REGIONAL ANALYSIS REPORT

Children on the Move in North Africa and along Key Routes

Trends, Vulnerabilities and Experiences of Migrant Children

Funded by the European Union

Italy, lead of the RDPP NA Consortium

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The Publication was made possible through the Regional Development and Protection Programme in North Africa and Key Routes with the generous support of The European Union, through The Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), and the Italian Ministry of Interior – Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration.

Publishers: International Organization for Migration
17 route des Morillons
P.O. Box 17
1211 Geneva 19
Switzerland
Tel. No. +41 22 717 9111
Fax: +41 22 798 6150
Email: hq@iom.int
Website: www.iom.int

United Nations Children's Fund
3 United Nations Plaza
New York
NY 10017
USA
Website: www.unicef.org

This publication was issued without formal editing by IOM or UNICEF.

Cover: Icons by Vecteezy.com

Required citation: Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2025). *Children on the Move in North Africa and along Key Routes: Trends, Vulnerabilities and Experiences of Migrant Children*. International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva; UNICEF, New York.

ISBN 978-92-9278-029-6 (PDF)

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PUB2025/003/L

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IOM and UNICEF Regional Offices

Regional Office for Middle East and North Africa
Regional Office for West and Central Africa

Funded by the European Union

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Core Project Team

Lead Researcher and Author: Emily Reid

Statistical Analyst: Evans Muchiri

Project Managers: Eva Pons, Rawaa Ahmed

Core Team Members: Asfand Waqar, Lobna Nahla, Phineas Jasi

Design, Layout and Review: Publications Unit

IOM and UNICEF Core Contributors

With sincere thanks to Adele Uwimana Rutsobe, Asfand Waqar, Aurela Hoxha, Claire Emilie Galez-Davis, Emily Reid, Emily Thuo, Eva Pons, Evans Muchiri, Faith Freeman, Haitham Khoudary, Josiah Kaplan, Khaled Khaled, Khobib Elsayed Awad Mohamed, Laura Bartolini, Laila Zaid, Lobna Nahla, Marianne Lane, Phineas Jasi, Rawaa Ahmed, Riham Abouelhassan, Rosal Maya Fischer, Ruslana Sirman, Sacha Chan Kam, Sébastien Nodjimbadem, Silvia Spinuso, Stine Laursen and Tasha Gill.

Child Protection Focal Points

This *Regional Analysis Report on Children on the Move in North Africa and along Key Routes: Trends, Vulnerabilities and Experiences of Migrant Children*, was made possible by the dedicated and tireless efforts of thousands of front-line Child Protection caseworkers directly supporting migrant children across the ten countries in North Africa, West Africa and the Mediterranean region. Pen names have been used for all migrant children in the case studies and quotes, and all other identifying details have been anonymized to protect their identity. With gratitude to Save the Children, UNHCR and ICRC for their support.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACRWC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (or Children's Charter)
AVRR	Assisted voluntary return and reintegration
CMR	Central Mediterranean Route
CTDC	Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
FMS	Flow Monitoring Survey
GBV	Gender-based violence
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services
MiMOSA	Migrant Management Operational System Application
MMP	Missing Migrants Project
OHCHR	United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
NGO	Non-governmental organization
UASC	Unaccompanied and/or Separated Children
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USD	United States Dollar
VOT	Victim of Trafficking
WAAR	Western African Atlantic Route
WMR	Western Mediterranean Route

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TERMINOLOGY

The study has adopted the following definitions:

Term	Definition
Asylum-seeker	is "any person seeking international protection. In some countries, it is used as a legal term referring to a person who has applied for refugee status or a complementary international protection status and has not yet received a final decision on their claim. It can also refer to a person who has not yet submitted an application but may intend to do so, or may be in need of international protection…"[1]
Child	is defined by the United Nations as anyone under the age of 18 years, acknowledging the specific vulnerabilities and legal protections afforded to children.[2]
Children on the move	is an umbrella term for mobile children which "refers to those who have been directly or indirectly affected by migration and displacement, either internationally across borders or within the same country. This encompasses migrant children and children of migrants; children in need of international protection, such as refugees and asylum-seekers or unaccompanied children; internally displaced children; children indirectly affected by migration and displacement, such as those who stay behind while parents or caregivers migrate; stateless children; and child victims of cross-border trafficking".[3]
Child trafficking	is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation. Unlike adult trafficking, however, the use of coercion, deception, or force is not relevant to be considered a victim, the mere act of moving a child for exploitative purposes constitutes trafficking in persons.[4] Exploitation can encompass various forms, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, servitude, and the removal of organs.
Internal displacement	is "the involuntary or forced movement, evacuation or relocation of persons or groups of persons within internationally recognized State borders".[5]
International migration	is "the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence and across an international border to a country of which they are not nationals".[6]

1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), n.d.
2 United Nations Treaty Collection, 1989.
3 International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC), 2023.
4 UNICEF, 2006.
5 UNHCR, n.d.
6 IOM, n.d. (last accessed 10 January 2025).

Migrant	is a person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from their habitual place of residence regardless of (1) their legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is.[7]
Missing migrants	are migrants who die or disappear during migration to an international destination, regardless of legal status. This includes those who die at sea, in deserts, or in other remote areas, as well as those whose remains are never recovered or identified.[8]
Refugee	is "a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it".[9]
Route-based approach	is an analytical and operational framework used to examine the entire migration journey across countries of origin, transit, and destination – particularly in mixed migration contexts. It addresses the evolving risks and protection needs that migrants and refugees face at each stage, recognizing the compounding vulnerabilities along irregular routes. The approach enables coordinated, context-specific responses tailored to specific migration corridors, including measures to prevent trafficking and exploitation, improve access to services, and strengthen safe, regular pathways throughout the journey.[10]
Separated children	"… are children… who have been separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may, therefore, include children accompanied by other adult family members."[11]
Smuggling of migrants	is the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the irregular entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident.[12]
Unaccompanied children	"… are children… who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so."[13]
Vulnerability	Within a migration context, vulnerability is the limited capacity to avoid, resist, cope with, or recover from harm. This limited capacity is the result of the unique interaction of individual, household, community, and structural characteristics and conditions.[14]

[7] Ibid.
[8] IOM, 2025a.
[9] UNHCR, 1977, p. 137.
[10] UNHCR, 2024b.
[11] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 2005.
[12] IOM, n.d.
[13] OHCHR, 2005.
[14] IOM, n.d.

Vulnerable migrant	Migrant(s) vulnerable to violence, exploitation or abuse: a migrant or group of migrants exposed to or with experience of rights violations, violence, exploitation or abuse within the context of migration and with limited capability to avoid, resist, cope or recover, as a result of the unique interaction of individual, household/family, community and structural characteristics and conditions.[15]
Youth	in this report refers to children and young adults between 14 to 24 years of age based on the DTM methodology and age range within the datasets used. This deviates slightly from the United Nations definition, which includes the ranges 15 to 24 years of age for statistical purposes.[16]

[15] IOM, 2023c, p. xiv.
[16] UN DESA, 1981.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In North Africa and along key migratory routes, widespread and worsening violations were reported against children in all seven key transit countries. The regional analysis report on Children on the Move in North Africa and along Key Routes highlights a sharp increase in child protection risks across each migration route. The data reveals clear, decade-long patterns of preventable violence, child trafficking, and child fatalities. In 2024 alone, 127 children lost their lives or disappeared (5%) during overland or maritime journeys towards Europe. These are not isolated incidents – these deaths are increasing due to systemic gaps in child protection systems that should include and safeguard children on the move.[17]

The research challenges common narratives of economic migration. The majority of girls and female youth (70%) reported leaving home for safety reasons: 35 per cent due to personal violence and 35 per cent due to war and conflict.[18] Similarly, just over half of boys and male youth (51%) left for safety, including 29 per cent due to war and conflict, 20 per cent due to personal violence, and 2 per cent due to forced conscription. The findings also show that children who experienced violence in their home countries were far more likely to encounter violence again in transit on their migration journey, compared to children who did not flee threats.

In 2024, IOM registered 15,691 vulnerable migrant children for assistance in seven key transit countries, including 2,989 unaccompanied and separated children, 979 with critical health needs and 396 identified as potential victims of trafficking.[19] Boys outnumbered girls among registered and unaccompanied children across all seven countries included in the data analysis. However, girls were more often identified as trafficking victims in Libya, Egypt and Mauritania. Over the past eight years, official CTDC cases show that child trafficking in North Africa has taken many forms: in Egypt, children were trafficked into hospitality, forced labour, construction, and sexual exploitation; in Libya, into forced labour, sexual exploitation, and domestic servitude; in Morocco, into prostitution, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and labour exploitation; and in Tunisia, into intimate partner exploitation, forced labour, prostitution, and pornography. These patterns underscore the vast diversity of exploitation and children's heightened vulnerability across the region.

In 2023, 55,704 children arrived in Europe, including 35,510 unaccompanied or separated children (UASC) — more than double the number in 2021. Italy alone received nearly 27,000 UASC, almost triple the 2021 figure, making the Central Mediterranean Route the epicentre of this crisis for the most highly vulnerable category of children.[20]

The report analyses key quantitative and qualitative data across the main migration routes, adopting a routes-based framework that takes a multi-country, multi-stage perspective to assess migration dynamics and protection risks. It explores the risks, vulnerabilities, and resilience of children on the move along the Central Mediterranean Route, the Western Mediterranean Route, and the West African Atlantic Route. The analysis covers conditions and experiences across origin, transit, and destination, highlighting how different locations and phases of migration are interlinked – shaping both the routes taken and the lived experiences of children.

- The **Central Mediterranean Route** (CMR) remains the deadliest migration path for children. From 2014 to 2024, over 855 children were reported missing or dead. In 2024 alone, 1,719 migrants died or disappeared into the sea, including at least 82 children (5%).[21] Deaths peaked in 2019 when 133 children were lost in one year. Persistent risks on this route include trafficking, extortion and forced labour as children move through Egypt, Libya, the Niger and Tunisia toward Italy.

17 IOM, 2025a.
18 IOM, 2024d, p. 12.
19 IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
20 UNHCR et al., 2024, pp. 2–4.
21 IOM, 2025b.

Between 2016 and 2023, 91 boys and 135 girls were trafficked, often through abuse (physical, sexual, psychological) as a means of control. Girls are often trafficked for sexual exploitation in "connection houses," while both girls and boys are pulled into debt bondage, forced labour and illicit work. In 2024, 24 per cent of boys were unaccompanied compared to 5 per cent of girls. Among registered girls, 41 per cent were identified as potential trafficking victims, compared to 19 per cent of boys.[22]

Peer networks and phone contact with family are critical coping tools. One Italian child protection frontliner described the scale of mental health distress:

"we've seen so many cases of total mental breakdown. They become – homeless, exploited, invisible."

- Along the **Western Mediterranean Route** (WMR), children migrate to, through and from Algeria and Morocco toward Spain. While the maritime journey is shorter, exploitation is prolonged and often hidden. In 2024, 581 migrants were recorded as deceased or missing, including nine children (2%), largely due to drowning or exposure.[23] Deaths on this route have steadily increased since 2014, with a peak of 60 in 2021. Girls were often exploited through forced labour (25%), and most had their travel documents withheld (75%).[24] More boys (22%) travelled unaccompanied compared to girls (7%).[25]

  Children on this route are driven by poverty, displacement, and gender-based violence. Many girls flee forced marriage or Female Genital Mutilation, only to face trafficking into domestic servitude or sexual exploitation. Boys – including Moroccan nationals – often self-organize their crossings and are trafficked into street work, begging or forced labour. Many are repeatedly detained, relocated or expelled. Without legal documentation, children cannot access education or services and are often criminalized or disappear from protection systems. From 2014 to 2024, 37 per cent of children registered on this route were unaccompanied or separated. In 2024 alone, this rose to 65 per cent (1,079).[26] Boys are lured by false promises of sports careers and end up trafficked into forced labour. Of the unaccompanied and separated girls in transit, 29 per cent of girls were identified as potential victims of trafficking, compared to 6 per cent of boys.[27]

- On the **Western African Atlantic Route** (WAAR), children migrate from Mali, Senegal, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire through Mauritania and Morocco toward Spain's Canary Islands. In 2024, more than 1,100 migrants – including seven children – died or disappeared at sea, with most never identified, lost to dehydration, starvation or drowning.[28] Between 2016 and 2023, twice as many girls were trafficked compared to boys.[29] Of the girls, 24 per cent reported sexual exploitation. Most children on this route were accompanied. In 2024, only 2 per cent of boys and 1 per cent of girls were unaccompanied. Key drivers included economic collapse, environmental degradation and gender-based violence. A distinctive trend on this route involves children being sent to religious schools (*Mahdrasas*), where many are exploited under the guise of guardianship. With no national shelters for trafficked children and few formal protection options, they rely almost entirely on informal support networks to survive.

  In 2024, IOM registered 407 vulnerable migrant children along this route – 81 per cent were UASC, a 25 per cent increase from 2023. Girls had greater medical needs (8%) than boys (2%). Across this and all routes, children continue to dream of safety and dignity. As one unaccompanied child from Guinea shared:

"Every day I keep going because I dream of something better, a life where I am safe, can go to school, and make my family proud."

[22] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
[23] IOM, 2025a.
[24] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 10 January 2025).
[25] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] IOM, 2025a.
[29] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Background

In total, there are now at least 281 million international migrants globally,[30] including 117 million forcibly displaced persons, among them 75.9 million internally displaced,[31] as well as 36.4 million refugees and 6.1 million asylum-seekers.[32] Children on the move today face some of the most appalling protection risks on the planet. As global displacement reaches record highs, children now make up 40 per cent of all forcibly displaced people – more than 47.2 million children have fled war, disaster, violence, or poverty, often without the most basic protections to survive, recover, and rebuild.[33]

Tens of thousands of children are on the move each year – fleeing violence, poverty, family pressure, exploitation, and climate-related collapse. Some are running from forced marriage or war. Others are sent by their families as economic lifelines. Many travel alone, unprotected, undocumented and unseen. Their journeys intersect with some of the most dangerous migration routes in the world: the CMR, WMR and WAAR. This report provides a route-based analysis of children's experiences along these three major corridors, grounded in protection and child rights principles. Drawing on IOM case management data, front-line interviews and children's own testimonies, it examines the complex interplay of migration drivers, trafficking patterns, protection failures and survival strategies. Each chapter focuses on one route, highlighting both common themes and distinct challenges, in order to strengthen targeted responses and ensure children's protection – regardless of their status or journey stage.

Together, these chapters offer a route-specific lens to better understand migrant children's realities across North Africa. By elevating children's voices, this report aims to inform targeted, principled and urgent action – because no child should be invisible, detained or trafficked simply for seeking a life worth living. These numbers are not abstract – they reflect children on the move across borders and continents, often navigating dangerous journeys alone, exposed to exploitation, abuse and trafficking.

In 2024, 127 children on the move, died or went missing through North Africa and along key migration routes.[34] One of the most dangerous routes in the world is the CMR where up to 90 per cent of unaccompanied migrant children arriving in Italy report having experienced exploitation, sexual violence or forced labour during their journeys.[35] Only a small proportion of children are identified and even fewer receive assistance, however their stories are not isolated events – they are systemic, repeated and preventable.

Children's migration decisions are rarely driven by a single factor. Rather, they emerge from the interplay of multiple, overlapping pressures – such as economic hardship, conflict, environmental degradation, family expectations, and lack of access to education or protection. Children and families often weigh these complex realities simultaneously when deciding if, how, and where to move – resulting in decisions shaped by survival, constraint, and fragmented opportunity, rather than linear motivations.

[30] IOM, 2024c, p. 29.
[31] IDMC, 2024, p. 5.
[32] UNHCR, 2024c, p. 2.
[33] UNICEF, 2024a.
[34] IOM 2025a.
[35] UNICEF, 2024a.

Aim

The *Regional Analysis Report on Children on the Move in North Africa and along Key Routes: Trends, Vulnerabilities and Experiences of Migrant Children* (hereafter known as the *Regional Analysis*) provides an in-depth examination of the experiences, vulnerabilities and resilience of migrant children traversing critical migration routes across North Africa, West Africa and the Mediterranean. Utilizing extensive quantitative data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), qualitative research and front-line testimonies, the report highlights migration trends, underlying drivers and significant gaps in child protection frameworks and migration governance.

Most children on the move face repeated and severe violations of their rights – including violence, deprivation, exploitation and death or disappearances – in the desert, at sea or en route through remote zones where no one is present to witness their loss. The *Regional Analysis* is a data-driven report focused on migrant children on the move through and from North Africa, towards Europe, with a specific lens on their experiences in seven priority transit countries: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, the Niger and Tunisia.

This report centres on the experiences of *children on the move* – drawing on data analyses, front-line accounts, regional trends and new data to highlight the risks, resilience and realities shaping children's mobility across North Africa and key migratory routes. It provides a route-based analysis of the three main migration routes to, through and from North Africa and the Mediterranean: It is grounded in child rights, humanitarian protection and migrant protection principles, to inform urgent policy and operational responses that meet children where they are – towards preventing them from falling through the cracks.

Approach

This report applies a route-based approach to highlight the risks, vulnerabilities and decisions that children on the move face, that are dynamic and ever evolving depending on their location, context and journey.[36] With the understanding that many children migrate through the Sahara Desert route to and through North Africa, the report will primarily present children's experiences along the three major maritime migration routes. This approach compliments as well as diverges from traditional origin/destination models in migration studies, however it is pertinent to understanding the entire breadth of migrant children's journeys, the associated protection risks and survival strategies that they develop. The analysis will focus on children's experiences in seven key transit countries along these three major routes:

- **Central Mediterranean Route:** The data focuses on four key transit countries: the Niger, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. The analysis adopts a broader lens, encompassing the overland journey through the Niger, Chad, the Sudan and Libya, as well as maritime routes through Libya, Tunisia and Algeria toward Malta and Italy.

[36] IOM, 2025e, pp. 11–16.

- **Western Mediterranean Route:** The data includes two main transit countries: Morocco and Algeria. In contrast, the research scope includes overland journeys through the Niger, Libya and Tunisia, and maritime routes toward Spain – including mainland Spain, the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla, and the Balearic Islands. This includes both sea crossings and land border movements into Spanish enclaves.
- **Western African Atlantic Route:** The data focuses on Mauritania while the analysis covers a wider geographic scope, including Morocco en route to the Canary Islands, in Spain, as the primary destination. It also includes overland and maritime migration from other origin and transit countries, including the Gambia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Mali (and Mauritania and Morocco).

The report aims to provide a detailed narrative of migrant children's lived experiences, examining their vulnerabilities, protection risks and coping strategies. It seeks to develop practical and strategic recommendations for strengthening child protection systems and addressing service gaps. By amplifying the direct voices, perspectives, resilience, aspirations and needs of migrant children, the report provides an invaluable opportunity for their experiences to significantly shape policy interventions. Additionally, it provides evidence-based insights to support strategic advocacy, policy formulation and response planning aimed at safeguarding migrant children from exploitation, violence and trafficking in persons.

It is important to note that this report only analyses the reported cases of vulnerable migrant children and victims of trafficking. However, it is understood that many, if not the majority, of cases have not been identified or reported, as the actual scale is significantly larger than what children have access to, to date.

Analytical Framework and Report Structure

This report provides a structured, route-based analysis of the risks, vulnerabilities and resilience of migrant children moving through and from North Africa – focusing particularly on unaccompanied and separated children, who face heightened exposure to exploitation, violence and protection system breakdowns. The analysis covers three major migration corridors the CMR, the WMR and the WAAR.

To ensure consistency, comparability, and clarity for the reader, the report applies a unified analytical framework across all three chapters. Each route-specific chapter is structured around the same three core dimensions:

1. Drivers of Migration

   This section explores the structural and overlapping conditions that compel children to migrate. These include armed conflict, persecution, targeted violence, gender-based violence (such as forced marriage and FGM), household economic collapse, pressure to repay debts, environmental degradation, and food insecurity. Many children are also driven by the absence of education, health care and legal protection, or are coerced or deceived by traffickers and smugglers. In most cases, children are not choosing to migrate – they are fleeing situations where their rights, safety and survival are under threat.

2. Protection Risks and Vulnerabilities in Transit

   The second section of each chapter presents a comparative analysis of the protection risks children face along their journeys, structured around cross-cutting thematic categories only highlighting specific nuances on each route and contextual variations. Across all routes, children face severe, overlapping risks during both overland and maritime journeys. These include life-threatening dangers such as long desert crossings without food or water, drowning at sea, suffocation in overcrowded transport and abandonment in remote areas – many of

which lead to their deaths or disappearance. Children are frequently subjected to trafficking and exploitation, including sexual violence, forced labour, domestic servitude, debt bondage and coerced begging – sometimes under the false promise of education or care. Many are detained – formally or informally – facing arbitrary or prolonged detention, often in unsafe and abusive conditions, or extorted for ransom. Gender- and age-specific vulnerabilities are especially acute: girls face pervasive risks of sexual exploitation, forced marriage and survival sex, while unaccompanied or younger children lack reliable adult care, making them highly vulnerable to manipulation and harm.

Legal and documentation barriers – such as the absence of identity papers or unclear legal status – further increase children's risk of statelessness and block their access to asylum, education, or health services. These risks are compounded by poor physical health, untreated illness or injury, and mental health and psychosocial distress, including trauma, depression and emotional shutdown. Finally, family separation – whether due to arrest, abandonment, border procedures, or loss of contact – leaves children without protection, kinship care, or pathways to reunification.

3. Resilience and Coping Strategies

Despite the severity of the risks they face, migrant children show remarkable strength, agency and resourcefulness. This section explores the coping strategies children rely on throughout their journeys. These include forming peer protection networks, drawing strength from faith, spirituality, or cultural identity, and engaging in creative expression such as art, storytelling, or music to process trauma and maintain hope. Many children seek support from diaspora communities, NGOs, or trusted adults, while others maintain long-term aspirations for safety, education, vocational training, family reunification, or return. These strategies reflect both children's resilience and the urgent need for formal protection systems to better support – not replace – their capacity to survive and recover.

This analytical framework is applied consistently across all chapters to support both comparative analysis and the clear presentation of route-specific insights. The guiding research areas for the analysis include:

- Drivers behind children's dangerous migration journeys.
- Specific risks and vulnerabilities along migration routes.
- Children's perspectives on migration decisions and experiences.
- Coping mechanisms and resilience strategies.
- Children's pressing needs, challenges, fears, dreams and motivations influencing migration decisions.

Methodology

A comprehensive mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating qualitative and quantitative analyses to investigate the vulnerabilities, risks, and resilience of migrant children across key migration routes in North and West Africa, and the Mediterranean. The analysis was structured around a route-based framework, focusing on seven transit countries within CMR, WMR and WAAR. This approach enabled regional comparison while accounting for country-specific dynamics along each corridor. The seven transit countries in North and West Africa prioritized for the data analysis, includes Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, the Niger and Tunisia, with complimentary analyses in Italy, Spain and Greece to smaller extents.

The quantitative analysis draws on key IOM datasets which provided regional trends on migration trends, arrivals, child trafficking cases, children deaths and disappearances, and vulnerability patterns, particularly in relation to unaccompanied and separated children and children at risk of exploitation. While these datasets offered essential insight into migration dynamics and route-level comparisons, qualitative research filled critical gaps in understanding children's lived experiences and protection challenges.

The Desk Review formed the initial phase of the research, grounding the analysis in both operational data and existing evidence across the CMR, WMR, WAAR and the Sahara Route. It included an in-depth review of internal and external IOM documents such as Best Interests Assessments (BIA) and Best Interests Determination (BID), vulnerability assessments, case notes, child protection reports, as well as inception and scoping assessments and findings. This was complemented by published, grey literature, as well as academic research, to capture broader regional dynamics. The review identified key gaps, refined the research scope, and informed the development of tools and approaches to better understand children's risks, vulnerabilities, and protection needs along key migration corridors.

Leveraging extensive quantitative data from IOM, the research used the datasets – including the Migrant Management Operational System Application (MiMOSA),[37] the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM),[38] and the Missing Migrants Project (MMP)[39] – to identify overarching trends and vulnerabilities at global, regional and country levels. These were complemented by thorough grey data analyses.[40,41] Other key sources include the Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC), which includes verified data on victims of trafficking, including IOM case data.

All data on migrant deaths and disappearances used in this report are from IOM's Missing Migrants Project database, accessed on 13 April 2025.[42] All MMP data are updated continuously, including in some cases retroactively for prior years when new data is reported. The timeframe for the datasets are as follows:

- DTM Europe Arrivals: 2016–2024[43]
- DTM Europe Flow Monitoring Survey: April to December 2023
- MiMOSA: Timeline covered is 2017–2024
- MMP: Timeline covered is 2014–2024
- CTDC: Timeline covered is 2016–2023

The qualitative and quantitative data were systematically triangulated, integrating narratives and statistical findings to ensure evidence-based recommendations. Ethical procedures and data responsibility considerations aligned with international child protection standards were maintained throughout. An overview of the core data management systems and databases is in the Annex.

[37] MiMOSA is IOM's institutional case management software utilized for processing data of various migrant programmes such as return and reintegration and assistance to vulnerable migrants. Managed at the national level by case managers, MiMOSA collects evaluations of each specific case, disaggregated by countries of origin and destination.

[38] IOM, 2023a. DTM Flow Monitoring Survey (accessed 10 January 2025). The DTM collects data within the International Organization for Migration (IOM) through field enumerators through key surveys such as Flow Monitoring Surveys (FMS). These are employed in key countries of arrival or transit for mixed migration to Europe such as Greece, Italy, Spain, Libya, the Niger and Mauritania, these surveys gather extensive raw data on migration flows. Mixed Migration Flows to Europe – Methodological Note.

[39] IOM, 2025a.

[40] IOM, 2023c.

[41] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 10 January 2025). The CTDC hosts one of the largest global case datasets on trafficking in persons, with contributions from civil society organizations, government agencies and international organizations. This is one of the first global datasets that harmonizes and publishes data on trafficking in persons cases from around the world. It has been accessed from more than 150 countries.

[42] IOM 2025a.

[43] IOM, 2025g. Arrival Data (accessed 5 April 2025).

The qualitative research included over 63 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) in over 15 countries, 21 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), seven migrant youth case study interviews, and 28 anonymized case studies. FGDs were conducted with male and female front-line workers supporting unaccompanied and separated children across the seven priority transit countries – Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, the Niger and Mauritania – in addition to Italy as a destination country. In-person FGDs with female and male unaccompanied and separated children in Mauritania (14–17 years of age), and virtual FGDs with youth who migrated when they were unaccompanied migrant children, in Morocco and Libya (18–24 years of age). KIIs engaged child protection specialists, data analysts and migration experts from regional and international organizations, including UNICEF, UNHCR, Save the Children, the ICRC, and IOM including the Displacement Tracking Matrix and the Missing Migrants Project among others, as well as government officials from several countries. These interviews provided critical operational and policy insights into structural protection challenges, trafficking trends and front-line service gaps.

Case studies documented the experiences of current and former unaccompanied and separated children, (who are now young adults between 18 to 24 years of age). The stories reflect their respective perspectives, genders and insights as well as more intimate discussions and analysis of protection risks. All data collection followed ethical, trauma-informed procedures, in line with UNICEF, IOM, WHO and Save the Children guidelines. Stakeholder consultations were facilitated with two conferences on Children on the Move in Egypt and Mauritania, where governments, United Nations and international organizations from the seven priority countries participated. These included observational site visits, presentations and contextual depth.

Age and gender disaggregation was possible with the quantitative data through MiMOSA, the MMP and the CTDC datasets and includes statistics that directly relate to children. The DTM Europe arrivals data shows statistics on adults versus children. However, the DTM flow monitoring survey used a broader methodology to categorize a vulnerable group prioritized by IOM called "migrant youth." In this report, youth refers to children between 14–17 years of age and "young adults" between 18–24 years of age. In the qualitative research, participants were questioned about "younger" and "older" boys and girls between 9–13 years, or 14–17 years of age. In the *Regional Analysis*, the data analysis primarily employed descriptive statistics to summarize and explore key characteristics of children migrating from, though, and to North Africa and Europe. The analysis focused on calculating summaries and proportions to quantify the number of children migrating, disaggregated by age, gender, trafficking status, and whether they were unaccompanied. The different migration routes and countries showcase the patterns and trends in child migration flows.

Several important limitations shaped the scope and depth of the data collection and analysis presented in this report. First, ethical and security-related constraints – particularly the need to uphold child protection protocols, secure informed consent, and apply trauma-informed methodologies – necessarily limited the intensity and frequency of direct engagement with children. In some high-risk locations, insecurity and access restrictions further prevented in-depth fieldwork, resulting in a narrower pool of firsthand insights than initially planned.

Additional limitations stem from the complexity of working across diverse datasets with varying indicators and coverage at the global, regional and country levels. Not all datasets allowed for disaggregation by age or gender, and in several instances, country-level data were incomplete, reported inconsistently, or absent altogether. This created challenges in comparing patterns between North and West African contexts, and in triangulating across sources with differing reference years, methodologies, and populations. Direct qualitative research focused on current and former unaccompanied migrant children. However, data related to children who had already arrived in Europe often reflected a different profile than those still in transit – adding additional layers to the comparative analysis. Language barriers also posed constraints in some locations, and the absence of

gender-disaggregated front-line interviews limited specific perspectives. Finally, while the route-based framework traditionally emphasizes arrival points in Europe, this report reframes the approach to prioritize the experiences of children moving to, through, from, and within North Africa – highlighting the dynamic and often overlooked risks they face prior to arrival.

Oversight was provided by the IOM Steering Committee, Technical Advisory Group, and a Peer Review Committee that included UNICEF, Save the Children and UNHCR. This integrated methodology ensured the report was grounded in both robust data and the lived realities of children on the move, strengthening the evidence base for child protection and migration policy recommendations. Migration and protection frameworks are critical to understanding and addressing the needs and rights of migrant children travelling within and from North and West Africa along significant migration routes. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the global benchmark through which children must be protected with a rights-based approach, based on four foundational principles:[44]

- **Non-Discrimination (Equal Treatment):** Ensuring all migrant children receive equal protection and access to services regardless of their nationality, migration status, ethnicity or gender.
- **Best Interests of the Child:** Prioritizing the welfare and developmental needs of migrant children in every policy and decision-making process.
- **Right to Life and Development:** Committing to protecting migrant children's fundamental rights to survival, safety, health and holistic development throughout their migration journeys.
- **Participation:** Actively including the voices and perspectives of migrant children in decisions that affect their lives, ensuring their meaningful participation and agency.

The Global Compact for Migration provides a cooperative international framework to enhance migration management.[45] These 10 Guiding Principles uphold respect for human rights, child-sensitive and gender-responsive approaches, non-discrimination and enhanced global collaboration to guide policies that ensure safety, dignity and comprehensive protection, particularly in critical transit and destination points.

Other frameworks guide the protection of migrant children in the context of Africa, including the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which addresses children's rights within Africa's distinct socio-cultural and political contexts. It mandates protection measures against exploitation, trafficking in persons, harmful practices such as child marriage, and prioritizes family unity, education, and health access and to proactively implement child-centred protections, thus building migrant children's resilience and safeguarding them from severe migration-related risks.

