



**GIRLS ON THE MOVE
IN THE BALKANS**



Save the Children



A qualitative study with the participation of girls and young women who are in transit or have migrated to Greece, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	4
Acronyms	5
Executive summary	6
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	8
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY	12
2.1. Approach	13
2.2. Sites, sampling and participants	15
2.3. Challenges and limitations	16
CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT	18



CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	22
4.1. PRE-MIGRATION	23
4.1.1 Agency of girls in making a decision about the journey	23
4.1.2 Push factors for migration	24
4.1.2.1 Sexual and gender-based violence	25
4.1.3 Planning the journey	27
4.1.3.1 Choosing the destination, the route, and the mode of travel	28
4.2. THE JOURNEY	29
4.2.1 Travelling with(out) documents and money	30
4.2.2 Using smugglers to travel	32
4.2.3 Pushbacks and violence by police and border guards	34
4.2.4 How the girls see their migration journey experience	35
4.2.5 Networks and protection in transit	36
4.2.5.1 Mother-daughter bond	36
4.3. ACCOMMODATION AND SERVICES	37
4.3.1 Access to accommodation in Greece	38
4.3.2 Access to accommodation in Serbia	42
4.3.3 Access to accommodation in Bosnia and Herzegovina	43
4.3.4 Access to support services	43
4.3.4.1 Healthcare	45
4.3.4.2 Access to learning	46
4.3.5 Communications and friends	51
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION	54
CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS	58
6.1.1 General recommendations	59
6.1.2 Recommendations for policy makers	60
6.1.3 Recommendations for practitioners	61
6.1.4 Recommendations for further research	61

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research study was designed and commissioned by Save the Children Sweden and its Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub. Research in Greece was conducted and research report developed by consultants Diana Manesi, Maria Liapi and Iasonas Gousetis from the Centre for Research on Women's Issues Diotima, a non-profit, non-governmental women's organization in Athens, Greece. Research in Serbia was conducted and research report developed by Miroslava Jelacic, Sinisa Volarevic and Gordana Vukasin from non-governmental organization Group 484, from Belgrade, Serbia, dedicated to migration and asylum-related policy work and support activities for refugees and migrants in Serbia. Research in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was conducted by Save the Children staff working to support refugee and migrant children in Bosnia and Herzegovina, under the overall coordination of Response Team Leader Dubravka Vranjanac. The desk review and data analysis for the interviews conducted in BiH was drafted by an independent consultant Majda Sehic from Mostar, BiH. The final report for publication was compiled as a summary of the three original research reports by Jelena Besedic from the Save the Children's Balkans Migrations and Displacement Hub, in cooperation with Melinda van Zyl, Katarina Jovanovic and Tatjana Ristic. Sara Granath and Maria Reglero from Save the Children Sweden and Karen Mets from Save the Children Europe gave input on recommendations and content. Save the Children staff used their knowledge of the context and experience in providing support to refugee and migrant girls to complement the findings of the consultants.

We want to extend a great thank you to all the girls and their families who generously shared their experiences with us.

** The girls in the pictures in this publication are not the girls interviewed for the study. The girls in the photos were participants in Save the Children's programmes for refugee and migrant children in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

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

Graphic Design: Adèle Prins, www.prinsdesign.co.za

Cover Photo: Nikola Vrzic / Save the Children

© Save the Children
June 2020

ACRONYMS

BiH: Bosnia and Herzegovina

COM: Children on the Move

EU: European Union

IOM: International Organisation for Migration

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

RIC: Reception and Identification Centre

SGBV: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

UASC: Unaccompanied and Separated Children

UN: United Nations

UNCRC: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNHCR: United Nations High Commission for Refugees

UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund

USK: Una-Sana Canton



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



“
Having daughters often served as an additional push factor for leaving, including to prevent forced marriages, escape domestic violence, or ensure access to education for the girls.”

“
The importance of a strong bond between mothers and daughters, with mothers ensuring their daughters were consulted and protected emerged as a strong finding.”

Girls on the move face a multitude of often gender-specific challenges during their migration journey and programming adjustments are needed to appropriately respond to their needs and fulfil their rights. In the data collected in this research, no evidence was found of specific migration routes in the Balkans being preferred by families travelling with girls, although it did suggest a greater level of preparation, resulting in somewhat slower mobility of families with children and of unaccompanied and separated girls. The findings confirmed the differences in the proportion of girls, particularly unaccompanied girls, accommodated in Greece, when compared with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with much higher proportion of girls present in Greece than in the Balkans transit countries, suggesting a degree of risk aversion by the families when deciding whether to continue their migration journey, but also an inadequate identification process for unaccompanied girls.

The push factors identified for families and unaccompanied girls to start the migration journey were quite complex, with safety and the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence mentioned as two predominant factors in the decision to move. Having daughters often served as an additional push factor for leaving, including to prevent forced marriages, escape domestic violence, or ensure access to education for the girls.

Families with children and unaccompanied girls emphasized the importance of travelling in groups and choosing a reliable smuggler, even if this meant waiting longer in some countries of transit. Families and girls reported having very little information about the journey ahead of time, and limited access to information during the journey. They relied predominantly on their family or other refugees and migrants, mostly women, and on those who had recently reached the destination, but also on the smugglers, for information. Findings show that families travelling with children possibly have a different decision-making process from refugees and migrants who travel without families. The findings from Greece indicate that travelling with children or as single women tended to be more expensive as these travellers sought to ensure some “safety” during the journey.

According to the interview findings in Serbia, having girls in the family has not proven to be a factor with a significant impact on the choice of route.

The importance of a strong bond between mothers and daughters, with mothers ensuring their daughters were consulted and protected emerged as a strong finding.



Girls themselves often struggled to articulate their migration stories, but they still reported personal experiences with violence, including rape and sexual violence, exploitation, neglect, abandonment during dangerous situations, or deceit by smugglers. Girls were often seemingly absent from decision making, but were still involved in a less obvious way, including through consultation with mothers and other women, and with noticeable differences in agency between younger and older girls, unaccompanied and accompanied girls.

Experiences of girls on the move were different from one country of transit to another, with widely ranging availability of services and gaps in systems of protection. There was also a gap in access to learning when comparing to boys on the move in Serbia and BiH, and fewer or no activities or schooling opportunities were available to older girls in comparison to younger girls in these two countries. Absence of friends, few targeted activities and limited access to school, coupled with a lack of interpreters, including women interpreters, was described as contributing to the feelings of loneliness among girls. Accommodation options for girls were limited, and although efforts to ensure separate spaces for girls and families were reported for all three countries covered, the situation on the ground remained challenging.

Comprehensive data on girls, disaggregated by age and ethnicity was generally not available in any of the three countries and this contributed to the greater invisibility of girls and their risks.

“None of the respondents emphasised economic reasons for leaving their countries of origin.”

“Respondents said that they would have never started the journey if they had not been forced to, since the journey itself is a life-threatening “game” with an unpredictable outcome.”



CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION



Photo: Centre for Youth Integration

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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

(Massah, 17, Afghanistan)

Girls on the move have always been especially vulnerable. Violence, insecurity and discrimination drive many girls to migrate, facing a great risk of violence and abuse during their journey.

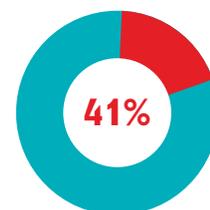
Data, collected regularly since the beginning of the migration crisis in 2015 by Save the Children in Serbia, suggests that a noticeably lower number of girl refugees and migrants reach Serbia when compared to Greece. This is particularly the case with Afghan teenage girls on the move when compared to the same age-group of girls from other countries arriving in Serbia.

Looking at the available official data on arrivals to Greek islands, it appears that girls make up around 41% of all refugee and migrant children on Greek islands¹. Looking at sea arrivals to Greece, girls make up 35-50% of all newly arrived children² from Afghanistan, which is almost double compared to only 20% of girls in the total number of Afghan children identified in Serbia.

The discrepancy in figures prompted questions about teenage Afghan girls among the arrivals to Greece, but also about destinies and experiences of girls on the move in general. Having in mind that migrations carry great risks for children, especially for girls, that some of these girls might become child brides or victims of trafficking, including trafficking for sexual commercial purposes, this research aims to look more closely into push and pull factors affecting their movement along the route, and potential indicators for sexual and gender-based violence, trafficking or abuse.

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 SC teams to **immediately strengthen ongoing interventions for girls** in different stages of migration, notably during transit and arrival. Research for the series was conducted during 2019, in Southern Africa, Latin America, and Greece and the Balkans. Another study is planned in West and Central Africa for 2020.



Looking at the available official data on arrivals to Greek islands, it appears that girls make up around 41% of all refugee and migrant children on Greek islands¹

¹ UNHCR, Aegean Islands Weekly Snapshot, 24 February - 01 March 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/74359>

² Compare UNHCR Sea Arrivals Dashboards, January 2020 and earlier additions. Note that the publicly available data only includes disaggregated data for girls per nationalities among new arrivals, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74139>



Photo: Nemanja Radovanovic / Save the Children Serbia

“ The lessons learned from programming also indicated that refugee and migrant girls often have a culturally influenced understanding of gender roles, lack sexual education and knowledge on reproductive health. ”

Experience from running support programs for refugee and migrant children in the Balkans indicate that girls might be more difficult to reach than boys. Potentially unaccompanied girls often “fall under the radar”, as they might join families they meet on their journey, in order to get some protection while travelling, or sometimes even travel with exploitative adults and might not be identified as unaccompanied. Unaccompanied girls might self-report as older and we have encountered older adolescent girls travelling with their husbands. In Save the Children’s programs in the Balkans, very few unaccompanied girls were identified (1-2% of all unaccompanied and separated children identified)^{3 4}.

The lessons learned from programming also indicated that refugee and migrant girls often have a culturally influenced understanding of gender roles, lack sexual education and knowledge on reproductive health. Many girls did not feel they could make decisions about who and when to marry, whether to have children and how many they would have.

The aims of the research were to:

- a) Incorporate gender as a central analytical category of the migration experience;
- b) Identify and assess the situation and needs of girls on the move currently residing in Greece, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This study looked at the following:
 - Reasons why girls are on the move, and how gender influences their decisions and motivations
 - Key migration routes, transit points and intended destination
 - Rights violations
 - Gender-specific protection risks
 - Needs of girls on the move and their suggestions on how to improve their situation
 - Strengths and coping strategies of girls and families to ensure protection while on the move
 - Available services and barriers to accessing, gender-responsive and culturally diversified services (protection, education, healthcare including sexual and reproductive healthcare etc.)
- c) Identify and analyze protective and gender-responsive factors that could strengthen programming and advocacy work promoting gender equality, addressing immediate and root causes of child rights violations, and supporting migrant girls during different stages of their journey.

³ Refugees and Migrants on the Western Balkans Route Regional Overview, 2019 - 2020, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/search/site/bmdh>

⁴ UNHCR Western Balkans Mixed migrations Weekly report, 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/103?sv=41&geo=0>

The research was conducted in three countries in the Balkans with a desk review of available literature on refugee and migrant girls and a qualitative study with girls, young women and their families conducted in each country. In Greece, researchers added a small quantitative survey with refugee and migrant girls (and their families) accommodated in Greece.

Having in mind that comparable instruments and methodology have been used in all three countries, as well as that migrants in all three countries represent roughly the same refugee and migrant population in transit, this report summarises those findings.



Photo: Velija Hasanbegovic / Save the Children

“

The aim of the research was to identify and analyze protective and gender-responsive factors that could strengthen programming and advocacy work promoting gender equality, addressing immediate and root causes of child rights violations, and supporting migrant girls during different stages of their journey. ”

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY



Photo: Bosko Djordjevic /
Save the Children

CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

2.1. Approach

The Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub (BMDH) designed and commissioned three separate research studies using a methodology comparable to the other research studies from the Girls on the Move Global Research Series. All three studies were linked with similar methodology and same data collection instruments which were somewhat modified to fit contextual specificities. Our aim was to better understand the needs and experiences of girls in migration with special focus on the girls who travel unaccompanied. In order to collect valid and comprehensive data, we used a mix of qualitative data, secondary data on girls in migration through Balkans, and primary quantitative data where possible. Although it was not possible to collect fully comparable data on all topics in all three countries, the findings allowed for a good enough comparison.

Interviews with girls and their families were chosen as the main data source representing the voices of the girls and their families. We opted for a predominantly qualitative study having in mind that it was not possible to collect fully representative quantitative data on this population, as well as because of the sensitivity of the topics discussed and the potential vulnerability of our respondents. The interviews were also a great way to guide the thinking around the action recommendations that would be derived from the research.

Girls' assent and parental consent were obtained for each girl interviewed. The procedures for obtaining informed consents from girls and parents were developed according to Save the Children's Child Safeguarding Policy, and the interviews were conducted taking into account child safeguarding standards. It should be noted that some interviews were conducted as separate interviews only with girls, while others included the participation of one or both parents, or — in some cases — other family members (e.g. siblings). Interviews were interpreted by cultural mediators who spoke the native language of the child (or other language that a child understands and speaks well).

The individual interviews with girls lasted between 15 and 40 minutes each, while group/family interviews and the interviews with parents lasted somewhat longer (between 20 and 75 minutes).

Greece

The research in Greece was conducted from November 2019 until January 2020. The research consisted of a desk review, qualitative studies (interviews and ethnography) with groups of accompanied and unaccompanied girls who have migrated to Greece, and a survey – a questionnaire with 46 girls on the move. The girls who participated in the research in Greece came from three different settings: shelters for unaccompanied girls or girls in a situation of vulnerability, organized accommodation, and independent living arrangements. The researchers interviewed 15 girls from two shelters and an accommodation program in Attica. In addition, 2 key stakeholders were interviewed and a focus group discussion was conducted with 3 front-line professionals.

The sampling was convenient⁵. Time and effort were invested in building trust

The Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub works within Save the Children North West Balkans to ensure visibility and continual support for children on the move in the Balkans. BMDH monitors trends in migrations across the Balkans and conducts research in particular issues related to children in migrations.



The research in Greece was conducted from November 2019 until January 2020.

⁵ Respondents were those easy to contact and reach and were not representative of the population of concern.



