guatemala and by air from Mexico and United States. On arrival, children are supported to register, restore family links with parents and other relatives, and access legal, health and psychosocial support. This includes health services for girls who have become pregnant following sexual and gender-based violence during transit. Girls are supported at the closest hospital and later the hospital is responsible for referring to the Attorney General of Childhood. Trained psychologists provide crisis intervention, psychological first aid, and support to specific cases of sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>43</sup> IFRC. (2018). Rights of Migrants in Action Child Protection Projects: Synthesis Report of Evaluations in Benin, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, and Indonesia. <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/06/ROMIA-Child-Protection-Projects-Lessons-Learned.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> IFRC. (2018). Smart Practices for Protecting Unaccompanied and Separated Children from SGBV through Access to Health and PSS in Last Mile Locations: Honduras. IFRC.

<sup>45</sup> Source: IFRC. (2017). Smart Practices for Working with Unaccompanied and Separated Children in the Europe Region.

<sup>46</sup> Temin, M., Montgomery, M. R., Engebretsen, S., & Barker, K. M. (2013). Girls on the Move: Adolescent Girls and Migration in the Developing World. A Girls Count Report on Adolescent Girls. Population Council.

<sup>47</sup> Temin, M., Montgomery, M. R., Engebretsen, S., & Barker, K. M. (2013). Girls on the Move: Adolescent Girls and Migration in the Developing World. A Girls Count Report on Adolescent Girls. Population Council.

<sup>48</sup> IFRC. (2018). Smart Practices for Protecting Unaccompanied and Separated Children from SGBV through Access to Health and PSS in Last Mile Locations: Honduras. IFRC.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.conmigo.hn/sub-secretaria/canfm-belen/>.

<sup>50</sup> IFRC. (2018). Smart Practices for Protecting Unaccompanied and Separated Children from SGBV through Access to Health and PSS in Last Mile Locations: Honduras. IFRC.

# RECOMMENDATIONS: WHAT WE NEED TO DO BETTER

## What is needed to better protect children?

**1** We need to ensure children at risk or in need of help are identified. This means training the people most likely to meet or encounter unaccompanied and separated children and ensuring it is a core part of their work. They include government officials (in particular at borders and staff in places that provide assistance to people in need. It might also include those involved in transportation – bus drivers, taxi drivers, staff at airplanes and boats, in ports, etc.

**2** Once identified, it is critical that children can be referred to safe, confidential and non-discriminatory services and support. Once children are safe, they then need medical, psychosocial and sometimes even legal support.

**3** Information is essential. This needs to be provided in the manner, location and language that unaccompanied or separated migrant children can access. It is important to be aware of different language and cultural needs, levels of literacy and locations where they may receive information. Referral systems are essential, ensuring that the necessary information and assistance is available for the children who need it.

**4** Basic services (such as health care) must be accessible and separated from immigration control. This means they need to be in relevant locations, free of charge, and child migrants should not be scared to access them. We know that children will not access these services if there is a risk they will be arrested because of their immigration status.

**5** Legal and policy frameworks need to ensure that child migrants are protected, not threatened. Children affected by sexual and gender-based violence should be treated as survivors, not criminals. Helping them should be promoted, not criminalized.

## We call on governments to:

Implement relevant policy and legal frameworks that **protect migrant children and ensure safe access to essential services, and reduce the risk of child migrants being separated from their families.**

Ensure government personnel and all engaged in border services, reception centres and provision of basic essential services are **appropriately trained and know how to identify, refer, and be sensitive to needs of unaccompanied and separated children** – who should be treated as highly vulnerable children and never as criminals.

**Invest in quality protection and assistance services** for migrant children, particularly focusing on unaccompanied and separated children.

Ensure there is **clear information about available services** and legal rights for all migrants, with particular information for children, in a manner that they can access.

**Eliminate detention of children** solely for reasons related to their migration status and the separation of migrant parents and children.

## We call on humanitarian organizations to:

Establish protection and assistance services for children, focusing on the hardest to reach places where there are the highest needs.

Ensure all staff are appropriately trained and know how to identify, refer and be sensitive to needs of unaccompanied and separated children.

Provide clear information about available services and legal rights for all migrants, with particular information for children, in a manner that they can access.

Invest in innovative practices and extend good practices that exist.

## APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

This study used a triangulated approach with a detailed global literature review (search terms and search strings<sup>54</sup>, and a review of 114 documents); extensive interviews with 16 child protection, psychosocial support or sexual and gender-based violence prevention and response specialists from nine global agencies and academia; country specific case studies in four locations including interviews with 86 field-level personnel from the Red Cross and Red Crescent and other experienced practitioners from women's group, child protection advocates, NGOs and local government. Case studies for this report drew on these field visits and also on an IFRC evaluation synthesis report on projects from Benin, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, and Indonesia.<sup>53</sup>

### LANDMARK ONLINE COURSE IN PROTECTING CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

IFRC and International Social Services are currently developing, with support from other humanitarian agencies as well as Harvard and CELCIS University, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on care for children on the move, including unaccompanied and separated children.<sup>51</sup>

This free, online and research-based training resource will equip front-line workers with the skills they need to identify and support children. The MOOC includes a focus on gender-responsive approaches, protection from sexual and gender-based violence, and how best to support unaccompanied and separated children to access health, psychosocial and other essential basic services.

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.childrenonthemovemooc.com/index.php/en/about/building-capacity>.

<sup>52</sup> Search strings: Unaccompanied OR separated OR ("asylum seeking" OR asylum-seeking) OR "children on the move" OR "youth on the move"; Child\* OR youth OR minor OR young OR girl OR boy; "SGBV OR "sexual and gender based violence" OR "sexual- and gender-based violence" OR "sexual and gender-based violence" OR "sexual- and gender based violence) OR (GBV OR "gender-based violence" OR "gender based violence") OR (SV OR "sexual violence") OR rape OR traffick\*; Trauma OR psychosoc\* OR psycho\* OR health OR medical; data OR inciden\* OR statistic\* OR intervention OR project OR progr\*; evaluation OR evidence OR assessment OR final report OR impact

<sup>53</sup> IFRC. (2018). Rights of Migrants in Action Child Protection Projects: Synthesis Report of Evaluations in Benin, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Guatemala, and Indonesia. <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/06/ROMIA-Child-Protection-Projects-Lessons-Learned.pdf>.



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# **THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT**

**HUMANITY** The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

**IMPARTIALITY** It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

**NEUTRALITY** In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

**INDEPENDENCE** The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

**VOLUNTARY SERVICE** It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

**UNITY** There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

**UNIVERSALITY** The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.