[44] UNICEF, 2024b (accessed 10 January 2025).
[45] IOM, 2025f (accessed 10 January 2025).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

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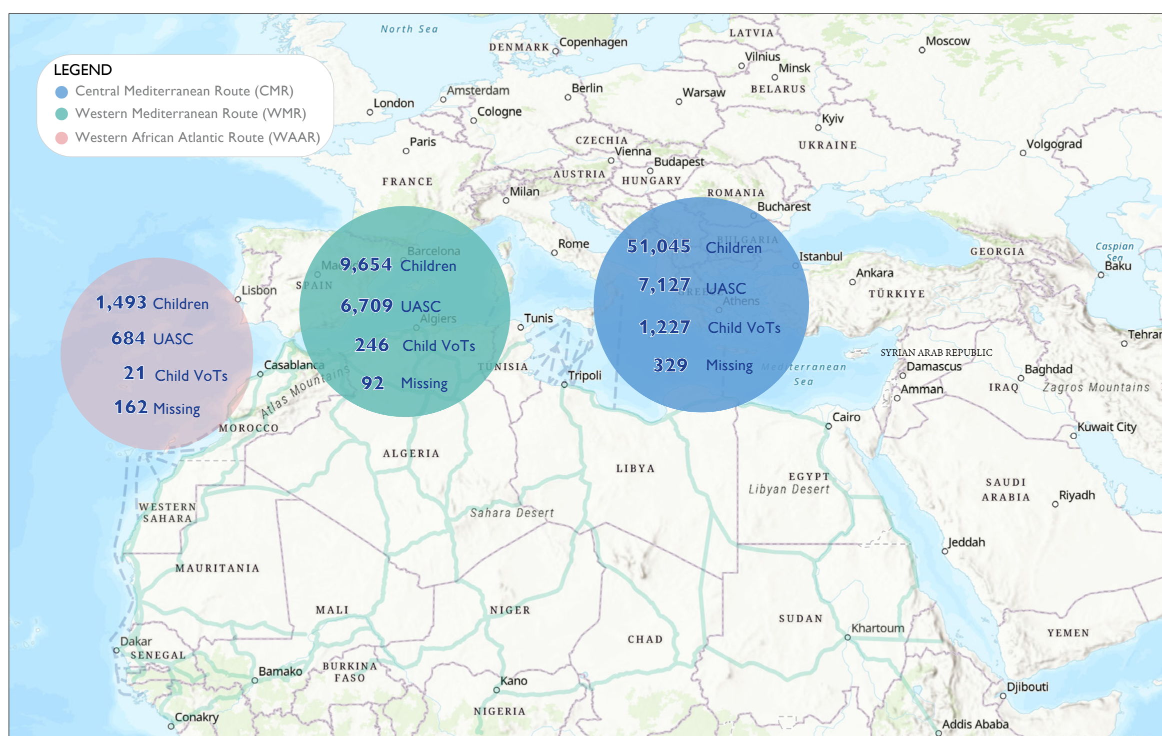
SUMMARY OF MIGRATION TRENDS IN NORTH AFRICA

All three maritime migration routes through North and West Africa, in addition to the Sahara Desert Route, show unique, albeit consistent and rapidly escalating trends that are not new or emerging but well-documented. The shocking grave violations of highly vulnerable children's rights have not only continued to cause harm, but have increased in number, and in predicable locations, hotspots and routes, for an entire decade. While irregular migration and trends in human trafficking will inevitably continue to evolve, children are still starving to death in the desert, drowning in the sea, and being held for extortion or trafficked in the same renowned hotspots as before. The literature supports the key drivers derived from the data, where displacement, insecurity and climate change directly exacerbate the vulnerability of children from Africa (and other regions) who are trafficked along these routes.[46]

Figure 1. Children on the Move Statistics, by Migration Route



Source: MiMOSA and MMP (2020–2024).

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration and United Nations Children's Fund.

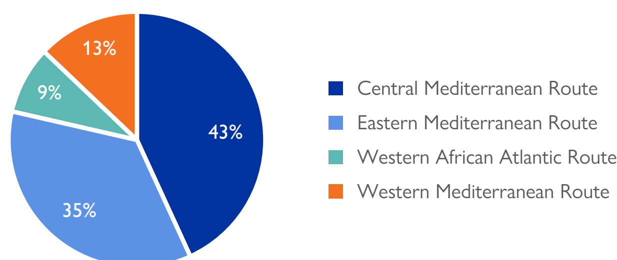
[46] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2024. *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024*, p. 10.

Figure 2. Arrivals to Europe by Migration Route, by Year (2016–2024)

Source: DTM Europe Arrivals (2016–2024).

In 2023, 64 per cent of all children arriving in Europe were unaccompanied or separated and highly vulnerable (35,500).[47,48] Historically, the majority of migrants used the CMR (44%), followed by the WMR (13%) and the WAAR (8%) from 2016 and 2024.[49] Over 208,000 migrants arrived in Europe in 2024.[50]

Figure 3. Arrivals in Europe, by Migration Route (2016–2024)



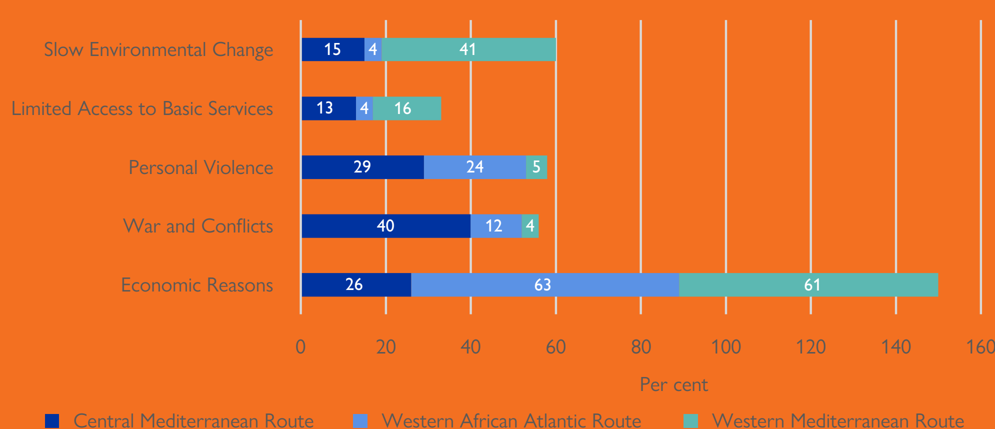
Source: DTM Europe Arrivals (2016–2024).

Over a third of children who arrived had family members somewhere in Europe.[51] Two thirds of female migrants left their country of origin for their own safety and security due to personal violence (35%) and war and conflict (35%).[52] Meanwhile, almost half the male migrants surveyed left for economic reasons (47%), a third because of war and conflict (30%), and a fifth due to personal violence (20%).[53] Other reasons were similar, including limited basic services (11%), slow environmental change (7%), education (3%), and avoiding as well as forced military conscription (2%).[54] The overall priority was personal safety, security, finances and services. The most common drivers for youth to leave their countries on the CMR was war and conflicts (32%), economics (30%), personal violence (29%), limited basic services (16%) as well as education (5%), slow environmental changes (4%) and military (1%).[55] They chose their destination for socioeconomic reasons (55%), safety (27%), access to asylum (9%), and family (6%).[56] Eighty-one (81) per cent chose Italy on this route.[57]

47 UNHCR et al., 2024., p. 1.
48 Ibid.
49 IOM, 2025g. Arrival Data (accessed 5 April 2025).
50 Ibid.
51 IOM, 2024d, p. 20.
52 IOM, 2024d, p. 12.
53 Ibid.
54 IOM, 2023a. DTM Flow Monitoring Survey.
55 Ibid.
56 IOM, 2024d, p. 20.
57 IOM, 2024d, p. 19.

The most frequently cited driver for both the WMR and WAAR was economic hardship (62% and 67%, respectively), followed by slow-onset environmental changes in the WMR (46%), limited access to basic services (17%), personal violence (6%) and conflict (4%).[58] Along the WAAR, additional drivers included personal violence (19%), war and conflict (11%), limited services (4%) and environmental factors (4%).[59] Children and families selected these routes and destinations primarily for socioeconomic opportunity (70% WAAR; 60% WMR), family connections (17% WAAR; 8% WMR), safety (10%), and, to a lesser extent, access to asylum or diaspora networks.[60] However, it is rarely a matter of choosing a single, isolated driver. In practice, migration decisions reflect the weighing of multiple, interconnected factors – such as economic collapse that is rooted in conflict or environmental degradation, or the pursuit of opportunity within the constraints of displacement. These overlapping influences shape not only why children leave, but also how they move and where they aim to go.

Figure 4. Reasons for Migrant Youth to Leave their Country, by Migration Route (2023)



Source: DTM Europe FMS 2023, n=2,082.

The majority of migrant youth never had their own identity documents or they left their origin countries without them on the WMR (79%) followed by the WAAR (55%) and the CRM (49%).[61] Across all routes, 61 per cent of children, was without identity documents during the journey while 14 per cent of them had lost it, three per cent had it stolen and for two per cent, someone else had control over them.[62]

The primary form of transportation that youth used to leave their country of origin was by land (44%), air (23%), foot (17%) and boat (15%).[63] Almost half received help to organize the journey, through either a recruitment agency or a family, friend or community (44%).[64] The primary mode of transport they used to reach destination countries was by sea (65%) and land (36%).[65] Thirteen (13) per cent of youth were readmitted into different countries and less than 1 per cent had been "returned' when attempting to enter.

58 IOM, 2024d, p. 12.
59 Ibid.
60 IOM, 2024d, p. 20.
61 IOM, 2024d, p. 23.
62 Ibid.
63 IOM, 2023a. DTM Flow Monitoring Survey.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.

The analysis showed various factors that increased the likelihood of violent experiences. Youth who had experienced physical violence and conflict in their home countries, were more likely to experience violence on their journey than others. Interestingly, the data shows that youth who "received assistance from others" to organize their migration journey, experienced more violence on the journey. Perhaps migrants who received more support ahead of moving, were more likely to be tricked, deceived or were sent on highly organized migration routes where violence was systemic. It also may debunk some myths where migrants migrating with less support or organization, being more vulnerable. Perhaps migrants who had more support with the funds, logistics or organization of the journey itself, whether by family, friends, recruiters, smugglers, had less agency to change their route independently. This also confirms global trends where victims of trafficking are more likely to be trafficked from someone they know, so perhaps some migrants who received more "assistance", were similarly knowingly or unknowingly misled into dangerous or violent situations. Boys experienced significantly more physical violence (27%) than girls (15%). Children between 14 to 17 years of age experienced the highest rates of violence (36%) than other age groups. Youth from Asia (32%) and Africa (22%) reported higher levels of physical abuse than other regions.[66] The analysis debunked common myths, where violence was shown not to be significantly associated with years of education, the continent of origin, and transportation mode when leaving home.

Transportation and Challenges

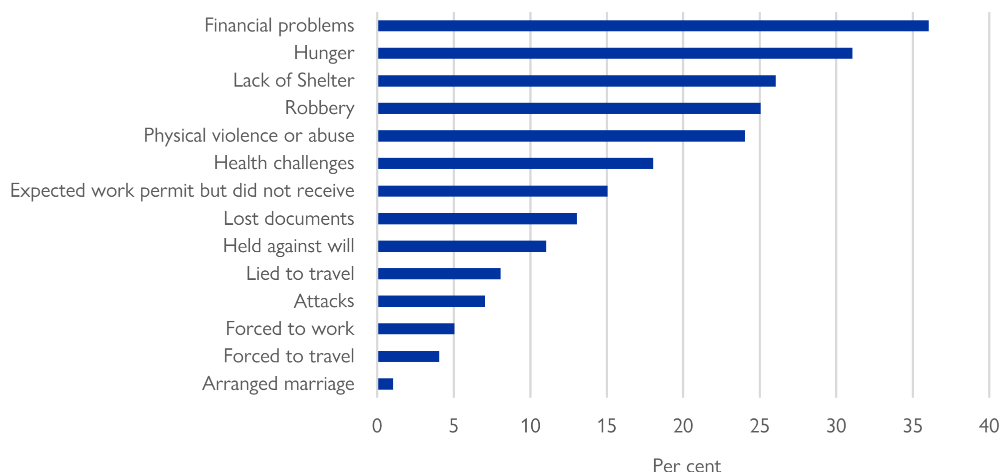
More than half of migrant youth respondents used their own money to facilitate the journey (50%) and more than a third had sourced money from relatives in their country of origin (33%), relatives abroad (7%), friends abroad (4%) or sold property (12%).[67] Others took on a debt or loan (17%), worked in transit (15%) or used an employment recruitment agency (1%). Up to 22 per cent of migrant youth planned to refund the money for their journey upon arrival in their destination countries.[68]

Youth in Europe reported spending different amounts on their journey, depending on distance and locations of origin, transit and destination; 26 per cent spent under USD 1,000, 20 per cent spent between 1,000 and 2,500 USD and another 20 per cent spent between USD 2,500 and 5,000.[69] The majority of the migrants from West and North African countries spent between USD 1,000 to 2,500, while those in Central Africa spent between 2,500 and 5,000 for their journeys. In contrast, 28 per cent of migrants from Bangladesh spent USD 7,500 to 10,000 for their journeys (usually by air to Libya).

Figure 5 highlights the breadth of risks faced by migrant youth on the move. Over a third experienced financial problems (36%), with many also facing hunger (31%), lack of shelter (26%) and robbery (25%). Nearly a quarter reported physical violence or abuse (24.2%), while others faced health issues (18%), lost documents (13%), or were held against their will (10.8%). Additional challenges included deception over work permits (15%), forced labour (5%), forced travel (4%), attacks (7%) and even arranged marriage (1%). These figures underscore how daily survival – not just migration – is the defining reality for many children on these routes.

66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 IOM, 2022d.

Figure 5. Percentage of Migrant Youth in Europe who Experienced Difficulties on the Journey



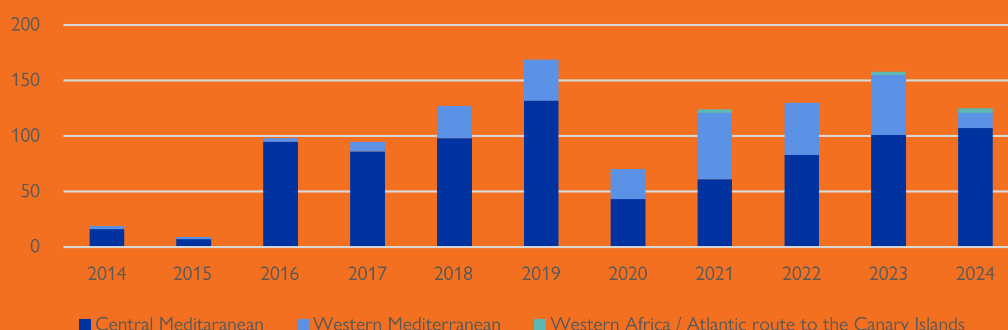
Source: DTM FMS Europe 2023, n=2,082.

Overland and Maritime Journeys

In 2024, approximately 43 per cent of all attempted crossings to Europe, resulted either in a fatal event or a return to the departure country after unsuccessful attempts (which surpassed the numbers in 2023).[70] Between 2014 and 2024, more than 40,000 migrants were recorded as dead or missing across four of the world's most dangerous migration corridors: the Sahara Desert (below), CMR, WMR and WAAR. Among them were 1,283 children and 2,619 women. Most children cross the Sahara Desert as an integral part of the CMR and WMR journeys, yet they are rarely showcased with the Europe-centric focus on maritime movements despite being inherently interconnected.

In 2024 alone, 127 children were recorded as dead or missing across the four routes, an increase from previous years.[71] Figure 6 illustrates the steady rise in child deaths and disappearances across all four migration routes, with the CMR accounting for the highest each year. The spike in 2024 underscores the escalating risks children face en route. The children who could be identified, originated from a range of countries, most frequently from the Sudan (19), Guinea (10) and Tunisia (4), but also originating from Nigeria (1), Bangladesh (1), the Gambia (1) and Iraq (1). However, 84 children were recorded as having mixed or unknown nationalities – underscoring serious gaps in the dangers, invisibility and challenges in ever identifying or tracing children on the move, who they were, where they came from, or whether anyone is still searching for them.

Figure 6. Children Deaths and Disappearance by Migration Route (2014–2024)



Source: Missing Migrants Project (2014–2024), n=886.[72]

70 IOM, 2025c, p. 14.
71 IOM, 2025a.
72 Ibid.

The Sahara Desert Route

INSIGHT

The Sahara Desert is the most dangerous overland route globally for children which connects to the other three maritime routes. Children migrate to, through and from this route, interchangeably, especially within and between Algeria, the Niger, Morocco, Tunisia and Libya and along the key routes.[73]

In 2024 alone, 485 migrants were reported missing – with an astonishing one in five being women and children – with preventable deaths including exposure, hunger, thirst, exposure, violence and accidents. That year, 29 child deaths were recorded during the Sahara Desert crossing, the vast majority – 19 children (66%) – were identified as Sudanese, followed by two from the Syrian Arab Republic, and eight children (28%) of unknown origins. This reflects the high protection risks for children fleeing the Sudan and crossing through remote, ungoverned desert regions.

Over the past decade, from 2014 to 2024, this corridor consistently recorded the highest proportion of deaths among female migrants (28%) and children (4%).[74] The number of children who were reported dead and missing during this time peaked in 2018 and 2019, with 64 and 31 cases reported, with recent peaks in 2022 and 2023 (12 reported in each year).

The Sahara Desert was the deadliest corridor for women and children, with 755 females (28%) and 397 children (4%) reported missing or dead from 2014 till 2024. Between 2014 and 2024, at least 397 reported deaths and disappearances of children were recorded during desert crossings. This number reflects only confirmed cases – many more children likely perish unrecorded in remote areas, far from State protection or humanitarian oversight. The main threats to life on this route through the Niger, Chad, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and the Sudan, was starvation, vehicle accidents and violence.[75]

2024 had the highest proportion of women and children's deaths on any overland route in the world, with 58 women (12%) and 29 children (6%), recorded as missing or dead.[76] This year, the route also had the highest number of violent deaths, with 86 migrants killed in incidents of abuse, assault, or armed attacks, and 219 from vehicle crashes – often in overcrowded, unsafe transport on the barren terrain.

[73] IOM et al., 2024, pp. 12–16.
[74] IOM, 2025a.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

Across the three maritime routes in 2024, drowning was the leading cause of death overall and for children, with 2,604 fatalities – including 76 children (3%).[77] As shown in Figure 7, drowning overwhelmingly remains the primary cause of death among children. However, exposure to harsh environmental conditions including heat, dehydration, and starvation, represented major – and largely overlooked – threat which claimed 545 lives (13 children, 3%). Smaller yet deeply concerning numbers of migrants died from vehicle accidents (258), violence (107), and lack of access to health care from health challenges (19). While children made up 3 per cent of all recorded deaths in 2024, these deaths were still overrepresented, neglected and preventable, as 10 per cent of deaths by violence and 5 per cent of deaths due to untreated illness shows the systemic failure to protect migrant children regardless of their status in areas where risk mitigation could prevent further death. It is important to note that these figures are an undercount the true scale of loss, as many deaths during migration go unrecorded due to limited access, lack of reporting, and identification challenges.

Figure 7 shows the sheer number of child deaths which been the highest on the CMR across the past 10 years, followed by lower – but likely underreported – numbers on the WMR and WAAR routes. Figure 8 highlights how drowning was the most common way both children and adults died on the CMR while the Sahara Desert was the most dangerous for children in other ways, compared to other routes. Notably, this pattern holds consistently over time, revealing a structurally lethal corridor for the past decade. As maritime migration deaths and disappearances often take precedence in media and other reporting, overland deaths are some of the most underreported causes of death for children. Most migrants do not die in mass casualty events, but isolated – stranded in the desert, adrift at sea, or abandoned in transit. Additionally, harsh environmental conditions – particularly in the Sahara Desert and the WAAR – continues to be one of the leading causes of death, such as from dehydration, starvation, prolonged exposure, and lack of access to shade, shelter, or water. While maritime deaths dominate attention, overland deaths remain among the most underreported in media.

In 2024, the data on migrant deaths and disappearances reveals a deeply concerning picture for nationals from the MENA region. At least 739 individuals from the region were recorded as dead or missing across various migration corridors. The most affected nationalities overall, were Algerians (169), Syrians (156), Tunisians (128), Sudanese (127) and Egyptians (88), as well as Nigerians, Bangladeshi, Guineans, Nigeriens, Eritreans, Senegalese, Somalians and children from the Côte d'Ivoire, Chad and Mali.[78] Sadly, most nationalities were unknown (45%).[79] Children on the move are not disappearing by chance – these movements, locations and patterns are well known, as are the risks, dangers and deaths. Children are dying unnecessarily because the systems that are meant to protect them did not include them, and despite having a decade of verified data, they are now knowingly excluding them. Migrant children are most likely to be left behind, denied entry, starve to death or be buried without a name.

The literature reflects what frontliners shared, that even if migrants were aware of the risks of irregular migration, the drivers were so strong children were compelled to migrate and overestimated their chances of safe arrival.[80] Yet concurrently, current and former unaccompanied children overwhelmingly said that they did absolutely did not know the risks, and wished that they knew what the journey would entail as they shared their immense fear, betrayal and despair that they were not aware of the dangers. The huge proportion of children who were recruited, tricked, deceived, exploited, kidnapped, extorted, detained, deported and/or trafficked, definitely did not know what the journey would entail.

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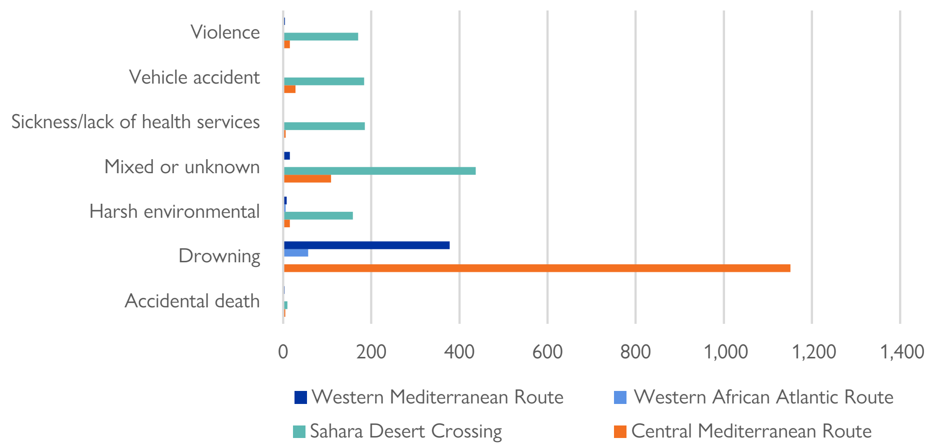
[77] Ibid.

[78] IOM, 2025a. *Note*: Globally, Morocco was the nineth highest country of origin for missing migrants (0.9%) and others in the region are in order of count; Algeria (0.84%), the Sudan (0.55%), Tunisia (0.32%), Egypt, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Guinea, the Niger, Eritrea, Senegal, Somalia, Côte d'Ivoire, Chat and Mali. The largest number however, are from unknown nationalities, at 45 per cent.

[79] IOM, 2025a.

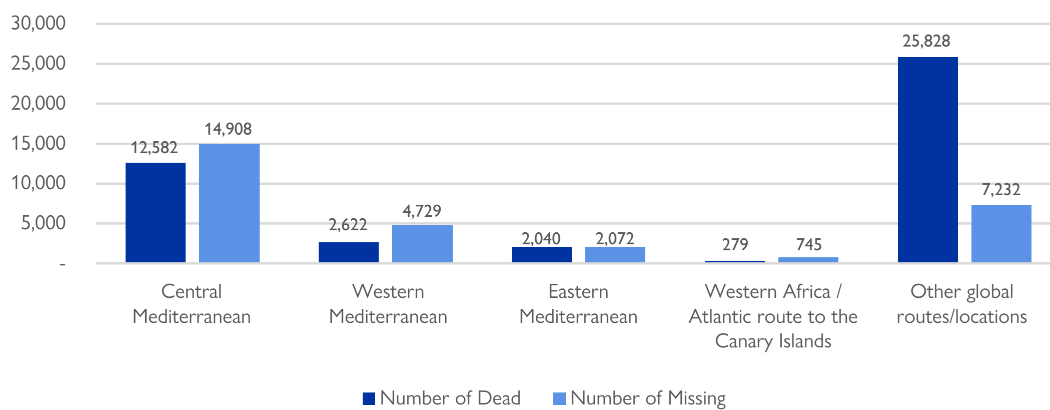
[80] IOM et al., 2024.

Figure 7. Causes of Child Death, by Route (2014–2024)



Source: Missing Migrants Project (2014–2024).

Figure 8. Migrant Deaths and Disappearances, by Route (2014–2024)



Source: Missing Migrants Project (2014–2024).

Vulnerable Migrant Children in Transit

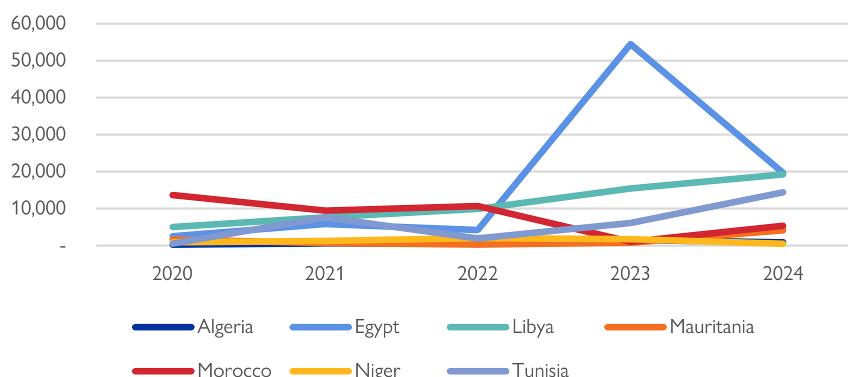
One smaller subset of children on the move in North Africa are those who are registered with IOM. Data drawn from IOM's MiMOSA case management system reflects one group of vulnerable migrant children – who were aware of, had access to, and were formally registered by IOM. While this dataset is not representative of all children on the move along the CMR it provides critical insight into the profiles and risks of children who engaged with formal protection mechanisms. Further analysis of the MiMOSA case management data indicates that of the 973 children registered in 2024, there were 103 children, 11 per cent identified as potential victims of trafficking.[81] This is higher than the proportion observed among adults, where 7 per cent (4,508 out of 64,012 registered adults) were identified as trafficking victims.

In 2024, a total of 62,095 migrants were registered in these countries, including 15,691 vulnerable migrant, with 2,989 unaccompanied and separated children.[82] The highest caseloads overall were recorded in Egypt (19,377) – primarily due to the very high number of Sudanese – followed by Libya (18,756), Tunisia (14,135), Morocco (4,627) and Mauritania (3,988). This same year, among vulnerable migrants who received assistance, 3,539 were identified as potential victims of trafficking,

[81] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
[82] Ibid.

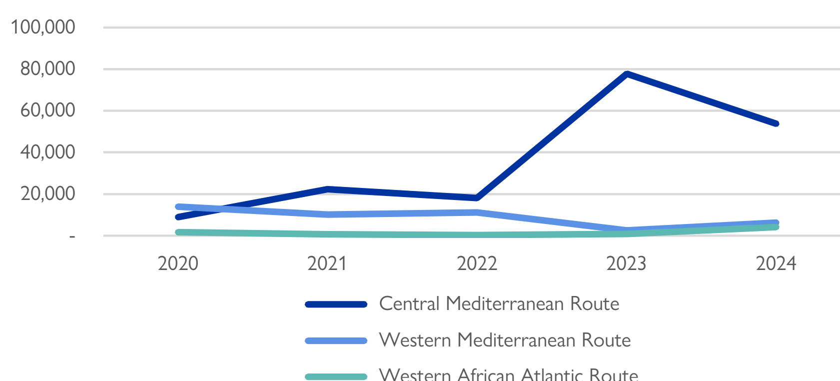
including 396 children. Gender-disaggregated data highlights some substantial disparities. In 2024, IOM identified 221 girls and 175 boys who were potential victims of trafficking across the seven countries. Among girls, 19 per cent were identified as potential trafficking victims, compared to 5 per cent of boys. These figures reflect a marked increase from previous years. Another vulnerable group was migrants with health needs which includes 9,630 migrants, and 979 children.

Figure 9. Vulnerable Migrants Registered by IOM, by Country and Year (2020–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Vulnerable Migrant Registrations by Country (2020–2024), Total: 232,467.

Figure 10. Vulnerable Migrants Registered by IOM, by Migration Route (2020–2024)



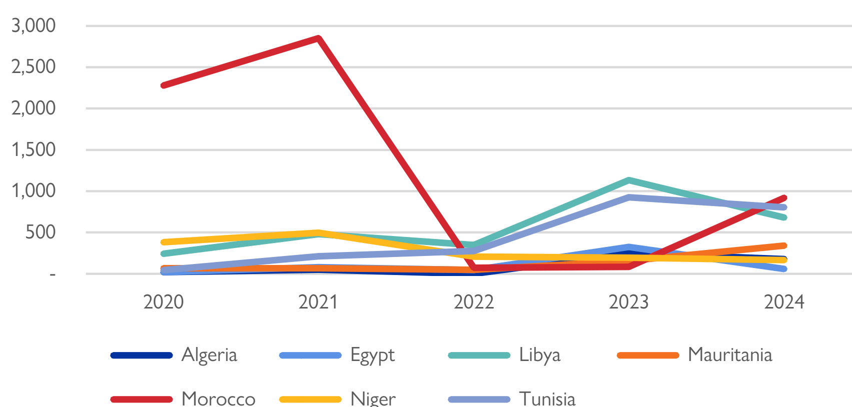
Source: MiMOSA Vulnerable Migrant Registrations by Route (2020–2024), Total: 232,467.

Children predominantly came from these origin countries: Guinea (8%), Côte d'Ivoire (7%), Nigeria (7%), Mali (6%), Cameroon (6%), Sierra Leone (5%), Senegal (4%), the Sudan (4%), the Niger (3%), the Gambia (3%), Chad (3%), Burkina Faso (3%), Benin (3%), Egypt (3%) and Liberia (3%). Vulnerable children who registered with IOM represents only a fraction of all migrant children, and among those, only the small proportion who was able to access support.

From 2014 until 2024, the MiMOSA data indicated a brief drop in vulnerable child protection cases in both Morocco and Algeria from 2021 to 2024, though the trafficking in persons trends remained present. However, there was a significant increase in vulnerable children registered in Egypt which highlights the influx of vulnerable migrants from the Sudan in 2023 and 2024. There is a critical shortage of both emergency and longer-term shelters for vulnerable children especially for UASC and victims of trafficking across all the migration routes, especially for the huge quota of male victims, who are more often criminalized than protected, before they are identified or prioritized, especially in rural areas.[83]

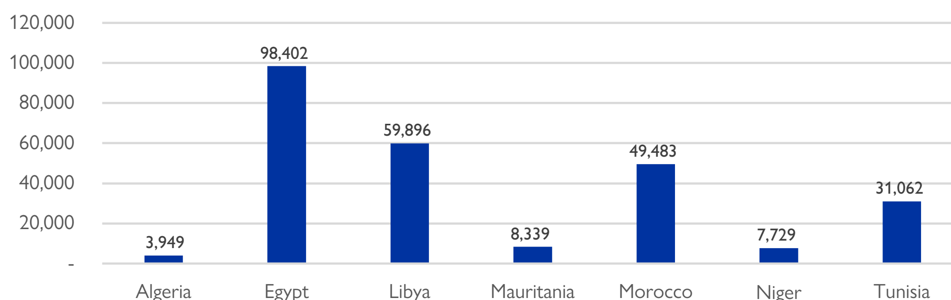
[83] Davy, 2025, p. 4.

Figure 11. Unaccompanied and Separated Children Registered, by Country (2020–2024)



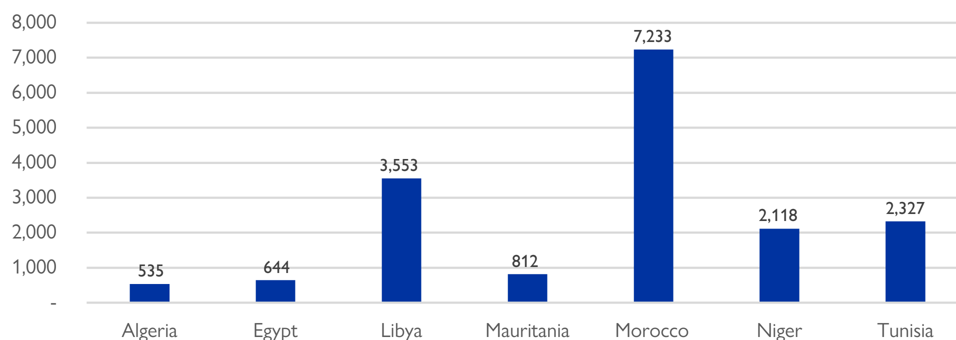
Source: MiMOSA Unaccompanied and Separated Children Registrations by Country (2020–2024), Total: 14,520.

