



GIRLS ON THE MOVE
IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO



Save the Children



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* *The names in this report have been changed to protect their identities.*

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ACRONYMS

- CBP:** US Customs and Border Protection
- COMAR:** Spanish acronym for the Mexican Commission to Help Refugees or *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda al Refugiado*
- DHS:** Department of Homeland Security
- DIF:** Spanish acronym for the National System for Integral Family Development or *Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*
- FY:** Fiscal Year
- HIV:** Human Immunodeficiency Virus
- IEC:** Information, Education, and Communication
- IOM:** International Organization for Migration
- IPV:** Intimate Partner Violence
- LGBTIQ+:** Umbrella term for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning and anyone who does not identify as heterosexual and/or cisgender.
- NT:** Northern Triangle
- PHR:** Physicians for Human Rights
- PTSD:** Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
- STI:** Sexually Transmitted Infection
- UNHCR:** United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- UNICEF:** United Nations Children's Fund
- WHO:** World Health Organization

FOREWORD

“
These findings show us the necessity for investing in the girls during the whole migratory process... ”



During the last few years, the international and regional migratory context has experienced significant changes in reasons for leaving, the routes taken and the composition of the migration flows. These impact groups in vulnerable circumstances, such as girls and adolescent women, in both varying and specific ways.

At the same time, concrete analysis of these new movements and of the capacity of international organizations and of individual states is necessary so that they can support the needs of the migrating population from a rights and gender perspective.

This study encompasses the Central America to Mexico context and is framed within the global series “Girls on the Move” led by Save the Children Sweden. We want to look directly at the experiences of girls and adolescents in the region and gather information to improve the programmes of international organizations and of states. In this sense we hope that this study will bring with it a transformation of programmes that will guarantee, not only equal access to services and development, but the foundations for a change for migrant girls and adolescents.

Given the current pandemic that we are experiencing, the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this study remain valid as long as they address the basic protection needs that girls and adolescents require in a humanitarian and development context. From a gender perspective, the structural reasons for leaving, the risks of transit (especially for unaccompanied or separated girls) and the challenges in the communities of destination give us important recommendations as well. These findings show us the necessity to invest in the girls during the whole migratory process, preparing and equipping them for their journey, strengthening services and making them more child friendly and with a gender sensitive. Programmes need to be adapted to the diverse needs of different groups of girls and special attention needs to be given to the prevention of gender-based violence. Most of all, we need to listen to and learn from the girls themselves.

Lastly, I want to thank the brave girls and adolescents who took part in this study; they expressed their experiences and yearnings without fear. We trust that the reflections that have come from their sincere testimonials will contribute to the work of everyone as well as contribute to reaching the goal of more inclusive, equitable and transformative programmes and services.

—Victoria Ward
Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean
Save the Children



Photo: Ximena Zambrana / Consultant

**WE NEED TO LISTEN TO AND
LEARN FROM THE GIRLS
THEMSELVES**

FOREWORD

A significant number of international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Declaration of Cartagena of 1984, the 2014 Declaration and Plan of Action of Brazil, and the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees determine the norms that regulate and guide national and international institutions regarding the international protection of all children and adolescents in migration contexts, for the full and effective guarantee of their rights. Said protection must be extended both in their countries of origin, as well as in the countries of transit and destination, for all girls, boys and adolescents regardless of their immigration or protection status. The American Convention on Human Rights, the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, and the Convention of Belém do Pará, establish legal duties for States regarding the eradication of violence and discrimination against women, girls and adolescents. This is done with the objective of providing special protection to this vulnerable population, which is also clearly formulated in the Inter-American System for the Protection of Human Rights - in particular, in Advisory Opinion No. 21/2014 of the Inter-American Court.



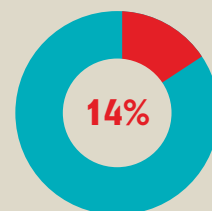
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In numerical terms, according to data from the United Nations, in 2019, migrant children (19 years of age or younger) represented **14% of the total migrant population**. In addition to the fact that there is an increased number of children on the move in the region, there are also gender patterns in child migration and different factors that generate displacement, such as violence, poverty, hunger, conflict, persecution for reasons such as race or belonging to a social group, which have a serious impact on their development and well-being. Girls face a higher risk of violence, abuse and exploitation during their journey, especially if they travel alone. Furthermore, when they arrive in a host country, they face the risk of humiliation and harassment, physical attacks and sexual abuse. In these contexts, girls are unable to access the protection to which they are entitled.

The study “Girls on the Move” represents a great advance in the process of guaranteeing the effective protection of the rights of girls and adolescents in migratory contexts, since it is only by documenting their testimonies, hearing their voices and learning from their experiences that institutions can achieve success in the protection response. The IACHR recognizes that, to this day, it remains a great challenge for authorities, institutions and society in general, to create spaces for listening and leading participation by girls, boys and adolescents. However, it is especially important to ensure their full and effective participation, with the aim of guaranteeing their full development and construction of their social citizenship.

You are invited to read this publication thoroughly, and to use it as a tool that will undoubtedly lead to the construction and concretization of strategic actions in the promotion and protection of the rights of girls who are migrants, refugees, stateless or in other contexts of human mobility.

— Esmeralda Arosemena de Troitiño
Rapport on the Rights of the Child
Inter-American Commission on Human Rights



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1. INTRODUCTION



Photo: Susan Warner / Save the Children

1. INTRODUCTION

Save the Children's global ambition is that all children survive, learn and are protected by 2030. To accelerate progress towards this goal for the most vulnerable children, the organisation's 2019 – 2021 Global Work Plan¹ strives to leverage and enhance existing knowledge and expertise to close the gap for five groups of children who are likely to be among the most deprived and vulnerable in any context:

- Girls
- Children with disabilities
- Children affected by conflict
- Children who are migrants or displaced
- Adolescents

Girls on the move are represented in at least three of the five categories listed above, and in some cases, in all five. Despite the well documented ripple-effect of enhanced wellbeing for families and future generations when development or humanitarian efforts invest in girls, interventions that target adolescents or children in mobility often continue to neglect thorough gender analysis during design and monitoring stages, with the result that far too often, girls on the move are absent from beneficiary populations and programme data and their needs and rights are not sufficiently addressed.

Reports and lessons learned from even long term extensive migration interventions indicate that girls tend not to be reached as effectively as boys. Very little evidence exists in contemporary migration literature to guide gender-sensitive and transformative programming for improving migrant girls' prospects to survive, learn and be protected. This knowledge gap has serious implications for girls on the move in Central America and Mexico, whose survival, protection and education outcomes are often in the hands of government actors, non-governmental agencies and other community or faith-based organizations that design and implement programming to promote the realization of their rights.

The primary purpose of this report is to recommend evidence-based strategies to improve the relevance and effectiveness of field interventions that target development outcomes for girls on the move in Central America and Mexico.

SAVE THE CHILDREN'S GLOBAL RESEARCH SERIES ON GIRLS ON THE MOVE:

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. Research for the series was conducted during 2019, in Southern Africa, Latin America, Greece and the Balkans.

“
Reports and lessons learned from even long term extensive migration interventions indicate that girls tend not to be reached as effectively as boys.”

1 Save the Children (2019). Closing the Gap: Our 2030 Ambition and 2019 to 2021 Global Work Plan. Available at: <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/closing-gap-our-2030-ambition-and-2019-2021-global-work-plan>

“
Identify which
sub-populations of
migrant girls face
the greatest risk.”

1.1 Objectives

This report consolidates findings from a rapid participatory consultation with: (1) migrant girls in the Southern Mexico border region, (2) front-line practitioners providing services to migrant children and their families, and (3) Save the Children teams in Mexico.

The aim of the research was to:

- a) Elucidate how gender and gender norms impact girls' decision-making and motivations to migrate from places of origin (for the purpose of this study: Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala);
- b) Unpack protection risks that girls face during the early stages of transit, and which coping strategies girls employ to navigate, mitigate and respond to these risks;
- c) Identify which sub-populations of migrant girls face the greatest risks. Where do the migrant 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, etc.) for migrant girls along targeted migration corridors;
- e) Identify protective factors that can be strengthened through programming in order to attain gender equality in programme outcomes and better protect and support migrant girls during the different stages of the journey.

Researchers followed a three-pronged approach:

- 1) **listen to and learn from girls;**
- 2) **highlight practitioner expertise navigating the highly dynamic circumstances** that girls encounter while traveling through Central America and Mexico;
- 3) **In collaboration with implementing field teams, identify programme and policy interventions** that can build on existing successes and gaps to protect and promote girls' rights prior to and during movement within the region.



Photo: Caroline Trutmann
/ Save the Children

Finally, Save the Children seeks to compare and contrast findings from research in four major migratory “hot spots” to deepen the global evidence base on girls’ movement. With this and a companion report on girls’ migration from Venezuela to Colombia, Save the Children hopes to better understand how age and gender shape the experience of girls’ migration within the Americas. The goal is to use “real-time” information from girls to produce actionable recommendations that address the needs and promote the rights of girls and children on the move.

1.2 Consultation

Consultations occurred within two sites of Latin America after an initial literature review. Consultation with 13 Central American girls, from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, were carried out in October 2019 in Tapachula in the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Consulted girls included both accompanied and unaccompanied children between the ages of 7 and 17. None of the girls were pregnant or mothers. Within Mexico, girls were either in shelters or Mexican government detention. Consultations occurred in workshop format over the course of two days.