Altogether there were 26 adults interviewed (young women who left their countries of origin as unaccompanied girls, parents of the girls, key stakeholders) and 17 girls traveling with their families.

with the girls before the interviews. Open-ended questions and a focus group discussion, alongside participant observation were chosen as the most appropriate methodology. Certain aspects of ethnographic fieldwork were employed, such as observation of girls and their families in their natural environments, and analysed through the lens of the girls' narratives.

Serbia

The research in **Serbia** was conducted during the last three months of 2019 and included a small qualitative (exploratory) study on the situation of girls on the move accommodated in asylum and reception centres in Serbia. The field research employed a participatory approach - ensuring opportunities for meaningful participation of girls and verification of findings with their parents and other family members, as well as with some of the key field-work service providers. However, it was also conducted as an action research seeking to inform changes to current or future programme activities and enhance their relevance and accessibility for girls accommodated in the centres. This study also included a desk review, which aimed to provide a brief analysis of relevant secondary data and information. This information included (a) recent reports on the situation of migrants and refugees in Serbia; (b) reports on the four countries of origin (where the girls involved in the research had come from); and (c) relevant research studies which had considered the situation of migrant/refugee girls in Serbia (even if not as one of their primary research interests).

The fieldwork research comprised of a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews and a 4-week participatory workshop programme. Both interviews and workshops were conducted during December 2019.

Altogether there were 26 adults interviewed (young women who left their countries of origin as unaccompanied girls, parents of the girls, key stakeholders) and 17 girls traveling with their families. The study involved girls between the ages of 11 and 18, but also young women who left their countries of origin as underage girls.

Convenience sampling was used and respondents were selected based on the availability at the time when interviews were conducted at the selected centres. While efforts were made to ensure that diverse ages and nationalities were represented, the sample remained a convenience sample of girls accommodated in the three centres at the time of research.

The researchers conducted individual and group interviews, where one or both parents, or other family member, were involved in the interview together with the girls. Interviews were mediated by interpreters who spoke the native language of the child (or another language that the child understands and speaks well). The fieldwork included a 4-week workshop programme organised in the Bogovadja asylum centre. There was a set of workshops for girls and boys (9 girls and 8 boys) and another set of workshops for their parents and some other adult family members (24 adults). The participants were from Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Burundi; some had been in Serbia for more than two years, others only over a month. Girls and boys who participated ranged in age from 6 to 16 years. The workshops, featuring creative arts and non-formal education activities, were organized to provide a safe space for participation and, as a result, helped achieve

a better understanding of the needs and the situation of the girls and their families, including their gender-specific needs, and explored the ways to improve the support programmes.

Relevant key stakeholders were interviewed as well in order to provide understanding of the context and the needs. Data analysed and presented in this report relies on the interviews as well as the reports from the workshops.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The research segment in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), was conducted in the final quarter of 2019. It included a desk review and in-depth semi-structured interviews with refugee and migrant girls and their parents accommodated in BiH. There were 15 interviews with girls and 21 with adults (their parents). Two questionnaires were used, one for girls travelling with their families and one for unaccompanied girls, with additional questions for parents / guardians travelling with girls. Responses were obtained through interviews, during which principles of voluntary participation, informed consent and full participation have been respected.

The interviews in BiH were conducted by specially trained Save the Children field staff in two reception centres, Borici and Sedra in the Una-Sana Canton, BiH. The sampling was convenient and only one of 16 girls interviewed travelled unaccompanied. Girls' parents were present during some of the interviews. Apart from girls and their families, key stakeholders from several NGO organizations were also consulted in order to get additional information on the context and the needs of the girls.



Bosnia and Herzegovina

There were 15 interviews with girls and 21 with adults (their parents).

2.2 Sites, sampling and participants

Data on qualitative research participants

Location	Number	Age range	Research tool	Countries of origin
Shelter: Purple House, Pink House, DIOTIMA beneficiaries and Program "ESTIA" accommodation - Attica, Athens, Greece	15	16-18	Interviews/ participant observation	Iran, Iranian Afghan, Syria, Kuwait and Afghanistan
Reception Centre Vranje, Asylum Centre Bogovadja and Asylum Centre Krnjaca - Belgrade, Serbia	17	11-21*	Interviews, workshops	Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria
Reception Centre Borici- Bihac, Reception Centre Sedra - Cazin, BiH	16	from 9 to 17	Interviews	Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran
Total	48	Range: 16-18 (*set out on their journey before the age of 18)		



Research studies with children in situations of vulnerability and disadvantage, such as refugee and migrant girls, need to comply with a number of safeguards to ensure a protective environment and sensitivity to the children's needs.

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

2.3 Challenges and limitations

Research studies with children in situations of vulnerability and disadvantage, such as refugee and migrant girls, need to comply with a number of safeguards to ensure a protective environment and sensitivity to the children's needs. Although the initial plan was to establish a unified methodology for all three countries, the different settings and modes of research required a context-adjusted approach for each country. Researchers in each of the countries faced specific challenges, but some of them were shared by all of them.

Identifying unaccompanied girls in transit has been particularly challenging for all countries. Unaccompanied girls are often registered as part of families, making them invisible (or difficult to identify) for the authorities and humanitarian workers.

Those unaccompanied girls who were identified were accommodated in specialized shelters, where access to them was restricted to ensure their protection. Interviews required special permits, which restricted the number of interviews. Some of the unaccompanied girls were not willing to talk about their experiences. Interviews with accompanied girls required consent from the parents and the girls themselves, which also slowed down the fieldwork and made some potential participants reluctant to participate.

Establishing the relationship of trust and a good rapport with the girls requires time, the right settings and the right approach. Using interpreters and cultural mediators during the interviews also presented a risk of distorting the narratives and diminishing trust building during the interview. Some of the girls hesitated to share their personal stories, which could be due to a reluctance to share experiences with researchers who they were not close to, resistance to exploring traumatic memories, unwillingness to repeat the story they have told many times, but also the detachment from the journey that some younger girls felt.

Researchers in Greece faced additional challenges in gaining permits from the Public Prosecutor and the shelter management to be allowed to interview unaccompanied girls, but also challenges in obtaining site access permission to interview girls in families. A limited consent was given only after the details and ethical safeguards of the research were discussed in detail. Using its network, Diotima obtained permits to conduct interviews at two shelters for unaccompanied girls.

The complex challenges refugee and migrant girls face in Greece also meant that some girls and families changed their mind about participating in the research for a number of reasons, including lack of trust in researchers, medical problems or the decision to try to continue their journey.

Another challenge was related to the painful and difficult experiences the girls were narrating and their hesitation to share some information fearing consequences.

Diotima's researchers highlighted that, although they were trained in dealing with victims of violence, the girls interviewed were likely traumatised, and they would have preferred having more time for counselling and support to help them navigate these difficult emotions.

Researchers in Serbia faced challenges with finding suitable girls to interview who would be representative of the ethnicities present in Serbia, and had difficulties finding unaccompanied girls, so they interviewed several girls who had started their journey as unaccompanied girls but came of age during the journey. Finding an adequate interpreter for each language the girls spoke was also a challenge.

Most girls and their families in Serbia were not willing to be recorded during interviews so the researchers took notes during conversations. Interviews done in this way helped researchers establish trust with the girls and families, but took more time than planned.

For **researchers in Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the challenge was finding an adequate space in the overcrowded reception centres to conduct interviews without interference. Researchers had difficulties to find the right interpreters at the moment the girls and their families were ready to talk. Family members were present during many interviews with girls, which may have influenced their responses.

“
Some of the girls
hesitated to share
their personal stories,
which could be due
to a reluctance to
share experiences
with researchers who
they were not close to,
resistance to exploring
traumatic memories,
unwillingness to repeat
the story they have told
many times, but also
the detachment from
the journey that some
younger girls felt.”



Photo: Tatjana Ristic / Save the Children

CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT



CHAPTER 3: CONTEXT

A literature review was conducted in all three countries to investigate the existing knowledge in recent migration literature about the situation for girls on the move in the Balkans. Available sources on girls on the move were quite limited, with the data across all categories rarely disaggregated by sex and age, especially the data on children, in all three countries.

From 2018, the Western Balkans route has been the most used route for refugees and migrants from Middle East trying to reach safety in Europe. Greece is often the first point of entry to the EU. According to the UNHCR, from 2015 to 2019, 1.2 million people arrived in Greece by sea or land⁶ and, while the numbers have been reduced significantly after the EU-Turkey Statement (March 2016), the arrivals have not stopped. From 2017 onwards, there was an increase in new arrivals each year, resulting in around 75 thousand arrivals during 2019 (59,726 sea arrivals and 14,887 land arrivals)⁷.

The most common countries of origin of the sea arrivals to Greece in 2019 were Afghanistan, Syria, Congo and Iraq⁸, and the vast majority of the people arriving to the Greek islands' shores were fleeing zones of armed conflict, violence or human rights violations in search of a safer, better future. Among them there were about 27,233 children (36,5%)⁹.

At this time, there is only a rough estimate of how many refugee and migrant children are in Greece as there is no central authority to track them¹⁰. According to UNICEF, the proportion of children crossing the Mediterranean route has increased since 2018 and up to December 2019, 40,000 children were present in Greece with 5,000 of them being UASC¹¹.

During 2018, more than 17,127 children had arrived in Greece (both accompanied and UASC) and 42% (7,193) of them were girls¹². Only counting sea arrivals in 2019, more than 21,000 children arrived in Greece, of which 42,7% (close to 9,000) were girls with the majority of the girls coming from Afghanistan (about 4,500), Syria (about 2,500 girls), Iraq (about 700) and Congo (about 550 girls)¹³.

From 2018, the Western Balkans route has been the most used route for refugees and migrants trying to reach safety in Europe.

75,000
new arrivals were registered during 2019 in Greece, the main point of entry to the EU.

The proportion of children crossing the Mediterranean route has increased since 2018 and up to December 2019,

40,000
children were present in Greece.
More than

21,000
children arrived in Greece in 2019, of which
42,7%
were girls.

⁶ UNHCR, Mediterranean Situation, Greece. Accessed 31/1/2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*, Based on data from January 2019, <https://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/521/1034>

¹⁰ Fili, Andriani. Xythali, Virginia. "The Continuum of Neglect: Unaccompanied Minors in Greece". Social Work and Society Vol. 15 (2), 2017, p. 2 Defense for Children, Athens, <https://www.defenceforchildren.nl/media/1933/athens-the-reflection-of-a-broken-protection-system-for-refugee-children-van-defence-for-children.pdf> The Reflection of a Broken Protection System for Refugee Children, 2017, p. 6 and The Greek Ombudsman, Annual Report – Rights of Children on the Move, 2019, p. 28 [in Greek], <https://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/ee2018-kdp-dikaiom-paid-pou-metakin.pdf>

¹¹ UNICEF, Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe, Situation Report #34, 2019, p. 2, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/situation-reports-and-advocacy-briefs-refugee-and-migrant-children>

¹² The Greek Ombudsman, Annual Report – Rights of Children on the Move, 2019, p. 24 [in Greek], <https://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/ee2018-kdp-dikaiom-paid-pou-metakin.pdf>

¹³ UNHCR Greece, Sea Arrivals Dashboard, December 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/73442>

The number of refugees and migrants registered entering Serbia also increased in 2019, with close to

30,000
new arrivals.

The share of girls among children accommodated in asylum and reception centres in Serbia during 2019 was varying between

18% and 33%.

The number of girls arriving in Greece is slightly lower than the number of boys and they mostly travel with their families. According to the National Center for Social Solidarity (EKKA), girls constitute 7.4% (about 400 girls) of the total number of UASC in Greece¹⁴.

This might explain why most humanitarian reports and academic studies on children focus on boys, while girls are relatively under-researched, despite the fact that boys and girls face different risks and have different needs¹⁵.

Both government and humanitarian policies often fail in incorporating female needs into their practices¹⁶.

The number of refugees and migrants registered entering Serbia also increased in 2019, with close to 30,000 new arrivals registered by UNHCR, or almost double the arrivals recorded in 2018, with a major increase in arrivals from Syria and Iraq. Around one third of refugees and migrants were children, of which a large percentage were unaccompanied and separated.

Refugee and migrant girls enter Serbia often irregularly through one of the three main routes: Turkey – Greece – North Macedonia; Turkey – Greece – Albania – Kosovo; or Turkey – Bulgaria.

In mid-December 2019, there were 5,199¹⁷ asylum-seekers and migrants accommodated in official reception centres in the Republic of Serbia, mostly from Afghanistan (51%) and Syria (13%) followed by Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. 76% were adult men, 6% were women and 18% children. The share of children among refugees and migrants in Serbia dropped significantly in the second half of 2019 (compared to 25% in June 2019 or to around 30% in 2018).

Around 40% of the children accommodated in the centres in December 2019 belonged to the age group of 15-17 years, 33% were 7-14 years, 15% were 3-6 years, and 12% were under 3 years of age. The official data for children are not disaggregated by sex.

UNICEF's monthly reports described the share of girls among children accommodated in asylum and reception centres during 2019 as varying between 18% and 33%. The smaller share of girls is partly affected by the high proportion of unaccompanied and separated children (in December 2019 they represented 49% of the total population of children in centres), who are mostly boys. Although the official data on UASC in Serbia has not been disaggregated by sex, the data from Save

¹⁴ EKKA, Situation Update: Unaccompanied Children (UAC) in Greece, 31 December 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/9991/file>

¹⁵ IFRC, Alone and Unsafe: Children Migration and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, 2018, p. 9, <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/document/alone-unsafe-children-migration-sexual-gender-based-violence/>

¹⁶ Oxfam, Gender Analysis: The Situation of Refugees and Migrants in Greece, 2016, p. 7, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/gender-analysis-situation-refugees-and-migrants-greece>

¹⁷ UNHCR Serbia Annual Quantitative Snapshot, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/74066>

the Children's partner Praxis, running outreach programs in Belgrade, could be illustrative. During 2019 there were 3,377 unaccompanied and separated children identified in Belgrade among newly arrived refugees and migrants, and only 38 (1.13%) of them were girls.