Figure 12. Vulnerable Migrants Registered by IOM, by Country (2020–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Vulnerable Migrant Registrations by Country (2020–2024), Total: 258,860.

Figure 13. Unaccompanied and Separated Children Registrations by Country (2020–2024)

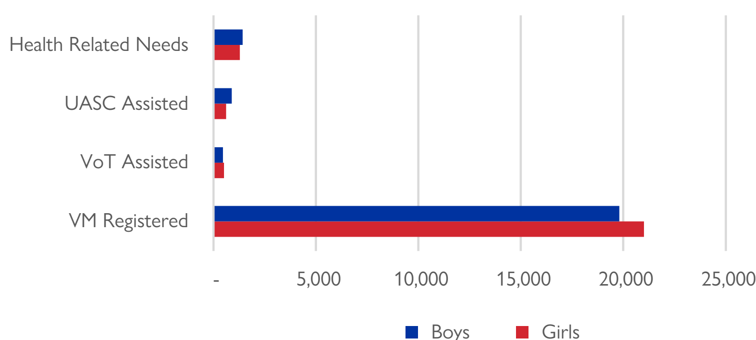


Source: MiMOSA Unaccompanied and Separated Children Registrations by Country (2020-2024), Total: 17,222.

The number of children that IOM registered 12 years and under was double that of 13 to 17-year-old age group which debunks traditional trends of older migrant boys migrating. From 2016 to 2024, over 7,600 unaccompanied boys were registered in MiMOSA – 5,163 were between older – making older boys the largest and most visible group of UASC by far. In contrast, only 990 adolescent girls were registered as UASC, despite known risks – pointing to possible gaps in identification.

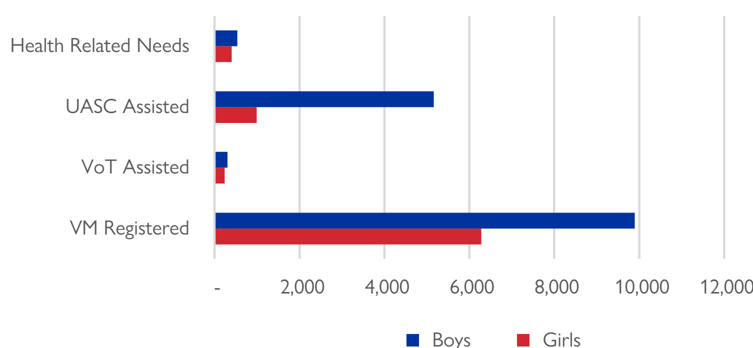
MiMOSA trafficking data flips assumptions: the group with the most potential victims was girls 12 years and under (505 cases), nearly double the number of girls 13 years and over (241), and closely followed by younger boys (453) and older boys (304). These figures challenge the common narrative that trafficking primarily affects older girls and boys, highlight the hidden risks for younger children, especially girls. Health-related needs were most prevalent among younger boys (1,425) and younger girls (1,286), suggesting that visible physical or medical concerns may drive earlier detection – while older girls remain the most likely to be invisible across all categories. The data calls for urgent investment in age- and gender-sensitive identification systems that don't just rely on visibility, but actively seek out those who are least likely to self-identify or be flagged – particularly adolescent girls and younger children facing hidden forms of exploitation.

Figure 14. Children Under 12 Years, by Case Type and Gender (2016–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Vulnerable Migrant Children, Registrations 2016–2024.

Figure 15. Children 13–17 Years, by Case Type and Gender (2016–2024)

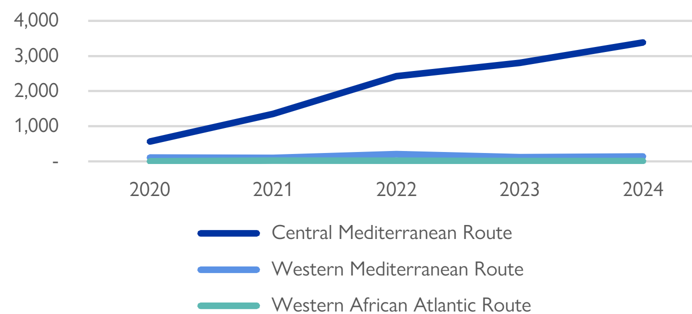


Source: MiMOSA Vulnerable Migrant Children, Registrations 2016–2024.

Children who Return Home

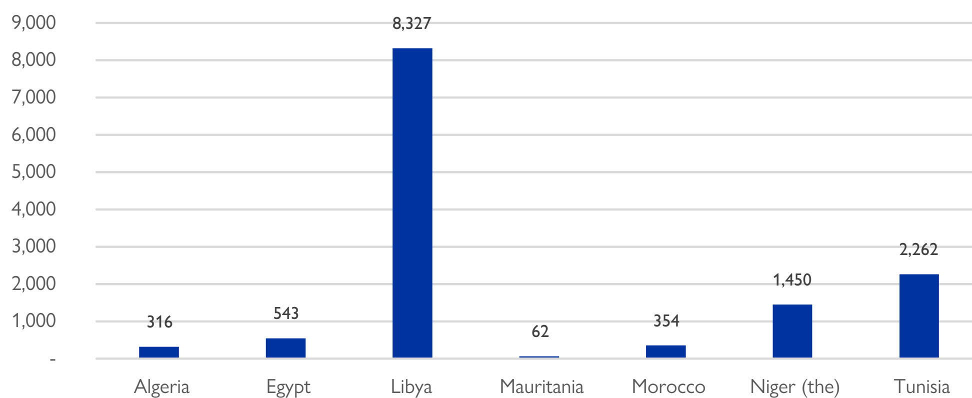
The second largest caseload that IOM assisted was assisting vulnerable migrants to return to their origin countries. IOM supported the voluntary return of 51,002 migrants from the seven key transit countries to 55 different countries of origin in 2024 alone, showing the enormous breadth of different nationalities that migrate through the region.[84] This region alone encompasses two thirds of the global IOM return caseload which was 81,108 migrants that year. Of those assisted, 82 per cent were male and 18 per cent female, including 5,461 children and 389 unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). The vulnerable migrants who returned included 1,325 identified victims of trafficking as well as 2,619 individuals with health conditions requiring tailored support. The highest number of returns originated from Libya (16,207), followed by the Niger (15,856), Algeria (7,844), Tunisia (6,885), Morocco (2,196), Egypt (1,020) and Mauritania (994). The main countries that migrants returned to includes Guinea (9,325), Mali (9,023), Nigeria (7,289), the Gambia (3,953), Bangladesh (3,107), Chad (2,803), Burkina Faso (2,793), Senegal (1,955) and Côte d'Ivoire (1,713).[85]

Figure 16. Potential Victims of Trafficking Assisted in North Africa, by Route (2020–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Trafficking Victims Assisted by Route (2020–2024), Total: 11,259.

Figure 17. Victims of Trafficking Assisted by Country (2020–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Trafficking Victims Assisted by Country (2020–2024), Total: 13,314.

84 IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
85 Ibid.

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MIGRATION ROUTE DEEP DIVE

The following three chapters will expand on each of the migration routes in more detail following the analytical framework. Each will share children's stories, migration trends, migration drivers, protection risks, vulnerabilities, resilience and coping strategies.

1 CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE

1.1. UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN'S STORIES

Nadia – Unaccompanied Child, Tricked Twice

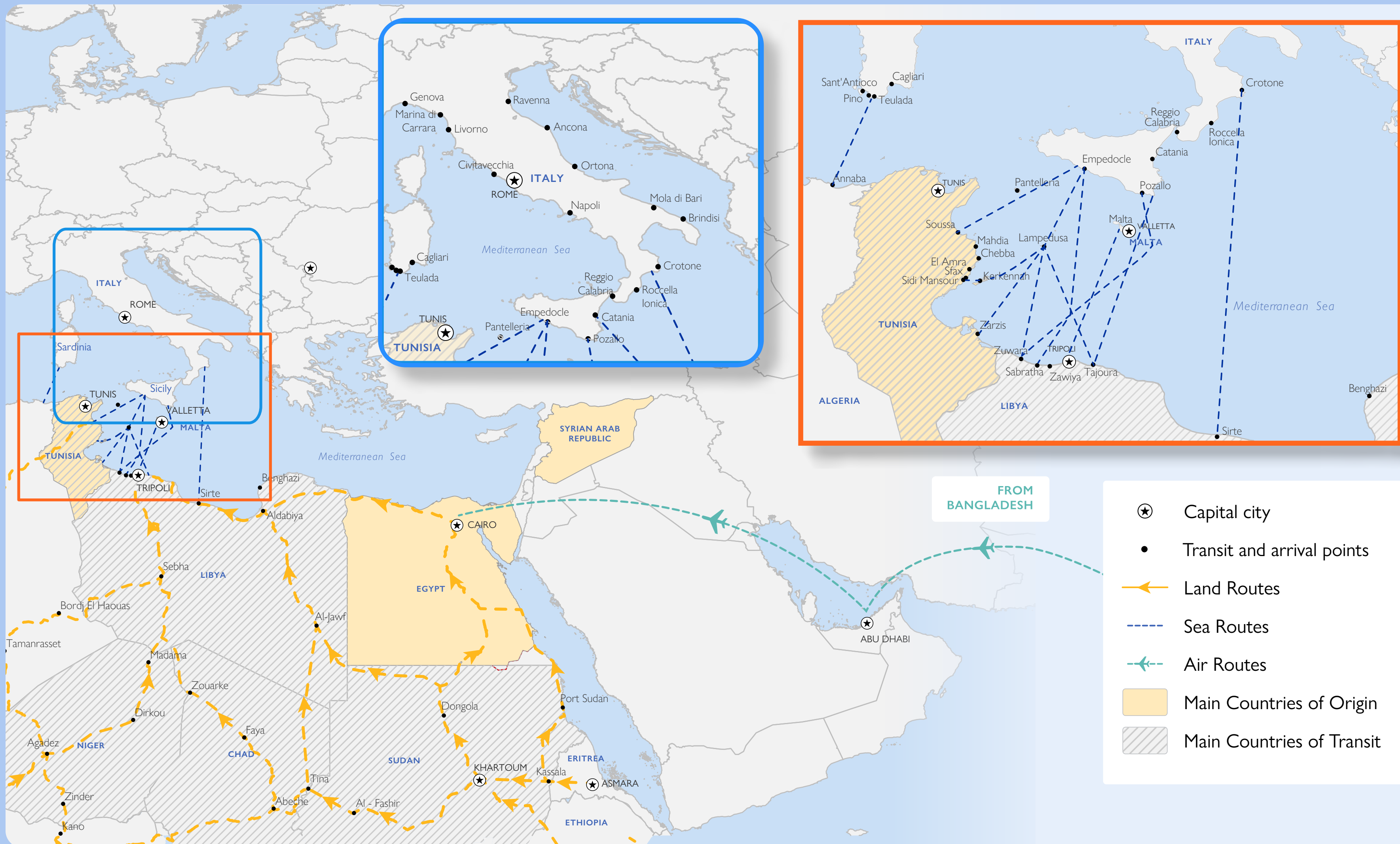
STORY

Nadia was 16 years old when she left her home in rural Nigeria when financial difficulties forced her leave school. When a broker promised her a job in Dubai, she was excited and felt this would be a way to help her family and "answer her prayers." She was taken to Mali where she realized that she was tricked and forced to work in transactional sex work. She escaped and returned to Nigeria.

However, as with most victims of trafficking, Nadia experienced more vulnerabilities when she returned home. With her family's increased financial pressures, Nadia was tricked once again by the same local broker who promised her a job in Asia. She trusted him again as she was taken through the Niger to Libya. This time Nadia realized that she was tricked again and was even more strongly resistant, which was met with violence. She was brutally beaten and sold to a new network of traffickers. Nadia was forced to work in oppressive conditions without freedom of movement, in a "Connection House" in forced transactional sex work. Her hopes for freedom came true when the there was a raid, however the "supposed police" then returned her to her captor. She discovered that this was a human trafficking syndicate that was part of an unofficial armed group, the more her captor became more violent and abusive. He sold Nadia to another trafficker, where she was forced to work for another four months.

One of the clients helped her to escape, however she was found and recaptured by the trafficker. When a second man tried helped her to escape, he tricked her and kept her for his own purpose under the threat of violence. She was able to reach out to the previous client, who helped her, and they entered an intimate relationship. However, Nadia was not aware that he was planning to cross the Mediterranean Sea, when she was pregnant at 17. She was abandoned in Libya when her baby was one month old. A woman in the community helped her and suggested to go to the Embassy for help. They referred her to IOM where she received protection, shelter and case management support alongside her baby. Nadia's future remains undefined, however she has received family tracing and reunification, where her parents await her return in Nigeria to receive reintegration support with vocational training.

CENTRAL MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE MAP



Source: The Annual Global Overview of Migration Routes 2024.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration and United Nations Children's Fund.

1.2. MIGRATION TRENDS

Globally, the CMR is the most perilous and dangerous route, yet it is also the most common for children on the move, migrating from the Sahel and the North and Horn of Africa, through to Malta and Italy, in Europe.[86] Arrivals through the CMR accounted for 49 per cent of children's movements to Europe.[87] Italy received the highest number of children, surpassing all other countries in Europe with 27,420 in 2023 (36% increase from 2022).[88] The majority of children were unaccompanied and separated, which was 69 per cent of all children (18,820).[89] 81 per cent of all unaccompanied and separated children were between 15 and 17 years of age.[90] Additionally, 88 per cent of children were boys.

In 2024, most migrants who arrived in Italy by sea departed from Libya (63%), with significant numbers also departing from Tunisia (29%), as well as Türkiye (5%) and Algeria (2%).[91] Most youth who arrived in Italy, had crossed two or more countries (69%). Additionally, one-third travelled for more than a year.[92] For migrant youth in Italy, 81 per cent intended to stay.[93] In addition to the many drivers, 55 per cent said that socioeconomic conditions was their main reason for choosing Italy.[94]

Those who migrated by sea were largely from Tunisia (18%), Guinea (15%), Côte d'Ivoire (12%), Egypt (9%), and the Gambia (7%). For migrant youth who were surveyed upon arrival in Italy in 2024, the main countries of origin include: Bangladesh (21%), the Syrian Arab Republic (19%), Tunisia (12%), Egypt (7%), Guinea (5%), Pakistan (4%), Mali (3%), Eritrea (3%), Ethiopia (2%) and Somalia (1%) along with others from Western and Central sub-Saharan Africa.[95] For migrant youth who arrived in Europe in 2023, most were male (91%) from diverse nationalities, with Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire showing substantial increases: 820 per cent and 554 per cent (compared to 2022).

The costs of the journey on the CMR was one of the most expensive. Migrants who were surveyed in Europe, reported that 30 per cent paid USD 2,501–5,000 while 24 per cent paid over USD 5,000.[96] In another study conducted in origin countries in the Sahel, the average cost for migrants using smugglers was USD 390 compared to migrants travelling independently (USD 298), and the median smuggling fee in that area was approximately USD 49. Despite this small additional fee, 32 per cent of migrants using smugglers reported that they were still likely to run out of money mid-journey compared to 26 per cent of migrants who did not use them, especially those using multi-country routes.[97] The study also found that 56 per cent migrants using smugglers had paid in full before their departure, showing their potential increased risks and limited flexibility if plans changed along the journey.

The CMR is the deadliest crossing in the world, with the highest number of missing and deceased children on the move globally – as well as the overall number of migrants. Between 2014 and 2024, at least 24,480 migrants were recorded either dead or missing, including 1,063 women (4%) and 567 children (2%).[98] These figures only represent identified, reported and verified numbers, the real toll – especially for children – is almost certainly higher. Drowning was by far the most common cause of death, with 1,614 recorded in a single year, followed by deaths due to environmental exposure, vehicle accidents and preventable health issues.

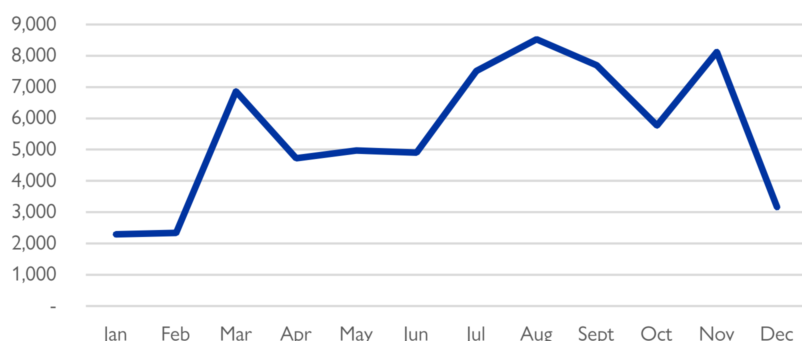
86 IOM and UNICEF, 2017.
87 UNHCR et al., 2024. p. 3.
88 Ibid.
89 UNHCR et. al., 2024, p. 1.
90 UNHCR et. al., 2024, p. 3.
91 IOM, 2025c, p. 9.
92 IOM, 2024d, pp. 15–16.
93 IOM, 2024d, p. 19.
94 IOM, 2024d, p. 20.
95 IOM, 2025c.
96 IOM, 2024d, p. 17.
97 MMC, 2025a, p. 2.
98 IOM, 2025a.

In 2024, there were 1,719 people reported dead or missing on this route – 6 per cent of whom were female (95) and 5 per cent of whom were children (82) – the highest number of confirmed overall as well as child fatalities for the past decade.[99] Most of these children died by drowning in unseaworthy boats, or after spending days at sea without rescue. Others died from starvation, dehydration, fuel burns, suffocation, untreated illness, accidents or shocks after shipwrecks. These children originally came from Guinea (10), Tunisia (4), Nigeria (1), Iraq (1) and Bangladesh (1). However, the majority – 54 children (66%) – were recorded as either mixed or unknown origins and could not be identified.

As reported by frontliners, children face gross violations and lethal risks at every stage of the CMR journey. Many children must cross the Sahara Desert as they move through the CMR – an unmonitored and deadly stretch of the route that is not often included in reports, research or statistics that focus on Europe. Other children die at sea after surviving the desert, only to drown, starve, dehydrate or perish in silence. Both segments are intimately connected in a route that does not offer children any safety, protection, services or other legal alternatives. The tragedy is that many children who die at sea have already survived horrors on the Sahara Desert, the most dangerous overland migration route in the world. In 2024, 29 children died or disappeared in the desert – 19 from the Sudan, two from the Syrian Arab Republic, and eight with unknown nationalities. Between 2014 and 2024, at least 398 children were reported dead or missing while crossing the Sahara. These children died from starvation, dehydration, extreme heat exposure, vehicle crashes, abandonment and violence, as well as preventable health concerns. Some were left behind after collapsing from exhaustion. Others fell from moving trucks. Most had no access to water, food, shelter or medical care. Their deaths occurred in isolated areas – far from any State protection or humanitarian presence. Their bodies were rarely recovered, and their families were never informed.

These are not isolated incidents, they are predictable, repeated, and preventable outcomes of a system that offers no safe migration pathways, criminalizes movement and leaves children without protection. Together, the Sahara desert and the sea routes account for 567 confirmed child deaths from 2014 until 2024. The CMR alone accounts for 66 per cent of the total number of children's deaths and disappearances globally during this same period. This is a corridor not of transit, but of disappearances where children's rights to life, survival and development are systematically denied.

Figure 18. Monthly Migrant Arrivals to Italy on the CMR (January to December 2024)



Source: DTM Europe Arrivals Monthly 2024.

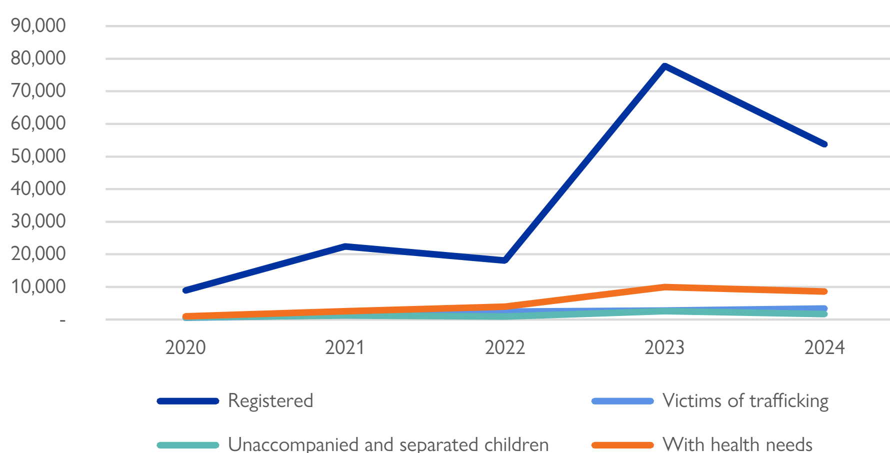
[99] Ibid.

In 2024, IOM registered 11,622 vulnerable migrant children on the CMR in Egypt, Libya, the Niger and Tunisia, of whom 14 per cent were unaccompanied and separated (1,580) and 3 per cent (353) were identified as potential victims of human trafficking.[100] From 2020 to 2024, the main countries of origin for migrant children who registered in these four transit countries, include Egypt where 70 per cent registered (35,882 children – yet the vast majority of these were from the recent influx from the Sudan and cannot return there). The second highest origin country was children from Libya, with 5 per cent (2,506), 4 per cent came from Nigeria (2,104), 3 per cent from Guinea (1,611), and 2 per cent from the following: the Sudan (1,265), Côte d'Ivoire (1,137), Mali (949) and the Niger (798). There were many other nationalities, with 1 per cent of children from each of these countries: Sierra Leone (709), Chad (577), Cameroon (484), Somalia (405), Pakistan (381), unknown (360) and the Gambia (324).[101]

In 2024, 41 per cent of registered vulnerable migrant girls in the CMR, were identified as potential victims of trafficking (sevenfold increase from 6% in 2023). Among boys, 13 per cent were identified as potential victims of trafficking in 2024, compared to 4 per cent the year before. Frontliners shared how girls are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and forced marriage, from Nigeria and Mali, while boys from West Africa and the Horn of Africa reported prolonged detention, forced labour and being held against their will.

While migration flows decreased through transit countries in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and with Niger's temporary partial border closure during the coup d'état in July 2023, however movements increased in both the Niger and Libya, especially after the Niger revoked the 2015 law that criminalized migrant smuggling, where there may be new organized convoys on new routes.[102]

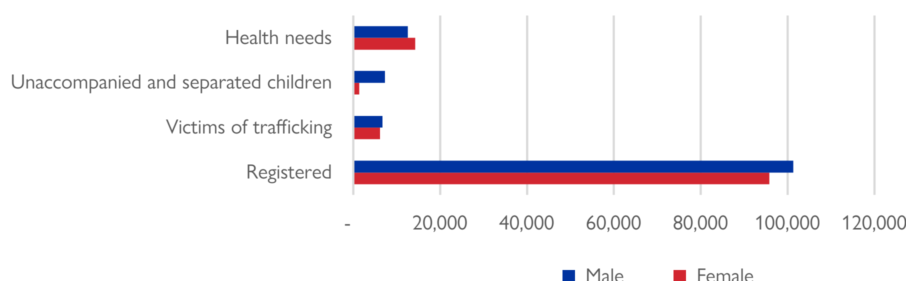
Figure 19. Migrants Registered and Assisted, by Year – CMR (2020–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Registrations (2020–2024).

100 IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
101 Ibid.
102 IOM, 2024e (last accessed 1 April 2025).

Figure 20. Case Categories, by Gender – CMR (2020–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Registrations (2020–2024).

Many migrants also transit through the Niger, Chad and the Sudan before reaching North Africa. According to the front-line interviews and MiMOSA data, in Libya, children often leave Nigeria at different times of the year, and head to the Niger and enter Libya through Katroun and Wadi Al-Doum.

The main nationalities for child victims of trafficking on this route, was Nigeria (75%) and Somalia (9%) (for those registered between 2016–2023). Overall, Libya (80%) had the highest proportion of children who were trafficked, across all of North Africa.[103] There were 4,300 victims of trafficking registered in transit countries including Libya (3,407), Tunisia (357), the Niger (206) and Egypt (203) over this timeframe. Cases were recorded in Algeria and Mauritania were reported in both MiMOSA and UNODC, however they were not recorded in the CTDC in this timeframe, for comparative purposes.[104] Overall, the number of trafficking victims registered dipped in 2020, due to COVID-19 related movement restrictions, office closures and border closures.

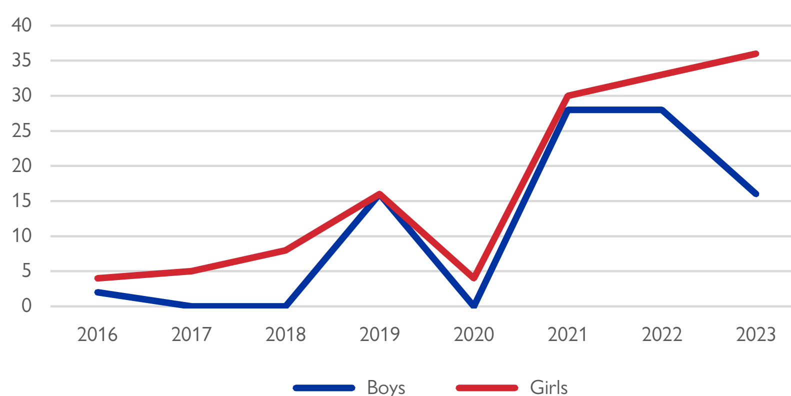
Front-line workers noted that girls fleeing gender-based violence – including forced child marriage and harmful cultural practices – often encounter the same risks they were attempting to escape. Girls were more likely to be trafficked, while boys were generally trafficked for longer.[105] Compared to other age groups, children aged 14 to 17 years were the highest risk group of being trafficked.

In transit countries such as (Egypt), children are controlled through debt bondage (7%) and trafficked for sexual exploitation (7%).[106] The number of migrant children who were trafficked increased after 2020, particularly in Libya and Egypt, which both reported the highest numbers of child trafficking cases.[107] Children in Egypt and Tunisia experienced longer durations of exploitation, often exceeding two years, compared to those in Tunisia who typically experienced shorter exploitation periods, under one year on average. Compared to the WMR (Morocco), however, children indicated shorter periods of exploitation in CMR (Egypt).[108]

In Egypt, the hospitality sector emerged as a primary site of child trafficking (17%), a trend not mirrored elsewhere in the region. Children trafficked in Egypt often originate from sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the Sudan and Ethiopia.[109] Egypt also stands out as having a high proportion of child trafficking for forced labour (11%), indicating specific industries where children are at heightened risk.[110] Tunisia presents a varied picture, with intimate partner violence (10%) and forced labour (10%) most commonly reported among trafficked children, and lower but important occurrences of exploitation within construction and transactional sexual exploitation contexts (each 5%).[111]

103 CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 December 2024).
104 Ibid.
105 CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 U.S. Department of State, 2024.
110 CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
111 Ibid.

Figure 21. Cases of Child Trafficking in North Africa by Gender and Year



Source: CTDC, n.d. data set (2016–2023), n=226.

Overall, from 2019 to 2024, IOM identified that overall, almost 4 per cent of vulnerable migrant children were identified as potential victims of trafficking, of these, almost 3 per cent of children registered in Egypt were identified.[112] Over the past six years, the number of children identified has sharply increased in Egypt and Libya, with a slight decline in Tunisia.[113]

1.3. MIGRATION DRIVERS

1.3.1. Economic and Family Pressures – and Basic Services

At least 30 per cent of migrant youth cited economic reasons as their main driver for migrating along the CRM while 16 per cent pointed to limited access to basic services, particularly for children from origin countries.[114] Across North Africa – particularly in Egypt and Tunisia – rising youth unemployment, poverty, and financial collapse, including the implosion of Tunisia's tourism sector, left families with few options. Frontliners described how parents who face impossible choices, are more likely to send their children abroad in the hopes of financial survival.

Children are not migrating out of personal ambition but are frequently cast as economic lifelines. Families expect them to start sending remittances immediately upon arrival. As one front-line worker in Italy explained, *"families send children as their last hope for economic survival."* This pressure to provide is deeply embedded in family and social dynamics. One former migrant child in Italy explained,, *"If you don't send money back, you're seen as useless. Sometimes your own family stops talking to you."*

The emotional burden can be devastating. *"The shame and pressure of failing to send money home can literally break children psychologically,"* one frontliner said. Front-line workers in Bologna and Sicily reported rising cases of mental health crises among boys from Tunisia and Egypt, many of whom were overwhelmed by debt, isolation and the fear of failing their families.

Frontliners were concerned that children are often not allowed to return home after extraordinarily traumatic events like kidnapping or extortion, as the families refuse to receive them. Sometimes they are not able to or they perceive the children are better off abroad, however the most significant reason across all North African countries, was that the family requires the financial payback, often due to debt bondage. *"You're not allowed to fail,"* one Guinean boy said in Morocco, whereas children from Mali reported less direct pressure, reflecting more flexibility in migration decisions.

112 IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
113 Ibid.
114 IOM, 2025c.

> *"The pressure of family expectations is overwhelming… some children particularly from Tunisia and Egypt, are literally driven mad by the burden of not being able to fulfill their financial obligations back home, those who can't meet them literally go mad."*
>
> Frontliner in Bologna, Italy.

1.3.2. Sacrifices and the Cost of Migration

Frontliners described how migration is often treated as a rite of passage for adolescent boys aged 12 to 17 years from North African countries. Families invest emotionally and financially, viewing migration as both a social expectation and an economic strategy. Children and front-line workers alike spoke of the extraordinary sacrifices made to fund migration, before, during and after the journey. Over a third of migrant youth (33%) reported raising money through relatives in their origin countries. Smaller proportions received help from relatives abroad (7%) or friends abroad (4%).[115] Another 12 per cent of migrant youth said their families had sold land or property to fund the journey.[116] *"Sometimes the whole extended family contributes,"* one boy explained. *"You carry their hopes with you."*

In some communities, smugglers are even trusted actors.[117] One frontliner in Bologna shared that, *"smugglers are often trusted by the family and accompany (Egyptian boys) the whole way."* He shared that that many intend to live in specific areas or countries for family reunion and/or with diaspora, not realizing until after they have left child protection services, that these networks are often linked to similar harmful cultural practices like child marriage or dangerous situations with underground criminal networks. The lines between smuggling, facilitation and exploitative experiences, become blurred, especially when families are directly involved in arranging the journey and regardless of how the children migrate, have crippling debt bondage that must be paid. Adding to this pressure is the influence of social media, which presents an idealized image of Europe.[118] Egyptian and Tunisian children often arrive in destination countries with a deep sense of responsibility fuelling them where they must sacrifice themselves for their family's survival. However, without legal opportunities, they find themselves trapped between expectations, survival and economic exclusion. The fear of failing their families or being seen as unsuccessful is immense, increasing vulnerability to exploitative labour and illicit economies. One frontliner in Bologna shared that it can take over ten years to repay debts, and out of thousands of cases, he had only heard one unique success story of *"an Egyptian boy (who) sent every euro home to repay migration debts, left with nothing for groceries, yet he felt relieved - the economic pressure from home was finally lifted…"*

One frontliner in Rome shared that *"many children arrive in Italy with a false sense of opportunity, expecting to build a better life, only to find homelessness,"* social rejection, and coercion into exploitative work or crime. They described how these shattered expectations often lead to deep psychological harm, with some children giving up hope entirely. Frontliners and children both emphasized the urgent need for accurate information to counter these narratives. *"We see too many kids arriving completely unprepared, thinking they'll have jobs and apartments,"* said a caseworker in Sicily. *"They have no idea what they're walking into."* The psychological toll is severe. Children report isolation, depression, post-traumatic stress, and even substance use – often triggered by their inability to meet family expectations. One psychologist in Italy shared that the priority is for children to have support, safety and security and that for children on the move, treating them is inherently challenging. Diagnosing children with psychological or psychiatric conditions requires children to be still, additionally, as almost all children have PTSD symptoms, these definitions and psychological or psychiatric interventions or focus on diagnostics do not help unless they have the holistic support they need, to seek immediate needs and

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115 IOM, 2023a.
116 Ibid.
117 IOM, 2025c.
118 IOM, 2023d, p. 16.

to process their experiences. They need ad hoc and ongoing psychosocial and psychological support regardless of whether they are homeless, on the move or in fixed locations, without barriers like requiring a phone, papers, fixed locations, authorities or money.