Semi-structured individual and group interviews took place with 34 stakeholders in Colombia and Mexico. In Mexico, individuals included government officials from local offices of the legal, child welfare, and Foreign Affairs systems or Ministries, Save the Children teams, non-governmental organizations, and representatives from Inter-Agency Groups on Migration and Child Protection². Save the Children teams in Mexico and Colombia met to analyse results, review existing programmes, and brainstorm solutions. This workshop included discussion on gender norms; a review of existing programming within the target geographic regions of Chiapas, Mexico and La Guajira, Colombia; and a gap analysis for programming and advocacy. After the workshops, the consultation team compared initial findings and inputs from local teams in Latin America with existing regional research and emergent “Girls on the Move” findings from other regions. Results present a snapshot of current:

- motivations that fuel girls’ migration;
- risks that girls experience during their journey;
- barriers that limit access to services;
- programme and policy recommendations.

This Girls on the Move Report focuses on Central American girls’ motivations to migrate and their experiences within early phases of transit. Unlike studies in Southern Africa, the Balkans, and South America, arrival is not covered. For migrants from Central America, destinations vary and may change along the way. Save the Children teams, as well as some of the girls themselves, noted that many girls, particularly unaccompanied minors, **envision Northern Mexico as a temporary or final destination instead of the United States.**

High rates of child apprehension, detention, and repatriation, both in Mexico and within the United States, mean there is little guarantee of arriving at an intended destination.

Consulted girls included both accompanied and unaccompanied children between the ages of
7 and 17

“
High rates of child apprehension, detention, and repatriation, both in Mexico and within the United States, mean there is little guarantee of arriving at an intended destination.”

² For Mexico, semi-structured interviews were carried out with members from the Procuraduría Federal de Protección NNA, COMAR, government employees, and DIF Tapachula. Other relevant actors: members from the Interagency Protection Working Group in Tapachula (7 NGO participants), and members from the Interagency Working Group Against Gender-based violence. Staff members from Save the Children’s team on the Southern Mexican border were also consulted.



The Girls on the Move Series highlights key findings from global research on girls' and child migration.”

1.2.1 Limitations

Girls consulted within Southern Mexico were in early stages of their journey, just after crossing the Mexican border and prior to reaching the desert geography of Northern Mexico. Some girls were living with their family in a family shelter, while unaccompanied girls were detained in a government shelter pending resolution of their case. No pregnant girls or mothers were consulted, though the Save the Children team conducted informal case analyses of prior cases of pregnant girls. Girls in known situations of sexual exploitation, internally displaced girls, and non-Central American migrant girls were not consulted. Permission for consultation was secured from parents and family members but they were not present during interview.

The Findings Section of this report includes issues surfaced by girls that were confirmed by stakeholders and/or secondary literature. The girls' input has guided the structure of the report; it is not intended as a full situational analysis of all issues affecting migrant girls within the Central American and Mexican corridor.

1.3 Girls on the Move

The Girls on the Move Series highlights key findings from global research on girls' and children's migration. The movement of girls between countries challenges strongly held norms around gender, childhood, and citizenship. Migrant girls, and particularly unaccompanied girls, do not fit within pre-assigned social categories. As migrants they are 'out of place' within the nation-state, as females they exist outside the domestic domain, and as children they are unprotected by the institution of family³. Nevertheless, girls do migrate, often crossing thousands of kilometres and multiple borders, alone, with family members, or in groups. Their needs and capabilities differ from those of women, boys, and men; yet scope remains for more studies to focus on the complex interplay between agency, exploitation, connection, and opportunity in the experiences of girls on the move. The Girls on the Move series seeks to highlight this complexity. It recommends actions that meet girls where they are—targeting interventions to existing “weak points⁴” and building from existing efforts of parents, families, communities and girls.

Literature review for the series surfaced several key themes that should inform programme and policy decisions around girls' migration. They include:

- **Migrating girls often experience agency, empowerment, and opportunity alongside harm, exploitation, and curtailment of freedoms.** Discourse on girls' migration often focuses on the detrimental aspects without acknowledging a far more complex reality for girls—that movement generates opportunities as well as risks. Discourse about girl migrants tends to gravitate towards opposite poles. The “girl as victim” portrayal may hide the capabilities and benefits that girls bring to travel or advantages they gain from leaving their home communities. Conversely, a “victor” mentality, while highlighting girls' agency, may not hold duty-bearers to account in ending systemic failures around girl's safety, well-

³ Save the Children Sweden (January 2020). “Girls on the Move in Southern Africa: A qualitative study with groups of young women who have migrated to South Africa from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Zambia, and Mozambique.”

⁴ Temin, Miriam, Mark R. Montgomery, Sarah Engebretsen, and Kathryn M. Barker (2013). “Girls on the Move: Adolescent Girls and Migration in the Developing World.” A Girls Count Report on Adolescent Girls. The Population Council

being, education, and health⁵. In practice, girls' migration is a complex lived reality, where risks and opportunities interact.

- **Girls depend on in-person and remote peer and family networks that support girls throughout their transit and arrival.** The title of “unaccompanied minors” often gives the impression that girls travel alone. This idea should be continuously questioned. Save the Children teams have found little evidence of this in Southern Mexico, noting that girls travel with peer groups, family members, and other families. Many girls travel with financial and emotional support from parents, family members, or community members residing within the US and Mexico, though that support is often insufficient to protect the girls against a multitude of risks.
- **Intermediaries can play protective as well as exploitative roles, with many intermediaries exposed to the same vulnerabilities as girls.** Binary narratives of intermediaries as “good” or “bad” often belie the complex spectrum of relationships that occur during migration. Intermediaries, including smugglers (known of as *coyotes* or *polleras*), transport service-providers, and male companions, often play multiple roles in the experience of girls. In many cases, those serving as intermediaries in both origin and transit communities are targeted by organized crime through extortion schemes to provide these criminal groups with access to migrants⁶.



Photo: Caroline Trutmann /
Save the Children

1.4 Migration within Latin America and the Caribbean

There are approximately 69,5 million forcibly displaced people in the world, 31 million of them are children⁷. In Latin America, three primary migratory routes exist: from Haiti to the Dominican Republic; from Venezuela to various South American destinations; and from Central America to the United States via Mexico. In 2019, Mexico received about 70,000 applications for asylum⁸. Patterns of age, gender and geography emerge in migration through the third route. First, individuals from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, known as the “Northern Triangle”, comprise the majority of migrants bound for the United States and Mexico. Eighty percent of the children detained at the US-Mexican border came

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⁵ Save the Children Sweden (January 2020). “Girls on the Move in Southern Africa: A qualitative study with groups of young women who have migrated to South Africa from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Zambia, and Mozambique.”

⁶ Nelson, Tamaryn and Hajar Habbach (October 9, 2019). “‘If I went back, I would not survive.’ Asylum Seekers Fleeing Violence in Mexico and Central America”. Physicians for Human Rights. <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/asylum-seekers-fleeing-violence-in-mexico-and-central-america/>

⁷ UNHCR (June 19, 2019). “Figures at a Glance.” <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html> , UNICEF (July 22, 2020) “Child displacement” <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/>

⁸ Gobierno de México (July 22, 2020) https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/561456/CIERRE_DE_JUNIO_2020_1-julio-2020_-1.pdf

⁹ Save the Children (2018) “Refugees and migration at the Western Balkans route: Regional Overview October-December 2018” Balkans Migration Displacement Hub. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/15187/pdf/refugees_and_migrants_balkans_regional_overview_q4_2018_sc_bmdh_data.pdf

El Salvador and Honduras

1

child is killed per day.
In Honduras a woman
is killed every

13.8 hours



The Northern Triangle
has one of the **highest**
homicide and
femicide rates in the
world

from these three countries⁹. Second, more children and women now travel, with an uptick in child and adolescent migrants noted since 2007¹⁰. Over the last five years, gender patterns within child migration have emerged. US Customs and Border Protection data indicates that girls under age 18 from the Northern Triangle formed 32 percent of the apprehended child population during fiscal year 2017¹¹.

Central American migration to the United States has a long precedent. In 1980, there were an estimated 354,000 Central American immigrants living in the US, by 2017 the Central American immigrant population had increased to over 3.5 million people¹². As Central American civil wars intensified during the 1980s, migrants fled northwards. Political violence, organized crime, and gangs—known as *maras*—flourished after the wars' end. Within the US, immigrant youth, many of whom were convicted due to laws that disproportionately criminalized Latin American males, were deported en masse back to Northern Triangle countries, thus fuelling the trans-nationalization of the largest Central American *mara*: MS-13 or the *Salvatruchas*¹³.

Root causes for current migration within the Northern Triangle and Mexico are diverse, interconnected, and well documented in existing literature. High levels of poverty, political and economic instability, inequality, structural violence, organized crime, gender-based violence and family reunification are all cited as root causes of migration.