In 2018, the route through BiH emerged as one of the main routes for refugees and migrants towards Europe, with over 50,000 refugees and migrants reaching BiH since 2018 and some 7-10,000 estimated to be in the country in December 2019. UNHCR estimates around 30,000 new refugee and migrant arrivals in BiH in 2019.

There is no official public data on arrivals disaggregated by age and sex, only by countries of origin. According to the data on new arrivals¹⁸, most new refugees and migrants in BiH came from Afghanistan (24%), Morocco (15%), Pakistan (15%), Syria (10%) and Iraq (9%), followed by arrivals from Algeria, Morocco, Iran, Egypt and India. According to the estimated data on those accommodated in reception centres and other shelters at the end of 2019, most refugees and migrants were from Pakistan (48%), Afghanistan (18%), Iraq (9%), Egypt (5%) and Syria (4%)¹⁹. In December 2019, children represented close to 20% of total refugee population accommodated in BiH. More than 50% of the children were unaccompanied or separated boys, while no unaccompanied or separated girls were registered.

Girls represented only 16% of all children, and 34% of the children were registered as accompanied. The proportion of girls and boys among the accompanied children might be skewed due to the suspected cases of "pretend male families"²⁰ which could include potentially unaccompanied boys. As a country in transition with a complex government organization, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been struggling to provide an efficient response to the migrant crisis.

All of the countries in the Balkans are parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the European Convention on Human Rights. In Greece, childhood is protected under the Constitution²¹, but the legal framework concerning children on the move remains complicated and ineffective²² and the reception and protection system for refugee and migrant boys and girls is not adequate. Both BiH and Serbia have a well-developed, although also fragmented, legal frameworks on children but its full implementation on reception and protection of refugee and migrant girls and boys remains challenging.

**Around
30,000
new refugee and
migrant arrivals were
registered in Bosnia and
Herzegovina in 2019.**

**Girls represented only
16%
of all children
in Bosnia and
Herzegovina.**

¹⁸ UNHCR, Western Balkans mixed movements report, <https://data2.unhcr.org>

¹⁹ UNHCR, Weekly Site Population Data, 22 December 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/9991/file>

²⁰ "Male families" consist of adult males presenting themselves as fathers or caregivers of the minor boys. These are suspected to be formed to ease access to services for single men (e.g. accommodation), and minors travelling in these groups might be at high risk. Minors are often left behind by their presumed adult family member.

²¹ Article 21 para 1 and article 5 para 2 of the Greek Constitution

²² Sarantou, Elina, Theodoropoulou, Aggeliki. Children Cast Adrift: The Exclusion and Exploitation of Unaccompanied Minors (UAMs) – National Report: Greece. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, Office in Greece. 2019, p. 18, <https://rosalux.gr/en/publication/children-cast-adrift-greece>

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS



Photo: Velija Hasanbegovic /
Save the Children

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter presents an overview of the findings from the desk review and the three original research studies, organized by the stages of the migration journey: pre-migration organization and planning, the journey and the section on accommodation and services in the three countries where the girls are accommodated. This chapter also provides a short discussion of the findings drawing on key points made by the girls themselves and the insight from field workers, attempting to highlight the areas where girls' experiences seem to differ from those of boys, particularly where the girls themselves made this distinction.

4.1 Pre-migration

4.1.1 Agency of girls in making a decision about the journey

The findings from all three countries indicate that the decision to start the journey was seemingly made without the full involvement of girls. Parents, with a prominent role of fathers as heads of the family, and other family members, made decisions regarding the route, destination and planning of the journey. Girls were still involved in a less obvious way and with noticeable differences in agency between younger and older girls. The girls were often consulted by their mothers and this mother-daughter bond emerged as one of the most important protective factors for the girls, ensuring they were consulted, and providing a way to strengthen their resilience during the journey.

During interviews in Serbia and BiH, questions about the reasons why they had decided to leave their countries of origin, the organisation of the journey and the risks faced during the journey, were more often answered by parents and close adult relatives (frequently fathers and male relatives). Girls and young women had much more to say about how they experienced the journey, what was difficult for them and what scared them, but also about their stay in Serbia and BiH and the services available to them. Older girls and young women were much more open in sharing their experiences than younger girls.

The research in Serbia indicated that the younger the girls, the less they participated in the decision-making. After the decision to start the journey was made, it seems that even the older girls were largely excluded from the decision-making processes about the routes and survival strategies.



The findings from all three countries indicate that the decision to start the journey was seemingly made without the full involvement of girls. Parents, with a prominent role of fathers as heads of the family, and other family members, made decisions regarding the route, destination and planning of the journey.”

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

Irem, 11, Iraq, interviewed in Serbia

“When my sister and I found out that father wanted us all to go, we rebelled, however, the only option for us to stay was to get married. We couldn’t agree to that, so we decided to leave Afghanistan with the rest of the family.”

Saba, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

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

Nadene, 18, Afghanistan, interviewed in BiH

Many girls interviewed in Greece, who travelled with their parents, said they were not aware of the destination or the route they would take beforehand. They talked about not really being able to remember the places they passed through or the countries they crossed.

The findings from Greece indicate greater involvement in decision making by unaccompanied girls than by accompanied girls, who could rely on the direct protection and support from their parents.

4.1.2 Push factors for migration

Girls we interviewed migrated for many different and often overlapping reasons: safety and security considerations, including to escape political or other forms of oppression, to get away from violence or an abusive home, to be reunited with their family. Having daughters in many cases served as an additional push factor for leaving, including to prevent forced marriages, escape the situations of domestic violence, or ensure access to education for the girls. In BiH, four out of eight parents interviewed said that their decision to travel was influenced by the fact they had female children.

“We left Aleppo at a time when the war was already raging. We were left homeless, with nothing.”

Leila, 21, Syria,
interviewed in Serbia

In Serbia, all respondents mentioned safety reasons as push factors for migration, and those from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq also referred to the socio-political situation in their countries of origin. Insecurity mentioned also included the inability to provide for the daily living needs. In BiH, the respondents mentioned war, life-threatening situations and poor living conditions - as one of the mothers from Afghanistan, interviewed in BiH, said, it was “better to die on the road than to live in Afghanistan”.

“Safety for girls is very poor in Afghanistan. We tried to live a normal life somehow... For the sake of the three daughters the father decided that we should leave the country.”

(A mother from Afghanistan interviewed in BiH)

Some of the respondents in Serbia mentioned more specific safety-related reasons, such as blood feuds, problems with the political regime or extremist factions, which influenced the safety of the whole family, endangering their lives, or severely restricting their personal freedom.

“My husband had big problems with the government, and we had to run away as a family, no matter we had a girl or a boy.”

Homa, 31, Iran, interviewed in Serbia

In most cases, it was not only one factor but a number of factors that influenced the decision to start the migration journey; however, the respondents in this study stated safety reasons as the dominant factor. **Not one of the respondents emphasised economic reasons for leaving their countries of origin, such as the lack of employment or employment opportunities.**

All the respondents in Serbia said that they would have never started the journey if they had not been forced to. According to their testimonies, they would have never taken the journey if their lives in their countries of origin had not been endangered, since the journey itself is a life-threatening “game” with an unpredictable outcome.

“If you have the opportunity and choice to stay where you live, stay. Don’t start a journey (...). This journey has been a really bad experience. This is like a big gambling game - you can lose your life, your family, your dignity, or you can get everything you’ve dreamed of. This is such a “game.”

Saba, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

4.1.2.1 Sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, forced marriage and rape, act as main push factors for migration for some girls and their mothers.²³ Out of 15 girls who participated in this study in Greece, 5 explicitly mentioned violence in the family as a key factor of migration. **Two out of three respondents who came to Serbia from Iran mentioned physical, psychological, and sexual abuse as reasons for leaving their country of origin.**

“I separated from my husband 4 years ago because I suffered physical and psychological violence. However, my family (...) insisted that we start over again and I had to agree to that. In the end, I decided to run away. Among other things, it was influenced by the fact that I have a little girl. I do not want my daughter to go through what I have gone through.”

Roya, 36, Iran, interviewed in Serbia

²³ IFRC, Alone and Unsafe: Children Migration and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, 2018, p. 15, <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/12/181126-AloneUnsafe-Report-EN-web.pdf> and UNHCR, UNFPA, WRC, Initial Assessment Report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crisis, 2016, p. 6, <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/operations/569f8f419/initial-assessment-report-protection-risks-women-girls-european-refugee.html>

A girl from Afghanistan, who migrated to Greece with her mother, sisters and a brother, faced the danger of being sold by her father to an older man and fled with her mother and siblings in the middle of the night.

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

Moska, Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece

Her mother said that the decision to leave was the only option she had to save her daughter – the two of them promised to save each other, which gave them strength and courage to go through with their plan. **The mother-daughter relationships have been shown as extremely important in the context of girls on the move.**

Some Afghan girls interviewed in Greece spoke about sexual and gender-based violence and surviving rape by a family member. A girl from Afghanistan, who was living in Iran, disclosed that she left Iran because she was raped by one of her step-brothers.

“I was raped and I could not stay there (...). And my mother would tell me I should leave, go somewhere secure. For six months I was depressed and didn’t leave the house. I was locked in the house and didn’t go out. It was a very hard situation, very hard... My mother-in-law also told me that I have to leave.”

Asal, Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece

In these cases, sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, occurred or continued throughout the journey and upon the arrival to Greece and this confirms the findings of previous studies²⁴.

“... my father didn’t let me go to school (in Iran: our explanation). In the safe zone²⁵ he (...) threatened me. He told me “if you dare come out, you’ll see what’s waiting for you.” (...) A woman there helped me and with her help I came here (...). My father always hit us, me and my mother. She worked and made it on her own. Still my father hit her. I don’t want to go back (...). I don’t want to go back to this.”

Bahar, Iran, Interviewed in Greece

²⁴ Medecins Sans Frontieres, Moria: Doctors Without Borders Clarification Response, 17 October 2018 [in Greek]; <https://msf.gr/en/node/5788> Harvard FXB, Emergency Within an Emergency: The Growing Epidemic of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Children in Greece, 2017, p. 21, <https://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/521> Fili, Andriani & Xythali, Virginia. “The Continuum of Neglect: Unaccompanied Minors in Greece”. Social Work and Society Vol. 15 (2), 2017, p. 10; UNHCR, UNFPA, WRC, 2016, p. 10, <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/operations/569f8f419/initial-assessment-report-protection-risks-women-girls-european-refugee.html>

²⁵ Until a vacancy in a longer-term facility is found, identified unaccompanied boys and girls in Greece stay in the Safe Zones within reception centres or are detained in “protective custody”.

4.1.3 Planning the journey

Most of the girls who were interviewed in the three countries travelled with their parents or other family relatives.²⁶

The available data shows that unaccompanied children in the Balkans are almost exclusively boys, while girls and young women travelling alone are much less often reported. This indicates some difficulties in identifying unaccompanied girls. Girls and young women travelling alone are more likely to travel in mixed groups, or with families that they present as their own. Due to lack of documentation, it is often impossible to determine their real age, and older girls often present themselves as adults. Some of the respondents in all three countries left their countries of origin and came of age during the migration journey. A respondent in Serbia reportedly left her home country with her family as a teenage girl but stayed in Serbia with her husband who she had met and married in Turkey. Several young women encountered in programs in Serbia in recent years also mentioned traveling with real or pretend spouses they had met during their journey.

“We heard about girls travelling alone when we were in Bulgaria, but we did not see them in person.”

Narges, 29, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

“We did not meet any girls travelling alone, while we met boys all the time. Boys are tougher, more capable, unlike girls who are gentler and need more care along the way.”

Omid, 29, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

Almost all the parents interviewed in BiH and Serbia said that they would not allow their daughters to travel alone because of the risks and the sensitive position of female children, but some parents in BiH said that they would agree to send their daughters alone if they had “adequate male protection”. This, again, potentially indicates that more girls travel unaccompanied than formally identified.

The respondents in Serbia reported travelling in groups of up to 20 people, that included families and single persons from different countries – Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria. The respondents reported making the decision to travel in groups because they felt safer, whether they hired smugglers or not. The girls and young women interviewed also said that it helped that they were surrounded by other people during the journey, even if they often could not understand each other.

The respondents in BiH stated that they had not made special preparations for the journey because they didn’t know what to expect. They brought some money and valuable items so they could pay smugglers or buy what they needed. They also emphasized the need to have phones so they could communicate with others.

The girls interviewed in Greece reported taking some clothes, food, mobile phone and some documents - school degrees, ID cards - which could prove who they were

The girls reported taking some clothes, food, mobile phone and some documents when they started the journey, as well as some things which could prove who they were.

²⁶ The results are limited to the sample of girls from select accommodation options, including a higher proportion of unaccompanied and separated girls than in the overall population. Out of the girls participating in the survey in Greece, 59% (27) left their countries of origin with family, while 32% (15) girls reported traveling alone from the start of the journey

and what they had achieved in their life - *“things I was proud of”*, a girl in Greece described them.

“We didn’t know what was waiting for us when started our journey. The “jungle”²⁷ surprised us the most. We would walk for hours, sometimes for 72 hours, without food or water, and the uncertainty was sometimes unbearable.”

Narges, 29, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

Refugees and migrants interviewed in the three countries reported having little information about the journey ahead of time, and limited access to information during the journey. The sources of information mentioned in Serbia included family or friends who were on the move, or those who have recently reached the destination, but also the smugglers, or agents, who arranged their journey. Girls were generally unaware of the risks and they only knew what they heard from their parents or other people they travelled with. Also, it is important to note that neither official institutions or non-governmental organizations were mentioned as relevant information sources.

The girls who were interviewed in Greece also said they had no prior knowledge about the risks they would face during the journey. One girl said that she would not have embarked on the journey if she had known beforehand about the risks.

4.1.3.1 *Choosing the destination, the route, and the mode of travel*

Circumstances under which migrants leave their countries of origin, the money they have at their disposal, and the time they have to prepare for the journeys, strongly influenced the mode of travel, routes chosen, and means of transport used.

The decision on the destination of the journey was often made beforehand by the family. Families planned to go to countries in North or West Europe where they had relatives or where they expected a better life. The European countries represented for them the *“lands of our dreams”* where *“we will lead happier lives”* as described by a father in Greece. The girls in Greece mentioned a sense of stability. *“I wanted to be somewhere stable...not to move from place to place”*. The destination was often linked with the availability of family networks and the presence of relatives or community members who could be the source of support.