> *"If you don't send money home, it's like you failed your whole bloodline."*
>
> Former unaccompanied boy in Italy.

1.3.3. Escaping Abuse, Exploitation and Violence

Thirty (30) per cent of youth on the CMR left their home country due to personal and targeted violence.[119] Similarly, 20 per cent of youth on the WAAR left, and 8 per cent on the WMR.[120] Front-line workers and migrant children consistently reported that abuse, harmful cultural practices and targeted violence drive migration – particularly along the CMR. Forced labour, trafficking and sexual exploitation in countries like Libya push children to flee, holding onto Europe as a symbol of safety and dignity.

Frontliners shared that common drivers for girls they have supported, from Nigeria, Guinea, the Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia, are to escape gender-specific threats including forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic violence, and sexual abuse. Some families send girls away to protect them; others flee alone. These journeys often result in renewed exploitation, ongoing threats, and serious health and psychological consequences. These experiences often layer trauma upon trauma – beginning in countries of origin and continuing through transit and arrival.

Frontliners shared that vulnerable girls, who escaped early marriage in Mali and migrated through the Niger, were frequently trafficked into forced marriage and/or exploited with the exact same risks they had left. Amongst the reported child victims of trafficking on the CMR, 1 per cent of girls were trafficked for forced marriage in transit countries.[121] Boys and girls from Egypt, Tunisia and other contexts also flee abusive home environments. Some boys described being targeted due to their gender expression or sexual orientation.

Exposure to violence – direct or witnessed – was a major reason for children's continued flight as returning home or remaining after traumatic experiences, meant renewed trauma, stigma or danger. Former unaccompanied migrant boys shared that emotional, psychological and physical abuse at home was the most common factor pushing themselves and other boys to flee in search of safety. Older boys often migrate alone in hopes of securing work and sending remittances home, particularly from countries like Egypt. However, all children frequently faced barriers to education and decent work, which limits their development and exposes them to further exploitation. Many are pushed into hazardous forms of child labour, often under dangerous and exploitative conditions. For many, continuing forward was not a choice, but a necessity. Front-line workers stressed that the trauma children carry often makes returning, psychologically impossible where migration becomes their only perceived path to safety, freedom and survival.

> *"Those who run away from their families to escape abuse often arrive deeply traumatized. Their trauma doesn't disappear just because they reached Italy."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

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119 IOM, 2024d, p. 12.
120 Ibid.
121 CTDC, n.d. (accessed 5 April 2025).

1.3.4. Conflict, Violence and Insecurity

Thirty-two (32) per cent of youth arriving in Italy along the CMR cited escaping war and conflict as their main driver to leaving their home, compared to 13 per cent on the WAAR and 4 per cent on the WMR.[122] In 2024, over 3.1 million people were internally displaced in the Sahel, primarily in Nigeria (42%), Burkina Faso (25%) and Cameroon (13%).[123] More than 931,000 people are stateless, primarily in Côte d'Ivoire and Cabo Verde.[124] In Nigeria, extreme (level 5) protection risks were reported due to attacks by Boko Haram and other armed groups, targeting civilians and further destabilizing communities.[125] These conditions have accelerated displacement, among youth and families towards toward the Niger and the CMR.[126]

Insecurity has intensified across the Sahel, with armed group activity and State fragility in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger.[127] UNHCR issued non-return advisories to Burkina Faso, Mali and the Sudan.[128] In 2024, the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from Mali triggered a 288 per cent increase in protection incidents – including a 66 per cent rise in gender-based violence and an 11 per cent rise in violations of children's rights.[129] Frontliners saw an increase of unaccompanied children moving through the Niger and Libya towards increasingly unsafe conditions. The loss of family members due to conflict additionally leaves many unprotected, or renders children the new breadwinners, increasing the likelihood of migration – and exposing them to further violence along the route.

1.3.5. Compulsory Conscription

Around 2 per cent of migrant youth interviewed by DTM in Italy in 2023, migrated to avoid conscription.[130] Frontliners shared that boys under 12 are particularly vulnerable to forced recruitment into armed groups, especially after dropping out of school. Drivers are interconnected, however as others shared that witnessing or experiencing violence firsthand, was the major trigger for migration.

Conflict, conscription, and political collapse in Libya and the Sudan expose children to repeated cycles of risk. Children and young people are fleeing conflict zones across Mali, Nigeria, the Sudan, and Somalia – driven by violence, forced recruitment, and collapsing protection systems. Frontliners report that many undertake dangerous journeys through North Africa, with a surge in unaccompanied children, especially from the Sudan.

> *"For many Sudanese boys, the journey is not about money – it's about escaping war, violence, and forced recruitment."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.3.6. Seasonal Movements

Frontliners shared that Nigerian children also migrate annually to Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon for agricultural labour, and to Algeria for begging, domestic work, or construction and to Libya for various roles. One in ten migrants from the Niger moved to Libya either annually or seasonally, returning again for (their own planting season) their own planting season.[131] Fifty-four (54) per cent sent remittances back home, which was the primary income source for their household.[132] Seventy-four (74) per cent said their remittances covered their family's basic food needs, which was higher than other nationalities (64%).[133]

[122] UNHCR et al., 2024, p. 3.
[123] UNHCR, 2025a, p. 1.
[124] UNHCR, 2025b.
[125] GPC, 2024, p. 6.
[126] Ibid., p. 5.
[127] IOM, 2020, pp. 128 and 330.
[128] IOM et al., 2024.
[129] GPC, 2024, p. 6.
[130] IOM, 2023a.
[131] IOM, 2024e, p. 1.
[132] Ibid.
[133] IOM, 2024e, p. 2.

1.3.7. Harsh Environmental Changes

Frontliners shared concerns that environmental degradation and climate shocks are worsening displacement pressures for children transiting the CMR. In 2024, they observed that severe droughts in Chad and northern the Niger, combined with food shortages and disease outbreaks, had further destabilized communities already affected by insecurity and economic collapse.[134] Children who have been displaced are more likely to migrate and children in Cameroon, Chad, the Niger and Nigeria were among those the 6 million affected by "conflicts and lawlessness, environmental degradation leading to resource scarcity, along with slow- and sudden-onset climate shocks conflict" in 2024.[135] Children who migrated from the Niger and Mali – both key transit countries – were particularly impacted, with rising levels of environmental stress amplifying protection risks and contributing to movements to Libya. In 2024, severe droughts compounded with heavy floods that devastated Ethiopia, Burundi and Somalia with loss of life, displacing hundreds of thousands, and pushing millions into severe food insecurity.[136]

1.3.8. Promises, Professional Sports and Social Media

Frontliners and former migrant children shared that children are increasingly recruited for work including domestic work, labour and hospitality. The Niger specifically attracts unaccompanied girls from Benin and Togo migrating to work as domestic workers. This targeted migration underscores gendered vulnerabilities and distinct child protection risks. Children are often enticed with promises of jobs, leading them into situations of forced labour, exploitation and trafficking.

Intense family and social pressures, reinforced by unrealistic portrayals of success on social media, further compel children to migrate, particularly from Egypt and Tunisia, to Italy.[137] Focus groups with children and frontliners showed that football recruitment was a powerfully notable and unique driver for Nigerian and other West African boys migrating through the Niger, who are frequently deceived by fraudulent agents who vanish upon arrival in transit and destination countries, leaving children stranded. A frontliner in Morocco described that "*…children from West Africa often leave home inspired by stories of football success, believing they'll soon become professional athletes in Europe.*" The "Italian dream" is vividly illustrated through social media platforms, creating powerful illusions that distort expectations and encourage migration. Children can migrate impulsively after seeing peers' posts from Rome, Milan or Naples, without realizing they may be sleeping on the streets or struggling financially when they reach Italy.

Dreams rapidly evolve under intense pressure, frequently shifting from optimism to survival-driven desperation. Peers already abroad unintentionally recruit through sharing idealized images of their European lives. Social media's unique role cannot be overstated; it consistently distorts realities and shapes migration decisions. Children see posts from friends and community members portraying success, stability and happiness abroad, fuelling immediate, impulsive migration decisions and magnetizing their pressures to help.

> *"Social media creates an illusion – kids think Italy is easy, safe, successful. They see only smiles on Instagram, unaware that their friends may be living on the streets… You see thousands of your friends - one day they're at home, the next day on Instagram in Naples or Milan, and you think, "It's easy; everyone's doing it"' without knowing they're sleeping on the streets."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

[134] GPC, 2024, p. 6.
[135] IOM, 2024h, p. 15.
[136] GPC, 2024, p. 6.
[137] UNICEF, 2022a.

1.3.9. Recruitment and Deception Exploitation

Formal recruitment processes were used by young adult Bangladeshi migrants (among the top 10 nationalities) who flew to Libya (97%) while a minority went overland (3%).[138] The majority had a work permit and passport, and 11 per cent used a migration facilitator indicating formal channels. In 2023, 95 per cent of migrants reported leaving Bangladesh because of economic reasons, and 61 per cent said they had insufficient income in their home country, whereas in Libya, the majority were employed as construction labourers, cleaners or waiters.[139] The DTM survey showed that per cent of migrant youth in North Africa were lied about work permits.[140]

Frontliners in Libya highlight that girls often migrate for domestic work and boys for construction work, however they are initially driven by false promises, and are often trafficked either through the migration journey or after arriving in Libya, with a high number finding themselves living wit. In 2024, there were 824,131 migrants reported living in Libya, with 11 per cent women, 10 per cent children and 3 per cent of unaccompanied and separated children.[141] Informal or other processes however, including highly organized trafficking in persons networks specifically target children in North Africa on the Eastern Route (from Tunisia and Egypt), trapping them in debt bondage before departure.

Frontliners in Italy, Tunisia and Egypt reported that trafficking networks deliberately recruit and target vulnerable children before their departure in their country of origin. Children are often offered spontaneous or excellent opportunities that can result in being trapped into debt bondage, whether formally or informally before migrating. On this migration route, children's journeys are more streamlined as they deal with the same line of recruiters, smugglers and/or syndicates who facilitate the entire journey, as opposed to other routes, where migrants navigate different recruiters, smugglers or criminal syndicates at each step, most of which rob them of their money or do not pay them for their work, and desert them. Many families organize the journey for the children, and are more involved. In regard to debts they incur this can later be used as a means of control for children to comply with the family connection, for victims of trafficking or other forms of control like extortion.

Trafficking in persons and exploitation are highly organized and prevalent in North Africa with criminal networks specifically targeting vulnerable children, trapping them in debt bondage and coercing them into illicit activities before during and upon arrival in Europe.[142,143] Trafficking in persons networks often deliberately target vulnerable children before their departure from the country of origin, as reported in destination countries like Italy, as well as transit countries, trapping them into debt. Once children arrive in Europe, exploitative work is already organized and/or they are quickly recruited into exploitative criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, and/or forced labour or sex trafficking in transit or destination countries like Italy or Greece. Before they depart, they are told the locations they should go to, who to call, and what to say. The children believe that they are migrating for legitimate work opportunities and/or family reunification, and trust that the promises are legitimate. Even if they receive help from support services, when and where available, they do not realize that they are in or entering into exploitative situations until they leave the formal system or arrive at their final destination.

Children, particularly from sub-Saharan nations like the Sudan, Eritrea and Somalia, are highly vulnerable to misinformation regarding European asylum procedures, which traffickers and smugglers exploit, trapping them in debt bondage and coercive labour situations.

[138] IOM, 2024f, pp. 1–2.
[139] IOM, 2024e.
[140] IOM, 2023a.
[141] IOM, 2024e, p. 1.
[142] Europol, 2020.
[143] Migration Data Portal, 2024.

1.3.10. Educational Dreams and Aspirations

Many migrant children hold fast to long-term aspirations – particularly around education, employment and entrepreneurship in Europe. These dreams provide psychological resilience, helping them endure trauma and danger. Education remains an under-discussed but powerful motivator. A former unaccompanied migrant child in an IOM community hosting programme, shared her vision of returning to school, becoming a hairdresser, opening a clothing shop, and eventually owning her own home. Another young girl echoed this: *"I want to return to school, start my clothing and hairdressing business, and eventually own my own house."* Boys from West Africa, especially Nigeria and Ghana, often migrate hoping to become professional footballers – a dream frequently exploited by fraudulent sports recruiters. These aspirations reflect the enduring role of hope as both a driver of migration and a coping mechanism for children on the move.

> *"Many children don't really choose Italy; they just know someone there, assuming they'll be safe. They quickly learn their relatives are equally vulnerable."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.4. PROTECTION RISKS AND VULNERABILITIES IN TRANSIT

1.4.1. Overland and Maritime Dangers

Despite receiving less attention than maritime routes, the Sahara Desert is one of the most dangerous and invisible migration corridors for children on the move – where the basic rights to protection, development, and life are routinely denied. Despite lower visibility, the risks in the Sahara Desert rivals the sea journeys.[144]

It poses a multitude of profound threats to children's right to life, survival and development. In 2024 alone, 29 children were reported dead or missing in the Sahara Desert.[145] The leading causes were vehicle accidents (22 child deaths), linked to unsafe and overcrowded transport, and environmental exposure (4 child deaths), including dehydration and heatstroke. Additional deaths were linked to abandonment, violence and untreated illness – circumstances that were preventable as repeatedly described by front-line workers in Algeria, Libya and the Niger.

> *'… We sleep on the sand… it was so very cold. We had no blankets, nothing. So we sleep like that. Just lay down on the floor….But no, we don't have time to sleep, so everybody stays up… the worst thing was that people were dying. So dead bodies. Sometimes during this journey, a car breaks down,, and there's no one else to come to them for. So they leave them in the desert."*
>
> Former unaccompanied migrant girl from Nigeria in Libya.

Most children who died or went missing came from across West, Central and East Africa – including the Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Mali and Eritrea. At least 322 children died on this route from 2014 till 2024, underscoring the absolute urgency and absence of effective identification, tracing, and dignified treatment in death. Children's fatalities occurred consistently across the past decade, with the highest toll in 2019 (130 deaths) which were persistent, preventable risks for children – whether travelling with families, alone, or in groups. Frontliners in Libya emphasized that: *"all of them report the journey across the desert is horrific. Many watch people die."* The hazardous journey overland across the Sahara Desert is chaotic. Research shows that this was the most dangerous place on the journey, yet youth migrants could determine what country they were in.[146] Many reported

[144] IOM, 2025a.
[145] Ibid.
[146] IOM et al., 2024.

walking for up to 30 days by foot across borders such as the Niger into Algeria, and another 14 days to the sea, enduring blistering heat, violence, dehydration, starvation and exhaustion. Some former unaccompanied migrant boys consider themselves still in transit after eight years. Children recounted witnessing the deaths of peers as young as 13 to 15, often after being left behind by smugglers. Several described watching friends and family perish. Pushbacks from authorities or being readmitted by countries they had departed, was common for 13 per cent of CMR youth.[147]

Boys from West Africa described witnessing trafficking, rape, and sexual exploitation of girls and women – including sisters, friends, and peers – which left them feeling powerless and traumatized. Others reported facing direct threats to their own lives, injury, and sexual violence. Girls from Nigeria and Mali are particularly vulnerable to trafficking for sexual exploitation, forced marriage and involuntary pregnancies. Sexual violence is not only prevalent but widely expected. It is well known that many girls take contraceptive pills before migrating in anticipation of rape – viewed as inevitable. Some reported deliberately overdosing on contraceptives to suppress menstruation entirely before departure.

The acute protection risks are not only pertinent en route, but also when children are sent back via expulsions and informal removals in the Sahara, especially in remote border zones between Algeria, Libya and the Niger, where humanitarian access and services are limited or entirely absent. In 2024, over 31,000 individuals – including children and families – were reportedly expelled from Algeria to the Niger, where migrants including Sudanese, Malians, Guineans, Nigerians, Chadians and Cameroonians, were left at informal desert locations known as "Point Zero," around 15 km from the Assamaka border post.[148]

Children not only endure the arid terrain in the desert for weeks or months on end when travelling overland into transit countries, but they face these exact same protection concerns when expelled, through arid terrain without caregivers, water, food, or shade – exposing them to dehydration, disorientation and harm. In contrast, Nigerien nationals are returned via official convoys.[149] The physical state of children arriving on foot has been well documented by children, frontliners and literature, with children who are exhausted, dehydrated and deeply distressed. MSF recorded over 4,600 migrants arriving in early 2023, with fewer than 15 per cent, accessing shelter, and confirmed deaths directly following expulsions.[150]

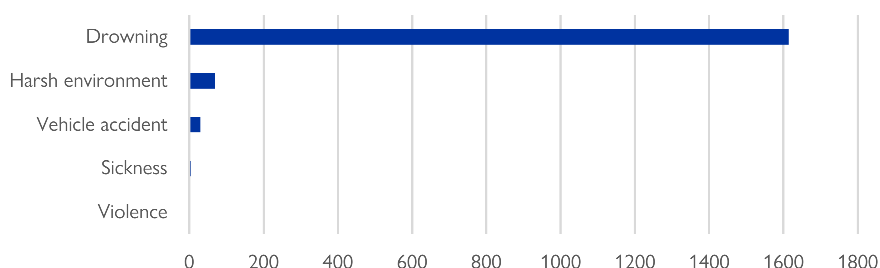
From Libya, children are similarly affected by informal removals or uncoordinated releases into the desert, often near Dirkou, Séguédine, and Qatroun.[151] These movements frequently occur without any protection screening or referral – leaving children at risk of trafficking, abuse or separation. Frontliners also highlight that mobile phones are often confiscated or destroyed during expulsions, cutting off children's only means of contacting their families or seeking help, and their right to communication with family.[152]

> *"…some girls, when they in desert, they always, get raped, by the drivers, some guests, get raped. Some even have to die. Some died because of lack of water. If you fall off from the car, they won't pick you up. They will leave it there. They repeat. They beat them, treat them like animals… any little thing that will hit you. They will give us water to drink with the camels, with the animals share the same water…"*
>
> Former unaccompanied migrant girl from Nigeria, in Libya dreams of being a hairdresser.

[147] IOM, 2024d, p. 14.
[148] Amnesty International, 2024, p. 3.
[149] Verma, 2025.
[150] Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), 2023.
[151] IOM, 2025b.
[152] Arias Cubas et al., 2025.

The Mediterranean Sea crossing from transit countries like Libya, Tunisia and Algeria to Italy and Malta, is another perilous stage of this migration route, marked by extraordinarily high rates of child deaths and disappearances. Migrant children frequently embark unsafe, overcrowded vessels without adequate rescue provisions.

Figure 22. Cause of deaths on CMR (2014–2024)



Source: Missing Migrants Project (2014–2024).

As shown in Figure 21, drowning accounts for the vast majority of recorded fatalities, followed by unknown causes, vehicle or vessel accidents, and exposure to harsh environmental conditions – all of which disproportionately impact children. The high fatalities are largely due to unseaworthy boats, overcrowded vessels, and harsh weather conditions with 82 recorded deaths and disappearances of children in 2024.[153] These figures are incredibly underreported due to the invisibility of deaths at sea, the clandestine nature of children's mobility along many of these routes, and the difficulty of confirming child identities among the missing which requires them to be validated and verified as per the MMP methodology.[154] Similarly, human rights violations for migrants including child trafficking are inherently difficult to identify, report and verify, let alone quantify due to the underground nature that is intimately interlinked with irregular migration.

For children who survive this journey and multiple near-death experiences, and the fact that they witness the deaths of friends, family and other migrants, exacerbates existing severe psychological trauma and significantly impacts their longer-term mental health and emotional stability whether they are pushed back to transit countries, or arrive in Italy. A 2024 medical review from MSF and SOS Humanity noted that children commonly arrive with chemical burns from fuel-soaked clothing, hypothermia, and acute trauma-related symptoms, including flashbacks and dissociation.[155]

Similarly, human rights violations for migrants including victims of human trafficking are inherently difficult to quantify due to the underground illicit nature. In 2024, the number of deaths and disappearances surged in March through to April and again in November and December with the majority vast resulting from shipwrecks.[156] Respondents from three focus groups in Italy emphasized concerns with maritime arrivals, *"children rescued from shipwrecks, such as the Pylos, were reported to be in a 'psychopathic situation'… There was no correct clinical terminology… it had a very negative impact on the children."*[157] MMP reports show high fatality rates of Eritrean, Somali and Nigerian migrant children, from drowning, dehydration and/or death at sea due to overcrowded, unsafe vessels, among other reasons.[158]

[153] IOM, 2025a.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Paynter, 2025.
[156] IOM, 2025b.
[157] IOM and UNHCR, 2024.
[158] IOM, 2025b.

Children experience a range of serious physical and psychological health consequences during both the maritime journey and previous periods of detention. According to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), over a two-year period (2021 to 2023), nearly 2,848 children were rescued by MSF's *Geo Barents* vessel, including 2,388 unaccompanied children, with one birth occurring onboard.[159]

Medical teams on the vessel conducted 3,660 consultations between January and September 2023, often treating children and adolescents for fuel burns, hypothermia, dehydration and fuel inhalation, which are commonly sustained during overcrowded and unsafe sea crossings.[160] Such conditions can have particularly severe implications for younger passengers and pregnant girls, who require specialized care that is often unavailable at sea. In addition to physical injuries, violence-related trauma was a consistent concern, with 273 cases treated for injuries resulting from beatings, sexual violence, and other forms of abuse prior to embarkation. MSF reports noted children among those suffering from scarring, untreated injuries, and psychological distress, including flashbacks, nightmares and heightened anxiety, consistent with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).[161]

The report underscores that many survivors had previously endured detention or captivity in Libya or Tunisia, with some accounts indicating sexual exploitation, coerced transactions for passage and prolonged exposure to inhumane conditions. Although not all child survivors spoke openly about their experiences, front-line responders noted that many required trauma-informed care and protection follow-up on disembarkation.[162] These findings highlight the importance of age-appropriate health and protection responses – both at sea and upon arrival – and underline the need for coordinated disembarkation frameworks that prioritize the best interests of the child, in line with international protection standards.

Children who were rescued by Geo Barents, are frequently treated for dehydration, hypothermia, salt-fuel burns, rashes and psychological trauma, including flashbacks and dissociation, from overcrowded, unseaworthy boats. In 2024 alone, MSF treated 273 such cases.[163] Humanitarian rescue efforts, however, are increasingly obstructed by deterrence. Italy's Piantedosi Decree (2023) for instance, imposed fines, ship detentions and bans on multiple rescues, forcing NGOs like MSF and SOS Humanity to delay or suspend missions.[164]

Another urgent protection concern includes "pullbacks" where boats are pulled back to transit countries by partner coast guards in Tunisia and Libya – funded and equipped by the European Union – are systematically returning children and other migrants to violations of human rights including trafficking, torture or detention situations.[165] Despite international law prohibiting refoulement to unsafe territories, over 110,000 migrants were intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard between 2017–2023, with documented exposure to abuse and extortion.[166] Pushbacks and forced returns also frequently separate children from caregivers, escalate disappearances, and contribute to cumulative trauma and family separation.

159 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), 2023a, p. 2.
160 Ibid., p. 3.
161 Ibid.
162 MSF, 2023a, p. 4.
163 Paynter, 2025.
164 Tilley, 2025.
165 Espasa, 2025.
166 Paynter, 2025.

1.4.2. Dangerous Experiences and Child Protection Risks

At least 56 per cent of youth reported at least one of the following protection concerns: unpaid work, forced work, marriage offers, being held against one's will, physical violence, forced travel and having a lack of access to identity documents.[167] Migrants face significant protection concerns at each stage of the journey, yet those travelling along the CMR do so more frequently. About 42 per cent reported at least one of the problems listed: financial issues, hunger, robbery, lack of shelter, health issues, issues with documents, attacks by others.[168]

The focus groups showed that children have limited to no agency over their experiences, they were tricked, deceived and navigated perpetrators at each stage, whether smugglers, traffickers, criminal syndicates and State or non-State armed groups, in contrast to other migration routes where children can more accessibly self-organize or travel with other migrants, either independently or in groups. They often could not determine whether they were in formal or informal detention, run by State or non-State armed groups, or which country they were in, particularly when crossing the Sahara Desert. Children frequently experience deception about their destination. One former unaccompanied girl lamented: *"…I wish I had known where I was going – the location – they lied that it wasn't Libya."*

On the CMR, 54 per cent of migrant youth experienced physical violence during their journey, compared to one per cent on both WMR and WAAR.[169] More than one third of all migrant children experienced violence (35%) compared to young adults (23%). Males (25%) reported this more than females (15%).[170] Experiences of violence varied significantly by nationality and region. Migrants from East Africa reported the highest incidence of violence.[171] Migrants from West Africa, particularly, Ghana (64%) and Nigeria (61%) reported very high instances, followed by migrants from Pakistan (50%). Experiences were often compounded by other severe hardships and experiences, including robbery (30%). In addition, deceptive practices that further heightened vulnerabilities included false promises regarding work permits (14.8%), being held against their will (11%), forced labour (5%), forced travel (4%), and forced or arranged marriages (1%).

Migrant children reported very high rates of violence on the CMR (40% in Egypt and 34% in the Sudan, 1% in Tunisia) compared to other routes.[172] Migrant youth originating from countries in East and the Horn of Africa, such as Somalia, also reported significant violence (29%).[173]

Both older and younger boys in transit countries, such as Egypt reported experiencing violence from smugglers and exposure to extreme conditions with limited resources. They are at risk of exploitation, and trafficking in persons, including for forced labour. Many girls sustain injuries that go untreated in transit, as well as experiences of gender-based violence that remains a constant threat throughout the journey. In transit, boys face similar hardships during migration, enduring long, difficult journeys and harsh conditions. They witness the death of companions, risk getting trafficked along the route and experience physical violence by smugglers.

Limited freedom of movement, kidnapping and extortion are also key concerns on this route. Thirty-one (31) per cent of respondents said that they were held at a location against their will, with frequent incidents including kidnappings and ransom demands. Another significant statistic is that almost one in four migrant youth, were kidnapped during their journey. Many migrated through the same high-risk areas multiple times."[174]

167 IOM, 2024d, p. 27.
168 IOM, 2024d, p. 26.
169 IOM, 2024d, p. 23.
170 Ibid.
171 IOM, 2023a.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
174 IOM et al., 2024, p. 28.

Recent data confirms that kidnapping for ransom has become a systematic practice along this route, particularly in desert zones and urban hubs where children are detained in informal compounds and abused until their families send money.[175] Children are routinely denied food, beaten and subjected to extreme violence in ransom-related captivity.[176]

Front-line workers and protection actors raised urgent concerns about Somali, Nigerian and Malian boys – alongside girls – who were increasingly targeted by violent groups for ransom. Children unable to repay migration-related debts are forcibly detained, tortured, or coerced into exploitative work to pay their own ransom, with threats of death or permanent injury.[177] Families often receive repeated demands for payment, with traffickers doubling ransom amounts mid-journey or prolonging children's captivity. When children are held hostage, they face severe psychological pressure and physical threats, serious permanent injury, such as paralysis, as well as death – compelling families to pay ransom, and pushing many into long-term debt bondage and cycles of exploitation.[178] The desert crossings and urban hubs such as Bani Walid, Sabha, Kufra and Tripoli are highlighted as among the most dangerous locations, with multiple overlapping risks, including ransom-based detention, trafficking, and extortion by both non-State and State-affiliated actors.[179]

Front-line workers and protection actors raised urgent concerns about Somali, Nigerian and Malian boys – alongside girls – who were increasingly targeted by violent groups for ransom. Children unable to repay migration-related debts are forcibly detained, tortured, or coerced into exploitative work to pay their own ransom, with threats of death or permanent injury. When children are held hostage, they face severe psychological pressure and physical threats, serious permanent injury, such as paralysis, as well as death, compelling families to pay ransom, as well as pushing children into exploitative work to secure release or to enable them to continue their journey.

> *"Many children arrive believing in opportunity, but instead, they face barriers, debt, and sometimes exploitation. The system needs urgent reform to prevent more from being lost."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.4.3. Deception, Debt Bondage and Recruitment Tactics

Debts are not only a way to finance migration along the Central Mediterranean Route – they are also used as a method of coercion and control. Seventeen (17) per cent of migrant youth took on a debt or loan specifically to fund their journey, while a broader 22 per cent reported that they planned to repay money to another, upon arrival, whether raised this through loans, family, friends, community, formal or informal channels.[180] Frontliners emphasized that, regardless of the source, this expectation creates immediate pressure that is often exploited by smugglers and traffickers.

175 IOM et al., 2024, p. 20.
176 IOM et al., 2024, pp. 21 and 23.
177 IOM et al., 2024, p. 24.
178 IOM et al., 2024, pp. 23–24.
179 Ibid.
180 IOM, 2023a.

In both transit and destination countries, frontliners described how children are pulled into tightly structured systems of exploitation. In Tunisia, debts are often formalized before departure. Upon arrival in Europe – especially Italy – Tunisian boys are immediately pressured to repay, commonly through forced labour or drug trafficking. One Italian frontliner explained: *"It's no longer just about survival – children migrate to escape trauma and shame, only to face new exploitation and unbearable pressure to succeed."*

Frontliners emphasize that regardless of the context, more likely than not, when the children are working *"…their salary does not go to the children. It goes directly to the smuggler."* For example, children are deceived, placed into prostitution houses, and told they must work off a one-year debt. Another frontliner shared: *"Some are released after one year. Others are sold to another trafficker."*

Frontliners also described how Somali boys in transit are particularly vulnerable to kidnapping, torture, and extortion. Many are held in makeshift prisons or compounds, forced to call family members, and repeatedly abused until debts are repaid. These attacks are widespread and increasingly normalized along this route.

The patterns differ by gender. Tunisian and Egyptian boys are often channelled into construction, agriculture, or informal urban labour, while Nigerian and Guinean girls are more likely to be recruited under false job offers and trafficked into domestic work or sexual exploitation. While both trends involve debt, Tunisia's model stands out for its pre-migration contractual nature and immediate post-arrival enforcement.

In one focus group with former unaccompanied migrant girls in Libya, many were victims of trafficking – participants described being tricked, deceived, transported, controlled when they were girls, and countless years working without freedom of movement, nor compensation. One said: *"I worked for three years, but then they said another three years. Most girls are working 7 years, 12 years… they didn't achieve anything."*

Frontliners and children described deep fears around trusting authorities in transit and destination countries. Several cases were shared where children had been handed over to traffickers by police or border officials. Others were sold or detained during attempted crossings. One front-line worker in Italy shared the disconnect between the stories they share and the realities for boys, as *"…families don't know what's happening. One day everything seems fine. The next, their child is arrested with drugs."* Criminal networks across routes capitalize on children's economic vulnerability and aspirations, using financial manipulation, coercion and misinformation to entrap them. These journeys are rarely self-determined. [181]

The CMR was the only route in North Africa where traffickers use debt bondage to control children who were victims of trafficking between 2016 until 2023. In 2023, 31 per cent of boys were controlled through their earnings (a sharp rise from 7% and 14% in the previous two years), compared to 19 per cent of girls (up from 12% in 2022).[182] Across the timeframe, 10 per cent of all identified child trafficking victims were controlled in this way.[183] Among Nigerian children, however, this rate was even higher – nearly one in four (23%) were trafficked under debt-based coercion. False promises were another widely used tactic, recorded in 9 per cent of cases, where children were lured with fraudulent offers of jobs, education, or family reunification, only to be exploited upon arrival.