- The Northern Triangle has one of the **highest homicide and femicide rates in the world**. It is a dangerous place for women and children: in El Salvador and Honduras one child is killed per day. In Honduras a woman is killed every 13.8 hours¹⁵.
- The threat of **gang conscription**—boys conscripted into criminal networks

¹⁰ Organización Internacional del Trabajo (2013) “Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Migrantes: América Central y México”. OIM, UNICEF, UNHCR, OIT-IPEC. https://www.ilo.org/ipec/Informationresources/WCMS_IPEC_PUB_25755/lang-es/index.htm

¹¹ Hallock, Jeffrey, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, and Michael Fix. (May 30, 2018). “In Search of Safety, Growing Numbers of Women Flee Central America” <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/search-safety-growing-numbers-women-flee-central-america>

¹² O'Connor, Allison, Jeanne Batalova, and Jessica Bolter. (August 15, 2019). “Central American Immigrants in the United States”. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states>

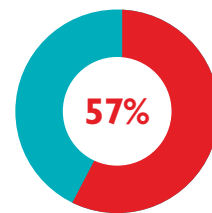
¹³ Some attribute the rise of gangs such as the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) to racial profiling and aggressive US legislation, particularly in California, that allowed for criminal prosecution of any youth—primarily Latino or black—affiliated with a gang. Between 2001 and 2010, 129,726 convicted criminals were deported to Central America, with 90 percent returning to Northern Triangle countries. For more information check: InSight Crime (2018) “MS 13 in the Americas: How the World Most Notorious Gang Defies Logic, Resists Destruction”. InSight Crime and Centre for Latin America and Latino Studies. <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1043576/download>; and Celinda Franco (January 30, 2008) “The MS-13 and 18th Street Gangs: Emerging Transnational Threats?” CRS report for Congress. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34233.pdf>

¹⁴ The World Health Organization states that femicide is generally understood to involve the intentional murder of women because they are women, though broader definitions are also used. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/77421/WHO_RHR_12.38_eng.pdf?sequence=1

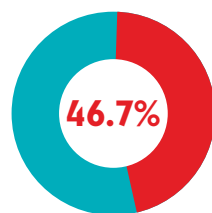
¹⁵ Todd, Camalot (July 13, 2018). “Conflict in Central America: Why Thousands flee their homeland in search of a safer existence.” Las Vegas Sun. <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2018/jul/13/conflict-in-central-america-why-thousands-flee-the/>

as members and girls as sexual “partners” or within commercial sexual exploitation rings—is often cited by families as a reason for leaving. MS-13 and other gangs conscript children, often manipulating them to commit murder, as children will not be sent to prison¹⁶.

- **Sexual violence**, as well as the lack of protection or justice after sexual violence, appears in literature as a primary motivation for child and adolescent migration. This includes gang-related, community, and household-related forms of sexual violence, such as incest. LGBTQ+ individuals report even higher rates of sexual violence¹⁷. In El Salvador in 2016, 57 percent of the formal complaints of sexual violence referred to cases committed against individuals between the ages of 12 and 17 years old¹⁸.
- Threats to children are real: **disappearance and kidnapping** are common, with girls affected more than boys. Save the Children (2017) found that 34 percent of those who have disappeared in Central America are children and teenagers. In Guatemala, in 2015, 5,998 children went missing, two thirds were girls and the rest were boys¹⁹.
- **Family reunification** also emerged as a primary “pull factor” drawing children northwards. According to UNICEF (2018), in a 2016 registry of migrant children and adolescents who had been returned to Honduras, 31.5 percent of respondents cited family reunification as their main reason for migrating. Similarly, in a 2018 survey of returnees to El Salvador, 28 percent said family reunification was their primary motivation²⁰.
- El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are three of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. **Poverty** limits life aspirations, prevents girls from accessing services, notably schools, and spawns a cycle of disadvantage. In Honduras, only 46.7 percent of adolescents ages 12-14 were in school in 2017²¹.



In El Salvador in 2016, 57 percent of the formal complaints of sexual violence referred to cases committed against individuals between the ages of 12 and 17 years old



In Honduras, just 46.7 percent of adolescents ages 12-14 were in school in 2017

¹⁶ UNICEF (August 2018). “Uprooted in Central America and Mexico: Migrant children face a vicious cycle of hardship and danger”. UNICEF Child Alert. <https://www.unicef.org/child-alert/central-america-mexico-migration>

¹⁷ Dotson, Rachel and Lisa Frydman (June 2017). “Niñez Interrumpida: Violencia Sexual y por Motivos de género contra Niñez Migrante y Refugiada Centroamericana”. Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) y Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Cordova. <https://observatoriocolef.org/articulos/ninez-interrumpida-violencia-sexual-y-por-motivos-de-genero-contr-ninez-migrante-y-refugiada-centroamericana/>

¹⁸ 5 April 2017. Persiste la impunidad en violencia sexual contra niñez. La Prensa Grafica.

<https://www.laprensagrafica.com/elsalvador/Persiste-la-impunidad-en-violencia-sexual-contra-ninez-20170405-0065.html>

¹⁹ Save the Children (2017). “Niñez y Adolescencia en situación de Movilidad” <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13638/pdf/spanish-com-programme-pr3.pdf>

²⁰ UNICEF (August 2018). “Uprooted in Central America and Mexico: Migrant children face a vicious cycle of hardship and danger”. UNICEF Child Alert. <https://www.unicef.org/child-alert/central-america-mexico-migration>

²¹ UNICEF (August 2018). “Uprooted in Central America and Mexico: Migrant children face a vicious cycle of hardship and danger”. UNICEF Child Alert. <https://www.unicef.org/child-alert/central-america-mexico-migration>

2. FINDINGS: UNDERSTANDING GIRLS ON THE MOVE IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA

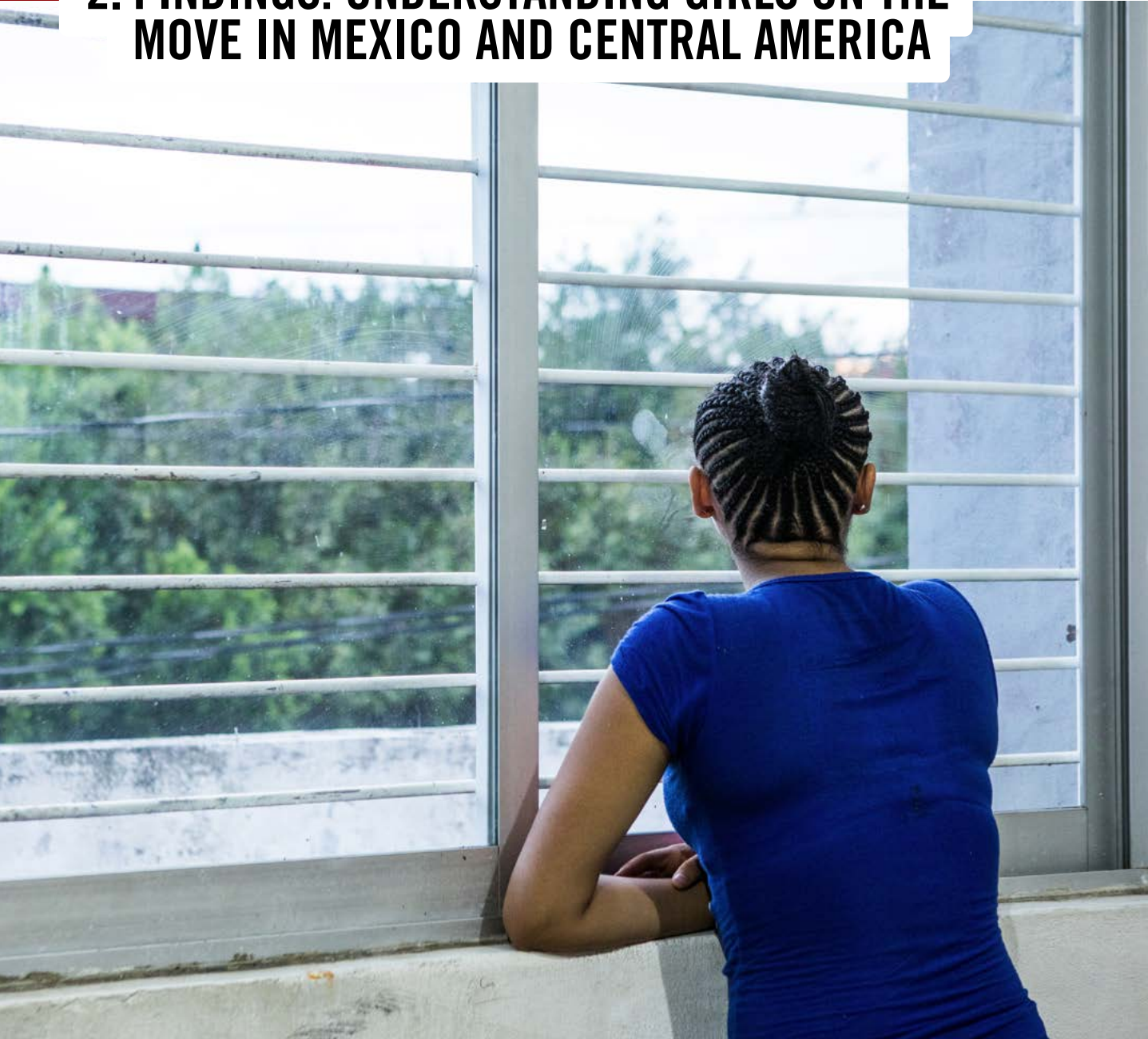


Photo: Caroline Trutmann / Save the Children

2. FINDINGS: UNDERSTANDING GIRLS ON THE MOVE IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA

Save the Children identified four principles from consultations with girls and stakeholders. These four principles serve as a shared starting point for deeper inquiry of girls' migration within Mexico and Central America. The team found repeated references to these principles within girl and practitioner narratives, yet they were under-represented within publications. They invite global programme and policymakers to re-frame our discourse around migration in a more migrant-centric way. They also question popular political and social narratives that seek to flatten the complexity of regional migration and girls on the move.