Most of the unaccompanied and separated girls who were interviewed in Greek shelters didn’t want to stay in Greece.

Based on the limited sample of unaccompanied girls interviewed, there seems to be a marked difference between accompanied and unaccompanied/ separated girls in their degree of involvement in the decision-making process about the destination.

Interviews conducted and the field experience in Serbia and BiH indicate the importance of family and community networks in journey planning. For example, in Serbia, all respondents of Kurdish descent, whether they were coming from Syria or Iraq, reported using the route that runs through Albania.

“
I wanted to be
somewhere stable...
not to move from
place to place.”

A girl interviewed in Greece

²⁷ “Jungle” is a colloquial name that migrants/refugees use for the forest or rough and inaccessible zones through which they travel on their journeys.

According to the interview findings in Serbia, having girls in the family has not proven to be a factor with a significant impact on the choice of route. It was also apparent from the interviews that families travelling with girls (or travelling with children in general) might be additionally cautious when selecting not the routes, but the persons to travel with or smugglers to organise their journey. These findings would require further research to be fully verified. On the basis of the limited data, it seems plausible that families travelling with children have a different decision-making process than refugees and migrants who travel without families.

The girls in Greece explained that the choice of route very much depended on the smugglers and the rumours that spread amongst the community regarding potential gender-related dangers and risks. Land routes were rumoured to potentially bring higher risks of sexual abuse.

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

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

4.2 The journey

Routes used to reach and cross the Western Balkans change frequently. From 2015, the most frequent routes included Greece or Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia crossing into Hungary or Croatia. During 2018, many refugees and migrants reaching Serbia also travelled the (previously rarely used) route that goes from Greece to Albania. From Albania, many headed to Montenegro and further to BiH, which became a major transit country in the Western Balkans. More recently, a route from Albania through Kosovo and Serbia became increasingly used with about a fifth of all new arrivals to Serbia in the last quarter of 2019 coming through that route²⁸.

The migration journey is highly perilous. Children, especially girls, face a number of threats, including assault, exploitation, sexual abuse or trafficking by smugglers or criminal groups and individuals along the way²⁹. Some children have made their way to Europe after crossing the desert, being imprisoned and tortured in Libya³⁰ before crossing the sea from Turkey to Greece in overcrowded boats which are occasionally subject to pushbacks³¹.

Some children have made their way to Europe after crossing the desert, being imprisoned and tortured in Libya before crossing the sea from Turkey to Greece in overcrowded boats which are occasionally subject to pushbacks.

²⁸ Of the registered new arrivals in Serbia, those who came from Greece passing through Albania and were fifteen times more numerous in 2019 than in 2018, when the routes through North Macedonia and Bulgaria were almost exclusively used. For more data and information: Quantitative Snapshot of UNHCR Serbia Achievements 2019. UNHCR, January 2020. Data for the last three months of 2019 could be found in the UNHCR regular monthly reports: UNHCR Serbia Update October 2019; UNHCR Serbia Update November 2019; UNHCR Serbia Update December 2019. Kosovo at <https://data2.unhcr.org>

²⁹ UNHCR, UNFPA, WRC, Initial Assessment Report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crisis, 2016, p. 6, <https://www.unhcr.org/569f8f419.pdf> and IFRC, Alone and Unsafe: Children Migration and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, 2018, p. 10, <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/12/181126-AloneUnsafe-Report-EN-web.pdf>

³⁰ UNHCR, Desperate Journeys: Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe and How to Strengthen their Protection, 2019, p. 12, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/72482>

³¹ UN Committee Against Torture, Concluding Observations on the Seventh Periodic Report of Greece, 3 September 2019, p. 3-4, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3860128>

According to the survey results in Greece, the average duration of the journey was

8.7 months,
with one month to one year spent in other countries before arriving in Greece.

In Serbia and BiH the reported duration of the journey became longer, with the average duration of the journey reported in BiH amounting to

24 months

All routes used were described as hard and risky for the girls and their families.

The journey can be fatal and, in 2018 alone, at least 65 boys and girls lost their lives trying to reach Greece by land or sea from Turkey³², while in 2019 the number of victims was at least 26³³.

Girls reported staying days, weeks or years in different transit countries: Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, BiH. According to the survey results in Greece, the average duration of the journey was 8.7 months, with one month to one year spent in other countries before arriving in Greece. The reported duration of the journey became longer in Serbia and BiH, with the average duration of the journey reported in BiH amounting to 24 months. Although an in-depth study in the countries of destination would be required to look at the outcomes for girls and boys, being on the migration journey for so long with limited access to learning, facing risks and an uncertain future, is likely to have a detrimental effect on children's development and wellbeing. Some sources have found greater socio-economic vulnerability and the risks of falling behind in household income, education, health and life satisfaction for immigrant children³⁴.

When the girls in all countries described their journeys, the majority of them spoke about how difficult it was to cross borders. The route described by the respondents in Greece included travelling from Iran, Iraq or Afghanistan to Turkey and crossing the Aegean Sea to Lesbos or Samos. The land route included crossing Evros river, but also in some cases travelling to the Western Balkans, and then crossing the borders back to Greece. All routes used were described as hard and risky for the girls and their families.

Duration of the journey and exposure to dangers (separation from family members, loss of personal items, arrest, detention and deportation) varied depending on the resources and networks of support. About two thirds of the respondents in Serbia said that, during their journey to reach Serbia, they more often used private accommodation or slept in the woods than staying in reception centres.

4.2.1 Travelling with(out) documents and money

Many refugees and migrants encountered in the Balkans were reluctant to confirm if they had their identity documents with them. Of the respondents in Serbia, only three families from Iran stated that they had identity documents with them, while all others claimed not to have any. The survey of the girls in Greece indicates that the majority (26 girls or 57%) did not have identity documents. A more detailed study would be needed to verify the reasons for being without the documents, but some stakeholders believe that the factors may include the fear of being registered as an asylum seeker in a country they have not considered as the destination. They might fear that the police will take or destroy their documents,

³² IOM, Fatal Journeys Volume 4: Missing Migrant Children, 2019, p. 16-17, <https://publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-4-missing-migrant-children>

³³ UNHCR, Desperate Journeys: Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe and How to Strengthen their Protection, 2019, p. 12, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/72482>

³⁴ Bruckauf, Zlata; Chzhen, Yekaterina; Toczydłowska, Emilia (2016). Bottom-end Inequality: Are children with an immigrant background at a disadvantage, Innocenti Research Briefs no. 2016-07, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/841-bottom-end-inequality-are-children-with-an-immigrant-background-at-a-disadvantage.html>

or the identity documents might have been seized by smugglers or potential smugglers to control payments. The documents might be a proof of identity which may be a security risk, including being a risk to one's life for those who flee persecution.

The mode of travel also seems to influence whether refugees and migrants will have their documents with them or not. In the case of Iranian families in Serbia, they arrived by plane, directly to Serbia or Bulgaria³⁵. Other respondents crossed the borders irregularly and, according to field work experience in Serbia, if they carried passports or some other documents with them, they were often secretive about it and tended to conceal the documents from the police and other authorities. Typically, they feared that police could take their documents away. Two respondents in Serbia said their documents were seized by the Bulgarian police.

The lack of passports, identity and other documents sometimes led to refugees and migrants not being able to access accommodation or adequate support, including access to school for the girls.

The girls and their families stated that they had taken limited amounts of money on the journey, or kept the money in safe places. The money to pay the smugglers was left with the intermediaries, or in private "exchange offices", as most respondents called them, from where the smuggler would take the money when the party reached the destination or the next point in their journey. Many reports of experiencing or witnessing smugglers taking the money early or holding people hostage in order to extort more money were heard.

The girls and families interviewed in Greece reported paying from 400 to 40,000 euros/dollars to reach Greece. A large family interviewed paid 400 euros per person and a single mother with four children, paid 40,000 dollars. It seems that the journey might be more expensive for single women with children to secure better "safety". The respondents said that the smuggler sometimes increased the price as the journey continued.

The money available influenced the means of transport and the length of the journey. Those without money walked more, often without smugglers, relying on their phones to find their way. Those respondents who were willing to talk about how they funded the migration journey, often said that their family covered the costs. The method of financing the journey and its potential repercussions would require a separate study because of potential links with trafficking, and would need to be taken into consideration when planning returns to the countries of origin.

The lack of money to pay for the journey sometimes meant that girls and their families risked becoming forced labourers. A family interviewed in Greece was forced to work without pay on a corn farm in Izmir.



The girls and families interviewed in Greece reported paying from 400 to 40,000 euros/dollars to reach Greece.

“We had arranged a different amount in the beginning but later he asked 10,000 extra... because there was no man with us, I think that was the reason...”
Moska, Afghanistan,
interviewed in Greece

³⁵ This was due to the existence of a visa-free regime between Serbia and the Islamic Republic of Iran at that time. However, on October 8, 2018, the Government of Serbia terminated the Decision on the abolition of visas for entry into the Republic of Serbia for citizens of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

4.2.2 Using smugglers to travel

All the girls interviewed had contact with smugglers at some point in their journey. Some had their parents or close family relatives pre-arrange the details with smugglers and the others met smugglers during the journey. From the interviews and the field experience, it was clear that there is a powerful and well-organised network of smugglers working to facilitate irregular movement across borders exploiting the desperation of refugees and migrants. The girls in Greece described smugglers as distant and fearsome.

“In reality, nobody sees the real smuggler. He has intermediaries who lead the groups during travel. These are usually very young boys who are 15, 16, or 17 years old.”

A mother from Iran, interviewed in BiH

The previous research conducted by Save the Children³⁶ on experiences of migration of unaccompanied and separated boys indicated that there is one main smuggler often in the country of origin, and local agents who change depending on the country of transit. A mother in BiH provided a similar observation.

Some families and girls in Greece mentioned that the behaviour of smugglers became worse as the journey progressed, sometimes as soon as they reached a forest, or an isolated place.

In some cases, the arrangement with smugglers included taking care of families in Greece by providing them with accommodation and work, and their interaction with the smuggler didn't necessarily end with their arrival to Greece.

“(…) we paid him in Iran and he said that “when you come, I will find you a house and job” and many other things and he will support us in every possible way. When we arrived, he said “today, tomorrow” and in the end he disappeared.”

Malakeh, Iran, interviewed in Greece

In interviews in Serbia smugglers were described as rude, unpredictable and often dangerous. Most girls in Greece reported negative and frightening experiences with smugglers. A sexual violence survivor interviewed in Greece got very distressed when asked about the smuggler. She said: *“The contact with the smugglers was very hard. I wish no girl would ever fall in their hands.”*

A girl travelling with her mother and sisters interviewed in Greece said that she felt that they were at the mercy of the smuggler.

“We were very afraid, so many fears I cannot even tell you, whatever he said, we said yes, he asked for more money, we didn't react (...) because we were afraid of him (...) he decided everything. Wherever we stayed, he locked us in a house.”

Moska, a girl from Afghanistan who had been living in Iran, interviewed in Greece

³⁶ Save the Children North West Balkans, BMDH, Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and Separated Children Travelling the Western Balkans Route, 2019, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/struggling-survive-unaccompanied-and-separated-children-travelling-western-balkans-route>

A girl was separated from her mother during the journey after the smuggler forced her to enter a different car³⁷ or be left behind. Another girl trusted a smuggler who told her to lie about her nationality and this has caused problems with her legal status in Greece since she was initially recorded with a different nationality. Her social worker said that “she probably won’t get a positive response to her application for family unification.”

A family with girls, interviewed in Greece, nearly drowned during the sea crossing when they were thrown into the sea by smugglers once the coastguard located their boat.

“They didn’t give us life jackets, they told us that we don’t need them. (...) As soon as we reached Lesbos (...) they began throwing us in the water under the threat of guns, they told us they can’t dock there, it’s dangerous. Fortunately, I had seen them throwing lifejackets in the forests, I took them and told my daughters to wear them under their clothes.”

A mother from Iran, interviewed in Greece

The risks of rape, having to trade sex for basic needs or resources and sexual harassment are very high for girls on the move.³⁸ Some families avoided the land route to Greece because of rumours about the risks of sexual abuse and rape of women and girls.

A mother who was travelling with her four children, told us about being raped by a smuggler. She admitted that she has suicidal thoughts.

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

Naghman, mother of four children from Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece

In spite of terrifying stories about the smugglers, most respondents still emphasized that they were willing to endure poor treatment from the smugglers to reach safety. This indicates that they might find the options of stopping before reaching their destination or returning very difficult.

³⁷ According to the experts from the field in Serbia and BiH, such separations by smugglers are frequently reported.

³⁸ UNHCR, UNFPA, WRC, Initial Assessment Report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crisis, 2016, p. 10, <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/operations/569f8f419/initial-assessment-report-protection-risks-women-girls-european-refugee.html>



Speaking about the behaviour of the police and border guards, girls emphasized the sadness and rage they felt about police brutality.

4.2.3 Pushbacks and violence by police and border guards

Many refugees and migrants are reporting being pushed back from the borders, often alleging they were denied the possibility to seek asylum. According to the data collected in Serbia by Save the Children and its partners in 2019, **every third case of pushbacks involved children and every fourth child reported experiencing or witnessing violence during pushbacks.** The police and border guards often seize or destroy personal items, especially mobile phones, and have been accused of taking money and valuables from refugees and migrants.

The respondents in Serbia who had experienced pushbacks at the borders highlighted the brutality of the police, especially the Turkish, Bulgarian and Croatian police, who reportedly subjected refugees and migrants, regardless of age and gender, to maltreatment and abuse, with children suffering violence or watching their parents suffer violence. Some respondents said that traveling with women, girls or small children occasionally protected the group from violence or made it less severe. All the respondents interviewed in BiH mentioned that they had been pushed back from Croatia at least once, some mentioning violence and seizures of phones, money and personal effects.

When the girls in Greece spoke about the behaviour of the police, they emphasized the sadness and rage they felt about police brutality.

“We were deported from Bulgaria to Turkey three times.

The Bulgarian police were extremely rude to people. They had no mercy on the children either - I saw them grab a 5-6-year-old child by the throat and throw him away. All the girls and women were searched by male police officers, which was embarrassing. They took everything we had with us.”