181 Europol, 2020.
182 CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
183 Ibid.

The frontliners in Libya emphasized significant risks that children were exposed to which is normalized, particularly in enforcing the sexual exploitation of girls, *"once they arrive here, they're deceived and immediately placed into prostitution houses… told they must pay off a one-year debt."* Another frontliner reflected global patterns in trafficking, *"…some are released after one year. Others are sold to another trafficker."*

Frontliners in Italy shared concerns for Egyptian and Tunisian boys, as their severe economic pressures were intimately interlinked with experiences with forced labour, predominantly in agriculture, construction, and the informal sectors, and transnational criminal networks. Frontliners emphasize that regardless of the context, with regards to debt bondage; *"…their salary does not go to the children. It goes directly to the smuggler."*

In one focus group, around ten unaccompanied migrant girls (many of whom were potential victims of trafficking) spoke of their collective experiences of rampant deception, debt bondage and exploitation that lasted years without compensation, as one girl summarized, *"I worked for three years, then they said three years plus. I did not achieve anything. Most girls are working 7 years, 12 years… they didn't achieve anything."* Frontliners and migrants in focus groups also shared fears around trusting authorities, as well as smugglers, recruiters and potential employers. They shared experiences where authorities had abused, exploited, killed children in front of them and sold them to human traffickers on border crossings of transit countries.

Debt bondage, however, is not exclusive to victims of trafficking, yet it is a common mode of control that exacerbates existing stress, trauma and protection risks. Children under debt bondage are controlled, exploited, and left without choices. Debt consistently exacerbates stress, trauma and vulnerability – especially in the absence of legal protections or support systems. In Italy, frontliners raised serious concerns for Egyptian and Tunisian boys, many of whom arrive already enmeshed in transnational criminal networks and forced labour arrangements, particularly in agriculture, construction and informal economies.

Across the CMR, debt is not simply a financial arrangement – it is a weapon. It is used by traffickers, smugglers, and criminal networks to dominate, deceive and dismantle any sense of safety or control that children may have had.

The DTM findings showed that 8 per cent of youth were lied to, to travel and 15 per cent expected work permits but it did not happen.[184] Almost one in four youth were robbed (25%) and a similar number experienced physical violence or abuse (24.2%). Youth also reported being forced to travel (4%), forced to work (5%), held against their will (11%) and experiencing attacks (7%).[185]

Almost a quarter, 23 per cent of migrants from the Niger (also one of the largest vulnerable migrant caseloads in Libya), reported security issues, such as attacks or assaults as the top difficulties that they faced.[186]

Youth travelling on the CMR recounted a journey fraught with hardships. Financial problems were emphasized by 64 per cent of respondents.[187] Also, 63 per cent of respondents reported suffering from lack of food at some point during their journey. Thirty-one (31) per cent said that they were held against their will.[188]

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184 IOM, 2023a. DTM Flow Monitoring Survey.
185 Ibid.
186 IOM, 2024e, p. 2.
187 IOM, 2024d, p. 24.
188 Ibid.

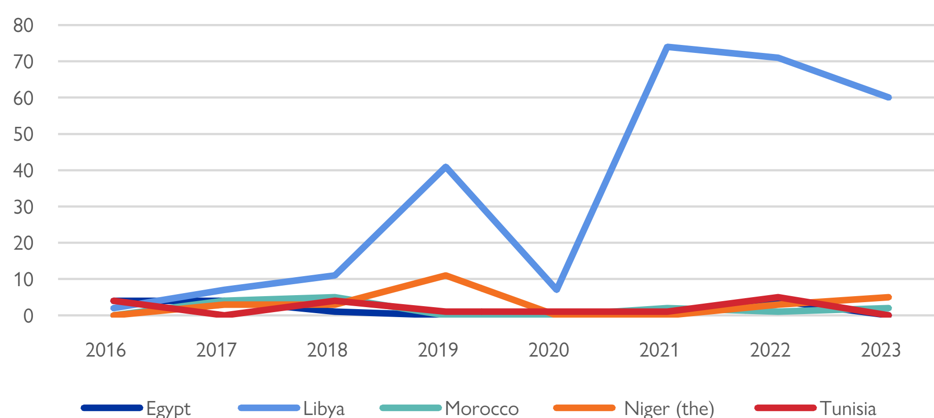
Financial difficulties were the most frequently reported issue, affecting over a third (36%) of young migrants in North Africa.[189] In Libya, 63 per cent of young adult migrants from the Niger that financial issues as their top difficulty.[190] Frontliners shared how this vulnerability exacerbated other child protection risks on the journey as well as in transit, from exploitative labour to transactional sex."[191] DTM data shows that 65 per cent of migrant youth on this route experienced at least one protection-related issue (the highest of all migration routes), including financial hardship, hunger, robbery, lack of shelter, and health issues.[192]

In many origin countries across the Sahel, frontliners described how "corruption is the most common risk faced by migrants on dangerous routes, affecting 74 per cent of those who used smugglers and 66 per cent of independent travellers."[193]

1.4.4. Child Trafficking

In 2023, there were 37 girls and 16 boys who were verified victims of human trafficking that were exploited on the CMR (alongside 229 women and 434 men).[194] From 2016 to 2023, trafficked children on this route were controlled through abuse (33%), threats (27%) and forced labour (26%). Other methods included denial of basic needs (20%), sexual exploitation (14%) and debt bondage (10%). False promises, excessive work and document withholding were less frequent, and no use of drugs or alcohol was reported on this route.[195]

Figure 23. Number of Children Identified in the CTDC, by Country of Exploitation, by Year (2016–2022)

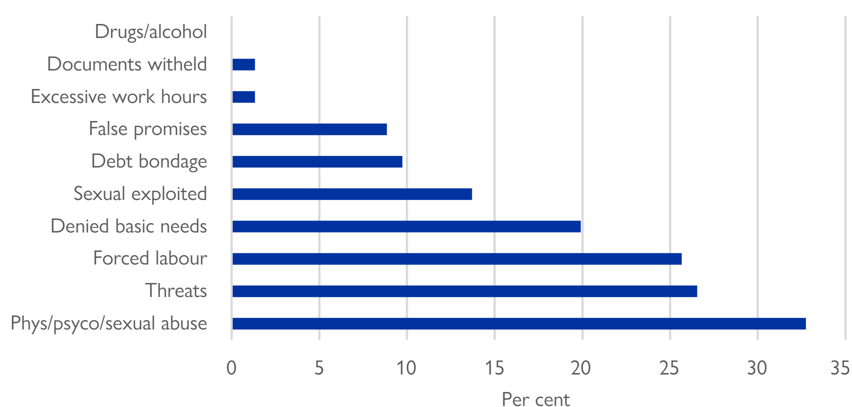


Source: CTDC, n.d. (2016–2022).[196]

Girls from Mali, Nigeria, Somalia and the Central African Republic face significant risks of sexual exploitation and forced child marriage along this route. They are disproportionately subjected to trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced marriages. Traffickers exploit cultural vulnerabilities and familial desperation, deceptively entrapping girls in exploitative arrangements. This severe violation of their rights compounds their vulnerabilities, subjecting them to long-lasting physical and emotional harm. In transit countries, 11 per cent of children assisted trafficked, as reported by the CTDC, experienced sexual exploitation.

[189] IOM, 2023a.
[190] IOM, 2024e, p. 2.
[191] MMC, 2025a, p. 11.
[192] IOM, 2024d, p. 21.
[193] MMC, 2025a, pp. 3 and 11.
[194] CTDC, n.d.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid.

Figure 24. Ways that Traffickers Controlled Children on the CMR (2016–2023)

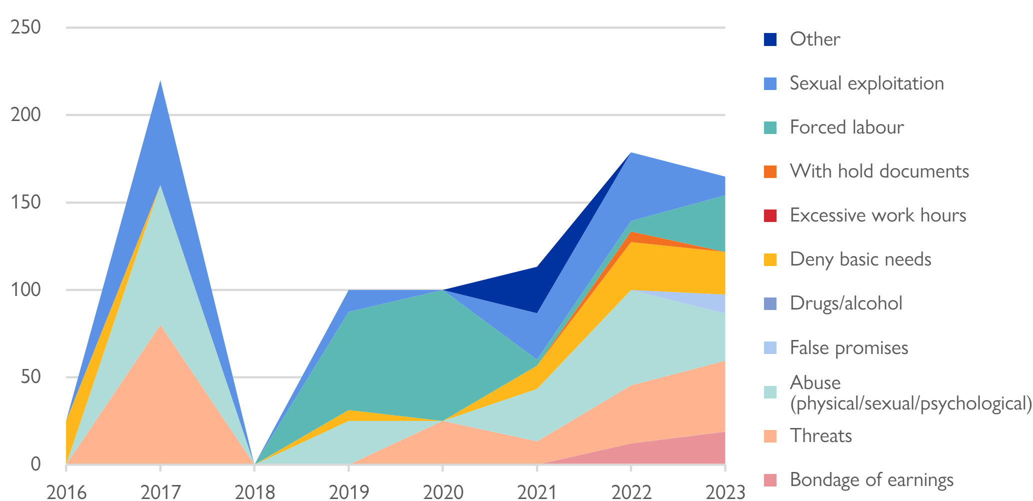


Source: CTDC, n.d. data set (2016–2023).

The main forms of control for victims of trafficking in Tunisia were restrictions on finances or movements (6%), forced labour (13%) and sexual exploitation (25%).[197] Among North African countries, trends in trafficking were consistently high in Libya, with a significant dip observed in 2020 that may be attributable to border closures with the COVID-19 pandemic, yet despite this, Libya still had the highest in the region.[198]

In Libya, 5 per cent of children between 14 to 17 years old were identified as potential victims of trafficking, while in Tunisia it was two per cent comparing to young adults (5% and 4% retrospectively).[199] Three (3) per cent of all vulnerable children in transit in North Africa were identified explicitly as victims of trafficking. Among these, higher trafficking in persons rates were recorded for children aged 14 to 17 in Algeria (5%), Morocco (4%) and Libya (0.2%), suggesting targeted vulnerabilities within this age group.[200]

Figure 25. Girl Victims of Trafficking and Types of Exploitation on the CMR by Year (2016–2023)



Source: CTDC, n.d. data set (2016–2023), n=135.

197 CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
198 Ibid.
199 IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
200 Ibid.

Traffickers used many means to control, manipulate and deceive children in transit countries on the CMR.[201] Physical, psychological and sexual abuse was the most prevalent way that traffickers controlled 33 per cent of children while sexual exploitation used on 14 per cent of children.[202] Perpetrators also used threats to individuals and family (27%), forced labour (26%), denial of basic needs (20%), debt bondage (10%), false promises (9%) as well as excessive working hours (1%) and withholding documents (1%).[203]

Overall, sexual exploitation was higher for children in Libya (19%) compared to other countries.[204] North African countries, such as Libya and Egypt (as well as Morocco) had higher proportions of trafficked migrants who were subjected to prolonged exploitation, exceeding two years. This was in stark contrast to Tunisia where children were exploited for under one year in duration.[205] Child-specific trafficking trends indicate shorter periods of exploitation in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, contrasting with Morocco, where trafficked children face longer exploitation durations.[206]

These controls function as systematic deprivation tactics to maintain dependency and compliance.[207] Interestingly, the use of psychoactive substances as a control method was notably rare and documented in the CMR for two per cent of cases.[208] Another frequently used tactic was recruiters making false promises to migrant children, which was notably high in Libya (10%).[209] The number of children who experienced excessive working hours was also substantial, which primarily affected children in Libya (3%).

Overall, sexual exploitation was the primary reason that children were trafficked in North Africa overall on this route. The main concern for children in transit countries such as Libya, was forced labour (25%) and sexual exploitation (19%). Many were controlled through excessive working hours (11%).[210] North African countries, such as Libya Morocco and Egypt had higher proportions of trafficked migrants who were subjected to prolonged exploitation, exceeding two years. This was in stark contrast to other countries such as Tunisia where exploitation typically remained under one year in duration (DTM). Another way that children were controlled was by withholding personal documents where (14%), experienced this, primarily in Libya and Morocco.[211]

The length of time that migrant children are exploited varies by gender, age and regionally. For instance, migrants trafficked in Morocco, Libya and Egypt face longer durations of trafficking – often exceeding two years. By contrast, migrants trafficked in Tunisia typically experience shorter exploitation periods, usually under one year. Child-specific trafficking trends indicate shorter periods of exploitation in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, contrasting with Morocco, where trafficked children face longer exploitation durations.[212]

In transit countries like the Niger, victims of trafficking – especially outside the main cities – often experience dangerous delays in access to emergency services, including accommodation, medical, legal and psychosocial care.[213] While one shelter exists, it provides short-term accommodation, which forces victims back into unsafe environments without sustainable solutions.

[201] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
[202] Ibid.
[203] Ibid.
[204] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 December 2024).
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid.
[207] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
[208] Ibid.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Davy, 2025, pp. 14, 36.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2 (below), official trafficking cases recorded over the past eight years highlight that patterns of child trafficking in North Africa were both fragmented and diverse compared with adults. In Egypt, children were most frequently trafficked into the hospitality sector (17%), followed by forced labour, construction, and sexual exploitation. In Libya, children were mainly trafficked for forced labour (30%), but also for sexual exploitation and domestic servitude. In Morocco, children were most often trafficked for prostitution (13%) and sexual exploitation, with smaller but notable cases of domestic servitude and labour exploitation. In Tunisia, the most distinctive trend emerged, with children trafficked for intimate partner exploitation (10%), alongside cases of forced labour, prostitution, and pornography. Children are not only trafficked for forced labour like adults, but also through hidden and relational forms of exploitation, where gross violations — including torture, violence, and threats — have been extensively documented across the region. This underscores their particular vulnerability and the urgent need for child-specific protection measures that actively support those exploited in both visible and invisible sectors.

Table 1. Type of Trafficking in Adults in North Africa

Type of Trafficking (%)	Egypt	Libya	Morocco	Tunisia
Forced Labour	17	33	15	12
Sexual Exploitation	11	16	11	0
Agriculture	2	0	0	1
Construction	1	0	3	1
Domestic Work	4	6	6	0
Hospitality	2	1	2	0
Prostitution	4	3	8	2
Pornography	3	0	0	3
Intimate Partner	2	0	0	3

Source: CTDC, n.d. data set (2016–2022).

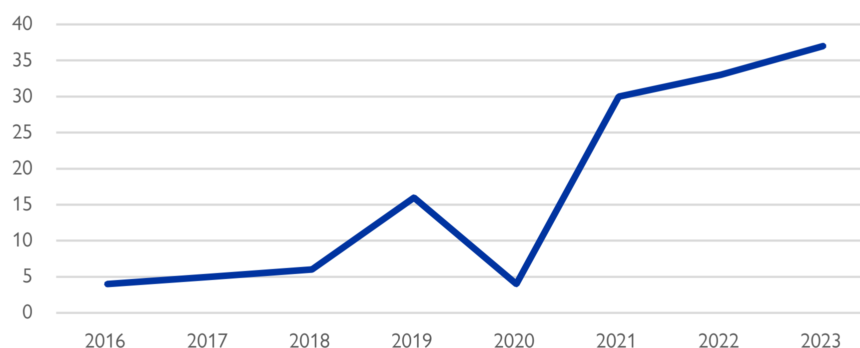
Table 2. Type of Trafficking in Children in North Africa

Type of Trafficking (%)	Egypt	Libya	Morocco	Tunisia
Forced Labour	11	30	0	10
Sexual Exploitation	0	11	0	0
Agriculture	0	1	0	0
Construction	0	0	0	5
Domestic Work	0	5	0	0
Hospitality	17	0	0	0
Prostitution	0	1	13	5
Pornography	0	0	0	5
Intimate Partner	0	0	0	10

Source: CTDC, n.d. data set (2016–2022).

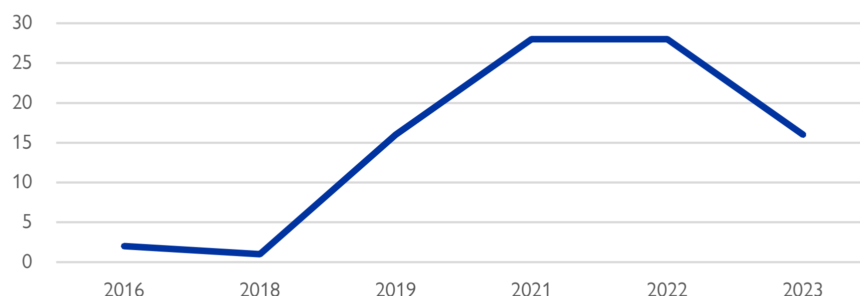
IOM's registered caseload in 2024, showed that 41 per cent of girls (79) were identified as potential victims of trafficking on this route which was a significant five-fold increase from 2022. Comparatively, 13 per cent of boys were identified as potential victims of trafficking (93).[214] This may indicate an increase in identification, referrals or girls seeking assistance or perhaps girls access predominantly access IOM for support for graver concerns, or are more likely to be referred for assistance. For boys, perhaps with the sheer amount who migrate undergo other protection concerns such as kidnapping, extortion and exploitation, do not have special categories similar to trafficking or health cases other than unaccompanied and separated children.

Figure 26. Trends in Girl Victims of Trafficking on the CMR by Year (2016–2023)



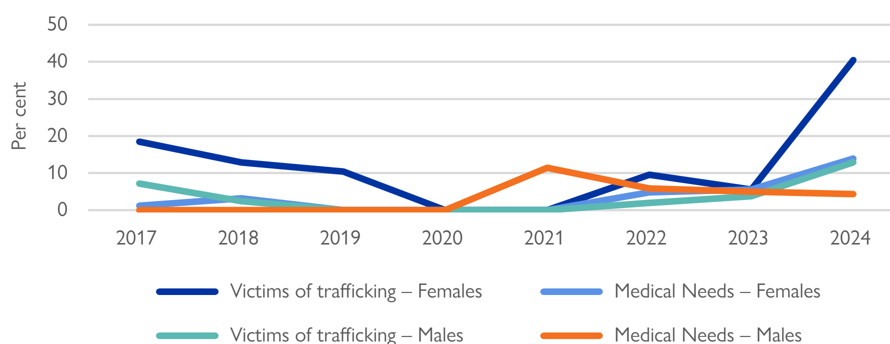
Source: CTDC, n.d. (2016–2023), n=135.

Figure 27. Trends in Boy Victims of Trafficking on the CMR by Year (2016–2023)



Source: CTDC, n.d. (2016–2023), n=135.

Figure 28. Child Victims of Trafficking Registered by Gender, by Year (2017–2024)



Source: MiMOSA data set (2017–2024), n=348.

214 IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.

Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation was used widely as a means of control on this route, particularly for children from Nigeria, where it used to control 37 per cent of victims of trafficking.[215] The main origin countries for children who were trafficked for sexual exploitation along this route are Nigeria and Somalia.[216] Frontliners and former unaccompanied migrant girls expressed that girls from Mali, Nigeria, Somalia and the Central African Republic face significant risks of sexual exploitation and forced marriage along this route. In transit countries (such as Libya), 11 per cent of children who were trafficked, experienced sexual exploitation.[217]

In focus group discussions, one former unaccompanied migrant girl from Nigeria said that she was 15-years old when she was first tricked and trafficked into domestic servitude, and then later sold into sexual exploitation in Libya, *"I was a fashion designer; they took me to housemaid work. I said take me back… but they introduced me to prostitution."* Another girl thought she was going to school in Tunisia, but was deceived: *"I was going to Tunisia to school… they told me I was going to school… when I came, I saw it was Libya."* Another girl, said that she was promised education in Libya, yet was exploited for years upon years for domestic servitude which then similarly segued into transactional sexual exploitation: *"they told me they would take me to school… instead they took me to clean houses, then told me to prostitute."*

Focus group participants with former unaccompanied migrant children and front-line protection workers operating in Libya shared distressing accounts of trafficking networks and compounds used for the sexual exploitation of girls – particularly Nigerian migrant girls, many of whom are underage. These were described as heavily guarded, clandestine sites where girls are subjected to violence, coercion and prolonged captivity.

One such location, referred to by multiple participants, in separate groups, was called "Shivana" – described not as a single house, but as a network of compounds and buildings operating under extreme secrecy. The site was repeatedly described as a major hub for sexual exploitation, where girls were "sold," confined, and forced into transactional sex under the control of traffickers. *"…There are over 100 girls there right now in Shivana… 70 per cent are underage… They will kill them. There is no escape unless the police know them. This is a big prostitution place. They are selling girls..."*

According to former unaccompanied girl's testimonies, these compounds are run by transnational trafficking groups and are reportedly protected through informal arrangements or non-interference by certain local actors. While some law enforcement debt bondage described as unable – or unwilling – to intervene due to the high risk, others are alleged to be complicit or turning a blind eye. However, these risks transcend even the authorities, where girls shared that *"…only 10 police can go there… They cannot survive it."* Inside the compounds/camps, the respondents described forced transactional, frequent violence, and reproductive harm. Girls who attempted to resist, escape, or who became ill were reportedly transferred, beaten, or subjected to further abuse. One survivor explained: *"Once you finish one cycle, they sell you to another prostitution house… or to another person."*

Pregnancies were said to be forcibly terminated, often resulting in severe and lasting health impacts: *"Even if they have pregnancies, they abort it. Their wombs shift… If they try to escape, they are killed,"* as reported by many former unaccompanied girls from Nigeria in Libya. Frontliners shared how these practices are illegal in Libya which shows the underground nature of these criminal syndicates operating in highly organized compounds. Their testimonies revealed psychological trauma, physical injuries, and prolonged isolation are normal, while girls actual dreams was what they were afraid of. Almost all of the girls described being locked indoors for extended periods, in both situations

[215] Digidiki et al., 2023, p. 23.
[216] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
[217] Ibid.

of domestic servitude (which included sexual exploitation) as well as situations of transactional sexual exploitation in both private and commercial settings such as these "compounds." Some of the young women had babies. They explained similar situations where they were kept under armed watch, and forced into short-term or "one-night" sex services, if not continuous transactional sexual exploitation. While debt bondage was used as one form of control, the girls who were trafficked for transactional sexual exploitation, reported practices of slavery, held against their will, without freedom of movement nor end point.

"In this country, we lost our girls…" This sentiment, expressed with grief and urgency by a Nigerian survivor, reflected a shared fear among migrant youth that many girls remain trapped in these networks – undocumented, unreachable and voiceless. They emphasized the lack of medical care or support as one real fear was their physical wellness which often resulted in death, rather than the need for psychological or emotional healing or support. Other participants echoed that such trafficking operations are enabled by complex networks that thrive on silence, invisibility, and the fear of reprisal. *"There are taxi Libya places that will take girls… there are many camps."*

These testimonies from survivors and front-line workers align with broader qualitative data from case notes, protection assessments and KIIs across both transit and destination countries. Though these trafficking compounds operate outside formal legal frameworks and remain difficult to verify, they point to a deeply alarming protection gap. The urgent need for strengthened cross-border cooperation, survivor-centreed assistance, and robust action by all relevant stakeholders – including Libyan authorities – is critical to dismantling such exploitative networks and safeguarding the rights of girls and young women on the move.

Front-line workers also noted that girls fleeing gender-based violence – including forced child marriage and other harmful cultural practices – only to face the very same risks they were attempting to escape. In Libya and Tunisia, these risks are compounded by limited shelter options, lack of legal protection, and inadequate services for victims.

Girls from Nigeria and Mali face extreme risks. In Algeria, Nigerian girls are often initially exploited by fellow nationals, but increasingly by perpetrators from other regions, suggesting an expansion of organized criminal networks. In several locations, children reported that girls were trafficked into so-called "sex camps," sometimes located near construction zones. These camps often masquerade as informal shelters or safe houses, drawing in girls who are then confined and abused.

Since mid-2023, Tunisia has seen a shift in trafficking modalities. Previously, adult women from Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea were trafficked by air and exploited in domestic servitude. Recent reports suggest a growing number of child and adult victims are now being forcibly detained by Guinean and Ivorian networks operating around Sfax. These individuals are held until family members – either in West Africa or in destination countries – can coordinate a ransom payment.

Among children who were surveyed on the on the CMR, 40 per cent experienced psychological, physical and/or sexual abuse (in Libya).[218] Frontliners said that girls who have escaped gender-based violence, forced child marriage and/or harmful cultural practices, they actually experienced the very same the risks that they originally fled (Tunisia).[219]

Girls from Mali, Nigeria, Somalia and the Central African Republic face significant risks of sexual exploitation and forced child marriage along this route. They are disproportionately subjected to trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced child marriages. Traffickers exploit cultural vulnerabilities and familial desperation, deceptively entrapping girls in exploitative arrangements which compounds

[218] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
[219] Ibid.

their vulnerabilities. In transit countries (such as Libya), 11 per cent of children assisted trafficked, as reported by the CTDC, experienced sexual exploitation.[220]

Front-line workers also noted that girls fleeing gender-based violence – including forced child marriage and other harmful cultural practices – often encounter the very same risks they were attempting to escape. In Libya and Tunisia, these risks are compounded by limited shelter options, lack of legal protection, and inadequate services for survivors.

Girls in transit countries such as Libya face heightened risks of trafficking and sexual exploitation. Front-line workers report that many are tricked, coerced, or forced into transactional sex – often under false promises of education or safe employment through both formal and informal recruitment channels. Unaccompanied girls are particularly at risk, frequently facing unwanted pregnancies and significant barriers to sexual and reproductive health care.

Financial dependence is particularly acute for girls. Research from 2025 in the Central Sahel shows only 28 per cent of females who used smugglers relied solely on personal savings to fund their journeys.[221] Financial vulnerability exacerbated risks, it also showed that "among women with insufficient pre-departure funds, 16 of smuggler-users and 15% of independent travellers reported engaging in transactional sex."[222]

Legal frameworks and administrative obstacles can further expose girls to harm. Frontliner works highlight that guardianship laws, birth registration procedures and access to documentation (as well as access to services) vary widely across countries – posing severe challenges for migrant girls. In some transit countries – such as Tunisia – automatically deem unaccompanied girls unfit to care for children unless they support from a relative or community member, leading to family separation and civil registration barriers. Front-line actors are concerned with intergenerational vulnerabilities, with migrant girls without documentation, giving birth in informal settings to babies without documentation, such as forest encampments, where civil registration is not possible – perpetuating undocumented status across generations.

Frontliners emphasized the risks that migrant girls face fragmented services in Italy which are not equip to provide culturally competent let alone survivor-centered care as where they still face specific risks of trafficking, forced marriage, sexual violence and ongoing psychological harm and 'even when the young migrants have not been trafficked for sexual exploitation… they suffered similar forms of violence.'[223]

Forced Labour and Economic Exploitation

More than one third (36%) of youth said that they worked without getting the expected payment, while 14 per cent reported to have been forced to work against their will.[224] The incidents were reported to have occurred before crossing the Mediterranean to Italy, in transit countries (Libya, Tunisia and Algeria).[225]

In North Africa, girls were more commonly trafficked than boys, however, Libya recent trends suggest that are closing the gap. Recent years saw a significantly higher proportion of males trafficked (42%) compared to other countries. However, a new upward male trend of children in statistics where the gender gap is closing, resulting in a narrowing of this gender gap, and shows that young men are either being increasingly trafficked or increasingly assisted and supported.

[220] Ibid.
[221] MMC, 2025a, p. 10.
[222] Ibid., p. 11.
[223] UNICEF et al., 2019, p. 56.
[224] IOM, 2024d.
[225] Ibid.

Frontliners in Libya shared their concerns with exploitative labour, with boys working more than 12-hour days in construction, "they work from 8am to 9pm. If they ask for their pay, they're threatened or beaten." The main concern was also that "they're paid nothing." In Libya, nearly one third of children were trafficked for the purpose of forced labour (30%), while 5 per cent were trafficked for domestic servitude.[226] On this route in particular, migrant children face incredibly high instances being trafficked, kidnapped and subjected to exploitative labour practices, with restricted freedom of movement in addition to formal and informal arbitrary detention situations with deplorable conditions.[227] In a DTM survey, migrant youth from a range of nationalities who arrived in Europe, reported that 65 per cent of all forced labour incidents they experienced took place in Libya.[228]

Emerging trends include an increasingly high number of Nigerien children migrating toward Algeria, engaging in begging as a survival strategy, while others journey to Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon for seasonal work. Other trends show unaccompanied girls arriving in the Niger from Benin and Togo for domestic work, placing them at risk of exploitation and abuse. Boys, particularly from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal, Burkina Faso and the Gambia, are vulnerable to forced labour in construction sites and informal sectors. They reported working long, gruelling hours under exploitative conditions, with none or inadequate compensation or basic protections. In transit countries (like Libya), boys experience forced labour in agriculture, domestic work and on construction sites. They are frequently exploited by traffickers and forced to work under harsh conditions with little to or no compensation.

Migrant children from conflict regions such as the Sudan and Eritrea face significant trafficking in persons and exploitation risks in transit countries (such as Egypt). They are often exploited in domestic and hospitality sectors, with families sometimes entrusting children to known smugglers, intensifying their vulnerabilities. Migrant boys in transit in Egypt, are often trafficked into forced labour, especially in domestic work with 19 per cent trafficked within in the hospitality industry.[229]

Migrant girls in Egypt are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation, trafficking in persons and forced domestic work. Many girls from countries like the Sudan and Eritrea are trafficked for domestic servitude, forced marriages and sexual exploitation. The lack of effective legal frameworks means these girls are often left unprotected, facing life-threatening risks and sexual violence without the possibility of recourse. *"They forced me to work as a maid. I never got to see my family again. I was only allowed to leave the house to buy food.' Female migrants in transit countries shared how they live and work with constant fear, "if they complain, they get placed in 'connection houses' – into prostitution."*

Migrant children in transit (Egypt and Tunisia) particularly from the Sudan and Eritrea, face significant risks of trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation. Boys are often exploited in informal labour markets, domestic work, or hospitality sectors. Trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation remains a significant issue, with limited protection for migrant children. Boys are often exploited in domestic work and the hospitality industry, while girls are trafficked for transactional sex work or domestic servitude.

Frontliners shared that boys, from Tunisia and Egypt, are commonly subjected to forced labour in Europe, criminal recruitment, and violence. Children between 12 to 17 years of age, often face heightened risks including forced labour, criminal recruitment, and gender-based violence, with Egyptian and Tunisian boys heavily targeted by criminal networks.

226 CTDC, n.d. (accessed 5 April 2025).
227 Ibid.
228 Ibid.
229 Ibid.

They face extreme violence and psychological abuse, with little to no protection mechanisms in place. Boys are also vulnerable to exploitation by smugglers and traffickers who promise them a better life, only to force them into labour or worse. *"I was promised work, but when I arrived, I had to clean and cook. If I didn't, I was punished."*

Overall, 36 per cent of migrant youth on the CMR reported unpaid labour, in particular for construction, farming, cleaning, sexual exploitation and/or hard manual labour where they were held by armed groups or smugglers.[230] Across all routes, more children (20%) were unpaid than young adults (14%), and more males (15%) were not paid compared to females (9%).[231] Most incidents occurred in Libya (30%), Algeria (16%) and Tunisia (13%).[232]

Forced labour was used to exploit 58 per cent of children from sub-Saharan Africa.[233] Frontliners shared that migrant children from conflict regions such as the Sudan and Eritrea are vulnerable to trafficking in persons and exploitation in transit countries. They are often exploited in domestic and hospitality sectors, with families sometimes entrusting children to known smugglers, intensifying their vulnerabilities.

Fourteen (14) per cent of migrant youth who arrived in Europe, reported experiencing forced labour on the CMR. Across all routes, the majority of were children compared to young adults (11% vs 4%) and male (5%) compared to female (3%).[234] The highest incidents took place in Libya (59%), Algeria (10%) and Tunisia (9%) irrespective of the route.[235]

Frontliners and former migrant children reported systematic exploitation by sophisticated criminal networks. Nigerian, Malian and Somali children are targeted for trafficking in persons and forced labour. The majority of focus group respondents reported that they were tricked into hazardous labour, only to have to work elsewhere at the next leg and threatened or held captive by armed groups and forced to engage in exploitative labour arrangements to repay continuously increasing and evolving migration-related debts.

Migrant children in transit countries (such as Egypt and Tunisia) particularly from the Sudan and Eritrea, face significant risks of trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation. Boys are often exploited in informal labour markets, domestic work, or hospitality sectors. Trafficking for forced labour and sexual exploitation remains a significant issue, with limited protection for migrant children. Boys are often exploited in domestic work and the hospitality industry, while girls are trafficked for transactional sex work or domestic servitude.