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

2.1 Diverse groups of girls move throughout the region

First, a **greater diversity of girls move throughout the region** than is often acknowledged in policy dialogue and publications. In addition to migrants leaving Central American countries, and particularly the Northern Triangle, many refugees and migrants from throughout the world approach the United States via Latin American routes. Origin country, language, age, ethnicity, race and intersection of various aspects of identity and power influence how girls experience their journey. **Diverse girls bring a diverse set of needs, capabilities, and support networks.** Policies and programmes may not reach or effectively support girls if they don't account for this diversity.

2.1.1 Diversity within "Girls on the Move"

- **Girls of all ages:** Given the feminization 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 communities²². Africans travel through Latin America seeking entrance and asylum within the United States²³. 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.

²² Phone Interview with Save the Children team in Tapachula, 16 Dec 2019.

²³ UNODC (2018). "Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants" https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glosom/articulos/ninez-interrumpida-violencia-glosom_2018_web_small.pdf

²⁴ Dotson, Rachel and Lisa Frydman (June 2017). "Niñez Interrumpida: Violencia Sexual y por Motivos de género contra Niñez Migrante y Refugiada Centroamericana". Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) y Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Cordova. <https://observatoriocolef.org/articulos/ninez-interrumpida-violencia-sexual-y-por-motivos-de-genero-contra-ninez-migrante-y-refugiada-centroamericana/>

²⁵ Bixby, Scott. (November 15, 2018) "LGBT Migrants Fled Persecution Back Home. Then They Flew the Caravan". Daily Beast. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/lgbt-migrants-fled-persecution-back-home-then-they-flew-the-caravan>

Travel creates unique threats to pregnant girls, already considered high risk if under

16 years old

- **LGBTIQ+ children:** LGBTIQ+ children report high levels of sexual and other forms of violence in their communities²⁴, and high levels of violence during transit²⁵.
- **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 specialized medical needs, from family members. Disability can also occur due to injuries during transit²⁶. 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 years²⁷. 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 households²⁸, 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, also affects indigenous groups.

2.2 Girls migrate for many reasons—including pregnancy

Girls travel for **complex and interrelated reasons**. These reasons complicate any single narrative about girls’ migration. Girls confirmed that the root causes of poverty, violence, and family reunification fuelled their migration, though root causes manifest in unique and complicated ways across generations of Central American families and individual girls, as described in [Findings: Motivations for Migration](#) making the reasons for migrating multiple and complex.

²⁶ Knoebel, Cindy. (February 6, 2019). “The Rights of Undocumented Immigrants with Disabilities Need to be a Priority.” IMMPRINT. <https://imm-print.com/the-plight-of-undocumented-immigrants-with-disabilities/>

²⁷ Galvan, Astrid. (July 4, 2019) “Pregnant teens especially vulnerable in border centers” AP News. <https://apnews.com/3defe7a843a14d12845227b5e6f930d0>

Voge, Cady (July 31, 2019). “I was scared I’d get sick’: the pregnant migrant women detained by the US” The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jul/31/us-immigration-detention-centers-pregnant-migrant-women>

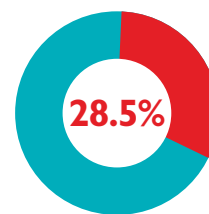
Associated Press (September 6, 2019). “US Tells Migrant Woman 8 Months Pregnant to Wait in Mexico”. VOA News. <https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-tells-migrant-woman-8-months-pregnant-wait-mexico>

²⁸ Index Mundi (2019) “Female headed households. Country ranking”. <https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/indicators/SP.HOU.FEMA.ZS/rankings>
WHO (2019) “Gun truce for violence prevention, El Salvador”. Bulletin of the World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/94/9/BLT-15-166314-table-T1.html>

2.2.1 Pregnancy and sexual violence

Pregnancy and motherhood, as well as efforts to prevent pregnancy during transit, feature prominently within the lives of girls on the move. DIF stakeholders in Tapachula estimated that **10-20% of teenage girls arriving seeking shelter are either pregnant or young mothers**²⁹. In many cases, pregnancy and motherhood results from failures to safeguard girls from sexual violence in their home communities³⁰, with girls pregnant by rape. **In El Salvador, 28.5 percent of adolescent mothers reported that their first sexual encounter was non-consensual**³¹, with human rights groups noting the frequency of incest and/or sexual violence within the home³². Pregnancy may trigger girls' decisions to migrate—in ways that also reflect other root causes. Save the Children teams in Tapachula noted cases of pregnant girls who migrated due to family violence, including disapproval from parents after pregnancy, intimate partner violence, or fear of gang reprisals if their partner was gang-involved. **No evidence of pregnant girls migrating to secure US or Mexican citizenship for their children was found**, despite that narrative's prominence within political discourse in the US.

Within El Salvador,



of adolescent mothers reported that their first sexual encounter was non-consensual

2.3 Girls employ various strategies to self-protect and cope with challenges

The region's socio-political complexity, sophistication of organized crime, 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.** Coyotes or other transport services; traveling in small groups or caravans; cross-dressing; taking birth control; or finding a male romantic partner prior to or during travel emerged as harm reduction strategies. Coping 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, may fulfil their contractual obligation or facilitate assault. Romantic partners may generate greater safety or intimate partner violence. More research is needed to understand how girls make decisions around risk.



Photo: Jonathan Hyams / Save the Children

²⁹ Phone Interview with Save the Children team in Tapachula, 16 Dec 2019.

³⁰ Filipovic, Gill (June 7, 2029) "I can no longer continue to live here'. What's driving so many Honduran women to the U.S. border? The reality is worse than you've heard". Politico Magazine. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/06/07/domestic-violence-immigration-asylum-caravan-honduras-central-america-227086>

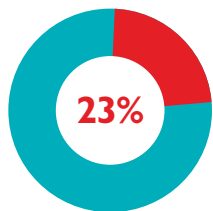
³¹ Dotson, Rachel and Lisa Frydman (June 2017). "Niñez Interrumpida: Violencia Sexual y por Motivos de genero contra Niñez Migrante y Refugiada Centroamericana". Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) y Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matías de Cordova. <https://observatoriocolef.org/articulos/ninez-interrumpida-violencia-sexual-y-por-motivos-de-genero-contra-ninez-migrante-y-refugiada-centroamericana/>

³² Ibid.

2.4 The migratory context changes rapidly

Policy, market, and social dynamism characterize the Central American and Mexican migration corridor. Circumstances change quickly, often without notice, and both migrants and practitioners must dedicate time to understanding changing conditions. **Public policy**, particularly around asylum, child detention, and border policing, shifts rapidly within the US. Mexico and Central American governments often change their policies in response to US socio-political pressures. Municipal, state and federal branches of the Mexican government may move encampments or temporary housing for migrants with no advance notice to civil society partners providing services to stranded migrants³³. **Market forces**, including transport services designed to facilitate irregular migration as well as vast criminal networks organized around drugs, arms, and trafficked humans, evolve in response to policy, policing, opportunity, and intra-group competition and violence. Tactics and schemes change frequently, thus limiting the efficacy of information sharing between migrants. **Migrant groups organize** in response to political and market forces. Caravans and other mechanisms around mass migration emerged as a way for individuals and families to navigate the difficulties of migration³⁴. The region is in near constant flux: demanding a high level of agility, a huge investment in information-sharing and coordination; and responsiveness on the part of those providing services and monitoring human rights situations.

Women and children’s detention and deportation rose from 12% in 2012 to 23% in 2016



2.4.1 ASYLUM, DETENTION, AND BORDER POLICING

The dynamism of the US, Mexican, and Central American policy environment changes the “rules” of travel, increases the stakes for irregular migrants, and impacts girls on the move. Three key policy areas that illustrate this dynamism are described below.

- Family separation and detention of women and children:** The US detention of women and children increased dramatically in the last decade. Women and children’s detention and deportation rose from 12% in 2012 to 23% in 2016³⁵. In April 2018, the US

³³ This occurred several times in Tijuana with Caravan migrants in 2018. For more information, see: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-americas/mexico-begins-moving-caravan-migrants-to-new-shelter-but-faces-mistrust/2018/11/30/4e597530-f497-11e8-aeaa-b85fd44449f5_story.html. In December 2019, Save the Children teams reported a similar phenomenon with African migrants in Tapachula.

³⁴ Jacobsen, Karen (October 25, 2018) “Migrants travel in groups for a simple reason: safety”. The Conversation. <http://theconversation.com/migrants-travel-in-groups-for-a-simple-reason-safety-105621>

³⁵ CEPAL, OIM, ONU (2017). “Informe preliminar de la reunión regional latinoamericana y caribeña de expertas y expertos en migración internacional preparatoria del Pacto mundial para una migración segura, ordenada y regular”. <https://www.cepal.org/es/publicaciones/42529-informe-preliminar-la-reunion-regional-latinoamericana-caribena-expertas>

government implemented a “zero-tolerance” policy to ramp-up criminal prosecution of undocumented migrants, thus resulting in criminal prosecution of migrant parents and the separation of nearly 3,000 children from their parents, with some sources indicating that over 4,250 families were separated³⁶. The US government, at the US-Mexico border, detained approximately 76,000 unaccompanied children while 450,000 family units (a child accompanied by mother or father) were detained during the fiscal year of 2019³⁷. The Mexican government does not separate families³⁸.