Zeinab, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

“Croatian police beat me and my husband, and then they searched us and took away two phones. Even my daughter was searched. And while they were doing all these bad things, they called us derogatory names and called me and my children terrorists.”

Nadia, 35, Iran, interviewed in Serbia

Although descriptions of poor treatment greatly dominate, some respondents in Serbia also spoke about positive experiences they had with some police officers.

“When the Serbian police saw how poor we were feeling, they bought food and water for the children. They even directed us to a hotel.”

Nadia, 35, Iran, interviewed in Serbia

4.2.4 How the girls see their migration journey experience

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

“I fell asleep for many hours on the bus, when I woke up, we were somewhere, I didn’t know where, there was a lot of green... it was raining, it was cold, we waited for the rain to stop, we were sitting under the roof of an apartment, a house... I think we were in Bulgaria, Serbia... Could you tell me which countries are around Serbia? (...) I don’t know, it could have been Macedonia... I had so much stress, I can’t remember where we were, the route.”

Malakeh, Iran, interviewed in Greece

In these circumstances, there is a great risk of family separation. A girl interviewed in Greece spoke about getting separated from her mother and siblings whom she has not managed to locate since.

“In Turkey we were two groups and two cars. My sisters, my mother and my brother were in one car and I was in another. I think the police may have caught them... I don’t know what happened. I got on but there was no space for my family and he said that they will come with another car. I wanted to be with my family. He told me to get off but if I didn’t come with this car, he would leave me there. And I had no choice but to get on this car and I lost my family...”

Shararah, interviewed in Greece

Other girls recall the lack of control over the journey and some girls speak about being very close to dying and barely surviving while others describe feeling powerless and at the mercy of smugglers.

“There was a mountain between Serbia and Bosnia and when I was climbing, at that moment, I missed my family, my mom and dad. And I was literally just sitting at the top of the mountain and I cried and I cried and I cried until somebody from the group came and pulled me to go on, saying I could not stay there. That was the most difficult moment.”

Nilab, 14, Afghanistan, who travelled only with her sister, interviewed in BiH

Personal items the girls carried were often lost or destroyed during the journey, including by police or border guards. The girls attached value to such personal items, which served as their connection to the past and the outside world, but also a way of maintaining some sense of self-control against the traumatic journey and uncertain future.

“All the things we had with us, all, everything they found and took (...). All my life was in that phone (...) all my personal photos, moments, everything was there. It was very important to me.”

Massah, 17, Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece



During the journey, refugees and migrants mostly relied on the support from other refugees and migrants or smugglers.

4.2.5 Networks and protection in transit

Families emphasized that travelling with girls required careful selection of groups to travel with and smugglers, to ensure some protection during the journey. The parents of some of the unaccompanied girls travelled with them until a certain point.

During the journey, refugees and migrants mostly relied on the support from other refugees and migrants or smugglers. Very few of the respondents in three countries mentioned encountering outreach services, information provision or support by organizations outside camps.

The girls and families interviewed in BiH reported that they travelled with groups that included families with younger children who provided advice and support, but that the groups had many single men they were trying to avoid. One mother interviewed in BiH, who travelled alone with her daughter, said that she didn't admit to local smugglers that she travelled without a man and stayed close to other families in the group. Older girls tended to avoid communicating with male group members to avoid potentially risky situations, which also shows their awareness of the dangers they may be exposed to.

“I had a good relationship with everyone, with those families, only the men from those families were saying: don't be too open to other men, don't talk to them, don't make any contact with them, because you're an adult little girl for our criteria, to make sure nothing happens.”

Nilab, 14, Afghanistan, interviewed in BiH

4.2.5.1 Mother-daughter bond

A very interesting finding from this study concerned the importance of a specific bond between mothers and daughters in all stages of the migration journey, during planning and decision making. This bond often also served as one of the most important protective factors for the girls, and strengthened the girls' resilience during the journey.

The mothers were involved in facilitating the agency of the girls in the decision-making process and they were the ones ensuring the girls were consulted, or even encouraging them to escape from dangerous situations.

“My mom asked if I wanted to, and I said I want to see another country and life outside of Iran. I couldn’t make any other choice because there was no other option.”

Nava, 12, Iran, interviewed in Serbia



The girls who were separated from their family either during the journey or had to leave them behind, talked about the promise they gave to their mothers to survive the journey, to see them again.

In cases reported in Greece of escaping domestic violence or forced marriages, the journey was also organized by the mothers. A girl who started the migration journey because of sexual abuse in the country of origin said that her mother encouraged her to leave.

The girls who were separated from their family either during the journey or had to leave them behind, talked about the promise they gave to their mothers to survive the journey, to see them again: *“I want to bring my mother, I want to go to see her...my mother went through so much to support me...my dream is to bring my mother here”*. Another girl interviewed in Greece was heart-broken to have been separated from her mother: *“I wait for time to pass, days to pass quick so I can manage to leave”*.

“When I have a problem, I talk to my mom. Girls talk more with mom, boys with dad.”

Irem, 11, Iraq, interviewed in Serbia

All the girls and young women said that they found the greatest support from their family, especially the mother, but also sisters and other women in the family.

4.3 Accommodation and Services

The interviewed girls and their families, with some exceptions, do not consider, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or even Greece as their countries of destination. They would like to go to North or Central Europe, but many remain stranded as they wait for their chance to continue their dangerous journey or for their asylum application to progress. The lack of legal clarity and potentially durable solutions prevents them from investing in their life in the present. The refugee camp is always perceived as a temporary solution, but refugees and migrants spend months or years in such camps. Some families would consider BiH as their destination but are worried about the slow asylum process.

“My sister and mother are my biggest support.”

Leila, 20, Syria, interviewed in Serbia

It was notable that accompanied girls from Iran and Afghanistan who live independently with their families in Athens, Greece (the accommodation programs provided by the state and run by both state and non-state actors) were more likely to imagine their future in Greece.

Refugee camps and reception centres have an impact on the girls’ notion of permanence and temporariness, and a closer look at how living in camps affects

“If I had a magic wand, I would move this camp to Germany. It’s nice here, I have friends, but I want to live in Germany. I would also like to forget all the bad experiences of the last 4 years, to erase them as if they never happened.”

Noria, 20, Syria, interviewed in Serbia

their life and their habits would be needed to assess a longer-term impact on their development.

4.3.1. Access to accommodation in Greece

Refugees and migrants are placed in Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) that are located on the islands or in the Evros region, in order to be registered. These centers are overcrowded, sometimes hosting populations more than ten times higher than their capacity. Refugees and migrants, including families with children and UASC live in inadequate overcrowded conditions in RICs for months³⁹.

Boys and girls often have limited access to services such as health, psychosocial support (PSS), legal aid on asylum and administrative procedures and education⁴⁰. They face a lack of appropriately trained staff and coordination, and slow institutions⁴¹. Many of the children remain in a status of a legal limbo for extended periods of time⁴², suffering the consequences of a weak (child) protection system⁴³.

Safety and security situation in the camps is described as very poor with testimonies⁴⁴ from women and girls that they cannot sleep at night because their rooms have no doors, that they suffer from stomach aches because they are too afraid to go to the toilet by themselves at night. Instances of violence in camps are frequent and sometimes minors get caught in the crossfire or participate in such acts themselves⁴⁵. Cohabitation of minors and adults, insufficient lighting in the camps, and the lack of effective policing lead to an increase of the risk of violence against the most vulnerable, women and children, including sexual abuse and exploitation⁴⁶. These threats are so prevailing that, in some cases, police have to escort girls to the bathrooms⁴⁷.

Studies have shown that Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) threatens both boys and girls on the move but on different levels, contexts and forms⁴⁸. SGBV has been frequently reported as widespread in Greek accommodation

³⁹ The Greek Ombudsman, Annual Report – Rights of Children on the Move, 2019, p. 9 [in Greek], <https://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/ee2018-kdp-dikaiom-paid-pou-metakin.pdf>

⁴⁰ UNICEF, Refugee and Migrant Response in Europe, Situation Report #33, 2019, p. 2, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/situation-reports-and-advocacy-briefs-refugee-and-migrant-children>

⁴¹ Digidiki, Vasileia. Bhabha, Jacqueline. “Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Greece: Identifying Risks Factors and Gaps in Services during the European Migration Crisis”. Children and Youth Services Review Vol. 92, 2018, p. 118, <https://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/ee2018-kdp-dikaiom-paid-pou-metakin.pdf>

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 117

⁴³ The Greek Ombudsman, Annual Report – Rights of Children on the Move, 2019, p. 8-10 [in Greek], <https://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/ee2018-kdp-dikaiom-paid-pou-metakin.pdf>

⁴⁴ Oxfam, Gender Analysis: The Situation of Refugees and Migrants in Greece, 2016, p. 24-25, https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/oxfam_gender_analysis_september2016.pdf Human Rights Watch, Greece: Camp Conditions Endanger Women, Girls. 4 December 2019 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/04/greece-camp-conditions-endanger-women-girls?fbclid=IwAR0nZYi-H8qTiGK5nEU-aWpu9mqjWabK61KfX5aTpBEyHBKknTCAItWZoiQ>

⁴⁵ Harvard FXB, Emergency Within an Emergency: The Growing Epidemic of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Children in Greece, 2017, p. 16-17, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Emergency-Within-an-Emergency-FXB.pdf>

⁴⁶ Harvard FXB, Emergency Within an Emergency: The Growing Epidemic of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Children in Greece, 2017, p. 13, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Emergency-Within-an-Emergency-FXB.pdf> and Digidiki, Vasileia. Bhabha, Jacqueline. “Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Greece: Identifying Risks Factors and Gaps in Services during the European Migration Crisis”. Children and Youth Services Review Vol. 92, 2018, p. 117

⁴⁷ UNHCR, Desperate Journeys: Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe and How to Strengthen their Protection, 2019, p. 12, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/71703>

⁴⁸ IFRC, Alone and Unsafe: Children Migration and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, 2018, p. 15, <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/12/181126-AloneUnsafe-Report-EN-web.pdf>

facilities and detention centers⁴⁹, and is likely underreported as SGBV survivors are often hesitant to come forward⁵⁰. UASC face a greater risk of SGBV but the living conditions increase the risk for all children who might be left unsupervised or may be victimized by their own families⁵¹.

The insufficient number of specialized facilities for children, the dangerous living conditions in the camps and detention centers, the cohabitation of children and adults, the weak child protection system, the lack of coordination and the inefficient relocation scheme have all been identified as major risk factors⁵² for violence, and sexual exploitation⁵³. In addition, there is a limited specialized response capacity, and the lack of training for the police personnel⁵⁴. Sexual harassment, domestic violence, rape, being forced to trade sex for basic needs and resources are some of the forms of SGBV that girls and boys might have experienced during their journey⁵⁵, while there are reports that children in Greece continue to be exposed to the risks of sexual abuse and exploitation, rape and assault. For instance, in Moria, Medecins Sans Frontieres reported that just for the first 10 months of 2018, they treated 23 cases of sexual abuse (including rapes) and 9 of these cases concerned minors⁵⁶. Other reports indicate numerous cases of early marriages⁵⁷.

Authorities are often unresponsive to SGBV cases⁵⁸, and even when a perpetrator is apprehended, he will most probably return to the same camp until his court case is examined. This exposes the victims to risks and deters them from reporting such incidents⁵⁹, fearing retaliation from the perpetrator.

Until a vacancy in a longer-term facility is found, identified unaccompanied boys and girls in Greece stay in the Safe Zones within reception centres or are detained in “protective custody”. The European Court of Human Rights found in 2019 that detention conditions for unaccompanied children under “protective custody” in police stations in Greece represented degrading treatment in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights⁶⁰.

The conditions of RICs Safe Zones are described as not complying with the minimum standards for accommodation of children. There have been reports of UASC taking

In Moria, Medecins Sans Frontieres reported that just for the first 10 months of 2018, they treated

23

cases of sexual abuse (including rape).

⁴⁹ Digidiki, Vasileia. Bhabha, Jacqueline. “Sexual Abuse and Exploitation of Unaccompanied Migrant Children in Greece: Identifying Risks Factors and Gaps in Services during the European Migration Crisis”. *Children and Youth Services Review* Vol. 92, 2018, p. 116

⁵⁰ Harvard FXB, Emergency Within an Emergency: The Growing Epidemic of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Children in Greece, 2017, p. 19, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Emergency-Within-an-Emergency-FXB.pdf>

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 17-18

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 4

⁵³ Fili, Andriani. Xythali, Virginia. “The Continuum of Neglect: Unaccompanied Minors in Greece”. *Social Work and Society* Vol. 15 (2), 2017, p. 10, <https://www.socwork.net/sws/article/view/521/1034>

⁵⁴ UNHCR, UNFPA, WRC, Initial Assessment Report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crisis, 2016, p. 10, <https://www.unhcr.org/protection/operations/569f8f419/initial-assessment-report-protection-risks-women-girls-european-refugee.html>

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 10

⁵⁶ Medecins Sans Frontieres, Moria: Doctors Without Borders Clarification Response, 17 October 2018 [in Greek], <https://msf.gr/en/node/5788>

⁵⁷ Harvard FXB, Emergency Within an Emergency: The Growing Epidemic of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Children in Greece, 2017, p. 21 <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Emergency-Within-an-Emergency-FXB.pdf>

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch, Greece: Camp Conditions Endanger Women, Girls, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/04/greece-camp-conditions-endanger-women-girls?fbclid=IwAR0nZYi-H8qTiGK5nEU-aWpu9miqWabK61KfX5aTpBEyHBKknTCAltWZoiQ>

⁵⁹ CRWI Diotima, UNICEF, Accessibility and Barriers to Gender-Based Violence Services for Refugee and Migrant Girls, Boys, Women and Men in Greece, December 2019, p. 47, https://diotima.org.gr/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/FINAL-REPORT_ENG-2.pdf

⁶⁰ ECtHR, H.A. and Others v. Greece, No. 19951/16, 29 February 2019

The European Court of Human Rights found in 2019 that detention conditions for unaccompanied children under “protective custody” in police stations in Greece represented degrading treatment in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights.

turns to sleep in Samos because of the overcrowded facilities for children⁶¹ or boys and girls staying together in the Moria Safe Zones⁶², with no locks on their wash facilities.