Boys from Tunisia and Egypt who migrate internationally, are commonly subjected to forced labour in Europe, criminal recruitment, and violence. Adolescents between 12–17 years of age, often face heightened risks including forced labour, criminal recruitment, and gender-based violence, with Egyptian and Tunisian boys heavily targeted by criminal networks. In Egypt, 19 per cent of children were identified as victims of trafficking within in the hospitality industry.[236]

[230] IOM, 2024d, pp. 24 and 25.
[231] IOM, 2024d, p. 24.
[232] IOM, 2024d, pp. 24 and 25.
[233] Digidiki et al., 2023, p. 25.
[234] IOM, 2024d, p. 24.
[235] Ibid.
[236] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 5 April 2025).

Table 3. Migrant Youth's Experiences During the Journey

Experiences during the journey	Count	%
Financial problems	746	35.8
Hunger	644	30.9
Lack of shelter	550	26.4
Robbery	515	24.7
Physical violence or abuse	503	24.2
Health challenges	370	17.7
Expected work permit but did not receive	308	14.8
Lost documents	269	12.9
Held against will	224	10.8
Lied to travel	151	7.9
Attacks	137	7.2
Forced to work	100	4.8
Forced to travel	86	4.1
Arranged marriage	13	0.6

Source: DTM Europe FMS 2023, n=2,082.

Table 4. Means of Control for Adults Victims of Trafficking in North Africa

Means of Control (% Yes)	Egypt	Libya	Morocco	Tunisia	Total
Debt bondage	1	15	3	3	13
Threats to individual and family	8	33	9	0	27
Psychological, physical and/or sexual	9	40	11	0	33
False promises	4	17	5	3	14
Psychoactive substances	0	0	0	2	1
Restricts finance, movement, medical care and/or necessities	6	37	7	1	29
Excessive working hours	2	11	2	1	1
Withhold documents	2	5	3	1	4

Source: CTDC, n.d. data set (2016–2022).

Table 5. Means of Control for Migrant Child Victims of Trafficking in North Africa

Means of Control (% Yes)	Egypt	Libya	Morocco	Tunisia	Total
Debt bondage	0	18	0	5	14
Threats to individual and family	0	22	0	0	17
Psychological, physical and/or sexual	17	25	0	0	20
False promises	6	5	0	5	5
Psychoactive substances	0	1	0	5	1
Restricts finance, movement, medical care and/or necessities	0	34	7	0	26
Excessive working hours	0	10	0	5	8
Withhold documents	0	1	0	0	0

Source: CTDC, n.d. data set (2016–2022).

1.4.5. Immediate Survival Needs and Inadequate Access to Services

Hunger and health are some of the most pertinent concerns that as well as safety, security and shelter. According to the DTM Europe survey, the biggest challenge reported by a third of respondents was financial difficulties (36%) and hunger (31%), followed by inadequate shelter (26%).[237] The basic right to safety can also be seen in the need for safe accommodation in transit countries (like Libya), where one in five migrants reported living in buildings deemed inhabitable, while 89 per cent reported living without electricity.[238] In Libya, a quarter of migrants are Nigerien and 20 per cent said that food and water insecurity were their top difficulties.[239]

Migrant children often sleep in unsafe conditions in transit countries, such as on streets, in markets, abandoned houses and olive fields, increasing their exposure to violence and exploitation. Health challenges were also a common concern, affecting nearly one in five migrants (18%).[240]

More severe human rights abuses, such as being held against their will (11%), deception related to travel conditions (8%) and forced work or forced travel (5% and 4%, respectively), were notably troubling.[241] A smaller, yet concerning, number (1%) were subjected to arranged marriages, further highlighting the diversity and severity of the challenges these young migrants faced.

The 2024, the IOM case management data shows that 4 per cent of vulnerable children assisted overall had medical needs, compared to eight per cent of adults.[242] Among girls, 14 per cent had medical needs – more than double the rate in 2023 (6%) – while boys remained stable at 4 per cent. Among children identified as potential victims of trafficking, five per cent of girls and 3 per cent of boys also had documented medical concerns.

On this route, 4 per cent of children had medical needs, compared to 8 per cent of adults. Of the victims of trafficking, 5 per cent were girls, compared to 3 per cent of boys.[243] The number of girls with medical needs was significantly high, and increased to 14 per cent in 2024, compared to 6 per cent the previous year while boys remained around the same. This may reflect boys perceptions of girls, as well as and frontliners reporting girls' help-seeking behaviour informally being higher than boys. However, it is well known that this is still the exception, as 'fear, mistrust, bad information, poverty and family responsibilities... are why it is very complicated to escape from trafficking and exploitation rings and thus why the figures about emerging victims are marginal compared to the extent of the phenomenon.'[244]

A profile on migrants in Libya from the Niger showed that they faced significant barriers to health care, including unaffordability (82%), unsafe access (27%) and distance to services (26%).[245]

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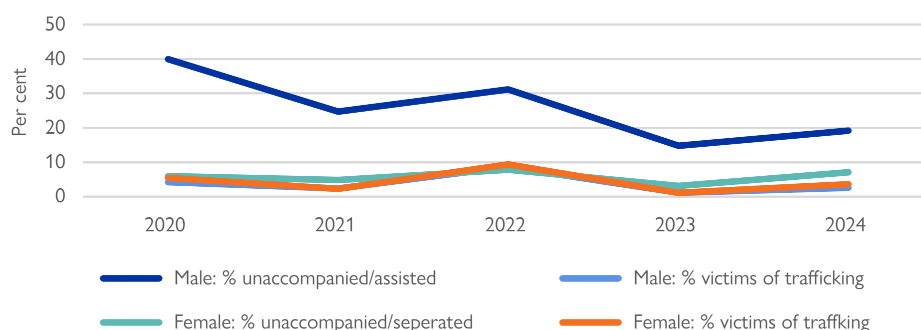
237 IOM, 2023a.
238 DTM, 2023, pp. 27, 30.
239 IOM, 2024e, pp. 1, 2.
240 IOM, 2023a.
241 Ibid.
242 IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
243 Ibid.
244 Save the Children, 2022.
245 IOM, 2024e, p. 2.

Figure 29. Children with Special Needs by Gender and Year (2017–2024)

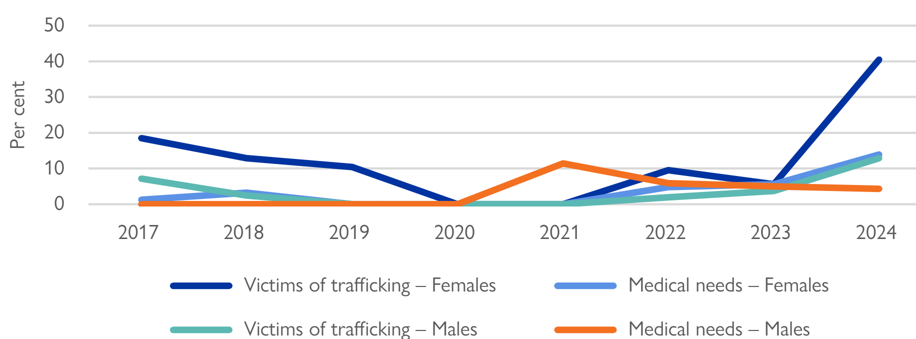


Source: MiMOSA 2024, Total: 973.

Migrants who used smugglers, had greater access to aid (58%) than independent migrants (43%), but NGOs and United Nations only provided support to 6 and 2 per cent, respectively.[246] Migrant children struggle to access essential services like education and health care, as well as protection support, which hinders their integration. Social isolation, discrimination and limited opportunities, like forced domestic labour, are common challenges. After migrating, older girls are vulnerable to GBV, exploitation and trafficking in persons, particularly if unaccompanied.

Older boys face risks of exploitation, forced labour, drug abuse, recruitment to gangs and trafficking after migration. They may lack a caregiver, making them vulnerable to further violence and abuse. Boys also face challenges in accessing education and health care, social isolation, bullying, and adapting to a new environment, and lack of opportunities that ensure safe and healthy transition into adolescence.

Figure 30. Children with Health Needs and Victims of Trafficking, by Gender on the CMR



Source: MiMOSA 2024, Total: 973.

Three quarters of youth did not have access to their identity documents on the CRM (79%).[247] Almost half never had them (49%), they were lost (15%), stolen (1%) or other people had control over them (14%).[248] On the CMR, 32 per cent of migrant youth lost their documents during the journey.[249] Almost half (48%) needed help with documentation as the primary necessity once they arrived in Europe.[250]

246 MMC, 2025a, p. 10.
247 IOM, 2024d, p. 23.
248 Ibid.
249 UNHCR et al., 2024, p. 4.
250 Ibid.

Challenges with civil documentation was a significant concern for many. Thirty-three (33) per cent of Nigeriens living in transit, in Libya said that identity documentation issues was their top difficulty.[251] Among victims of trafficking, one way that traffickers used to control children in transit countries on the CMR was by withholding personal documents (1%), primarily in Libya, and withholding their crucial documents (4%).[252]

Frontliners and specialists shared that showed that migrant children commonly lack proper legal documentation in transit countries, such as the Niger and Libya, increasing their susceptibility to apprehension and detention. Additionally, frontliners and desk reviews in transit countries share that children face severe barriers to accessing essential services, such as education and health care, including being denied treatment at public hospitals. The identification of a child's age by embassies can be inaccurate when issuing travel documents, potentially putting children at further risk upon return if proper family assessments are not completed. The lack of embassy representation for certain nationalities makes it harder to assist children from those backgrounds. For humanitarian crises, the process for protection assessments for unaccompanied children from the Sudan that are referred to UNHCR appears lengthy and unclear, complicating protection efforts.

In transit countries (like Libya) migrant jobs consist of construction labour (46%), manufacturing or factory work (10%), cleaning or domestic work (10%), agricultural work (9%) and salesperson or cashier (7%). It showed that 23 per cent of migrants were unemployed and actively seeking work, with 48 per cent females and 21 per cent male migrants. The top nationalities include the Sudan (29%), the Niger (23%), Egypt (20%), Chad (10%) and Nigeria (4%).[253] In North Africa, girls were more commonly identified as being trafficked than males, yet there was a new upward trend of boys narrowing the gender gap.

In Libya, among all child victims of trafficking, nearly one third were trafficked for forced labour (30%), while 5 per cent experienced domestic servitude.[254] On this route in particular, migrant children face incredibly high instances being trafficked, kidnapped, and subjected to exploitative labour practices, with restricted freedom of movement in addition to formal and informal arbitrary detention situations with deplorable conditions.[255] In a DTM survey, children and young adult migrants from a range of countries who arrived in Europe, reported that 65 per cent of all forced labour incidents were experienced in Libya.[256]

Emerging trends include an increasingly high number of Nigerien children migrating toward Algeria, engaging in begging as a survival strategy, while others journey to Côte d'Ivoire and Gabon for seasonal work. Other trends show unaccompanied girls arriving in the Niger from Benin and Togo for domestic work, placing them at risk of exploitation and abuse. Boys, particularly from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal, Burkina Faso and the Gambia, are vulnerable to forced labour in construction sites and informal sectors. They reported working long, gruelling hours under exploitative conditions, with none or inadequate compensation or basic protections. In transit countries (like Libya), boys experience forced labour in agriculture, domestic work, and on construction sites. They are frequently exploited by traffickers and forced to work under harsh conditions with little to or no compensation.

> *"They don't know if they will be allowed to stay or if they will be sent back. The fear of being deported keeps them awake at night."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

[251] IOM, 2024e, p. 2.
[252] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
[253] IOM, 2025h.
[254] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 April 2025).
[255] IOM et al., 2024.
[256] IOM, 2024k, p. 28.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Trauma

INSIGHT

Across the CMR, front-line workers consistently report that unaccompanied and separated children show signs of deep psychological distress. While the full extent of trauma is difficult to diagnose – especially during displacement – children frequently exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress, anxiety, depression and emotional shutdown.

This distress is cumulative: rooted in experiences of violence, loss, exploitation and prolonged uncertainty in their countries of origin, during transit and upon arrival. As Terre des Hommes affirms, migrant children *"bear the scars of violence, both before their perilous journeys and after their arrival on foreign shores."*[257] Many children have passed through detention, extortion, or sexual violence in Libya, or faced abandonment and abuse in the Niger, Tunisia and Algeria. In these contexts, protection systems are limited or absent.[258] Children may have no access to basic needs, let alone psychosocial care. As one front-line actor noted, *"under such conditions, trauma can't even be quantified – children remain in survival mode, and mental health becomes invisible."*

On arrival in Europe, this trauma often resurfaces with full force.[259] The transition from movement to reception is not relief – it is rupture. Children face legal uncertainty, social isolation, and, in some cases, overwhelming pressure to repay debts or meet family expectations. One front-line worker in Italy shared: *"Resilience can only get you so far. If you lose hope, you collapse. And we see it time and time again. They arrive thinking life will start, and then they realize there are legal hurdles, no work, no documents."* In Italy and other receiving countries, mental health care remains critically under-resourced. While neuropsychiatrists may be available, culturally appropriate, trauma-informed services – such as those provided by ethnopsychologists – are rare, particularly in high-transit cities like Rome, where children stay only briefly. UNICEF's Nuovi Percorsi mapping highlights this gap, noting that individualized, early intervention by multidisciplinary teams is essential, but rarely available in practice.[260]

Even where services exist, instability often prevents access. In transit hubs or informal sites, children may not stay long enough to build trust or receive consistent care. Many are homeless or in rapid onward movement, making it impossible to prioritize mental health when survival needs – shelter, food, documents – are not yet met.

The signs of trauma vary widely. Among boys from North Africa, symptoms may present as aggression, substance use, or total withdrawal. In reception centres, front-line workers report spikes in panic attacks, despair, and sudden behavioural changes, particularly among unaccompanied children. One described the aftermath of the Pylos shipwreck: *"There was no correct clinical term... the trauma was so severe it left them emotionally paralysed."* According to Save the Children, psychosocial symptoms among migrant children include sadness, anger, fear, nightmares, substance use,

257 Terre des Hommes, 2022.
258 Ibid.
259 UNICEF et al., 2019, p. 44.
260 UNICEF, 2022b.

self-harm, speech difficulties, and behavioural shifts such as bedwetting or aggression.[261] Yet across the CMR, front-line actors confirm that children's suffering is often misread – or ignored entirely – due to overstretched systems with limited or no child-focused mental health capacity. These gaps leave invisible wounds untreated and compound the long-term psychological risks faced by children in transit. According to UNICEF, children exposed to prolonged insecurity and displacement face a high risk of long-term psychological harm, especially where mental health concerns remain unidentified and unaddressed.[262]

"The shame of not sending money home is unbearable. Some of them spiral into addiction or depression."

Frontliner, Italy.

1.4.6. Limited Protection in Reception and Return Contexts

In transit and destination, children face incredible uncertainty, challenges and are at risk of dangers including criminal networks. Cultural and linguistic create more vulnerabilities differences hinder the effectiveness of child protection efforts, especially for those who have not received education in their home countries. Children's primary needs include trauma-informed mental health services, stable accommodation and vocational training. Protection from debt bondage and exploitation by criminal networks is critical. Opportunities include structured transitional support services, expanded psychosocial care and accessible vocational education programmes.

The frontliner respondents shared that Tunisian and Nigerian children reported being organized by and/or recruited into organized criminal networks immediately upon arrival. Nigerian girls are vulnerable to being trafficked into sexual exploitation rings, where they also experience violence and coercion by traffickers. Many children leave Reception Centres prematurely to reach specific destinations, following the guidance recruiters gave them prior to migrating, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation.

Economic distress and misinformation about European asylum processes significantly increase vulnerabilities. Reunification efforts are hampered by difficulties in family tracing, particularly for children from conflict-affected countries like the Sudan.

After the migration journey, younger migrant girls remain vulnerable to gender-based violence and exploitation. Unaccompanied girls struggle without caregivers and often find it difficult to access essential services like health care, housing, and education. Social isolation and bullying in new communities can further hinder their integration. Boys face daily uncertainty, violence and exploitation while waiting for asylum processing.

After migrating, younger boys are at risk of drug abuse and are often recruited to gangs, or targeted by them. Unaccompanied boys may lack the support of caregivers, making it harder for them to access necessary services. Additionally, young boys are often pushed into hazardous labour, taking on dangerous work to survive. Social isolation and bullying are also significant challenges children face as they try to adapt to their new environment.

[261] Save the Children, 2023, p. 7.
[262] UNICEF, 2022c, p. 3.

There are new and significant stressors that children experience approaching adulthood in both transit and destination contexts. For unaccompanied migrant children in transit along the CMR, protection risks do not ease upon arrival – they shift, multiply and often intensify. Children nearing adulthood face a fragile and deeply uneven protection landscape, where legal rights on paper rarely translate into care in practice. Although Italian legislation allows children to remain in care until age 21 under certain conditions, access to this continued protection is inconsistent.[263] As frontliners shared, and reported in At a Crossroads notes, support depends heavily on local decisions, resources, and whether a child already holds a valid residence permit.[264] Many municipalities do not systematically initiate these procedures, and some front-line actors reported that municipalities have faced severe financial strain when attempting to support young adults beyond age 18 without dedicated national funding.

Even when legal pathways exist, children face bureaucratic complexity and insufficient time to act on them. Many arrive around the ages of 16 or 17 and feel that they are expected to become autonomous before they've had a chance to learn the language, finish school, or access job training. These structural limitations were highlighted repeatedly in the research, where young people were found to enter adulthood without documentation, income, or housing, despite being theoretically eligible for all three.[265] Front-line workers explained that services are often prioritized for newly arrived children, leaving older adolescents behind as resources stretch thin. One caseworker reflected the fear many children carry:

> *"When you turn 18 in Italy, you are suddenly nothing. No papers, no shelter, no protection. This is when they find you."*
>
> Front-line worker, Italy.

The Triple Transition of Unaccompanied Migrant Children

INSIGHT

The transition to adulthood for unaccompanied migrant children is shaped by three overlapping dimensions – often described by practitioners and experts as a "triple transition":[266]

- **The developmental transition to adulthood**, as experienced by all young people, involving identity formation, increasing responsibility, and social and emotional change;
- **The geographic and cultural transition**, as children navigate movement from their country of origin to a new and often unfamiliar legal, linguistic, and cultural environment;
- **The psychological transition of trauma recovery**, as children attempt to heal from experiences of violence, exploitation, or displacement that occurred before, during, or after their migration journey.

These transitions do not happen sequentially but simultaneously – often while children face legal uncertainty, housing instability, and systemic exclusion. Supporting unaccompanied children into adulthood requires approaches that reflect this full, complex reality.

[263] Italy, Law No. 47 of 7 April 2017, *Disposizioni in materia di misure di protezione dei minori stranieri non accompagnati*, Article 13. p. 47.
[264] UNICEF et al., 2019, pp. 72–73.
[265] UNICEF et al., 2019, pp. 41–44, 53, 72–73.
[266] UNICEF and Médecins du Monde, as cited in UNICEF et al., 2019, p. 9.

Eloise – Unaccompanied Girl from the Sudan – in Egypt

STORY

In 2024, a 15-year-old girl fled the war in the Sudan by herself across the desert: "the journey was incredibly tough, lasting more than two weeks and filled with hardship." She eventually reached Cairo, where she stayed with her aunt and cousins. *"Even though my father sent my aunt money for me from Sudan, she kept pressuring me to find a job,"* Eloise said. After returning one day from searching for employment, she found that her relatives had left without informing her. *"I found that they had moved apartments and left me behind."* Left alone, Eloise stayed temporarily with the building guard, who referred her to IOM. With support from IOM, she was able to meet her basic needs and eventually reunite with her mother, who arrived in Egypt two months later. *"They provided me with some support, which helped me get by until I was able to reunite with my mother who arrived in Egypt a couple of months later."*

Children frequently experience separation from their families during journeys orchestrated by smugglers or because of police raids and detention practices in Libya. Many children are also abandoned or become separated from caregivers when parents die, are detained, or abandon them due to extreme circumstances. These children face intensified vulnerabilities, left to survive alone under harsh and precarious conditions. The lack of documentation further complicates reunification efforts. Girls released from detention centres are especially vulnerable to re-trafficking and harassment by the same criminal networks. Family tracing is complex and protracted, especially for children separated from their families during the journey. Limited contact information, combined with the remote and challenging environment, complicates reunification. Family tracing for unaccompanied children is difficult, especially if children cannot recall contact details or if their home countries do not have embassies in Libya, this significantly hampers the process of reunification. Providing adequate care for unaccompanied babies within community hosting programmes remains a significant challenge due to the lack of available caregivers.

There are often difficulties in tracing the families of migrant children from North Africa as there are fears and emotional ramifications associated with their perceived and/or real failures to provide economically. Shame and guilt associated with failing family expectations often result in profound psychological breakdowns, including suicidal ideation, depression and substance abuse.

One frontliner in Libya said that families from francophone countries often reject the children, *"some families refuse to take the child back because they are afraid, or not able to or think they're better off in Libya."* Many children on this route return to their country as they were offered voluntary returns if they are 'trapped in transit' for many reasons with no possibility to go further ahead or reach Europe. An internal evaluation of vulnerable migrant children in North Africa of vulnerable children who returned, showed that they did not want to remain in detention (33%), faced very difficult living conditions (20%), sought better opportunities in their country of origin (13%), ran out of money (13%), could not reach their intended destination (7%), missed their family (7%) and felt their family back home needed them (7%).

> *"There is a high incidence of delinquent behaviours, such as aggression and drug use in refugee facilities due to untreated trauma."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

Paul – Separated Boy from the Sudan – in Transit

STORY

Paul, a separated child from the Sudan, was just 10 years old when he arrived in Egypt in April 2024 with his stepmother. Initially brought for "educational purposes," he was instead forced to work 12-hour days and was given steroids without consent. *"She made me work every day for 12 hours while giving me steroids,"* his grandfather later explained. *"He still has tremors and mental issues because of them."* Paul described his early months in Egypt: *"I stayed with my stepmother until my grandfather arrived in July 2024. I didn't eat well. My father sent her money for me, but she spent it on her sons. When my grandfather came, she disappeared. I prefer staying with him. I used to live with him in Sudan."* Paul is now in his grandfather's care, and is receiving proper meals and support. IOM provided medical assistance for the effects of the steroid abuse and referred him to UNHCR to seek asylum.

1.5. RESILIENCE AND COPING STRATEGIES

1.5.1. Peer Support and Community Networks

Children consistently highlighted the emotional comfort gained by connecting with peers from their nationality, describing these relationships as providing vital feelings of belonging and mutual understanding. Front-line workers confirmed that unaccompanied children housed in community-based programmes visibly improved – appearing "more comfortable," laughing, playing and engaging more actively – when interacting with peers from their communities. Community members frequently organized culturally familiar and recreational activities, like football, significantly aiding emotional relief.

Front-line workers and children alike also described how unaccompanied children actively sought out connections to create stability and security, forming strong peer networks and engaging closely with diaspora communities. Children built trusting relationships with adults, such as social workers, teachers and religious leaders, often forming "new families" in their destination countries. In some cases, community support and a sense of belonging are vital coping mechanisms for migrant children, particularly those who are unaccompanied or separated from their families. The support offers emotional stability and protection and can improve their well-being. When communities provide a safer environment, children are more likely to cope well with their migration experiences.

However, in some situations the communities themselves navigate informal systems, rather than referring cases to authorities, which may offer immediate support, but lack accountability, potentially exposing children to neglect, exploitation, or inadequate care. The fear of authorities, lack of information and access to public services contributes to this as well. Despite this, informal community care can be beneficial by offering immediate shelter, food and emotional support. This is often the only solution.

According to MiMOSA, up to 5 per cent of children are registered are unaccompanied, with 6 per cent on both the CMR and WMR.[267] Boys were more likely to be unaccompanied compared to girls. For youth migrants arriving in Europe, up to 56 per cent of males reported travelling alone compared to 43 per cent among females. Travelling alone was particularly dangerous for children crossing to

[267] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.

Europe, as they were more likely to be forced to work, held against their will, lack shelter and likely considered returning to their countries of origin.

> *"They arrive alone, but they find people - they build networks, friendships and sometimes even new families."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.5.2. Seeking Help and Protective Relationships

While one study from the Sahel showed that 83 per cent of people believed smugglers helped them, it showed that 58 per cent of migrants received assistance during their journey – primarily from smugglers, friends, or fellow migrants – compared to 43 per cent of independent travellers.[268] It also showed that those who used smugglers had greater access to aid (58%) than independent migrants (43%), as the NGOs and United Nations only provided support to 6 per cent and 2 per cent respectively.[269]

Front-line workers observed that some migrant children actively sought assistance from embassies or international organizations like IOM, especially after experiencing exploitation or detention. Both front-line staff and children emphasized forming protective relationships as critical coping mechanisms. Children sought relationships for protection. Frontliners and former unaccompanied migrant girls, expressed how girls and women, develop relationships, as well as being coerced or forced into them, which can act as a form of protection even if they are unsafe and exploitative. Survival sex is one prevalent coping mechanisms that is used on the physical journey as well as for those living in transit to gain protection and to survive.

> *"They carry this burden alone – knowing their families expect them to send money, but having no legal way to earn it."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.5.3. Information Gathering

Front-line workers observed that many migrant children displayed remarkable strategic thinking, arriving well-informed about critical survival information. Children reportedly arrived in Lampedusa, Italy already familiar with how to apply for residency permits, find shelter, and identify cities offering better opportunities, demonstrating their preparedness and resilience.

> *"They arrive prepared. They know where they need to go and what steps to take next."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.5.4. Family Connections

Maintaining family ties emerged as one of the most emotionally significant coping strategies during transit. Front-line workers emphasized that facilitating family calls and related activities significantly helped children process trauma, manage isolation and sustain emotional resilience. Frontliners shared how regular contact with the families, with mobile phones emerged as a key positive coping mechanism.

> *"The only thing that helped was calling my mom. But when I couldn't call her, I felt desperate."*
>
> Former Unaccompanied Migrant girl from Nigeria, in Libya

[268] MMC, 2025a, p. 15.
[269] Ibid.

1.5.5. Holding onto Dreams and Aspirations

Children described maintaining aspirations and dreams as vital emotional coping strategies. One Nigerian girl, who fled forced labour in Libya, explicitly emphasized her continued aspirations, stating clearly that she dreams of becoming "a fashion designer or a barista." Other children similarly cited educational and employment aspirations as essential motivators, amidst distress. One frontliner in Italy shared how *"…education gave them a goal, a future – it made them feel like they still had choices."*

> *"…Resilience can only get you to some point. It has to be based on something. If you lose hope, you collapse. And we see it time and time again. Children arrive thinking life will start, and then they realize there are legal hurdles, no work, no documents. And so you lose your objective, you lose your resilience, and at one point, you snap."*
>
> Fabio, frontliner in Italy.

1.5.6. Faith and Religious Practices

Front-line workers identified faith as providing significant emotional and psychological support, particularly for those who grew up with this, such as for Sudanese and Somali children. Prayer offered comfort, structure, and hope amidst uncertainty.

> *"Some children tell me that prayer is the only thing that helps them keep going. It reminds them they have a future, even when they feel lost."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.5.7. Creative Expression

Front-line workers noted that many children, especially from the Sudan, Guinea and Eritrea, utilized artistic and creative expressions, such as drawing, poetry, storytelling and music as therapeutic coping mechanisms. Creative outlets allowed children to process traumatic experiences, reclaim narrative control, and manage emotional distress effectively. One frontliner in Italy shared how *"some children use drawing and storytelling to make sense of their experiences. It's their way of processing what happened to them."*

> *"Some kids who were completely broken when they arrived found a second life through painting or playing football. It gave them structure, a way to express themselves."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.5.8. Sports and Education

Front-line workers described structured sports activities, particularly football, as critical for community building, inclusion and avoidance of criminal involvement among Egyptian and Tunisian boys. Education and vocational training similarly offered stability and purposeful futures. Children also engaged actively in advocacy, forming self-organized support networks to push for improved migrant rights and conditions. Front-line workers highlighted that many children from Guinea, Nigeria and the Sudan actively pursue educational programmes and engage in advocacy as ways of coping with their circumstances. Education provides stability, a future goal, and a sense of agency. Children also formed self-organized support networks, advocating for improved migrant rights and conditions.

> *"Some find hope in education and vocational training. It gives them a goal, a future."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.5.9. Sharing Experiences and Seeking Connection

The detailed accounts provided by children during Best Interest Assessments (BIAs) and case management processes suggest a willingness to share their stories and experiences. This act of narration can be a crucial step in processing trauma and seeking connection with others. The fact that many children share similar stories might also foster a sense of shared experience and mutual support within their communities. However, they also reported tensions between different nationalities. One frontliner in Libya shared one case where a girl who was unbelievably traumatized, had completely transformed with the connection after *"…she was living in the forest. Couldn't speak. Afraid of people. Now she's laughing and engaging again."*

1.5.10. Dissociation, Aggression, Post Traumatic Stress and Emotional Suppression

Front-line workers confirmed observing severe depression, suicidal ideation, and self-harm among trafficked Guinean and Nigerian girls who had experienced severe exploitation, forced transactional sex work and trafficking in transit countries. Emotional suppression and psychological detachment frequently emerged as coping mechanisms among traumatized children. Workers described children arriving with significant accumulated trauma, leading to aggressive behaviours, difficulties trusting others, and emotional numbness. Emotional suppression temporarily shielded children but hindered meaningful emotional engagement and recovery. Front-line workers particularly noted Sudanese children with war trauma often exhibited PTSD symptoms, including aggression, hypervigilance, emotional outbursts, and difficulties trusting authority figures. Many engaged in high-risk behaviours or excessive informal labour due to anxiety and familial pressures.

Former migrant children reported many shocking coping responses as one former unaccompanied migrant girl from Nigeria in Libya, described: *"I tried to commit suicide. I drank a bottle of bleach."* When asking about her dreams, she later continuously cried out *"thank god I have a second chance. Thank god I am here now. Thank god, I can DREAM."* Other children in transit and destination countries, dissociate, and as frontliners in Italy explained that children adopted a survival-focused mentality termed "apnea," temporarily suppressing and compartmentalizing trauma to maintain daily functioning.

> *"They put their trauma on hold. It's the only way to survive."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

1.5.11. Psychological Distress

Frontliners in Europe reported a phenomenon where Somali girls who escaped forced marriage exhibited an interesting collective trauma response, with one girl fainting and subsequently triggering fainting in others within the same room. This "fading out" behaviour was frequent, occurring multiple times a week, demonstrating a significant and challenging psychosocial situation. Frontliners shared that these fainting episodes highlight how extreme emotional distress can manifest in physical symptoms, as a physiological coping response to overwhelming pressure.

Maritime Humanitarian Emergency "Pylos" Shipwreck

INSIGHT

Children rescued from shipwrecks, such as the Pylos, were reported to be in a "psychopathic situation", indicating severe psychological distress.[270] Testimonies shared that boat capsized with up to 750 people onboard, while only 104 were rescued and 82 bodies were retrieved.

As one protection specialist notes, *"approximately 500 people may have lost their lives there, those who were rescued from that shipwreck were referred to our accommodation facilities"*. He emphasized that there was no correct clinical terminology or translation for this "psychopathic situation," which he used to describe the severe state of psychological distress and disturbance in these children, stemming from the trauma of surviving a shipwreck where a large number perished in Pylos. As another frontliner shared, *"it was not only that shipwreck; there were also more. It had a very negative impact to the secondary situation of the children",* highlighting that multiple shipwreck incidents contribute to the severe psychological distress of the children in their care. The protection specialist also expressed concern that *"in some cases, you know that their staff may not be that much well trained to support those challenges"*, acknowledging the difficulty in supporting children who have endured such extreme trauma. Other protection specialists share the ripples of missing migrants in countries of origin, where they never hear of their children again, as national missing persons reports are not linked internationally.