- **Policing and Apprehension in Mexico and Central America:** Under threats of increased tariffs from the US government in early 2019, the Mexican government further intensified border policing, adding extra road checkpoints, sending 15,000 National Guard to patrol Northern Mexico and 6,000 officers to guard the Southern border with Guatemala. Mexico apprehended more than 29,000 migrants in June 2019, up to 200% more compared with the same month the year before³⁹. The 2006 Central American Free Mobility Agreement, or the CA-4, established free movement across borders for citizens of the four signatory countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Under pressure from the US during the mobilization of Caravans in 2018, Guatemala began to police borders, resulting in greater challenges in crossing Central American borders⁴⁰.
- **Changes and Limitations for Asylum:** Migrants seeking asylum within the United States saw increasing restrictions on the asylum process on January 25, 2019. The implementation of the “Remain in Mexico policy” forces asylum-seekers arriving at ports of entry on the US-Mexico border to be returned to Mexico to wait for the duration of their US immigration proceedings⁴¹.

The US government, at the US-Mexico border, detained approximately **76,000** unaccompanied children while **450,000** family units were detained during the fiscal year of 2019



Photo: Susan Warner / Save the Children

³⁶ US Office of Attorney General (April 6, 2018). “Memorandum for Federal Prosecutors along the Southwest Border” <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1049751/download>
Alvarez, Priscila. (November 7, 2019). “Trump administration separated an additional 1,500 migrant families at the US-Mexico border” CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/06/politics/family-separation-court-filing/index.html>

³⁷ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/sw-border-migration/fy-2019>

³⁸ McDonnell, Patrick J. (June 19, 2018) “Mexico blasts U.S. family separation policy as a ‘violation of human rights’”. Los Angeles Times. <https://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-family-separation-20180619-story.html>

³⁹ Fredrick, James. (July 13, 2019). “How Mexico Beefs Up Immigration Enforcement to Meet Trump’s Terms” NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/13/740009105/how-mexico-beefs-up-immigration-enforcement-to-meet-trumps-terms>

⁴⁰ BBC News (October 20, 2018) “Migrant caravan: tear gas on the Guatemala Mexico border” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-45925186>

⁴¹ DHS (January 24, 2019). “Migrant Protection Protocols”. Official Website of the Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2019/01/24/migrant-protection-protocols>

3. FINDINGS: MOTIVATIONS FOR MIGRATION



Photo: Caroline Trutmann /
Save the Children

3.1 FINDINGS: MOTIVATIONS FOR MIGRATION

3.1 Poverty

Girls cited the inability to build a successful life within their communities. For older girls, poverty manifests in their inability to continue education and difficulties in finding employment. This reduced opportunities for learning, personal advancement, employment, and safety.

3.1.1 Few economic opportunities and inability to cover basic needs

Girls confirmed that lack of economic opportunities for young people fuels migration. Save the Children teams confirmed expectations in home communities that some young people will migrate as part of a household livelihoods strategy, as family members in origin depend to a great extent upon remittances.

“The interconnections between poverty, violence, and family reunification were evident throughout the girls’ testimonials.”

“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 years old. Salvadoran

“In my country, there are no jobs right now, and there is plenty of gang violence and one wants to improve oneself and be able to help the family.”

Adriana. 17 years old. Honduran

3.2 Violence: at home, in the community and in caretaking situations

Girls reported that **violence, structural and otherwise, saturated all aspects of their lives** manifesting in the forms of: weak social safety nets, threats, extortion, kidnapping, conscription, intimate partner violence, and femicide. The **interconnections between poverty, violence, and family reunification were evident throughout the girls’ testimonials.** For example, girls noted that caretakers’ control of remittance funds sometimes violated their right to an education, as the money was not used for the intended purpose. Intimate partner violence escalated rapidly to threats of contract killing, likely due to the ubiquity of criminal networks and violent practices within the Northern Triangle⁴². Physicians for Human Rights reports that threats, physical violence, witness elimination, extrajudicial killings, including the use of contract killers or “hitmen” are commonly used throughout the region and figure prominently within the narratives of asylum-seekers as well as those remaining within the Northern Triangle.

⁴² Note that Violence Against Women is global problem, but the rapid escalation as well as the frequency within the region is highly problematic. UN Women (2016) “Ending Violence Against Women”. Global Database on Violence Against Women. <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en>



Several girls indicated financial insecurity, particularly the dependence on remittances insufficient to cover basic expenses

3.2.1 Financial exploitation and emotional abuse in caretaking situations

Several girls indicated **financial insecurity**, particularly the dependence on remittances insufficient to cover basic expenses, and associated **emotional insecurity within the relationships in the household**, including the lack of trusted adults, as prompting the decision to migrate. Girls also recounted abuse or exploitative relationships associated with kin and non-kin caretaking situations as prompting their decision to migrate. As noted in the situation described below, abuse and financial insecurity intermingle. The girl perceived that her caretaker misused remittances from a migrant parent in an exploitative way. The second case highlighted caretaking situations resulting from the death of a parent.

“My mom sent me money and she (the lady who took care of me) stole it from me, she would keep the money from me, wouldn’t give me any to study, then I started working in a market, I worked from 7am to 5pm, almost all day.”

Fernanda. 17 years old. Salvadoran

“Here I am, living with my aunt (pointing at a drawing she made), I didn’t feel good there, they didn’t treat me or my siblings well. I have a younger and an older sibling. This is the house where I used to live with my mother (pointing at another picture), she died. I used to feel safe there. Here, is the tree where I felt safe... I could see the stars and the moon and I would think about what I wanted to do.”

Adriana. 17 years old. Honduran

“Intimate partner violence, particularly affecting girls’ mothers, also fueled migration.”

3.2.2 Rapid escalation of intimate partner violence

Intimate partner violence, particularly affecting girls’ mothers, also fueled migration. Intimate partner violence manifested as daily violence or abuse, or linked to community-wide criminal networks involving threats of extreme violence, led families to flee. Sometimes the violence was also directed at the girls themselves, speaking to the interlinkages between violence against women and violence against children. Girls and their mothers in this situation travelled without the advantage of preparation: of documents, routes, evaluation and decision-making of protection strategies during travel.

“My dad already knows we are in Mexico. In the beginning, my dad thought we had disappeared, but he sent people to kill my mom, he wanted them to cut my mom’s head and bring the head back to him. Once, my dad found out my mom’s phone number and called her and told her he knew she was in Mexico and that she would end up dead.”

Nancy. 10 years old. Honduran

“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 years old, Honduran

Cases of extreme intimate partner violence, as well as other forms of gender-based violence against women and girls, highlight the importance of recognizing gender-based persecution as sufficient grounds for obtaining a right to asylum. Until state systems within Northern Triangle countries can protect from and effectively enable prosecution for different forms of gender-based violence, women see migration with their children as the only option.

3.2.3 Community violence

Girls who reported safety in their home often reported insecurity elsewhere. An 11 year old from Honduras reported living in the home of a in-law aunt where she and her sister were able to study until community violence began.

“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.”

Ximena. 11 years old. Honduran

“In my neighbourhood there was the Mara 18. My mother showed me the photo of one of the girls who got raped. They stole my mom’s wallet, she carried my cousins’ photo and birth certificate. I don’t know why we started the journey.”

Karina. 10 years old. Honduran



Cases of extreme intimate partner violence, as well as other forms of gender-based violence against women and girls, highlight the importance of recognizing gender-based persecution as sufficient grounds for obtaining a right to asylum

⁴³ UNICEF (August 2018). “Uprooted in Central America and Mexico: Migrant children face a vicious cycle of hardship and danger”. UNICEF Child Alert. <https://www.unicef.org/child-alert/central-america-mexico-migration>

3.2.4 The body as transaction: sexual assault and gang conscription of girls

Gang violence and particularly gang conscription manifests differently within the lives of adolescent boys and girls. Gangs conscript girls as “partners” of gang members and/or for commercial sexual exploitation purposes⁴³. In the testimonial below, the girl notes that boys are expected to give money while girls are expected to give sex. Girls receive the message—at origin and throughout transit—that their body is the base for transaction. This “normalization” of sexual violence by girls and boys is well documented in contemporary literature on gender-based violence in the LAC context.

“I also worked in a shop, and they would say things to me, they wanted to assault me, they want to touch you, they ask us to have sex with them. With men it’s different, they ask them for money. So I decided to go. I want to help my siblings.”

Adriana. 17 years old. Honduran



Girls also indicated a desire to continue learning while traveling and in detention

3.2.5 School as safety

Girls of all ages identified schools as safe spaces. Girls also indicated a desire to continue learning while traveling and in detention. This finding provides a strong argument for programming in origin communities that builds from existing support networks and girl-serving institutions.

“I kept studying, studying is where I felt best, in school.”

Adriana. 17 years old. Honduran

“What I liked most in my country was to go to school.”

Jessyca. 9 years old. Honduran

“I liked to go to school and grocery shopping, and do lots of things.”

Yana. 7 years old. Honduran

“What I liked best from where I lived was to go to school.”

Karina. 10 years old. Honduran



Photo: Ximena Zambrana / Consultant

3.3 Family reunification

Family reunification refers to travel that unites girls with individuals from a spectrum of nuclear and extended family relationships, living in the US or Mexico. The significance of reunification in the life of the girl varies, though family reunification takes on added importance given the insecurity girls experience in origin communities. Family, rather than the geographic location of arrival, becomes the girl's destination.



Family, rather than the geographic location of arrival, becomes the girl's destination

"I went to live to my aunt's house, my mom called me and asked me if I wanted to go with her (she's been living in Mexico for a year and a half) or live in Honduras, I thought about it a lot. I wanted to stay in Honduras but I [also] wanted to live with my mom."

María. 14 years old. Honduran

"My dad went to the USA and we want to meet him."