Once a vacancy in a long-term facility is found, UASC are transferred to shelters or supported independent living (SIL) apartments where conditions are significantly better⁶³. However, according to some reports, a number of UASC leave the shelters, including to continue their journey and because of the long delays in administrative procedures⁶⁴. At the end of 2019⁶⁵, the majority of UASC were at RICs (1,809 boys and girls), while 1,045 UASC were reported as living in informal/insecure housing conditions including homelessness and 195 UASC were under protective custody. 52 UASC shelters and 34 supported independent living apartments were operational, with additional spaces planned. Ten shelters and one supported independent living apartment are dedicated only to girls with an estimated capacity of 193 and 4 places, respectively.

“When we reached Samos, they took me to the camp. Sleep and food were awful. First, I was in a tent, then in a container. There were police outside but no security. People opened the door in the middle of the night. We were 15 girls in one container. Then they prepared my papers and took me to Thessaloniki. I was in a hotel in the beginning, the only Arab-speaking amongst Afghans, I had nobody to talk to, I was alone...”

Itimad, Kuwait, interviewed in Greece

“At this moment, the situation is out of control. There are girls at Samos, 40 girls in half container sleeping in turns. To go to the toilet, you have to go with somebody else because of fear that something might happen to you. It’s tragic. All the places at shelters are full.”

Nora,
Child Protection Professional
interviewed in Greece

Instances of intolerance and xenophobia from the local community compounded with lack of support and cultural misconceptions by NGOs and other professionals/public servants serve as barriers to their social inclusion.

The conditions of living in “protective custody” and in Safe Zones have been described by the girls in our study as very poor. The respondents in Serbia and BiH also emphasized the poor and over-crowded conditions in the camps in Greece.

“It was one day, a big fight happened, and they put the camp on fire. After the fire and that big fight, I was exhausted so much... I shaved my head... I was so sad and the fight around me and all the people I knew had left the camp... Later they took me to a shelter for minors, because I was always sad, I had stress...”

Asal, Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece

⁶¹ UNHCR, Desperate Journeys: Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe and How to Strengthen their Protection, 2019, p. 12, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/71703>

⁶² Human Rights Watch, Greece: Camp Conditions Endanger Women, Girls, 4 December 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/04/greece-camp-conditions-endanger-women-girls?fbclid=IwAR0nZYi-H8qTiGK5nEU-aVWpu9mqWabK61KfX5aTpBEyHbKknTCAItWZoiQ>

⁶³ The most recent legislative regulation regarding UASC shelters is included in the Ministerial Decision 26945/1074. However, this regulation only introduces the creation of a record of all shelters operating in Greece, not the standards of their operation. On this matter, it refers back to older regulations of the national protection system.

⁶⁴ Faros, Children on the Run: Experiences of Unaccompanied Minors Leaving Shelters in Greece, 2018, p. 9, https://www.academia.edu/35879190/CHILDREN_ON_THE_RUN_Experiences_of_unaccompanied_minors_leaving_shelters_in_Greece_Faros

⁶⁵ EKKA, Situation Update: Unaccompanied Children (UAC) in Greece, 31 December 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/9991/file>

The reception conditions on the islands were described as very poor, depriving the girls of their basic needs (sleep, food, health and public and personal hygiene, according to the interviewed stakeholders. There are reports of frequent sexual abuse cases in the refugee camps⁶⁶.

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

Moska, Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece

The girls with families described their life in refugee camps, and some of the girls also spoke about staying in police stations and other forms of temporary accommodation such as hotels or under protective custody (the girls stayed there for more than a month on average before they were sent to another facility). The unaccompanied girls interviewed said that they had lived in safe zones from one to eight months before being transferred to the shelter.

“We had girls that arrived at RIC and it was obvious they were unaccompanied girls. They might have travelled with another family. (...) They would arrive and it's not that they receive any information regarding the services we offer them or that there is a good screening process or that professionals at first reception are well trained, we would find out they are unaccompanied later, from their guardians.”

A child protection professional interviewed in Greece

Some girls spoke about mental health problems caused by poor conditions in the camps as well as witnessing violence.

The lack of access to information, and the lack of interpreters resulted in girls feeling alone, abandoned and afraid.

The child protection professional interviewed spoke about the systemic deficiencies, including the lack of information, interpreters, and the lack of professional capacity. On the other hand, the longer-term shelters in Greece included in this study were described as warm and home-like, located in a working-class suburb close to a big park. The girls interviewed said they felt safe and supported by the staff.

From the survey conducted in Greece, 50% of the respondents (23 girls) said that they felt safe and happy in the accommodation (although some of them made a clear distinction between feeling safe and happy) and 46% (21 girls) said that they did not feel safe.

⁶⁶ In Moria, Medecins Sans Frontieres reported that just for the first 10 months of 2018, they treated 23 cases sexual abuse (including rapes) and 9 of these cases concerned minors (Medecins Sans Frontieres, Moria: “Doctors Without Borders Clarification Response”, 17 October 2018 [in Greek]), <https://msf.gr/en/node/5788>

Families with adolescent girls who live in external accommodation units provided by NGOs experienced life in the city differently, but they were stressed that they might lose their house once they were no longer considered eligible for accommodation, including once they get asylum. The families interviewed were already informed that they would have to find their own places. They worried because they had no employment, did not speak Greek, and it was very difficult to find houses for rent for refugees and migrants.

4.3.2 Access to accommodation in Serbia

Most of refugees and migrants in Serbia are accommodated in government-run centres, throughout Serbia. Those who choose to stay outside are often young single men. Beside asylum-seekers, many others retain only a vague status, as irregular migrants, whether they have no documents (issued by Serbian authorities) or just an expired registration certificate. Refugees and migrants are assigned to one of the eighteen asylum or reception centres in Serbia after registering their intention to apply for asylum at the police station. This can also happen sometimes after being identified, even without any legal document. Asylum and reception centres in Serbia are managed by the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia. The Commissariat provides guidance about the centres refugees and migrants will be assigned to. Of sixteen asylum and reception/transit centres operational in January 2020, eight accommodate mainly or exclusively families.

The Commissariat aims to preserve the family unity, and to ensure that every family gets its own room, but in practice the centres are often full and several families need to share one room. Women who travel alone are supposed to be accommodated separately from families and single men, and there are special rules for unaccompanied and separated children, but identification can be challenging.

The respondents in this study have been in Serbia between 3 months and 3 years. Some of them have changed the asylum or reception centre once or twice during their stay, often because of health issues or other challenges.

The respondents in Serbia, including parents, girls and young women, stated that they felt safe in the reception centres and that they personally had no negative experiences, but many mentioned witnessing safety incidents.

The authors of a small-scale study⁶⁷ in one reception centre in Serbia from 2018 concluded that all women included in the research experienced some form of violence, and that three of the respondents were still exposed to violence by their husbands/partners. The women believed that reporting violence would not improve their situation and that it would separate them from their family, keep them in Serbia, and would complicate their further journey to their desired destinations. Another research study⁶⁸ in 2017 showed that two-thirds of refugee and migrant

“I don’t feel completely safe. We don’t have a room key. Personally, I’m scared of single men, because many people take medicines. I think everything would be easier if the families were in a separate camp. All the dangers that threaten me can be applied to my daughter as well.”

Homa, 31, Iran, interviewed in Serbia

⁶⁷ The Woman Migrant – Between Tradition and Modernity, published in Zbornik IKSI, 2/2018 – S. Knežević, M. Momčilov, “Žena migrantkinja - između tradicije i savremenosti”(pages 81-95) accessed at https://www.iksi.ac.rs/zbornik_arhiva/zbornik_iksi_2_2018.pdf, based on in-depth interviews with 13 migrant women over 18, coming from Afghanistan and Iran

⁶⁸ Violence against women and girls among refugee and migrant population in Serbia, NGO Atina, 2017, <http://atina.org.rs/en/violence-against-women-and-girls-among-refugee-and-migrant-population-serbia>, based on a survey with of 162 women and girls, aged 15 to 60, from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Iran and several other countries.

“I know that various bad things happen around the camps and that women often consent to sexual intercourse with those with power.”

Saba, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

women and girls survived some form of physical and/or sexual violence in their countries of origin, during their journey, but also during their stay in Serbia. More than 75% of the respondents witnessed violence against other women or girls.

4.3.3 Access to accommodation Bosnia and Herzegovina

The complex governance and institutional structure of BiH affected the response planning and the set-up of additional accommodation options needed from 2018. There is one regular asylum centre (with limited capacity) run by the Ministry of Interior, and the Refugee and Readmission Centre run by the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The vast majority of refugees and migrants are accommodated in seven temporary reception centres run by the IOM. Children are accommodated in reception centres designated for families or in separate zones for unaccompanied and separated boys.

The respondents in this study described the conditions in camps in BiH as generally good and the girls and their families were satisfied with the accommodation. The main problems they stressed were safety concerns and shared rooms.

The respondents also mentioned that they needed more clothes and shoes and that they were not happy with the food.

“Have you seen our rooms where we live? We have 20 people in the room. What kind of security are we talking about?”

A mother from Afghanistan, interviewed in BiH

“That’s the worst, shoes. We can’t even walk.”

Hamida, 18, Afghanistan, interviewed in BiH

4.3.4 Access to support services

According to the Greek law, immediately after the reception of an unaccompanied or separated minor, a guardian must be appointed to the child⁶⁹. Public Prosecutors act as temporary guardians for hundreds of children in some regions, thus, in practice, they are unable to fulfil their responsibilities as guardians. None of the interviewed unaccompanied girls in Greece had a responsible guardian they knew of.

The two shelters included in this study hosted 52 girls speaking different languages but only one of the shelters had an Arabic interpreter and no other interpreters working permanently in the facilities, although the need for Farsi/Dari was the greatest. Both shelters collaborated with external interpreters. The professionals working in shelters were welcoming and helpful but seemed overloaded with work. In all accommodation options, the lack of interpreters was described as contributing to the feelings of loneliness for the girls.

⁶⁹ Article 75, L. 4636/2019

Challenges with access to interpretation were emphasized in all three countries. A mother interviewed in BiH explained that she had a miscarriage because she was not understood in a camp in Serbia.

From the survey in Greece, one third of interviewed girls said they didn't have anyone to take care of them where they were staying.

Access to specific benefits for refugees and migrant children in Greece depend on age, even though wrong age registration is reported as common.

“There was a case of a pregnant adolescent girl, who said she was underage and still she was registered as an adult, just because she was pregnant, you can see this kind of things happening.”

Child protection professional interviewed in Greece

Life in a shelter or a camp can also depend on the professional capacity and the priorities of the organisations running the shelters or camps.

“There are shelters and facilities run by organisations who had no prior engagement with child protection. All of a sudden, because of public funds they decided to open a shelter... I believe shelters provide an institutionalised kind of care, where the individual needs of each child are often lost... It usually depends on the personal effort of some professionals, who are already over-worked and exhausted.”

State Child Protection Professional, interviewed in Greece

The girls' expectations that they would be supported in cases of safety incidents is limited. The respondents in Serbia stated that they would report serious and urgent incidents or threats to civil society organisations or camp management staff they trusted. For everyday problems, they rely on family members and close friends. The stakeholders interviewed stated that the most commonly reported safety problems concerned domestic violence.

The resistance to reporting incidents seemed to be due to the fear that reporting might make the problem worse, by being labeled as a snitch, or expecting there would be no reaction or support available.

“I know there were people who responded to certain problems and reported them, but there was no effect. This is not our country and the help we get is not, in fact, efficient and does not help us to solve the problem, but often things get even more complicated. I am aware that I am here temporarily and that if I complain the situation will be no better for me, but worse.”

Saba, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

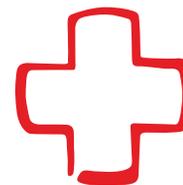
4.3.4.1 Healthcare

Access to health care in Greece is limited for refugees and migrants living in the Reception and Identification Centres and open accommodation facilities as there is a shortage of human and material resources, especially to respond to the needs of children. In many accommodation facilities there is a lack of pediatricians or child psychologists, despite the fact that almost one third of the cases concern children⁷⁰ and the fact that children's mental health is often at risk due to the past traumas including from the migration journey, and the living conditions in the camps⁷¹. Frequently occurring violent incidents in camps can trigger the memories of violent experiences from the children's past⁷² and cause new trauma. Uncertainty for the future, past traumas and the circumstances of life in temporary reception centers have an impact mental health, leading to instances of substance abuse, self-harm and violent behavior⁷³.

Women and girls' access to health services is particularly challenging. There is a lack of female doctors and interpreters, which is especially problematic in cases when gynecological exams are needed. This puts them in an uncomfortable situation when they have to show their body to a male doctor or to verbally communicate their symptoms through a - usually male - interpreter.⁷⁴ Women and girls are not provided with adequate hygiene supplies forcing them to use their cash assistance.⁷⁵ Girls lack access to adolescent reproductive and sexual health information. Pregnant women and girls, living in hotspots such as Moria, have very limited access to appropriate medical care.⁷⁶

Refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers in Serbia have the right to emergency health care only, but can usually access other care with referrals. In addition to this, there is a general practitioner in each of the reception centres, with specialist examinations (internist, gynaecologist, etc.) sporadically organised. All respondents thought the availability of medical care in Serbia was good, and some respondents said that Serbia was the first country in which they had access to the needed specialized therapy.

The respondents in Serbia had some complaints about the motivation, availability and cooperation of the doctors in the reception centres, lack of appropriate medicines, and the lack of interpreters during medical appointments. During the interviews, the families, including those with girls, did not emphasize a preference for a female doctor⁷⁷. Experience with access to medical care in BiH was described as mostly positive, and the respondents reported that medical assistance was available when they needed it.



Pregnant women and girls, living in hotspots such as Moria, have very limited access to appropriate medical care.