1.5.12. Solitude, Isolation and Emotional Withdrawal

Children explicitly described isolating themselves or emotionally withdrawing as coping strategies to manage intense stress or overwhelming emotions. Front-line workers confirmed observing these behaviours, recognizing prolonged silence and withdrawal as children's attempts to regain emotional balance and reduce anxiety. Children described experiencing chronic fear and anxiety linked to threats of arrest, detention and their undocumented status. Front-line workers noted this persistent apprehension often manifested as anger, quietness, distrust, and severe psychological strain.

They explained clearly that limited access to specialized mental health care complicated children's abilities to manage emotional challenges and post-traumatic stress. Frontliners in Libya said that *"children take psychiatric medications like drugs – to calm down, to survive."*

In Libya, one former unaccompanied migrant girl from Nigeria said that, *"if it's the one who has anger issues, they have to go to bed, we don't go close to them. They have to be left to themselves. They have to go to somewhere far away where nobody can see them, to go stop themselves, or even go to bed, to sleep."* Another woman, in transit says *"sometimes, I just wanted to be alone. I would go somewhere quiet."*

[270] IOM and UNHCR, 2024.

1.5.13. Substance Abuse, Crime and Detachment

Front-line workers noted coping mechanisms among Tunisian and Egyptian children, including substance abuse and criminal activities (such as theft), driven by survival, financial pressures, as well as family expectations. They characterized these negative coping methods as children's symptomatic responses to extreme despair, rather than deliberate choices. Extreme emotional pressures also led children to negative coping strategies, such as crime or disappearance from shelters, often driven by overwhelming burdens of perceived failure. Front-line workers also observed the misuse of psychiatric medication intended for therapeutic purposes. Workers explained this misuse as children's attempts to manage anxiety, depression, and acute emotional distress. Substance use was described explicitly as indicative of children's severe lack of healthier coping mechanisms and supportive resources.

> *"Many children feel like they have failed their families. They carry this burden alone. Some disappear, some turn to crime, and some just lose themselves."*
>
> – Frontliner in Italy.

1.5.14. Resistance – Structure and Support

A notable trend observed, particularly among children arriving from Egypt in the last six months prior to the discussions, is the presence of "very deliberate behaviours". These behaviours include a significant level of aggressiveness towards beneficiaries of other nationalities, specifically Egyptians towards Afghanis and Pakistanis. This manifests as bullying, harassment, and actual violence, with some children requiring hospitalization due to violent incidents. This aggression can be interpreted as a negative coping mechanism stemming from their experiences and potentially exacerbated by their unfamiliarity with the accommodation environment and social norms.

Frontliners in Italy shared that these children have not experienced safety, stability or structure, and realized that there are "no consequences" for their actions, which is reported to be triggering a lot of delinquent acts. This lack of perceived accountability may contribute to the continuation and potential escalation of negative behaviours as a maladaptive way of navigating their environment. While accommodation facilities aim to provide safety and support, some children may find it difficult to adjust to the stricter framework. Having been accustomed to more independence and fewer boundaries, they may resist the rules and routines, which can be seen as a negative reaction to a system intended to help them.

The sources indicate that drug use is another negative coping mechanism observed among some children. This can be a way to self-medicate against trauma, anxiety, or the difficulties of their situation. They may engage in and abuse drugs, or involve themselves with gangs

1.5.15. Art, Culture, Sports and Religion

The focus groups showed that younger girls and boys in transit countries experienced positive coping mechanisms including through expressing their emotions by painting and drawing. For older children, religion is one of the key strategies they find comfort in. Children who have been brought up in religious environments tend to seek comfort in praying. Another is sports, where many children find comfort in playing and/or watching sports. Children find it beneficial to seek support from migrant communities when in transit countries, including through Community-Based Organizations. Community leaders and well-established organizations in Egypt provide powerful opportunities for migrant children to seek urgent protection support, or referrals as well as providing powerful psychosocial opportunities for children to heal and connect, using art, theatre, culture, music and poetry.

1.6. CHILDREN'S DREAMS AND VIEWS

One former unaccompanied migrant girl from Nigeria in Libya said, *"… if I were the president, I will give my people a better life, a deeper life, not making them go so far. Give them their needs. Everything beautiful, yeah, take children to school, do many things to the prices, not making things expensive…. I'll change the high economics, yeah, then better everything, like the prices of everything not expensive, down to how they can afford."*

One Nigerian former unaccompanied migrant girl's experience of trafficking has fuelled her dream to fight back; *"my dream is becoming a lawyer because I want to be in charge investigating and dealing with human trafficking. I want my country to be proud."* Another victim of trafficking was inspired by the humanitarian caseworkers that she met *"I want to do the work you are doing now… I want to be popular, be a lawyer… do the work like you are doing."*

One musician from Nigeria who primarily spoke to the years of continuous trauma, sexual exploitation and violence, felt more comfortable speaking of violence than her dreams, and at the end of the FGD she finally shared her true authentic desires, about how she still secretly holds onto her dream of music: *"I want to sing… I want to be a lead singer. I sing gospel songs."* Another, longs to rebuild her life back home: *"I want to go back to my job. I want to achieve."* And many simply dream of family reunion: *"I want to go back to my country, Nigeria… see my mum… my siblings… I will give thanks to go meet my daddy."* The women desired to feel a sense of achievement and safety in speaking about and realizing their true dreams.

One girl in Libya reflected soberly on her journey, acknowledging both the brutality and the wisdom gained: *"we learn from it… It's two in one. It's good and bad."* Former unaccompanied migrant girls urged that their eldest daughters be prioritized, as the breadwinners for their families, through education and business: *"some have to go to school, some have to do their business... even if you're the first daughter of the house, you need money to support the family – not depend on your mom or brothers or sisters. You have to support yourself to be independent."*

Another Nigerian girl encouraged peers to trust themselves: *"Follow their minds, not listen to whatever someone says to them. Also play business with you and help you support the family."* One girl shared a clear warning: *"Libya is a good country, too, but we Nigerian girls are pointed to prostitute work, so I asked my friend to stay back."*

Several former unaccompanied migrant girls from Nigeria, in Libya urged future migrants to avoid the path they took and stay safe at home: *"what I would like to share… they should investigate before going on a journey. We should be okay with what we have. Work hard… because if you work hard, you will get what you want."* Another shared that *"my own advice… they should be content with what they have."* And others warned that *"I want to tell them what I faced during my own time. I wouldn't like them to face the same thing. They should be careful."* Above all, they stressed their own right to safety, dignity, and opportunity. *"We dream of better life conditions than where we came from,"* one said. *"We need protection, safe housing, and access to services,"* added another. While they acknowledge that "migration is challenging," their determination to survive and rebuild shines through.

Former migrant children described deep fears about survival, legal limbo, and pressure to meet family expectations. Sudanese and Somali children worried about deportation, abandonment and unpaid migration debts. Tunisian and Egyptian children felt overwhelmed by the responsibility to send money home, often making risky choices under pressure. One frontliner in Italy shared that, that no matter where they are, *"they don't know if they will be allowed to stay or if they will be sent back. The fear of being deported keeps them awake at night."* Misinformation and fear are pervasive, despite the Zampa law which was the comprehensive act to and European model to protect refugee and

migrant children.[271] Front-line workers emphasized that boys also face harsh realities – detention, desert crossings, smuggler abuse, and extreme deprivation. Unaccompanied children in Libya remain especially exposed, living without protection under constant threat. Across all routes, children voiced urgent needs: protection from trafficking, forced labour, sexual violence and harmful practices. They asked for safe shelter, sanitation, health care, psychosocial care and legal assistance. Somali girls and Egyptian boys called for stronger case management, family tracing, trained cultural mediators, interpreters, and front-line staff who understand their context.

Children nearing 18 years of age in transit countries, but in particular in Italy, expressed their growing anxiety about losing support, and as frontliners shared, "legal protections". Many feared becoming undocumented, homeless, or excluded from services. Regret over missed opportunities – schooling, identity papers and jobs – was common, with children recognizing how these gaps shaped a precarious future. One frontliner in Italy said, *"many children feel like they've failed their families. They carry this burden alone. Some disappear, some turn to crime, and some just lose themselves."* The frontliners in transit and destination countries were strongly concerned that this is where the children nearing adulthood are most at risk.

These fears often overlapped with exploitation by traffickers or criminal networks, as children felt compelled to support their families. Emotional distress ran deep – depression, isolation, and fear of criminalization or institutionalization were widespread. Fear of returning home was particularly acute for girls, due to stigma linked to sexual violence, trafficking, or transactional sex work. Debt bondage added to their sense of hopelessness.

[271] UNICEF, 2017.

2 WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE

2.1. UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN'S STORIES

MOROCCO – Two Friends, Eight Years, Endless Resilience

STORY

Two young boys from Guinea embarked on an arduous eight-year migration journey together, beginning their quest at the age of 14, driven by poverty, family conflicts, and dreams of a brighter future. Their path took them through Mali, the Niger, Algeria and finally Morocco, where eight years later they were still in transit. They endured severe deprivation, violence, forced labour, human trafficking, kidnapping, robbery, arbitrary detention and other threats to life, as well as the gruelling 30-day walk overland from the Niger to Algeria.

One of the boys vividly recounted their encounter with armed guards in the desert, stating, *"They asked us to kneel in the desert and threatened us with rifles to our heads... they even killed my friend in front of me, shot him right in the head."* They cried when reiterating how powerless they felt when was forced to leave girls behind in the desert to die of dehydration and exhaustion when they couldn't walk anymore. They felt despair when other girls were segregated from the group and systematically raped, and at the border when girls were sold to traffickers to be taken to camp for transactional sexual exploitation. Despite witnessing this profound trauma, he found strength in his friend's tragic end: *"I felt courage seeing how they killed my friend in front of me. I decided to go on, I refuse to let go, I refuse to be weak."*

Their journey was further plagued by extreme hardships such as exploitation, robbery, and violence, with one of them stating, *"My skin was cut open, the Algerians did this to me."* Despite these trials, their dreams remained steadfast – one aspired to become a football player, hoping to join a football academy, while the other dreamed of continuing his studies to become a skilled craftsman. The aspiring footballer had a huge vision for humanity: *"Football for me, can unite everyone, so it's a great tool for unity."*

WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN ROUTE MAP

Source: *The Annual Global Overview of Migration Routes 2024*.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration and United Nations Children's Fund.

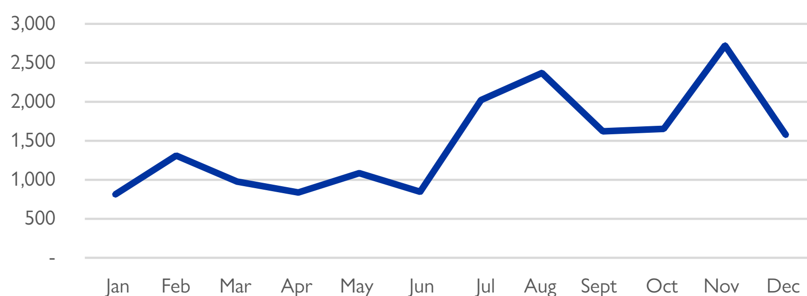
2.2. MIGRANT TRENDS

The number of children migrating along the Western Mediterranean Route, pass through Morocco and Algeria and potentially onwards towards Spain, are increasing, particularly for children escaping poverty, violence, harmful cultural practices, and seeking economic stability and safety in Europe.[272] Economic reasons, intense familial expectations, and profound gender-specific vulnerabilities heavily influence migration decisions for children across this route.[273]

In 2023, an estimated 10,287 migrant children arrived in Spain by land and sea – more than double the number recorded in 2022 (4,369), marking a 135 per cent increase.[274] Among the children who arrived, 89 per cent were unaccompanied and separated (9,131) which was a 163 per cent rise from the previous year (3,466).[275] Most of the children who arrived were from Mali, Morocco and Senegal.[276]

In Spain, approximately 10,287 children arrived by both sea and land in 2023 which was an increase of 135 per cent increase compared to 2022. Figure 27 shows how the monthly arrivals to Spain through the WMR increased significantly in mid-2024, peaking in August with over 3,000 arrivals before declining slightly in the final quarter. The seasonal spike reflects increased movement during summer months, likely driven by calmer seas and reduced enforcement. Of the children who arrived, 89 per cent were unaccompanied and separated children (9,131), which increased by 163 per cent compared to 2022.[277] Most of these children were from Mali, Morocco and Senegal.[278] These statistics reflect the WMR and the WAAR combined as the Government of Spain encompasses the Canary Islands. Only a small number arrive in Europe, however, with the majority migrating from Morocco (58%) and Algeria (35%).[279]

Figure 31. Monthly Migrant Arrivals to Spain on the WMR (January–December 2024)



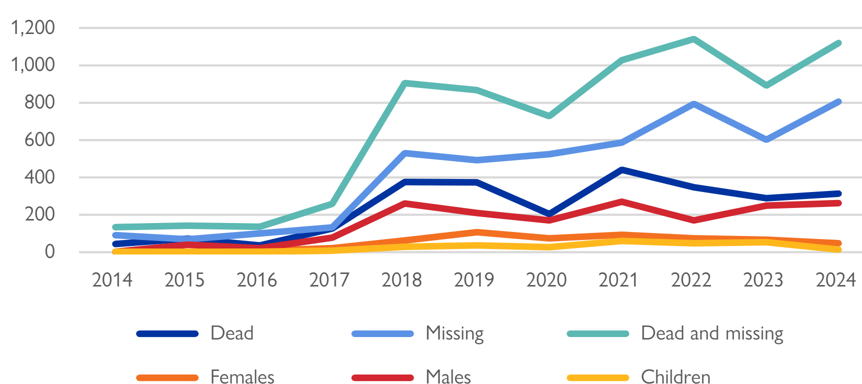
Source: DTM Arrivals 2024, n=18,835.

The DTM survey showed that 82 per cent of migrant youth along the WMR, departed and arrived in Europe on the same day, which means that the countries closest, experienced the shortest, most direct journeys of any route. The cost of migrating was also less on this route, with 58 per cent of WMR respondents reporting spending under USD 1,000. Only 7 per cent spent more than USD 2,500.[280]

272 MMC, 2025b.
273 IOM and UNICEF, 2017.
274 UNHCR et al., 2024, p. 1.
275 Ibid.
276 Ibid.
277 Ibid., based on Spain Ministry of Interior's statistics and UNHCR's estimates.
278 UNHCR et al., 2024, p. 1.
279 IOM, 2024d, p. 8.
280 IOM, 2024d, p. 17.

WMR youth had the highest education levels of all the routes, where 15 per cent had tertiary education, and six per cent had no formal education compared to other routes.[281] WMR had the highest employment rates pre-departure with 63 per cent who were employed or self-employed before migrating.[282]

Figure 32. Migrant Deaths and Disappearances on WMR (2014–2024)



Source: Missing Migrants Project (2014–2024), n=4,291.

The WMR remains a deadly maritime migration route for children. Between 2014 and 2024, at least 4,291 migrants were reported dead or missing on this route – including 148 children, who made up 3.4 per cent of total recorded deaths and disappearances, and 288 women (approximately 11%). Most fatalities occurred during sea crossings from Algeria and Morocco to Spain, including the Canary Islands, as well as attempts to cross land borders into Ceuta and Melilla. While the WMR is geographically shorter, it is consistently more dangerous for children despite the proximity to Europe as well as protection risks associated with maritime "push backs," "pull backs," relocations, movements and detention or detention like situations. Figure 28 illustrates a steady rise on the WMR over the past decade, with the highest number of total missing and dead migrants recorded in 2023. Notably, the number of disappearances consistently exceeds confirmed deaths, indicating ongoing challenges in tracking and identifying those lost at sea. Children remain underrepresented in the data, suggesting serious gaps in age-disaggregated reporting.

In 2024 alone, 581 migrant deaths and disappearances were recorded on this route, of which 473 were due to drowning – making it the leading cause of death. Other causes included exposure to harsh environmental conditions (79 deaths), hazardous transport-related incidents (9 deaths) and violence (3 deaths). Compared to other major routes, the WMR sees relatively fewer violent incidents, but continues to be deadly due to unsafe sea crossings and inadequate protection mechanisms. In 2024, the most affected nationalities that could be identified were Algerians (27%) and Moroccans (7%), however, the overwhelming majority, 66 per cent of all victims were listed as "unknown nationality," highlighting persistent gaps in identification, documentation and family tracing. This invisibility continues to distort data, delay accountability and leave families without closure – particularly those with missing children.

There were 31 women (5%) and 9 children (2%) recorded this same year.[283] However, only one child could be identified as Algerian. Most children die as a result of drowning, where 78 per cent of child deaths were due overcrowded and unseaworthy boats capsizing near the coast or failing mid-journey, while the remainder linked to exposure and dehydration (22%) after days at sea without food, water, or medical care.[284] These conditions reflect the absence of coordinated rescue, safe disembarkation, or protection mechanisms – despite the WMR being geographically shorter than the CMR.

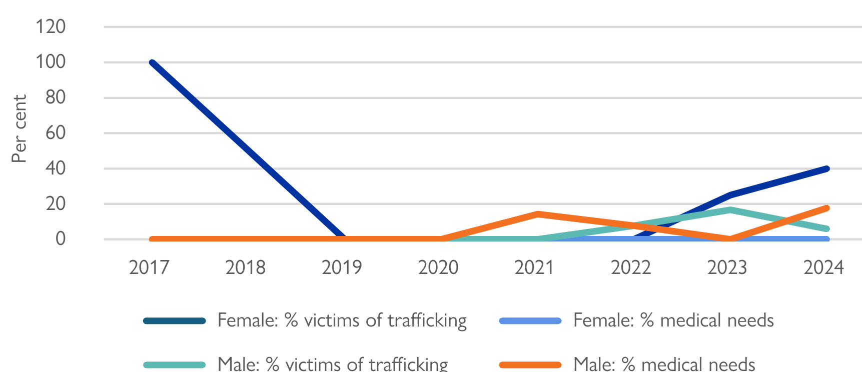
[281] IOM, 2024d, p. 10.
[282] Ibid.
[283] IOM, 2025a.
[284] Ibid.

Female fatalities on the WMR declined in recent years but remain significant. In 2024, 31 women were recorded as dead or missing, compared to much higher levels in previous years, such as 498 in 2018. Many women on this route are often travelling with children or in mixed groups and facing similar conditions and risks at sea and which are largely unassisted.

There was a decrease in recorded child deaths in 2024, the overall number of missing migrants on the WMR has been on an upward trajectory since 2020, reflecting rising departures in the wake of COVID-19 and the continued lack of legal or safe migration channels.

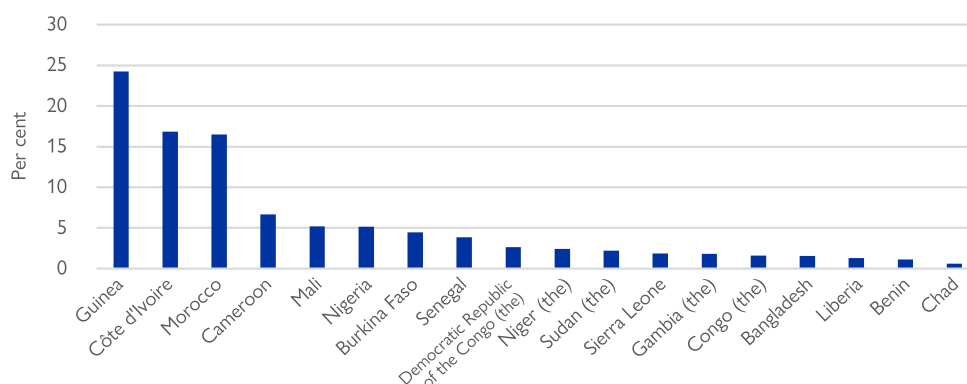
WMR youth had the highest education levels of all the routes, 15 per cent had tertiary education, and 6 per cent had no formal education compared to other routes.[285] WMR had the highest employment rates pre-departure with 63 per cent who were employed or self-employed before migrating.[286]

Figure 33. Vulnerable Migrant Case Categories by Gender (2017–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Registrations (2017–2024).

Figure 34. Countries of Origin for Vulnerable Registered Children (2020–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Registrations (2020–2024), n=2,624.

285 IOM, 2024d.
286 Ibid.

Conversely, vulnerable children who registered with in transit countries along the WMR in 2024, originated from Guinea (7%), Côte d'Ivoire (5%) and Morocco (4%). Over the past four years, the vulnerable children who registered along the WMR primarily originated from Guinea (24%), Côte d'Ivoire (17%), and Morocco (17%), followed by Cameroon (7%), Mali (5%), Nigeria (5%), Burkina Faso (4%), Senegal (4%), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (3%), and the Niger, the Sudan, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, the Congo and Bangladesh (each 2%).[287]

For those who arrived in Europe, the DTM survey showed that the migration journey was shorter, however the qualitative findings show that for many migrants who are in transit, the journey can be extremely difficult for extended periods of time. Two youth from Guinea had been in transit for eight years, and knew many others in a similar situation, migrated through the Niger, Algeria and Morocco among other countries.

MiMOSA data indicated that the majority of the children on the WMR are under five years of age, which is a similar trend to the WAAR. Trends in children vulnerability indicates a high level of vulnerability in recent years (2020–2023) in Algeria with an overall of 17 per cent vulnerability and highest in 2022 at 33 per cent.[288] Child trafficking cases, however, remained a concern in 2023, with the overall number of registrations of children for case management totalled 2,598, and 135 unaccompanied children among them. In Algeria, the registration of unaccompanied and separated children has been increasing since 2020, peaking in 2022 at 29 per cent, of all children registered.[289] UASC assisted in Morocco were more likely to be identified as from Somalia (92%), Guinea-Bissau (83%) and Eritrea (60%).

IOM assisted 13,054 children to voluntarily return to their countries of origin (between 2014 to 2024) in North Africa. A longitudinal evaluation of this, showed that children who received reintegration support reached notably higher satisfaction rates for children departing Morocco, on the WMR compared to Egypt and Libya on the CMR.[290]

The recent policy frameworks for Moroccan nationals to move to Portugal may have increased trends towards Europe. Other policy that may change mobility patterns, include the independence of Burkina Faso, the Republic of Mali and the Republic of the Niger and the introduction of new passports, free movement and residency for these three nationalities. The movement away from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) from January 2025 may additionally create new movements internally.[291]

2.3. MIGRATION DRIVERS

2.3.1. Environmental Shocks and Displacement

Front-line workers emphasized that children from Nigeria and Cameroon arriving along the WMR were frequently impacted by environmental shocks in their countries of origin. They noted that the widespread flooding across West and Central Africa in 2024, which displaced 1.1 million people across 11 countries, contributed to rising vulnerabilities.[292] This environmental devastation, combined with economic fragility and insecurity, was cited as a growing factor influencing adolescent migration toward Algeria and Morocco, where protection risks persist.

[287] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
[288] Ibid.
[289] Ibid.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Press Statement.
[292] GPC, 2024, p. 6.

Similar to the countries migrating along the CMR, the 2024 monsoon floods impacted 7.2 million people on the WMR route, across the Sahel, with widespread displacement in countries including Mali and Algeria – core overland transit hubs leading to Morocco. The destruction of homes and livelihoods heightened protection risks and prompted more children and families to migrate north toward the WMR.[293]

The DTM showed that 46 per cent of migrant youth on the WMR cited slow environmental changes as their primary reason for migrating.[294] In Algeria, for instance, 53 per cent of respondents in Europe, mentioned that water scarcity has affected their environment prior to their departure, while others mentioned biodiversity loss (12%) and drought (11%), loss of production or damage to property (17%).[295]

In contrast, only 6 per cent of migrant youth on the CMR said that said that slow environmental changes or sudden natural disasters was their core reason.[296] Meanwhile 5 per cent on the WAAR reported this as their core reason for migrating.[297]

Uniquely on this route, children migrate due to internal displacement and forced evictions by State actions. Specifically, girls from countries like Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire flee violent evictions and destruction of neighbourhoods, compounding existing vulnerabilities and hastening their migration decisions. Children may migrate due to a lack of means of living and to improve their economic situation. Some migrate alone or with traffickers, while others travel with acquaintances, aunts, or uncles. One former migrant girl from Mail in Mauritania, recounted generational displacement and mass evictions in countries without war, in West Africa: *"My mother died due to sadness. They were beaten and forced to leave their houses."*

> *"Forced evictions by authorities push young girls and their families into desperate migration decisions, often without adequate planning or protection."*
>
> Female Frontliner in Morocco.

2.3.2. Fleeing Gender-Based Violence

Furthermore, widespread harmful traditional practices like forced marriage and gender-based violence drive migration, especially among girls from Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and neighbouring West African countries.[298]

Frontliners and former unaccompanied migrants shared that girls along this migration route were compelled or forced to migrate due to severe gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices in their home countries, notably Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Nigeria. Forced marriages arranged by families to significantly older men who treated them with sustained violence and abuse were frequently cited as critical reasons for their flight. Girls also faced additional threats of violence from male family members – fathers, brothers, or husbands – who enforced these marriages and punished attempts to escape.

Female front-line workers expressed shock at encountering the complexity and severity of medical emergencies arising from female genital mutilation. The profound physical and emotional trauma experienced by girls post-FGM necessitated emergency case management, rapid triage and new specialized medical interventions in transit countries. Girls fleeing these situations were further traumatized by systematic sexual violence, survival sex, and pregnancies resulting from forced marriages or sexual assault, significantly compounding their vulnerability during migration.

293 Ibid.
294 IOM, 2024d, p. 12.
295 IOM, 2024g, p. 8.
296 UNHCR, 2023, p. 5.
297 UNHCR et al., 2024, p. 3.
298 Save the Children, 2022.

"Girls migrate to seek freedom from the oppressive authority of fathers, brothers, and husbands, often fleeing violent marriages or threats if they attempt to leave."

– Female Frontliner in Morocco.

2.3.3. Psychological Pressure and Obligations

Child migrants on this route shoulder profound psychological burdens driven by intense family expectations to become economic providers, often perceived as their families' "saviour" or "magic wand" to escape poverty. This overwhelming sense of responsibility creates immense internal pressure, dramatically affecting their mental health and clouding decision-making, pushing them into desperate migration attempts. Consequently, these children become highly vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking in persons, and forced labour, as they relentlessly pursue dangerous opportunities to fulfil familial hopes, even at severe personal cost.

"The children carry the economic burden of their entire family on their little shoulders, internalizing an obsession to fulfil their obligation."

Frontliner in Morocco.

2.3.3. Economic Distress

Economic hardship remains a primary driver that compels children to take risks along the WMR. The DTM survey showed that 62 per cent of migrant youth said that their main reason for leaving their country of origin was the economic situation, while 18 per cent said this was because of the limited basic services. [299]

Families, particularly from Morocco, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire and Mali, experience intense poverty and unemployment, pushing children to migrate independently as an essential economic survival strategy for their entire family. Migration is often not voluntary but imposed by parents who see their children as the family's sole economic hope.

"I would like to cross to Europe to have a better life for my family because I want to enhance their economic situation."

Former Unaccompanied Migrant Boy from Guinea, in Morocco.

2.3.4. Educational, Vocational and Reunification Opportunities

Some drivers in transit countries include new legal migration provisions that facilitate work and residency opportunities between Portugal and Morocco. Family reunification and economic prospects is another, particularly from Morocco to Spain, France and Belgium. Limited educational infrastructure and inadequate vocational opportunities in origin and transit countries strongly drive children to migrate toward North Africa and Europe. Migrant children consistently express aspirations to continue their education or vocational training, such as nursing, teaching, or skilled trades like glass design, reflecting their clear understanding that education is vital for sustainable livelihoods and integration in Europe. One Senegalese migrant dreamed specifically of becoming a nurse or teacher, citing lack of funds for continued education in his home country as a primary motivator. One Guinean migrant-maintained hope of continuing vocational training as a glass designer once reaching Europe which was his family trade.

"I tried to enrol in school, but they said I need documents. I don't have papers; no school will take me."

Former Unaccompanied Migrant Boy from Guinea, in Morocco.

[299] IOM, 2024d, p. 12.

2.3.5. Dreams of Europe, Football and Professional Sports

Frontliners and migrants shared that the unique and quite specific driver for many migrant boys, particularly from West Africa (Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire), is the dream of becoming professional footballers in Europe. This aspiration is frequently exploited by fraudulent recruitment networks promising careers in European football academies. Migrants cite friends who successfully entered football academies in France or Spain as motivating examples, despite the reality often involving deception by agents.

Social media was used by 34 per cent of migrant youth who had access to migration-related information.[300] These digital narratives can reinforce unrealistic expectations of success and downplay the risks involved.[301] Former migrant children, shared how misinformation online led them to make impulsive, high-risk decisions, which is especially pertinent for children with limited education or support.[302]

> *"I dream of becoming a footballer. Friends who reached Morocco are now in football academies in France, living the dream."*
>
> Former Unaccompanied Migrant Boy from Guinea, in Morocco.

2.3.6. Independence and Agency

A recent study in Morocco showed that for Moroccan children preparing to migrate abroad, their friends are the dominant source of information (53%), and word of mouth (23%) compared to older youth regardless of being national or international, who more heavily rely on social media.[303] Conversely, international migrant children mostly rely on family (36%) as well as peers (26%) to migrate, while international youth rely on friends (29%) and social media (26%).[304] The influence of family tends to drop once migrant children reach adulthood.[305] Migrant children show agency and resilience, as well as incredible resourcefulness. Notably, unaccompanied Moroccan boys independently organizing dangerous boat crossings to Spain, shows simultaneous desperation and determination. Unique to this border, Moroccan children often travel solo and pool resources with other children to buy boats themselves, showing extraordinary resilience and proactive efforts to escape poverty.

> *"Some Moroccan children organize themselves, pool money, and buy boats to cross to Spain. It's risky but reflects their incredible determination."*
>
> Frontliner in Spain.

2.3.7. Perceived Salvation

The persistent vision of Europe as a place of safety, stability, education, and employment powerfully drives children's migration decisions. Despite dangers, children view Europe, particularly Spain and France, as their sole chance to secure better futures, reunite with family, or achieve long-held dreams. Spain's labour market and educational opportunities, despite harsh realities upon arrival, motivate dangerous journeys.

> *"Migrants come to Marrakesh begging just to save enough money to buy passage to Spain. Europe remains their powerful dream of salvation."*
>
> Frontliner in Morocco.

300 IOM, 2023d, p. 22.
301 Ibid., p. 24.
302 IOM, 2023a. DTM Flow Monitoring Survey.
303 IOM, 2023d, p. 16.
304 Ibid.
305 Ibid.

2.4. PROTECTION RISKS AND VULNERABILITIES IN TRANSIT

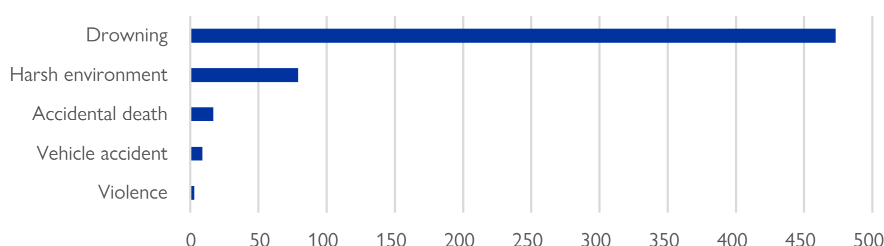
2.4.1. Overland and Maritime Dangers

Children migrating through transit countries like Morocco and Algeria, are primarily from sub-Saharan African countries like Guinea, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and the Gambia, endure the life-threatening journeys across the Sahara Desert, often lasting up to 30 days without sufficient access to water, food or shelter. Common modes of transport include trucks, buses, cars and occasionally trains.[306] Many children suffer severe injuries or death from falling off overcrowded trucks; others are tragically abandoned by transporters, left to die from dehydration, starvation, or exhaustion, unable to survive the extreme heat and harsh terrain on foot. Girls face intensified risks, including organized and systematic sexual violence, rape and forced pregnancies, significantly exacerbating their vulnerability during these perilous crossings. Nigerian and Malian girls report heightened vulnerability, especially during desert transits, where isolation facilitates exploitation and violence.