Karina. 10 years old. Honduran

4. FINDINGS: GIRLS IN TRANSIT BETWEEN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO



Photo: Victor Leiva / Save the Children

4. FINDINGS: GIRLS IN TRANSIT BETWEEN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

Girls traveling from Central America to the United States face a journey that can range between 2,000 to over 5,000 kilometers, crossing two to five international borders. Consultations with girls for this report occurred in Tapachula, at the Southern Mexico Border. Injury, sexual violence, and death are common for migrants traversing the Central American and Mexico corridors. According to US Customs and Border Protection, over 7,000 deaths have been reported since 1998⁴⁴. In 2019, there were 431 deaths in the US-Mexico Border Region, with 67 of those deaths reported as women and children⁴⁵. Many believe that reported statistics underestimate loss of life given the clandestine travel and the harsh climactic conditions on the US-Mexico border⁴⁶. Stakes are high for all migrants traveling in the region. As children and females, girls experience a significant disadvantage in terms of power, resources, control over their own bodies and access to the public space. This leads to greater risks, less access to information and services and less options for safe and legal migration. For girl migrants, the stakes are high.

Over
7,000
deaths have been
reported since 1998

4.1 Girls begin travel without understanding the magnitude of their journey—often because they flee imminent threats

Save the Children and stakeholders agreed that very few girls understand what their journey would entail prior to departing home. Save the Children attributes this to the lack of time and preparation girls have prior to travel as many girls flee after a violent incident or threat in their home, family, or neighbourhood.

“I did not like it. I thought we were just going to go in the bus, but they stopped us several times and I did not like that. To be sitting, surrounded by police...it was suffocating.”

Ximena. 11 years old. Honduran

4.2 Girls encounter the same risks they flee from, as well as new risks, in transit

4.2.1 Physical risks

The testimonials of girls highlight the intense physicality required for irregular migration. Many girls reported crossing rivers without knowing how to swim. Families and parents had to ferry multiple children who could not swim across the river. Others reported fairly easy transit via bus within Central America. Physical risks intensify as migrants head northwards as US border policing strategies send migrants through desert terrain with no natural water sources. Migrants tackle the most difficult part of the journey at the end of the trip, when their energy and resources are depleted.

⁴⁴ US Customs and Border Protection (2019). “Migrant Protection Protocols” Official Website of the Department of Homeland Security. <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2019/01/24/migrant-protection-protocols>

US Customs and Border Protection (2019) “Southwest Border Deaths by Fiscal Year”. South Border Sectors. <https://www.cbp.gov/sites/default/files/assets/documents/2019-Mar/bp-southwest-border-sector-deaths-fy1998-fy2018.pdf>

⁴⁵ IOM (2019) “Recorded migrant deaths by region”. IOM Missing Migrants Project. <https://missingmigrants.iom.int>

⁴⁶ Androff, David K. and Kyoko Y. Tavassoli (April 2012). “Deaths in the Desert: The Human Rights Crisis on the U.S.—Mexico Border” Social Work Vol. 57, No. 2: 165-173.

Sexual violence is a reality and a constant threat for girls on the move. Amnesty International notes that

6 out of 10

women and girls

will be victims of sexual assault during their journey

“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 years old. Salvadoran

4.2.2 Sexual violence and commercial sexual exploitation

Sexual violence is a reality and a constant threat for girls on the move. Amnesty International notes that 6 out of 10 women and girls will be victims of sexual assault during their journey⁴⁷. Taking contraceptives to prevent pregnancy is now a common practice for women and girls traveling through the region⁴⁸.

A high percentage of girls will require trauma-informed care, either from experiences within high violence settings of the Northern Triangle or from risks encountered during their journey.

“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 years old. Honduran

4.2.3 Detention

Impacts of detention emerged as a common theme amongst respondents as many of the girls consulted were in detention. Girls enter detention with experiences of trauma from origin communities as well as from transit. Detained girls consulted by Save the Children reported receiving food, lodging, health, mental health services, and some recreational services, though they had no freedom of movement or access to education. The confinement generated a great deal of stress. According to article 111 of the Mexican migration law, children are not supposed to be held in detention for more than 15 working days. Under certain circumstances this can be prolonged to a maximum of 60 days, however, these time limits are often exceeded, especially when the cases are evaluated in towns where there is no office for the national migration agency COMAR⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ Amnesty International (2019). “Migrants in Mexico: Invisible Victims of Abuse”. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/migrants-in-mexico-invisible-victims-of-abuse/>

⁴⁸ UNHCR (2015) “Women on the Run”. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/5630f24c6/women-run.html>

⁴⁹ Article 111 del Reglamento de la Ley General de los Derechos de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes (LGDNNA).

“I feel bad. There’s a girl here that cries all the time, and her weeping stresses me deeply.”

Adriana. 17 years old. Honduran

“Here, I am sad because I am locked up and I don’t have much communication with my mom.”

Fernanda. 17 years old. Salvadoran

4.3 Girls gather information during their journey

Stakeholders reported anecdotal evidence of girls learning during the journey. The Save the Children team noted that girls gather information about routes, geography, checkpoints, and safety. One stakeholder commented, “We see that girls seek to learn more than boys, maybe because boys tend to believe that their strength will protect them. By their second attempt, girls would tell us, *“I knew there was a police checkpoint near the river, so we detoured toward a safer crossing.”*

4.4 Girls develop friendships in transit

Some girls reported developing bonds of friendship and a deep sense of solidarity with detained peers. In a way, girls created substitute families. These strong bonds with other migrant girls were mentioned in the interviews, but also present in the girls’ drawings, when they depicted real or imagined spaces where they felt safe and experienced joy.

“My dream is to be in Cancun with all the girls that are here.”

Adriana. 17 years old. Honduran

4.5 Girls care for other children during transit

Accompanied children and young mothers care for children and siblings during travel. While in shelters, parents leave the oldest child in charge of siblings within the shelter while parents work or complete administrative tasks. Failure to provide care for siblings or age-segmented spaces may result in fewer girls accessing programming.

4.6 Girls employ protective strategies prior to and during transit

Ample evidence exists that girls and young women employ diverse protective strategies prior to and during transit. 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. These results hold true within the Central America and Mexican context.

““
The Save the Children team noted that girls gather information about routes, geography, checkpoints, and safety. ””

The cost of *coyotes* can range from **USD 3,500** per person or up to **USD 15,000** for transporting an unaccompanied child

4.6.1 Accompaniment and group travel

Girls sought out companions for travel as a protective strategy. Stakeholders noted that girls tended to prioritize male companions believing they can provide greater protection, though that strategy may backfire. The Save the Children team also noted the rise in groups of four to five young people, of mixed gender, traveling together.

“I came with them as if I were their daughter, they took care of me. They liked me because they say I was good to them. I came with a man from Tamaulipas and his wife, they came from Nicaragua.”

Adriana. 17 years old. Honduran

4.6.2 Transport services

Guides, also called *coyotes* or *polleros*, ferry groups of migrants across the border. The cost of *coyotes* can range from USD 3,500 per person or up to USD 15,000 for transporting an unaccompanied child. Families often sell their house or belonging or enter into debt to pay transport⁵⁰.

“I went with a guide, one pays for the trip oneself, let’s say that I take you to the border with US3,000... he has to find the paths, cross a river or take another way.”

Yessenia. 17 years old. Salvadoran

Two children, **ages 12 & 14**, reported to stakeholders that they were “kidnapped” by a rival *coyote*

Key stakeholders within Mexico reported that *coyotes* are contracted within origin communities and employ various mobility strategies to move girls, as well as other people who have contracted their services, across the landscape. Two children, ages 12 and 14, reported to stakeholders that they were “kidnapped” by a rival *coyote*. Their original *coyote* had to “rescue” them to continue on in their journey.

Girls reported a range of more transit-specific services provided at key points within the journey, including rafts to cross high rivers. Nevertheless, families reported being assaulted after transport service-providers colluded with criminal entities.

⁵⁰ UNICEF (August 2018). “Uprooted in Central America and Mexico: Migrant children face a vicious cycle of hardship and danger”. UNICEF Child Alert. <https://www.unicef.org/child-alert/central-america-mexico-migration>

4.6.3 Harm reduction around sexual violence

Women migrating through Central America and Mexico have reported seeking birth control injections or pills to prevent pregnancy if raped during travel, “so that if you are raped, you will not end up pregnant. And you will only have the trauma of the event, but not a baby in the future from the rape”⁵¹. Stakeholders consulted confirmed this practice for girls and young women, noting that mothers will secure birth control for their daughters prior to travel.

4.6.4 Caravans

Caravans emerged as a protective strategy, particularly for women, children, and members of the LGBTIQ+ community⁵². Save the Children teams reported that many women and children made the decision to travel because they felt that the Caravans would provide “safety in numbers” without the expense of a *coyote*.

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Women migrating through Central America and Mexico reported seeking birth control injections or pills to prevent pregnancy if raped during travel.”



Photo: Caroline Trutmann / Save the Children

⁵¹ UNHCR (2015) “Women on the Run”. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/5630f24c6/women-run.html>

⁵² Rosenberg, Mica, Delphine Schrank and Kristina Cooke (October 10, 2019). “The migrant caravans: A common road toward different fates”. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-profiles-introduction/the-migrant-caravans-a-common-road-toward-different-fates-idUSKBN1WVP1GB>

Holmes, Catesby (December 21, 2018) “Remembering the caravan: 5 essential reads that show the desperation of Central American migrants” The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/remembering-the-caravan-5-essential-reads-that-show-the-desperation-of-central-american-migrants-108860>

Neve, Gordon and Nicola Perugini (November 19, 2018) “Migrant caravan: branding migrants ‘human shields’ has a deadly motive”. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/migrant-caravan-branding-migrants-human-shields-has-a-deadly-motive-106885>

5. RECOMMENDATIONS



Photo: Andrea Aragon / Save the Children

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Invest in girls in origin, transit, and at destination

The primary recommendation is to take action for girls, with a particular focus on adolescent girls. A few ways to prioritize investment are detailed below.