“**Girls lack access to adolescent reproductive and sexual health information.**”

⁷⁰ The Greek Ombudsman, Annual Report – Rights of Children on the Move, 2019, p. 10 and 89 [in Greek], <https://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/ee2018-kdp-dikaion-paid-pou-metakin.pdf>

⁷¹ Faros, Children on the Run: Experiences of Unaccompanied Minors Leaving Shelters in Greece, 2018, p. 1, https://www.academia.edu/35879190/CHILDREN_ON_THE_RUN_Experiences_of_unaccompanied_minors_leaving_shelters_in_Greece_Faros

⁷² Harvard FXB, Emergency Within an Emergency: The Growing Epidemic of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Migrant Children in Greece, 2017, p. 17, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Emergency-Within-an-Emergency-FXB.pdf>

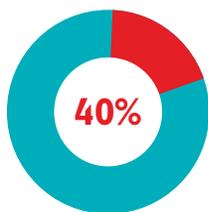
⁷³ Defence for Children, Athens, The Reflection of a Broken Protection System for Refugee Children, 2017, p. 11, <https://www.defenceforchildren.nl/media/1933/athens-the-reflection-of-a-broken-protection-system-for-refugee-children-van-defence-for-children.pdf>

⁷⁴ Oxfam, Gender Analysis: The Situation of Refugees and Migrants in Greece, 2016, p. 28, https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/file_attachments/oxfam_gender_analysis_september2016.pdf

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch, Greece: Camp Conditions Endanger Women, Girls, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/04/greece-camp-conditions-endanger-women-girls?fbclid=IwAR0nZYi-H8qTiGK5nEU-aWpu9mqjVabK61KfX5aTpBEyHBKknTCAltWZoiQ>

⁷⁶ *Ibid*

⁷⁷ In two reception centres where the interviews were conducted, the doctors were women.



40% of children enrolled in schools in Greece were girls.



**As many as
4,200
children who lived
in Moria, Lesvos had
no access to formal
education as of
September 2019.**

4.3.4.2 Access to learning

Important steps have been made in recent years to improve the access to education for refugee and migrant children in Greece, but there are still a number of gaps. Less than half of the refugee and migrant children in Greece were enrolled in formal education as of June 2019, while the percentage is somewhat higher (67%) for the children residing outside camps (apartments for families, shelters and hotels for UASC)⁷⁸. Furthermore, according to the available data, children originating from Iraq and Syria seemed to have the highest enrolment rate, while the lowest rate was found for children originating from Afghanistan. Data shows that 60% of the enrolled children were boys and 40% were girls, indicating similar enrolment for girls and boys, as boys constitute about 58% of the total number of children in Greece (during 2018) and girls about 42%. Enrolment rates for boys and girls of different nationalities was also similar⁷⁹.

Nevertheless, long delays⁸⁰, lack of familiarity with intercultural education and specifically with teaching Greek as second language, insufficient number of teachers⁸¹, are some of the issues making access to education challenging. The children accommodated in camps had additional challenges in accessing and being motivated to attend school⁸². As many as 4,200 children who lived in Moria, Lesvos had no access to formal education as of September 2019⁸³.

Four of the girls interviewed for this study said that their fathers did not allow them to go to school in their countries of origin. Child protection professionals suggested that younger girls (under 13 years old) were more willing to go to school. Some of the older girls stated they would like to continue their schooling but could not enrol into public schools.

Child protection professionals stated that some parents were against mixed classrooms and some were concerned about teenage girls traveling to school on the bus with the boys. Explaining why it was difficult to go to school, the girls mentioned instances of islamophobia, racism and xenophobia.

Some girls go to school only because of the efforts of the staff in their shelters in Greece, who contacted the local public school and organized an induction class for the girls. Other interviewed girls do not want to go to school since they hope to leave Greece soon. The child protection professional interviewed in Greece explained that the girls perceived their time in Greece as a transitional phase (while waiting for the family reunification) and they did not wish to invest much time and energy into something that would not last, although their stay in Greece often lasted more than a year.

⁷⁸ UNICEF, Refugee and Migrant Children in Greece (as of 30 September 2019), <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/8341/file/greece-general-data-september-2019.pdf>

⁷⁹ Greece Education Sector Working Group, "Access to Formal Education for Refugee and Migrant Children Residing in Urban Accommodation (Apartments, Shelters and Hotels for UAC, SIL Apartments)", June 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/8361/file/Education%20assessment%20-%20June%202019.pdf>

⁸⁰ It should be noted that according to article 50, L 4636/2019, all minors who have applied for international protection, should be enrolled to the public educational system within 3 months after their identification process is completed.

⁸¹ The Greek Ombudsman, Annual Report – Rights of Children on the Move, 2019, p. 10 and 108-9 [in Greek], <https://www.synigoros.gr/resources/docs/ee2018-kdp-dikaion-paid-pou-metakin.pdf>

⁸² *Ibid*, p. 112

⁸³ UNHCR, Desperate Journeys: Refugee and Migrant Children Arriving in Europe and How to Strengthen their Protection, 2019 p. 15, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/71703>



Photo: Nemanja Radovanovic / Save the Children



Photo: Nemanja Radovanovic / Save the Children

The stakeholders interviewed in the shelters suggest that not knowing Greek affects the girls' independence and the motivation to go to school.

“At first, it was the language barrier. (...) But when we managed to create an induction class at the local school and brought a professor to teach Greek as a foreign language (...) they still didn't go. They have the motivation in the beginning but lose it, I don't know why, they don't receive enough feedback from school to keep them going. (...) They can't go to the “ordinary” class because of the language, they can't understand a word in Greek, in the Induction class, they feel isolated and very soon, they get tired. (...) ”

Child protection professional interviewed in Greece

“(...) Even if we find them language classes in German, for example, if they say they want to go to Germany, they still don't go. I think they treat their time in Greece as a transitional period and they don't want to invest, they want to go through this time without a lot of hardship.”

Child protection professional interviewed in Greece

The girls living in independent accommodation with their families in Athens appeared more committed to school and integration. They were learning Greek with the aim to study and find a job in Greece. Their mothers stated they were very proud that their daughters were going to school and would have a better future. The mother-daughter bond again emerged as a very important factor for the girls' advancement.

In BiH, access to local schools has been provided only in some reception centres. The younger girls interviewed said that they attended school, while the older girls (14-18) were not attending school. When asked why they were not attending school, the girls said that they did not know.

“I want to go to school, but I don't go because I'm 17 years old. I speak English and Persian and take a Bosnian language course. I'm going to this children's playroom, I'm drawing there. But there are kids there and it's always crowded, so I don't stay long.”

Zahra, 17, Iran, interviewed in BiH

Refugees and migrants accommodated in Serbia are being enrolled in local primary and secondary schools. Since 2017, more than a half of school-aged migrant children in Serbia have attended primary schools in the places they lived in. Girls, more than boys, do not attend school. This difference in attendance was explained by planning to continue their journey as soon as possible.

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

Saba, 21, Afghanistan,
interviewed in Serbia

Girls over 18

faced the problem of getting their diplomas from their countries of origin recognized, limiting the options for continuing professional education.

Some refugee and migrant schoolgirls in Serbia stated that being in school with boys was challenging, which is further exacerbated by gender norms and the negative attitude about education for girls from their family and community. Some girls mentioned feeling uncomfortable about wearing a headscarf among local children. Teasing and bullying by refugee and migrant boys in school, but also in the reception centres, presented a more difficult issue for the girls.

Girls over 18 faced the problem of getting their diplomas from their countries of origin recognized, limiting the options for continuing professional education in Serbia.

The girls attending schools said that going to school was important because of socialising and being able to learn something new. However, field workers explained that their enthusiasm for school quickly disappeared because not knowing Serbian prevented them from fully understanding the material. They had already missed school and learning because of the journey, and learning became twice as difficult for them requiring many adjustments and more intensive work. Teachers also do not expect the students from the camps to stay, so they do not make sufficient efforts to adapt their teaching to the needs of refugee and migrant children. The teachers sometimes generalise their approach, neglecting the individual needs of different children.

Informal education and psychosocial support activities in the asylum and reception centres in Serbia and BiH are mostly targeted at preschool and school-aged children. Far fewer activities target adolescents. Almost all interviewed girls and young women in Serbia participated in the activities in centres or out of centres. The activities ranged from creative (drawing, sculpting, etc.), educational (language learning or workshops on a variety of topics - peers, school, violence, etc.) to psychological empowerment workshops.

Activities for children in Serbia are often conducted in mixed male-female groups. The respondents thought this was not a problem for the girls. However, many respondents criticised the fact that groups included a wide range of ages, which was especially problematic for teenage girls as it directly affected their motivation and interest in participating.

“There are few activities intended for my age. I have the impression that my generation has been completely neglected. Most activities are organised for school-aged children and young children. Girls my age are sitting in rooms doing nothing. There is no way for us to go to schools or colleges, and everything is focused on young children only.”

Saba, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

All the respondents said that it was important to be consulted about what they would be interested in, because then they had the impression that they were visible and that someone respected their opinions.

The activities most girls and young women emphasized that they would like to have more often were related to language learning, which corresponded to the wishes of their parents.

“It would be interesting if besides language learning (which is not only Serbian), there were sports activities organised for girls, and we would even use self-defence classes to help defend ourselves in some risky situations.”

Saba, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

Representatives of civil society organizations conducting non-formal education and psychosocial support activities in Serbia said that they often talked to children and young people about the activities and their interests, but that there was a problem of motivation and consistent participation.

The girls in BiH were generally satisfied with the activities offered to them in the camps. They described Child Friendly Corners where they could draw, do crafts and play with other children. The activities are more suitable for younger children and the older girls reported that they would be happier if they would have a greater choice of activities such as music or dance classes.



In BiH, most girls said that they had lost contact with friends and families in their countries of origin, including because they had lost their phones, or their phones had been taken by the police.

4.3.5 Communications and friends

For adolescents, friends play an important role in adapting to the situation in reception centres and help achieve a degree of ‘normalisation’, and building a positive self-image. Many girls spoke about maintaining contacts with friends from countries of origin, especially older girls who have their own phones. Most girls in Greece reported using mobile phones and social media to communicate with family. Younger girls were more likely to communicate only with friends they had met along the way.

“I am in touch with friends from Afghanistan, but we hear from each other every 2-3 months. There is no need to communicate more frequently because nothing special is happening here.

I use Facebook, IMO, WhatsApp.”

Saba, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

In BiH, most girls said that they had lost contact with friends and families in their countries of origin, including because they had lost their phones, or their phones had been taken by the police. A few girls maintained communication using social networks (IMO, WhatsApp or Instagram),

Girls often expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation being in a new environment while processing the difficult past experiences and facing the uncertain future. The girls in BiH said that they did not have friends in the camp and that the only people they could trust were their parents or camp employees, which highlights the need for targeted psychosocial support interventions.

“I’m not used to sharing my thoughts much. I’ve made up a friend who is always with me. When it is most difficult, he tells me not to give up and accept things as they are.”

Zainab, 21, Afghanistan, interviewed in Serbia

The girls in Greek shelters seem to rely on and create networks of support among each other, develop relationships and friendships that sometimes lasts long after they have been moved to another accommodation. Although some girls reported being lonely and wanting to leave the shelter and be with their mothers, majority of the girls said they had social lives inside and outside the shelters.

Refugees and migrants in Greece often rely on networks of support from other refugees and migrants who have been in the country for some time and are willing to help and guide them, often from the same country of origin. Some families with adolescent girls in Greece have found accommodation with the help of other refugees and migrants. One family interviewed in Greece managed to rent a house with the help of another Afghan family, they also helped the daughter enrol into school. A girl from Afghanistan mentioned the existence of a network of small, self-organised initiatives of refugees and migrants in Greece, mostly centered around shared religion. She volunteers as an interpreter at a small grass-root initiative and teaches English and Greek.

“The man helped us rent a house, he told us it’s best not to live with the smuggler. (...) He and his wife gave us hope. It was not the Greeks, or the smugglers, or the organisations, or the Greek state (...) It was other migrants who had some time in Greece and helped those who arrived. I found them at the smuggler’s houses.”

Malakeh, Afghanistan, interviewed in Greece

**““
Refugees and migrants often rely on networks of support from other refugees and migrants who are willing to help them.””**

“

A father interviewed in Greece described his family as “*captives at home*” since they never go out and his daughter said she was not interested in making friends in Greece. ”



Photo: Velija Hasanbegovic / Save the Children

Many families and girls find themselves in a state of limbo, waiting to leave for “*the land of their dreams*”, or to be reunited with their family. The absence of durable solutions often results in years of waiting, fatigue, isolation and frustration. A father interviewed in Greece described his family as “*captives at home*” since they never go out and his daughter said she was not interested in making friends in Greece.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION



CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that girls on the move face a multitude of challenges, often gender-specific, during their migration journey and that programming adjustments would be needed to appropriately respond to their needs. The data collected in this research did not find evidence of **specific migration routes** being preferred by families travelling with girls, although it did suggest the greater level of preparations, resulting in somewhat **slower mobility** by families with children and by unaccompanied and separated girls. The findings confirmed the discrepancy in the proportion of girls accommodated in Greece, when compared with Serbia and BiH, with much higher proportion of girls present in Greece than in the Balkans transit countries, suggesting a degree of **risk aversion** by the families when deciding whether to continue their migration journey. Similarly, the available data for Greece showed a higher proportion of **unaccompanied girls** in Greece (more than 7%), while the unaccompanied girls in Serbia and BiH only accounted for 1-2% of the identified unaccompanied children. It is likely that more girls potentially travel unaccompanied than formally identified in Serbia and BiH, and it is also likely that the unaccompanied girls more often pursue legal options for a status from Greece rather than continue the risky migration journey, but this would need to be verified through further research. As indicated by the information provided by the key stakeholders during the study, as well as the experience of the field workers providing support to the refugee and migrant children in the Balkans in past 5 years, older unaccompanied girls might travel with pretend families, husbands and even children and are often not adequately profiled. Some of the women and girls interviewed in this study said that they were hiding the fact that they were travelling without “men who could protect them”, for their safety, by joining other families.

While the **push factors** for families and unaccompanied girls to start the migration journey were quite complex and involved a number of factors. Among the respondents in this study, safety reasons were mentioned as the dominant factor while none of the respondents stated economic reasons as the main factor for leaving their country of origin. **Sexual and gender-based violence** emerged as an important factor for families with girls leaving their country of origin, particularly for unaccompanied girls. In many cases, sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, occurred or continued throughout the journey.

Having daughters often served as an additional push factor for leaving, including to prevent forced marriages, escape situations of domestic violence, or ensure access to education for the girls.

When **planning the journey**, all the families with children and unaccompanied girls emphasized the importance of travelling in groups and choosing a reliable smuggler, even if this meant waiting longer in some countries of transit. Families and girls reported having very little information about the journey ahead of time, and **limited access to information** during the journey. They mostly relied on their family or other refugees and migrants, including those who had recently reached their destination, but also on the smugglers or agents who arranged their journey, for information. Girls often only knew what they heard from their parents



““
Some of the women and girls interviewed in this study said that they were hiding the fact that they were travelling without “men who could protect them”, for their safety, by joining other families. ””

““
Families and girls reported having very little information about the journey ahead of time, and limited access to information during the journey. ””

All the girls interviewed for this study used the services of smugglers and found them to be fearsome and exploitative. Many girls narrated the traumatic stories of personal experiences with violence by smugglers.

“
Most of the girls interviewed for this study experienced pushbacks, including instances of violence by the police or border guards.”

or other people they travelled with. On the basis of the limited data gathered, it seems plausible that families travelling with children have a decision-making process different from refugees and migrants who travel without families. The **choice of route** very much depended on the decisions by smugglers, but also on the rumours regarding potential dangers and risks, which seem to be gender-specific, with land routes sometimes perceived as involving higher risks of sexual abuse.

The findings indicate that the girls interviewed and surveyed in Greece reported the average **duration of the migration journey** as close to 9 months, while in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the reported duration of the journey became longer, with the average duration of the journey reported in BiH amounting to 24 months. Being on the migration journey for so long, facing risks and an uncertain future, including such a lengthy disruption in learning, is likely to have a detrimental effect on children's development and wellbeing. The journey is often described as very traumatic, with difficulties in crossing the borders, and the girls are sometimes reluctant to share their experiences.

The fact that many families and girls were hiding their **documents** or carried only a small amount of money, and were reluctant to speak about **financing the journey**, is another indication of the existence of a well-organized migration smuggling or human trafficking network, that would require further research. Experiences of our field workers, as well as previous research⁸⁴, suggest that smugglers often advise migrants to hide their documents. As smugglers provide food, transportation and other things needed, refugees and migrants often find that the money is redundant and decide to carry only small amounts or not to carry any money at all.

The findings from Greece indicate that travelling with children or as single women tended to be more expensive, to ensure some “safety” during the journey.

All the girls interviewed for this study used the services of smugglers at some point in their journey and found the **smugglers** to be fearsome and exploitative. Many girls narrated the traumatic stories of personal experiences with violence, including rape and other types of sexual violence, exploitation, neglect, abandonment during dangerous situations, or deceit by smugglers. The girls and the families who are still in transit face a conflicting dynamic of fear and dislike of smugglers, while at the same time believing that it was necessary to continue to rely on them for information and assistance to continue their journey.

Most of the girls interviewed for this study experienced pushbacks, including instances of violence by the police or border guards. **Violence** experienced during the journey, especially if perpetrated by representatives of official institutions, could erode the trust in justice system. It also degrades human dignity and deepens the vulnerability of this population, and especially of children, many of whom are fleeing conflict-ridden countries and have already been exposed to traumatic events, with serious physical and psychological consequences, including diminished capacity for healing.

⁸⁴ Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Western Balkans Route, Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub, Save the Children, 2020, <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/struggling-survive-unaccompanied-and-separated-children-travelling-western-balkans-route>

The girls themselves were often **reluctant to speak** and struggled to articulate their migration stories. They were often seemingly absent from decision making in their families in relation to the journey, but were still involved in a less obvious way, including through consultation with mothers and other women, and with noticeable differences in agency between younger and older girls, unaccompanied and accompanied girls. The girls interviewed expressed a sort of detachment from the journey, not remembering it well, experiencing confusion, disorientation, and the feelings of powerlessness, indicating potential trauma and the need for targeted mental health support. The girls also emphasized the loss of personal items during the journey, which contributed to the sense of loss of control, and symbolized the loss of their past life to them.

Experiences of girls on the move, compared to the experience of boys on the same route, are often very different from one country of transit to another with widely ranging availability of services and gaps in systems of protection, including a gap in access to learning. Also, there is a notably reduced or inexistent availability of activities or **schooling** for older girls. Very few girl-specific targeted activities have been identified in the three countries studied, particularly for older girls. The lack of friends, targeted activities and access to school, coupled with the lack of **interpreters**, were described as contributing to the feelings of loneliness and sometimes desperation, for the girls. Access to services was also made additionally challenging with limited availability of interpreters and cultural mediators in all three countries, including the availability of women interpreters, especially for medical examinations. Accommodation options for girls are limited, and although there are efforts to ensure separate spaces for girls and families, this is not always implemented on the ground.

While the majority of refugees and migrants do not consider Western Balkans to be the right destination for them, the girls who live independently with their families, and not in the camp environment, in Athens, Greece were more likely to imagine their future in Greece. Some of the families accommodated in BiH also expressed an interest to stay in BiH but had no faith in the asylum procedures. Relevant stakeholders should invest efforts in creating and promoting **durable solutions** for girls.

A very interesting finding from this study concerned the importance of a strong **bond between mothers and daughters**, with mothers ensuring their daughters were consulted and protected, as in the cases where mothers encouraged and organized the migration journey when their daughters faced violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (e.g. forced marriage). The girls relied on their mothers and on their sisters for advice and support. This strong bond would be a great driving force for more effective programming and advocacy interventions concerning girls.

Comprehensive **data on girls**, disaggregated by age and ethnicity were generally not available in all three countries. This contributes to the greater invisibility of the girls, makes it more likely they would not be considered when planning shelter options, and it affects the needs assessments and the availability of targeted support services.



“

Lack of comprehensive data on girls contributes to the greater invisibility of the girls and affects the needs assessments and the availability of targeted support services.”



“

Strong bond between female members of the family would be a great driving force for more effective programming and advocacy interventions concerning girls.”

CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS



CHAPTER 6: RECOMMENDATIONS

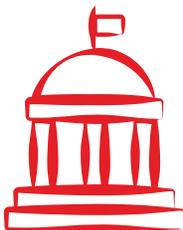
The research on girls on the move in the Balkans provided an important insight into the lives, journeys, experiences and needs of the girls travelling through the region, also confirming the need for further investment in researching girls in migration. The report holds valuable lessons and recommendations for a range of stakeholders who have the responsibility to protect girls in migration and promote their rights, such as governments, authorities and civil society.

Aiming to contribute to better policies, systems of support and programming for girls in migration, we present the following recommendations which, we believe, can be used to increase the visibility of migrant girls, reduce their vulnerability, and ensure they have the opportunity to realize their potential and build their future.

6.1.1 General recommendations

- Promote the collection of data on children disaggregated by sex, age, location and ethnicity to provide evidence for quality research, tracking of children and for the targeted interventions and evidence-based advocacy.
- Ensure effective access to age- and gender-responsive information about children's rights, support services and legal options in countries of transit and destination. Map information exchange within refugee and migrant communities and invest in building trust to be able to provide information, raise awareness about risks of travelling irregularly and counter misinformation spread by smugglers or other refugees and migrants.
- Ensure effective access to asylum procedures and promote durable solutions for girls and their families, among other by supporting successful integration models, such as opportunities to join the workforce and independent living for the families, and access to permanent residency permits.
- Investigate drivers of migration in the countries of origin, including gender- and age specific drivers, and invest in creating and promoting legal pathways to safety. Consider developing appropriate advocacy interventions to share information and raise awareness of the risks and dangers girls could face during the migration journey, including by designing programmes to work with families in the countries of origin.
- Improve visibility and identification of unaccompanied girls by developing indicators for profiling victims of trafficking, under-age married girls and potentially unaccompanied adolescent girls travelling with pretend families. This could include initiatives for more protection staff at the borders, but also working more closely with border guards and training them to be more sensitive regarding unaccompanied girls.

“ Consider developing appropriate advocacy interventions to share information and raise awareness of the risks and dangers girls could face during the migration journey, including by designing programmes to work with families in the countries of origin. ”



“
Strong international cooperation and targeted national action is required to counter the lucrative cross-border migrant smuggling and trafficking network and to ensure accountability for widespread extortion, violence and rights violations by smugglers.”

- Ensure access to health services, including mental health services and psychosocial support activities to address the effects of the traumatic journey but also of living in temporary reception centres, especially targeted to girls, and adjusted to their age and development levels.
- Strengthen the procedures to identify and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, among other domestic violence within refugee and migrant communities and specific forms of SGBV that disproportionately affect girls, such as sexual violence and early and forced child marriage. Provide training opportunities for all stakeholders with a mandate to care for and support the refugee and migrant population (e.g. camp staff, including security staff, medical staff, police officers, case and social workers, members of outreach teams etc.). Consider strengthening the referral system and ensure the availability of safe alternative accommodation for the victims of violence and effective processing of suspected perpetrators. In order to address violence affecting girls and provide them adequate support, SGBV services, often attending to the needs and risks for adult women, need to be more adapted to girls' needs.

6.1.2 Recommendations for policy makers

- Improve child protection procedures upon identification at the borders, or with regard to identification and reception of refugees and migrants apprehended during irregular crossings, among other things, by:
 - establishing connections with relevant bodies and improving standard operating procedures to immediately involve child protection authorities in all cases involving children;
 - ensuring that border police are provided sufficient capacities to safeguard refugee and migrant children and conduct gender-responsive policing, by providing training in child safeguarding, gender and cultural sensitivity, sexual and gender-based violence and other relevant training;
 - monitoring compliance to laws and procedures, including by involving external, independent monitoring bodies;
 - ensuring accountability for human rights violations, among other things, by ensuring age-appropriate reporting mechanisms.
- International human rights treaty bodies that monitor implementation of core international human rights treaties, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child and regional human rights bodies, such as the Council of Europe and OSCE, should examine the human rights situation at the European borders and access to procedures in countries of transit.
- Strong international cooperation and targeted national action is required to counter the lucrative cross-border migrant smuggling and trafficking network and to ensure accountability for widespread extortion, violence and rights violations by smugglers. In parallel, investments should be made in strengthening systems of identification and support to victims of trafficking, including by ensuring access to basic services, prompt access to asylum and access to justice.

6.1.3 Recommendations for practitioners

- Make gender analysis a prerequisite in proposal design and incorporate gender lens in programming and advocacy for migration and displacement.
- Create programmes which build upon intergenerational solidarity amongst women and girls in families. This will enable them to create networks to formulate their needs and ask and advocate better for their rights. Involve mothers and sisters in programming activities targeting girls, including psychosocial support and education. Develop targeted information materials that build upon and encourage the solidarity and exchange between women and girls.
- Find innovative ways to consult girls. Encourage involvement by girls in decision making, including by establishing safe spaces, utilizing their close connection with mothers or sisters, where girls can express themselves and share their opinions and experience about the context, activities and facilitators. Tailor-made, context-appropriate activities, including those enabling processing and expressing difficult emotions and experiences (e.g. creative play and art activities) will encourage the girls' meaningful participation. Targeted activities should be ensured for unaccompanied or separated girls, as well as other vulnerable groups (e.g. trafficking victims, survivors of violence) to enable them to express themselves.
- Secure availability of staff from appropriate cultural background, cultural mediators or interpreters, among other things, by relying on telephone and online technology. Ensure that cultural mediators of both genders are available, particularly female mediators in gender-sensitive situations.
- Schooling and livelihood options for the older girls should be explored, including by consulting the girls, to promote integration. Develop and strengthen targeted activities for older girls, for example language classes, life skills and other activities prioritized based on consultations with the girls.

6.1.4 Recommendations for further research

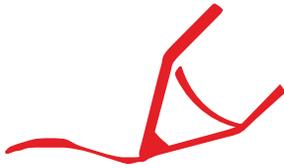
- A more comprehensive study would be required to verify the reasons behind the discrepancy in the numbers of girls, and unaccompanied girls, in Greece when compared to the Balkans.
- A more detailed study would be needed to verify the reasons for refugee and migrant girls and their families frequently being without their documents, which may include the fear of being registered as an asylum-seeker in a transit country, fear that the police will take or destroy their documents, or the fact that identity documents may have been seized by border guards during push-backs or by smugglers to control payments, or by potential traffickers.



Photo: Marija Jankovic / Save the Children



“ Create programmes which build upon intergenerational solidarity amongst women and girls in families. ”



“
Schooling and livelihood
options for older girls
should be researched in
more detail.”

- The manner of financing the journey and its potential repercussions would require a separate study because of potential links with trafficking, and would need to be taken into consideration when planning returns to the countries of origin. It would be interesting to get more detailed information on trafficking networks and their interaction with children in countries of origin, transit, and destination countries as well.
- Schooling and livelihood options for older girls should be researched in more detail.
- Research initiatives looking into the motivation of children and network of support available to them would help to create better programmes to address lack of motivation that refugee and migrant girls are experiencing due to the complexity of their situation (the stress of general uncertainty, the fact that they are in transit etc.), which prevents them from using the time and the opportunities they have available in the best possible manner.





GLOBAL RESEARCH SERIES: GIRLS ON THE MOVE

SUMMARY

*The Girls on the Move Initiative is a global series of **action research** conducted across different regions within existing*

*Save the Children programmes. Each regional study generates targeted evidence to address knowledge gaps in current literature and programme approaches, and engages Save the Children teams to **immediately strengthen ongoing interventions for girls** in different stages of migration, notably during transit and arrival.*

*The Methodology and emphasis vary according to the context, but the research is mostly qualitative. In all contexts, the methodology includes **literature review, participatory research** with girls on the move in countries of origin, in transit and/or at destination, **participatory programme review and capacity building** with country and regional office teams directly responsible for implementing programming that reaches girls on the move. Through this initiative, we hope to cultivate a more nuanced understanding within and beyond Save the Children of how gender impacts the experience 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.*

© Save the Children

Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub

Save the Children North West Balkans

nwb.savethechildren.net

Find our other reports on children on the move at the Resource Centre,
resourcecentre.savethechildren.net