- **Identify immediate ways to reduce imminent harm to girls:** Girls identified natural and social hazards in origin and transit that result in injury and loss of life. Girls' basic safety needs must be secured in a way that respects their human rights. The recommendation is to start from a harm reduction approach during transit while building stronger support networks and systems in origins. Various strategies to do this, from raising awareness about risk in transit, preparing girls for migration and strengthening existing child protection systems, to improving specific services for girls, and demanding greater accountability from origin and destination governments, are noted below. Despite the importance of long-term investment in systems and services, urgent efforts to protect life and secure safety for girls on the move, responding to their specific needs, are necessary.
- **Provide girls-only safe spaces to strengthen girls' empowerment, support networks and build skills:** Girls need safe spaces characterized by the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence and abuse⁵³ to counteract the deleterious effects of living in homes, communities, and countries saturated by violence – including different forms of gender-based violence. Moreover, gender inequalities place girls in a subordinate position in terms of gendered power relations and translate into different forms of discrimination, which may be perpetuated in mixed spaces. Girls' clubs, life skills programmes, or other types of girl-centred programmes provide girls with safe spaces, trained mentors, and guided peer learning and age-appropriate skills acquisition. They have been proven to change discriminatory gender norms and practices, provide psychosocial gains, and increase knowledge⁵⁴. Some programmes have reduced the share of girls reporting having sex against their will⁵⁵. The social support fostered within girl-centred programming can provide an important source of emotional security to girls deprived of family members, easing feelings of loneliness and disconnection associated with poor mental health. Peer learning can build key skills girls will need for migration, livelihoods, self-protection, and sexual and reproductive health. Girls may also strengthen certain skills, such as assertiveness, communication, decision-making, and refusal, to which they may have had less exposure than boys due to restrictive gender norms.
- **Improve support to caregivers:** Caregiver capacity to protect girls is weakened by poverty, violence, and widespread crime. Migration intensifies stress in complex and unpredictable ways. Within origin communities, the recommendation is to focus on parent, family, and non-kin caregivers who may abuse or exploit girls. Examples of gender-transformative parenting programmes within humanitarian, refugee, and high-migration scenarios, as well as local approaches could provide a blueprint for programming within the region.



Urgent efforts to protect life and secure safety for girls on the move, responding to their specific needs, are necessary. ”

⁵³ UNFPA (2015). “Women and Girls Safe Spaces. A guidance note based on lessons learned from the Syrian crisis”. UNFPA Regional Syria Response Hub. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA%20UNFPA%20Women%20and%20Girls%20Safe%20Spaces%20Guidance%20%5B1%5D.pdf> Citing Wendy Baldwin (May 2011) “Creating ‘safe spaces’ for adolescent girls” Population Council. Series: Promoting healthy, safe, and productive transitions to adulthood. https://www.popcouncil.org/uploads/pdfs/TABriefs/39_SafeSpaces.pdf

⁵⁴ Marcus, Rachel; Nandini Gupta-Archer; Madeleine Darcy and Ella Page. (September 2017) “Girls’ clubs, life skills programmes and girls’ well-being outcomes”. GAGE: Gender and Adolescent Global Evidence. <https://www.gage.odi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/GAGE-Girls-Club-Report-FINAL.pdf>

⁵⁵ Bandeira, Oriana, Niklas Buehren, Robin Stuart L. Burgess, Markus P. Goldstein, Selim Gulesci, Imran Rasul. 2017. “Women’s empowerment in action : evidence from a randomized control trial in Africa (English)”. Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/707081502348725124/Women-s-empowerment-in-action-evidence-from-a-randomized-control-trial-in-Africa>

“
If girls travel with the intent of reunifying with family in the US or Mexico, they should have family members’ contact information and back-up contacts ready in the case of detainment and emergency.”

5.2 Prepare and equip girls before they migrate

Preparation for migration can occur through longer-term and more time-intensive girl-centred programming as described above. Shorter encounters, awareness-raising, information, and peer learning sessions could reach a greater number of girls with information and harm-reduction strategies. While short courses cannot guarantee safety, they can enhance girls’ existing self-protection strategies. Peer learning strategies that engage girls who have previously migrated, repatriated girls, 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 migration⁵⁶ while providing girls the information to decide if migration is in their best interest. Suggested content includes:

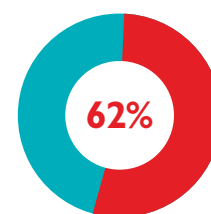
- **Map of routes and known risks:** Girls should understand the landscapes they will cross, risks, seasonal fluctuations in risks (e.g. crossing dangerous rivers in dry season or avoiding desert crossings in summer), and service providers who support their journey – including those providing services for survivors of sexual violence.
- **Information about public and civil society actors:** It is important that girls access available protection and support quickly when they need it. Information about both government agencies responsible for protection of children and civil society actors who offer support and protection should be made available to children before their departure.
- **Contact information for family reunification:** If girls travel with the intent of reunifying with family in the US or Mexico, they should have family members’ contact information and back-up contacts ready in the case of detainment and emergency.
- **Budget:** Girls of all ages mentioned the stress of watching their or their parents’ budget dwindle as they travelled across the region. Girls mentioned bribes, transport services, hotel, food, and other unforeseen costs. Awareness raising can support girls to consider costs associated with travel, as well as promote higher-order skills acquisition linked to financial literacy.
- **Overview of policing, detention, asylum, and deportation:** Girls, as well as parents or caregivers, have the right to know their probability to secure asylum in either the US or Mexico, as well as the requirements and time estimates associated with the process, though the changes in policy complicate information dissemination. Contacts of legal service providers in border regions can support girls and families to understand relevant processes.

⁵⁶ Mesoamerica Regional Migration Program. IOM. (August 27, 2019). “IOM Launches Campaigns to Prevent Irregular Migration in Mexico and Central America”. <https://www.programamesoamerica.iom.int/en/news/iom-launches-campaigns-prevent-irregular-migration-mexico-and-central-america>

5.3 Adapt programmes to meet needs of diverse groups of girls

Programmes should consider how age, language, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, motherhood, care structures, and familial arrangements generate specific needs for girls or affect how girls access existing services.

- **Target by age:** Girls experience multiple rights violations throughout their lives, though resource limitations may require age targeting. Gang conscription, often linked to commercial sexual exploitation, intensifies for girls around puberty. Testimonials from girls indicate an increased exposure to more types of sexual violence, including increased prevalence of sexual violence in public spheres, occurring during the same period. Gender roles are often questioned or consolidated at this time, allowing opportunities for meaningful reflection and dialogue⁵⁷. While these findings merit further testing, both primary and secondary data point to an optimal window or intervention immediately prior to and during early puberty, approximately 9-14 years old. This coincides with more frequent school dropout in the region. Programming should build from the existing knowledge base, including Save the Children's programmatic guidance on Very Young Adolescents⁵⁸.
- **Make programming accessible to a broad range of girls:** Translation, sibling or childcare; and trauma-informed programming increase the accessibility and effectiveness of existing and new programmes for girls. Providing additional childcare, as well as ensuring age-segmented gender-safe spaces, allows older girls to benefit without creating greater burdens for parents, family members, or caretakers. Save the Children makes it a practice to provide childcare when working with families in shelters.
- **Address trauma:** Many Central American girls grow up in communities saturated by violence, including gender-based violence and discrimination. Absence of trusted adults within origin communities weakens the family and community support structure and limits children's ability to cope⁵⁹. A 2015 UNHCR report found that 62 percent of interviewed women reported that they observed dead bodies in their neighbourhoods. A Physicians for Human Rights analysis of Mexican and Central American asylum-seekers found that twelve out of fifteen adults interviewed screened positive for PTSD, and many who screened positive for depression also experienced fear and hypervigilance, while two out of the three children interviewed reported symptoms of PTSD⁶⁰. Programming and services for girls must incorporate trauma screening and response to identify and reach girls who require specialized services.
- **Nurture partnerships within civil society networks to manage cases and monitor change:** Case management remains the most viable way to ensure that diverse groups of girls receive specialised services. LGBTQI+ serving groups, disability-specific organizations, mental health providers, women's rights organizations and others can use their expertise to provide appropriate services and attention to specific populations of



A 2015 UNHCR report found that 62 percent of interviewed women reported that they observed dead bodies in their neighbourhoods

⁵⁷ Institute for Reproductive Health, Georgetown University. (September 2010). "Reaching Very Young Adolescents (VYAs): Advancing Program, Research and Evaluation Practices." <https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/files/resources/PBAAB034.pdf>

⁵⁸ For a compendium of existing research, including Save the Children programmatic guidance, see <https://www.youthpower.org/youthpower-issues/topics/very-young-adolescents>

⁵⁹ UNHCR (2015) "Women on the Run". United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. <https://www.unhcr.org/publications/operations/5630f24c6/women-run.html>

⁶⁰ Nelson, Tamaryn and Hajar Habbach (October 9, 2019). "If I went back, I would not survive." Asylum Seekers Fleeing Violence in Mexico and Central America". Physicians for Human Rights. <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/asylum-seekers-fleeing-violence-in-mexico-and-central-america/>

“None of the consulted girls reported trading sex for basic needs or resources during transit, though one girl was threatened with commercial sexual exploitation.”

girls. Partnerships within the Mexican and Central American context, given strong civil society, ensure that referrals build from individual and collective strengths. Platforms for information sharing allow migrant-serving civil society the opportunity to adapt and respond to the rapidly changing context and advocate with a unified voice to government.

- **Identify appropriate support for girls affected by commercial sexual exploitation:** This report did not consult girls affected by commercial sexual exploitation. None of the consulted girls reported trading sex for basic needs or resources during transit, though one girl was threatened with commercial sexual exploitation. Identifying trafficked girls linked to cartel or other criminal elements creates security risks for program delivery teams. Border towns, including the southern, but particularly the northern Mexican borders, are “weak points” where girls cannot continue travel, run out of funds, and start having to exchange sex for access to basic needs or commercial sexual exploitation. Commercial sexual exploitation, intravenous drug use, and STI infection including HIV have been well-documented in border towns such as Tijuana and Ciudad Juarez⁶¹.

Donors need to account for resources necessary to reach hard-to-reach girls, including security of staff, personnel providing childcare, translation services, or costs of coordination. They also need to consider resources for frontline staff self-care and proper de-briefing.

5.4 Strengthen services to make them migrant-girl friendly

Quality education, health, and protection services, as well as safe and dignified employment options, provide girls with strong motivation to stay in their communities of origin. In addition to adaptation, the following points can improve the relevance and accessibility of these services to migrant girls.

- **Skills-based education:** Many girls indicated that their schools were safe spaces. Enhancing existing education systems in origin to ensure that they provide learning relevant to girls’ lives (including employment-relevant learning; social and emotional learning; gender equality and empowerment; migration-specific topics; and skill acquisition) is critical. Non-formal learning provide opportunities for cognitive stimulation and social interaction outside schools, while often allowing greater flexibility for working adolescents and youth. Within transit, destination, and migrant facilities settings, girls need educational services to provide a psycho-social buffer from stress, combat boredom, connect to caring adults, and link their experience of travel to a larger worldview.
- **Health, including trauma-informed care:** Due to the prevalence of sexual violence within origin and transit communities, health service providers are often the primary point of contact for survivors. Pre-natal care must account for the possibility that girls are pregnant due to sexual violence. Survivor services should be integrated within routine pre-natal care. Sexual and reproductive health education, as well as menstrual hygiene management, remains critical throughout transit. In addition, to address

⁶¹ Strathdee SA, Lozada R, Martinez G, Vera A, Rusch M, Nguyen L, et al. (2011) Social and Structural Factors Associated with HIV Infection among Female Sex Workers Who Inject Drugs in the Mexico-US Border Region. PLoS ONE 6(4): e19048. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0019048>

trauma and sexual violence, counselling and preventive services around child marriage or informal unions and early pregnancy would benefit girls.

- **Protection, particularly justice for sexual violence, reducing violence against children, and integrating a gender lens into gang prevention:** Impunity within the region remains a barrier to reporting and accessing services for sexual violence, particularly for children, with girls being disproportionately affected. Due to gendered power relations, sexual violence is largely normalized and generates impunity – or even legitimacy – for the perpetrators. Gang prevention or rehabilitation of current gang members may focus on boys and men while neglecting the financial and social manipulation of girls and young women within gangs. Protection programming should also respond to anecdotal evidence indicating that girls marry as a protective strategy to avoid gang conscription⁶². Investing in gender-transformative protection programming that digs deeper into the less visible phenomena of violence against girls will better address root causes.

5.5 Target policies that affect girls

Current policies around detention, family separation, border policing, and asylum negatively impact women and children. Despite ample evidence against child detention, the practice is wide-spread. Between October 2018 and August of 2019, US Customs and Border Protection apprehended 72,873 unaccompanied children⁶³. Since January of 2019 the US have operated the Remain in Mexico policy. This has prevented people to enter the US while their claims are being processed. This has affected more than 80,000 people and of them 27,000 are children⁶⁴. Save the Children and partners have issued several policy statements about how policies around irregular migration further undermine children's rights without addressing the root causes of migration. Two main policy recommendations merit additional mention here.

- **Restore US asylum protections for gender-based persecution:** Intimate partner violence, and other forms of gender-based violence creates risks for girls and young women both within their romantic relationships and as daughters of affected mothers. In the past, women and girls could qualify to apply for asylum within the US if they could prove “persecution or a fear of persecution in their homeland based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or ‘membership in a particular social group,’ which included victims of domestic violence and other severe abuse⁶⁵. In June 2018, the US government called for the denial of asylum claims of women fleeing domestic violence and for individuals fleeing from violence in Central America in general. The restoration of asylum protections for gender-based persecution would respond to findings that particularly brutal forms of intimate partner violence lead women and children to flee. It would also align 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.

Honouring asylum commitments for survivors of gender-based violence would respond to the specific needs and rights violations faced by girls.

Since January of 2019 the US have operated the Remain in Mexico policy. This has prevented people to enter the US while their claims are being processed. This has affected more than

**80,000 people
and of them
27,000 are
children**



Target policies that affect girls

⁶² Moloney, Anastasia (June 5, 2015). Gang Violence fuels child marriage in Central America, researchers say”. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-centralamerica-childmarriage/gang-violence-fuels-child-marriage-in-central-america-researchers-say-idUSKBN0OL1Z920150605>

⁶³ Chappell, Bill (November 20, 2019). U.N. Expert Clarified Statistic on U.S. Detention of Migrant Children. National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/2019/11/20/781279252/u-n-expert-clarifies-statistic-on-u-s-detention-of-migrant-children>

⁶⁴ <https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/en-un-ano-estados-unidos-regreso-a-mexico-84-mil-migrantes-que-esperan-por-asilo>

⁶⁵ Applebaum, Adina (February 19, 2019). “A fight to restore asylum protections for domestic violence survivors.” Capital Area Immigrants’ Rights Coalition. <https://www.caircoalition.org/20190219/fight-restore-asylum-protections-domestic-violence-survivors>

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Girls on the move provide real-time information and explain how they cope. Save the Children and partners can then build from what girls are already doing.”



Photo: Salvador Zuleta / Save the Children

5.6 Listen to and learn from girls

Listening 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. Policies change, numbers fluctuate, interested parties reveal or hide data, and information gathered from boys or certain sub-groups of girls may not reflect circumstances of vulnerability. Girls on the move provide real-time information and explain how they cope. Save the Children and partners can then **build from what girls are already doing**.

- **Disaggregate all data by age and sex/gender:** This relatively easy step allows programme and policy makers to identify gaps or trends using existing or routinely gathered information.
- **Build from existing learning:** In addition to programme data, there is a deep evidence base on migration from the Northern Triangle to the US and Mexico. The process of listening to girls should fill gaps in the evidence base or respond to recent changes in the situation of girls.
- **Consider diversity of girls:** The heterogeneity of girls in the region should be reflected, where possible, in segments of girls. Married girls, domestic workers, young mothers, girls engaged in commercial sexual exploitation, girls living in residential care, girls with disabilities, girls who work, or out-of-school girls are often absent from research or informal listening processes. Being intentional in identifying hard-to-reach girls can ensure that information is gathered from a broad base of girls, including those not participating in programming.
- **Test assumptions:** Programme teams working with children in the same region for years may make assumptions about girls that are inaccurate or don't reflect the experience across differing groups of girls. Surface these assumptions to guide programme design.
- **Tailor questions by age:** Consulting a broad age range illuminates different developmental aspects of girlhood. Segmenting girls by age, and tailoring questions to their emotional maturity level and cognitive capabilities, allows researchers to delve more deeply into age-related patterns and ask questions that girls will feel more comfortable answering. Results can then be tested within older or younger groups (e.g. “the little girls said ...is that true?”).
- **Triangulate with parents, caregivers, and others:** Parents, caregivers, teachers, and other community members may agree, disagree, or re-frame girl narratives. They may also shed light on limitations they experience in caregiving.
- **Create gender-safe spaces:** Sessions need to be organized at times and in places that are easily accessible and that girls feel are safe. Using same sex

groups helps to ensure that girls can express their views in a safe space – particularly when discussing issues related to gender, sexual and reproductive health and rights, violence, but also more generally.

The rapid consultations with girls included in this report generated a series of questions that could inform future research and listening efforts.

5.6.1 Girl-centered learning agenda

Several specific questions for inquiry with girls emerged from the literature review and recent consultations.

- **Caretaking:** Do girls experience abuse or exploitation within caretaking 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 caretaker? 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? What did girls experience when travelling in caravans?
- **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?
- **Pregnancy:** How does pregnancy influence decisions to travel? Does pregnancy trigger migration? How does sexual violence or other gender inequalities trigger migration?
- **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 doing differently as the journey progressed? What would they have wanted to know prior to travel?



Do girls experience abuse or exploitation within caretaking situations?

Did family members suggest to girls that they should migrate?

What did girls experience when travelling in caravans?

How does sexual violence or other gender inequalities trigger migration?

What would they have wanted to know prior to travel?





Photo: Caroline Trutmann / Save the Children



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. Methodology and emphasis vary according to context, but research is mostly qualitative. In all contexts, it includes the **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 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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Developed by the The Civil Society Strengthening Programme - PASC
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resourcecentre.savethechildren.net