From there, they either attempt to cross the Alboran Sea in small boats or try to enter Spanish territories by climbing border fences.[307] The journey overland involves long treks across difficult terrain, where children are at risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse.[308] Crossing sea is extremely hazardous due to overcrowded and unseaworthy boats, leading to frequent shipwrecks and drownings.[309] Children attempting to scale border fences face physical injuries and are often subjected to pushbacks and violence from border authorities.[310] Migrants may arrive in Morocco where they may remain or continue their migration journey. The journey overland involves long treks across difficult terrain, where children are at risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. In 2023, Spain recorded a significant number of arrivals via this route, highlighting its continued use despite the risks.[311] Those intercepted often endure detention in Spain or face deportation back to Morocco, which poses legal uncertainties and humanitarian challenges for children, limiting their access to protection and support.[312]

In 2024, nine children died or went missing on this route. The main causes of death were drowning, harsh environmental conditions and lack of adequate needs, unknown causes, vehicle accidents or linked with hazardous transport, violence, sickness or lack of access to adequate health care and accidental deaths.[313] Key Informant Interviews identified that many families do not have closure, so many are separated or unaccompanied when someone goes missing, and often more family members migrate to find them. The family tracing can be almost impossible, and the bodies are not returned.

Figure 35. Causes of Deaths on WMR – 2024 (2014–2024)



Source: Missing Migrants Project data set (2014–2024), n=581.

[306] Save the Children, 2023.
[307] UNHCR, 2024b, p. 3.
[308] Human Rights Watch, 2023.
[309] European Commission, 2024.
[310] Save the Children, 2025, p. 29.
[311] UNHCR, 2024b, p. 3.
[312] European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), n.d.
[313] IOM, 2025b.

Children migrating through transit countries (such as Morocco) face physical dangers from crossing borders and legal challenges upon arrival.[314] In 2023, Morocco was one of the most common nationalities of origin (14%) for migrants to Europe[315,316] One insight on this route, is that unaccompanied children travelling through Morocco, Mauritania and Spain who are from Morocco, Mali and Senegal often self-organize journeys by pooling resources independently, showcasing resilience and agency, in contrast to other routes.

At Spain's heavily fortified borders in Melilla and Ceuta, migrant children frequently attempt dangerous crossings by scaling high, razor-wire fences or concealing themselves beneath or inside moving trucks. Such crossings result in severe injuries, including broken limbs, or fatalities from falls, crushing or suffocation. Focus group discussions describe violent pushbacks, forced returns and maritime expulsions. As one frontliner in Morocco said, *"children repeatedly arrested and deported display resilience, trying again and again – Europe is their persistent hope."* Deportations and forced returns routinely lead to family separation, leaving unaccompanied children stranded alone at isolated border regions without immediate access to support, heightening their susceptibility to trafficking in persons and exploitation.

> *"We tried five times. Each time they beat us and threw us back. I saw my friend fall from the fence and break his legs."*
>
> 15-year-old Guinean Migrant Boy in Morocco.

Near Melilla and Ceuta, girls attempting clandestine entry onto trucks face extreme risks, with frequent fatalities resulting from falls during transit. Additionally, systematic sexual violence and rape are disturbingly prevalent, with organized criminal networks preying upon their vulnerability during the entire transit. Boys, particularly from countries such as Burkina Faso and the Gambia, frequently endure severe physical violence at border crossings, detention and forced relocations. Moroccan and Malian children are particularly highlighted for repeatedly attempting dangerous border crossings, driven by resilience and determination, yet repeatedly subjected to violence and exploitation by authorities and criminal networks.

Girls are systematically targeted and subjected to organized sexual assaults, survival sex and exploitation for basic needs. Girls are at heightened risk of sexual and economic exploitation, facing gender-based violence and coercion within migrant networks. Boys are more likely to be detained by authorities due to their visibility in begging and informal work. Unaccompanied girls also face housing issues in Egypt.

> *"We ran out of food and water crossing the desert. We thought we would die there."*
>
> Former Unaccompanied Migrant Girl from Nigeria, in Libya.

2.4.2. Dangerous Experiences and Child Protection Risks

Children migrating through transit countries experience frequent forced relocations, often to remote or borders that are not near their home countries. Moroccan front-line workers detail these forced internal displacements of unaccompanied migrant children: *"authorities take them from the city and return them to their hometowns, preventing them from settling."* Such relocations routinely separate children from families, further exposing them to exploitation, trafficking in persons and repeated attempts at dangerous border crossings. Additionally, migrants, including children, risk detention without adequate family tracing or reunification support, leaving them isolated and trapped in cycles of displacement. One Moroccan frontliner underscores this cycle: *"They always migrate again and*

314 IOM et al., 2024.
315 IOM, 2023a.
316 Ibid.

again…when authorities arrest them, they apply legal protocol and send them back. But they return, trying again." Migrant children reported fear of accessing services fearful of being separated from their friends or family, and exposure to violence, forced displacement and police raids. One specific fear that children had was the use of dogs to scare them, and to prevent Moroccan boys from attempting port crossings. Migrant children are often subject to mass expulsions to desert towns without support, returning on foot with little assistance.

Children who arrived in Spain reported experiencing violence in transit countries (6% of children in Morocco, and 1% in Algeria).[317] Frontliners shared severe abuse cases documented in transit countries, where children were kidnapped, and held for extortion, thrown from buildings if their families fail to pay ransoms demanded by traffickers. The complexities of these trafficking networks and the violence involved highlight the extreme protection risks, including kidnapping, extortion and trafficking. In remote desert transit zones, children have been detained in inhumane conditions while traffickers or affiliated actors extorted money from their families through threats and physical violence.[318] Areas such as Tamanrasset have been repeatedly flagged as high-risk zones where informal detention for ransom is used as a systematic tool of exploitation.[319] Children often do not know what country they are in or whether it is formal or informal detention situations, or whether it is non-State or State-linked actors. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, especially under false promises of employment or safe passage – cases which have been documented along irregular routes used to cross into or through the region.[320]

Morocco is a central hub for smuggling networks exploiting migrant children's desperation, charging exorbitant fees up to EUR 12,000 per individual for perilous journeys toward Europe. Networks now dangerously use high-speed drug-trafficking boats, significantly increasing fatal risks. Authorities frequently react with lethal violence, deliberately capsizing or attacking boats, resulting in child fatalities and disappearances at sea. A front-line worker in Morocco chillingly describes these violent encounters: *"Captains refuse to stop when ordered, so they bombard them or try to flip the boats. Many have died, and some have completely disappeared."* An account from an former unaccompanied migrant child in Morocco illustrates the violent pushbacks by authorities: *"The Algerian army forced us into Morocco. They pointed guns at us and told us to leave their land."* This boy had already been robbed, beaten, kidnapped, held against his will and engaged in debt bondage and forced labour, as well as trafficked by criminal syndicates in Algeria. Such severe violations underscore the continuous threats children face along this dangerous migratory route who may not ever be identified by protection actors, until they have passed though multiple countries.

Children on the move in transit countries such as Morocco and Algeria are primarily from sub-Saharan African countries, live under precarious conditions in informal settlements, forests, streets, abandoned buildings, and markets, and are frequently exposed to physical violence, sexual exploitation, and severe health risks. Economic desperation pushes children into forced begging, hazardous informal labour, and survival sex – particularly for girls seeking basic necessities such as food and shelter. Boys often resort to and/or are tricked, deceived or recruited, into informal labour, drug trafficking, or hazardous work in secret workshops, frequently unpaid or exploited, further compounding their vulnerability and psychological stress. Urban survival strategies, including begging in cities like Marrakesh, reflect desperate but practical responses to poverty, driven by an ongoing pursuit of migration toward Europe. Children reportedly travel alone or in small peer groups, sometimes pooling funds to buy zodiac boats.

> ***"There's nothing here."***
>
> Senegalese Unaccompanied Migrant Boy, in Morocco.

[317] IOM, 2023a.
[318] IOM et al., 2024, p. 21.
[319] IOM et al., 2024, pp. 23–24.
[320] IOM et al., 2024, p. 55.

"Girls are very vulnerable on the road, so they are attacked by men."

Frontliner in Morocco.

2.4.3. Deception, Debt Bondage and Recruitment Tactics

The deliberate targeting of children by organized networks, combined with escalating violence when ransom demands go unmet, highlights the growing sophistication of exploitative practices along this route.[321] Qualitative findings showed that criminal trafficking networks heavily exploit the vulnerability of children on this route, particularly young girls and children from West Africa. Traffickers lure children by falsely promising safe passage, education, employment, or legitimate reunions with family or spouses, trapping them into exploitative labour or sex trafficking. Young girls, often unaware of their vulnerability, travel with traffickers or distant relatives who exploit them upon arrival in transit countries like Algeria or Morocco. As one Frontliner in Morocco shared *"girls face growing threats of trafficking and sexual violence, often facilitated through deceptive recruitment."*

"Girls arrive believing they will safely join their husbands, only to discover they're victims of trafficking and exploitation."

Frontliner in Algeria.

2.4.4. Child Trafficking

Contrary to all other migration routes, on the WMR, 75 per cent of children were trafficked for forced labour and 25 per cent were trafficked for sexual exploitation.[322] In Morocco, children are often exploited for longer amounts of time compared to other North African countries, and typically for more than two years, compared to children in other transit countries like Tunisia, who tend to be exploited for around one year, or in Egypt and Libya who tend to be exploited for less than a year.[323]

There were 127 victims of trafficking in Morocco registered between 2016 and 2023. While there were no cases reported in Algeria through the CTDC reporting system, there were victims identified in both MiMOSA and UNODC databases.[324] Young male adults were slightly more likely than young adult females to be trafficked for extended durations, particularly in Morocco, Libya and Egypt, where exploitation frequently exceeded two years, with men in Tunisia trafficked, on average, for under one year. From the smaller sub-set of migrants that IOM identified, there 1.1 per cent of all registered children were victims of trafficking, with Algeria (3%), Egypt (0.1%), Libya and Morocco (2%), and Tunisia (2%).[325]

In most countries, children were trafficked for both forced labour and/or sexual exploitation, while in Morrocco, children were primarily trafficked for transactional sex work. The number of victims identified remained steady between 2019 to 2024, in Morocco and Algeria.[326] The highest proportion of children being trafficked were between 14 and 17 years of age.[327] Children are increasingly targeted by traffickers and criminal networks. Former child migrants as well as frontliners emphasized that children often do not know if they were held by State or non-State armed groups as and was an overall confusion around being held for extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking versus arbitrary detention. This is reflected in a recent research report.[328]

[321] Ibid., p. 24.
[322] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 4 April 2025).
[323] Ibid.
[324] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 3 November 2024).
[325] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.
[326] Ibid.
[327] Ibid.
[328] IOM et al., 2024, p. 10.

In emergency contexts, there are clear indicators to identify the "act of trafficking" children which are tied to separation, isolation, exploitative environments and lack of protective relationships.[329] These include being unaccompanied or travelling without caregivers, moving along known trafficking or smuggling routes, or living with non-relatives or unrelated adults, especially in unsafe or exploitative settings.[330] Frontliners reported children living and working on worksites, housed in agricultural or industrial buildings, or in conditions of isolation, confinement, or without private space. Other key indicators include association with gangs or armed groups (in origin countries children may have fled), living with the family they work for, or being denied integration, such as not eating with or being related to household members. Limited or no contact with parents, guardians or peers, and being found in locations linked to high-risk sectors also signal possible trafficking and exploitation risk.

> *"I was forced to marry an 80-year-old sheikh. He treated me with violence, his boys treated me with violence. When I went back to my father, he was violent too."*
>
> Former Unaccompanied Migrant Girl in Morocco.

Sexual Exploitation

Frontliners and protection actors highlighted that girls arriving through the WMR are systematically targeted for exploitation, including "survival sex," sexual exploitation and coerced transactional sex, in exchange for shelter or passage. Many are deceived by traffickers at early stages in Morocco or Algeria, and later passed through organized networks operating within Spain. Girls in transit experience severe vulnerabilities, including systematic sexual exploitation, trafficking in persons, forced pregnancies, exploitative situations. As one frontliner in Morocco shared, *"pregnant girls without documentation face significant challenges in getting birth certificates, leaving the newborn child at risk of becoming stateless."*

Nigerian girls face particularly severe sexual exploitation, often controlled by organized criminal networks operating within informal urban environments, covert apartments, and construction sites secretly operating as sites for transactional sex work. Frontliners detailed how girls in Algeria endure severe exploitation, including trafficking into domestic servitude, sexual exploitation and forced marriages to older men under false pretences. Girls reported experiencing routine emotional and physical abuse in homes, informal work and hidden construction sites.

Trafficking in persons is prevalent for Nigerian and West African girls in Algeria and Morocco, often deceived under the guise of work opportunities in Europe, only to face sexual violence and exploitation. Pregnant girls struggle immensely due to limited access to safe shelters, psychological support, and reproductive health services. Harmful practices such as female genital mutilation further compound their suffering and health complications. Girls frequently experience deception by travel companions or traffickers, forced into abusive relationships or marriages as false protection mechanisms. One vivid testimony highlights their extreme vulnerabilities:

> *"Girls like us often hide together because it's safer. Alone, we are afraid of being attacked."*
>
> Former Unaccompanied Migrant Girl from Senegal, in Morocco.

Forced Labour and Economic Exploitation

Protection specialists and frontliners highlighted Morocco and Algeria, as critical transit and destination points where migrant children frequently experience severe labour and exploitation. Boys encounter significant violence, exploitation, and forced labour, particularly in urban settings such

[329] IOM, 2024b.
[330] Ibid.

as Marrakesh. Many attempt dangerous crossings near Ceuta and Melilla, resulting in severe injuries or death from falls off trucks or violence from border guards and smugglers. They frequently resort to begging, hazardous labour or drug trafficking as survival strategies, making them vulnerable to detention, forced relocation and further violence. Fear of authorities and civil society organizations limits their access to support. A front-line worker illustrates the grim reality: *"Recently, going by boat is no longer possible… networks of human trafficking are trying to smuggle migrants using high-speed drug boats."* Detainment, deportation, and repeated forced removal remain major fears for boys trapped in transit.

Frontliners reported that migrant boys from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal, Burkina Faso and the Gambia are especially vulnerable to labour exploitation, often forced to work in challenging, abusive conditions within construction sites, agriculture, domestic work, and informal sectors. Algerian boys described being deceived by traffickers who promised legitimate employment, only to exploit them in inhumane conditions involving frequent physical abuse.

According to frontliners in Morocco, most unaccompanied migrant boys, were involved in highly organized enforced begging, as well as begging for survival. They shared that children on this route were trafficked enforced begging and forced labour, and exploited by both smugglers and community leaders. Children are often reportedly housed by leaders who compel them to beg to pay rent, debt bondage and other services. One global study showed that victims of trafficking between nine and 13 years of age were more often exploited for begging, while compared to older children who were more likely to be trafficked other sectors, such as hospitality or domestic work (aged 15 to 17).[331] There was an increase in the number of victims of trafficking for street begging on this route. Notable cases include very young children from Benin identified as exploited in urban settings. Nigerian, Guinean and Senegalese children were also identified as at particular risk of trafficking in persons.

Frontliners further noted that migrant children in destination countries, notably Spain, frequently resort to street begging due to extreme hunger and lack of support, further exposing them to risks of trafficking and exploitation. Specialists raised concerns regarding social exclusion for undocumented migrant children, highlighting significant integration challenges into Spanish society and underscoring Spain's difficulty managing accurate data on these children, especially when they lack official recognition.

> *"We were forced to work in construction sites. Some of us were not paid. If you were late or didn't work hard enough, you were beaten."*
>
> 18-year-old Former Unaccompanied Migrant Boy from Guinea, in Morocco.

2.4.5. Immediate Survival Needs and Inadequate Access to Services

Children frequently reside temporarily in overcrowded, unsuitable shelters or isolated forest camps, exposing them to harsh weather, health risks, sexual violence and psychological distress. Girls and boys alike suffer isolation, limiting their ability to access consistent care, information, or protection. Girls in isolated forest shelters are particularly vulnerable to harassment and sexual violence from companions or other migrants, with minimal opportunities for intervention from humanitarian organizations due to remote locations and lack of trust. Migrants' constant movement across transit countries complicates humanitarian responses, further deepening children's vulnerability and isolation.

Boys and girls suffer distinct but severe health risks due to harsh living conditions, prolonged exposure to violence, and limited access to medical services. Boys display hyper-independent survival behaviours, often distrustful and fearful of assistance organizations and authorities and leaving shelters, due to repeated negative experiences. Girls' health challenges, especially related to reproductive health, sexual violence, and forced pregnancies, often go unaddressed due to limited health-care access.

[331] Digidiki et al., 2023, p. 47.

Mental health and significantly acute psychological, psychiatric and psychosocial concerns were raised by all frontliners. In focus groups, children also reported feelings of terror, powerlessness, and chronic fear, baring witness and/or enduring extreme violence, including beatings, threats at gunpoint, and the deaths of friends, family and other migrant children. Girls specifically endure systematic sexual violence, deepening their trauma and isolation. Boys similarly face cumulative trauma from frequent violence and harassment, especially at isolated borders, urban outskirts and informal shelters. The relentless exposure to violence and exploitation causes deep psychological distress and long-term emotional harm, often with little access to appropriate support or treatment. Migrants, experience significant compounding trauma both before and during and after their migration journeys, positive and harmful coping mechanisms, such as reliance on faith and self-harm.

Frontliners emphasized the severe psychological toll of the overland journey through Morocco and the traumatic crossing into Ceuta or Melilla, with children arriving after experiencing violence, pushbacks, and long periods of instability. Despite clear signs of distress, mental health support is limited and often only available in acute cases. Children's trauma often goes undetected due to lack of ethnopsychological care or appropriate screening procedures.

> *"Girls are often unable to access basic services like education, health care, or psychosocial support."*
>
> Frontliner, Morocco.

2.4.6. Limited Protection in Reception and Return Contexts

On the WMR, 87 per cent per cent of youth did not have access to their identity documents upon arrival in Europe.[332] The vast majority never had them which was the highest of all migration routes (79%) while others lost them (6%) or had them stolen (2%).[333] Another survey similarly showed that only 11 per cent had access to their documents on this route.[334]

For migrant children in transit, frontliners share the significant bureaucratic challenges that children face, which prolongs their transit, and increases vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Their lack of legal status, identification documents, and access to essential services such as education and health care severely limits their fundamental rights to development, as well as protection. Humanitarian organizations struggle to provide basic necessities like emergency shelter, food and health. The frequent forced relocations of children that separates them from family, friends and support networks, from borders, seas and cities to rural areas, other borders-crossing or facilities, particularly affects boys, disrupts access to protection, and increases risks of exploitation, isolation and dangerous attempts.

Frontliners in Spain and in transit countries reported systemic risks related to the frequent pushbacks at the land borders of Ceuta and Melilla, where children are often returned without proper assessments, posing risks of refoulement and significant secondary trauma. Overland pushbacks are well-documented, and some children are reportedly bussed back across borders into Morocco. They also raised urgent concerns about age determination processes along the WMR, noting that unaccompanied children are frequently misidentified as adults due to resource shortages, lack of modern tools, and bureaucratic delays, leading to a loss of legal protections and inappropriate placement in adult facilities.

For migrants who returned to their origin countries from transit, albeit with complexities with voluntariness, the top reasons include their difficult living conditions, not wanting to stay in detention, unable to stay in host country, better opportunities in their country, expelled to a third country as

[332] IOM, 2024d, p. 23.
[333] Ibid.
[334] UNHCR et al., 2024, p. 5.

well as not finding a stable job or not wishing to respond.[335] Migrants from the Niger typically stayed abroad longer, with a median of three years, while those transitioning through Libya and Morocco had median stays in transit countries of two years. The majority were away from their home countries for less than a year, although the longest absence was 18 years.[336] Around five per cent of those who returned, preferred to resettle away from their original communities to seek better economic prospects or avoid social stigma. Seventy-six (76) per cent of respondents from an evaluation were male, between 14 and 24 years.

> *"With faith, everything will work out fine with faith and courage."*
>
> Female Migrant from Senegal, in Morocco.

2.5. CHILDREN'S RESILIENCE AND COPING STRATEGIES

2.5.1. Hardship as Motivation

Former child migrants in Morocco reinforce their dreams that "with faith (and football) everything will work out fine." "They have nothing but everything, as they have hope, an objective, a dream." In Italy one frontliner said, *"they have been through hell and back,"* and will continue their plight towards their dream. However, "once they realize that their dream has been shattered, they have nothing left, and they are broken."

Recounting the killing of his friend, one boy shared that:

> *"they have killed my friend in front of me... because he refused to be tied, so they shot him in the head… I felt courage because I saw how they killed my friend in front of me. So I have decided to go on. This is the strength that I have. I refuse to let go. I refuse to be weak".*
>
> Male Migrant from Guinea, Morocco.

Based on the focus group discussions, while the term "resilience" is not explicitly used, the experiences shared by front-line staff and former child migrants in Morocco suggest certain aspects of determination and coping in the face of significant challenges. Children on the move are driven by the desire for a better life and to support their families, demonstrating a strong motivation to overcome difficult circumstances. Girls, in particular, are noted to be more courageous in seeking help from civil society organizations. The persistent attempts to remigrate after being deported also indicate a degree of resolve.

Migrant children in Morocco, still in transit, face extreme hardships, including poverty, legal uncertainty, exploitation and violence. Many are stranded for months or even years as they attempt to reach Europe, surviving in an environment where they lack legal protection and access to basic needs.

Their ability to cope depends on personal resilience, available support networks, and the strategies they develop to navigate daily hardships. While some rely on faith, peer support, and future-oriented thinking, others fall into harmful survival mechanisms such as, substance use and criminal activities.

> *"I was born poor. I do not want to die poor and live my life in poverty. This is what motivated me. I want to enhance my life, to collect money to get out of suffering".*
>
> Female Migrant from Senegal in Morocco.

[335] IOM, 2024i.
[336] Ibid.

2.5.2. Seeking Support Networks

Coping mechanisms often involve relying on their own communities and leaders for support. Migrant children form small, close-knit groups to provide each other with emotional and practical support. These informal networks serve as a source of protection but are often difficult for external organizations to access. Identifying resources and seeking assistance for basic needs like food and shelter from NGOs and individuals demonstrates a proactive way of coping with immediate challenges. Older or more experienced migrants offer guidance to younger children, advising them on how to find work, avoid dangerous areas, and access food and shelter. This knowledge-sharing helps children navigate high-risk environments. Frontliners in Morocco shared that *"some of them share tips on where to find work or which places are safest. It's their way of looking out for each other."*

Migrant girls often try to find their own communities and live within them, which can provide a sense of belonging and mutual support in a challenging environment. They may rely on personal relationships and form small groups. Migrants generally seek help from associations, individuals, or NGOs. This indicates a proactive approach to accessing potential resources and support. Migrant girls, in particular, are proactive in seeking assistance from humanitarian organizations, NGOs, or kind individuals to access food, shelter and legal support. These external support systems play a crucial role in offering protection in a country where child protection mechanisms remain weak.

> *"They create their own small families on the streets. These groups protect each other, even when no one else does."*
>
> Frontliner in Italy.

2.5.3. Focus, Goals and Determination

The majority of migrants encountered are described as well-educated with a clear final objective: to reach Europe and earn money. This strong focus can act as a positive psychological coping mechanism, providing a sense of purpose and resilience in the face of hardship. They are seen as smart and knowing what they want, suggesting a level of agency in their situation. For many migrant children, having a clear goal - whether reaching Europe, finding work, or supporting their families – helps them stay disciplined and avoid self-destructive behaviours. Well-educated children are often perceived as being more careful with their resources, avoiding distractions like drugs and alcohol to stay focused on their long-term plans. *"They are focused on their goal. They don't waste money on alcohol or drugs because they know what they came,"* one Frontliner shared in Italy.

> *"Some children tell me that prayer is the only thing that helps them keep going. It reminds them they have a future, even when they feel lost."*
>
> Frontliner in Morocco.

2.5.4. Maintaining Hopes and Dreams

Despite the hardships, migrant children have hopes and dreams for the future. Holding onto these aspirations can be a positive psychological coping mechanism, providing motivation and a sense of purpose. The desire of frontliner staff to help children integrate into communities and schools and the emphasis on vocational training for older migrants suggest that engaging in these processes is seen as a positive pathway towards long-term well-being. High risks and experiences of sexual and economic exploitation, particularly for girls, highlights a vulnerability that could lead to negative coping strategies if exploitation occurs.

> *"Some children tell me that prayer is the only thing that helps them keep going. It reminds them they have a future, even when they feel lost."*
>
> Frontliner in Morocco.

2.5.5. Faith and Spirituality

Faith is a critical source of resilience for many migrant children. Even in extreme poverty and hunger, their religious beliefs provide them with strength and hope. Many express that their faith keeps them going, even when they lack access to food or shelter. Youth who were formerly child migrants, expressed how faith was an important element in helping them stand their ground and move forward despite difficulties. This suggests that religious belief can be a significant positive coping mechanism. Female migrants shared what gave them hope, and emphasized that *"even when they have nothing to eat, some say, 'God will provide.' Their faith gives them the strength to keep going."*

2.5.6. Risk-taking Behaviours

With limited to no access to work or financial resources, many migrant children live on the streets. Boys are highlighted as being more at risk of detainment due to activities like begging rather than seeking help, which is different to girls. *"You see young boys asking for money in traffic, in markets. Sometimes it's the only way they can eat."* While a means of survival, begging in the streets is a precarious and exploitative activity. It can expose children to various risks.

Similar to transit countries, if children in destination countries lack adequate support, they might resort to begging or other street activities to survive, which can be risky and expose them to further vulnerabilities. Some migrants, when deceived or lacking other means of survival, may resort to drug trafficking or other f dangerous forms of work. This is high-risk with severe potential consequences.

In desperate situations, some migrant children resort to theft or aggressive behaviour to obtain food or money. Engaging in illicit activities such as drug trafficking can be a survival mechanism. Some migrant children, particularly those in severe financial distress, turn to drug trafficking as a way to survive.

> *"When there is no food, no shelter, and no work, they will do what they have to do to survive – even if it means taking dangerous risks."*
>
> Former Unaccompanied Migrant Boy, Guinea.

There are cases of self-harm and resorting to drugs or alcohol as a way to cope with stress and trauma. Regular alcohol drinking might occur among non-Muslim migrants but is not typically severe. While severe drug abuse among migrant children is rare, alcohol consumption is reported, particularly among non-Muslim migrants. Some Moroccan children have also been noted to use industrial substances. *"Most of them don't use hard drugs, but alcohol is a problem, especially when they have no hope left."* Morocco frontliner Children take desperate measures such as attempting to enter Europe via trucks that face a high risk of death or injury by falling off.

> *"When you are starving, you stop thinking about what's right or wrong. You do what you have to do."*
>
> Former Unaccompanied Migrant Boy from Guinea in Morocco.

2.5.7. Community Exploitation and Gender-Specific Abuse

Vulnerable children, especially girls, often face exploitation from other migrants. This includes forced cohabitation, sexual exploitation, and economic abuse. The respondents highlight that within the migrant communities themselves, there are significant risks of exploitation, particularly for girls and women. This includes instances where men, often leaders of groups, force women into cohabitation under the guise of protection, leading to potential exploitation and even unintended pregnancies. These situations make it extremely difficult for external organizations to reach and support these vulnerable individuals due to the insular nature of these communities and a reluctance to discuss these issues.

Women and girls often experience gender-based violence from authorities due to their irregular status, harassment and attacks in the desert, including from other migrants, and the risk of rape on migration routes. GBV, and the fear of it, can significantly impact the coping mechanisms adopted by girls.

> *"Girls are the most at risk. Sometimes, even within their own communities, they are forced into situations they cannot escape from."*
>
> Former Unaccompanied Migrant Boy from Guinea in Morocco.

2.5.8. Sexual Exploitation for Survival

One of the focus group discussions with former migrant youth explicitly discusses the issue of women and young girls being forced into transactional sex work due to the need to earn money for rent and food, which is referred to as "survival sex" by the interviewer. A former migrant recounted the experience of a friend who was pressured into transactional sex work and the shame associated with it within their community. This is presented as a direct consequence of the lack of economic opportunities and the desperation to meet basic needs. The myth that vulnerable migrants are not educated is not accurate, as some of the most educated were exploited (expanded in the CMR chapter).

> *"They told me I was going to get a job in a restaurant. But when I arrived, they sold me to a man who treated me like a slave."*
>
> Unaccompanied Migrant Girl from Guinea, in Mauritania.

2.5.9. Seeking Support from NGOs and Authorities

Frontliners share that girls usually seek help more often than boys in transit, from civil society organizations and NGOs, as they are "more courageous and do not fear these organizations" as a female frontliner shared,, unlike their apprehension towards authorities due to different security approaches and laws. Children arriving in Spain, for instance, are placed in specialized reception facilities for unaccompanied children, separate from adults, which aims to provide a safer and more supportive.

> *"Girls are more likely to seek help when they are in danger. They know they have to be careful."*
>
> Former Unaccompanied Migrant Boy from Guinea in Morocco.

2.5.10. Building Resilience

Given the numerous challenges faced in destination countries, including potential difficulties in integration, legal status issues, and overcrowded accommodations, children who manage to navigate these systems and persist in their pursuit of a better life are likely to develop significant resilience.

> *"Girls are incredibly resilient. They form communities, provide mutual support, and sometimes find informal jobs like babysitting. This helps them survive."*
>
> Frontliner in Morocco.

2.5.11. Silence and Isolation

The tendency of migrant girls to remain within their own communities and not open up to the local community could, while providing safety, also lead to isolation and prevent them from accessing broader support systems. Their privacy and unwillingness to discuss their situation might hinder access to necessary help. Migrants often stay hidden to avoid detection, and children often hide and use disguise for survival, with girls dressing as boys, for example.

2.5.12. Frustration and Re-migration Attempts

When faced with detention, deportation, or failure to achieve their migration goals, children may experience significant frustration. The tendency to migrate again and again despite these setbacks could be seen as a negative coping mechanism, exposing them to repeated risks and instability, though it also demonstrates resolve and resilience. It is important to note that coping mechanisms can be fluid and may shift depending on the child's circumstances, available support, and stage of migration. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for developing effective protection and support interventions.

2.6. CHILDREN'S DREAMS AND VIEWS

Children along the WMR shared powerful insights into the hardships they face. Many spoke of severe shortages – of food, water, shelter, and health care – and how these basic needs shape their daily fears. Girls from Nigeria and West Africa described heightened risks of trafficking and sexual exploitation, while boys reflected on the dangers of detention, forced relocation, and street-level survival.

One frontliner captured the hopelessness felt by many: *"We don't have enough shelters... So many unaccompanied children are left stranded without food or health care. It's heartbreaking."* Girls shared painful accounts of forced relationships, the physical aftermath of female genital mutilation, and the silence surrounding sexual violence. Others expressed deep shame and fear of stigma if they returned home without success. *"Children fear going back. If they haven't succeeded, they're treated like they've let everyone down."*

Some children reflected on the invisible lines that cut them off from protection. Many had waited months for age assessments, during which time they lost the very safeguards they were meant to receive. *"Determining the age of children takes too long. Many lose their protections before they're even recognized as children."* On the WMR, frontliners emphasized there are no shelters for emergencies for younger children let alone older children, *"when they turn 18, they have nothing."*

Former migrant children in Morocco offered warnings and dreams. Several described being trapped in forced labour, discriminated against in transit countries, or living in isolation even within migrant communities. But others still held onto hope as one boy from Guinea shared: *"My dream is to become a footballer. It's why I left – I want a better future."*

Across conversations, children consistently asked for real support: safe shelters, child-friendly services, protection from violence and exploitation, and someone who would simply listen. They called for better education, vocational training, trauma support, and faster responses that recognize their rights and realities – not just their paperwork. Their stories are not just about hardship – they are about survival, resilience, and the need to be seen as more than a number in a queue. As another boy from Guinea put it: *"We just want to feel safe again."*

> *"With faith, everything will work out fine with faith and courage"*
>
> Former Migrant Girl from Senegal, in Morocco.

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3 WESTERN AFRICAN ATLANTIC ROUTE

3.1. UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN'S STORIES

MAURITANIA – Migrant Girls Strength Amidst Adversity

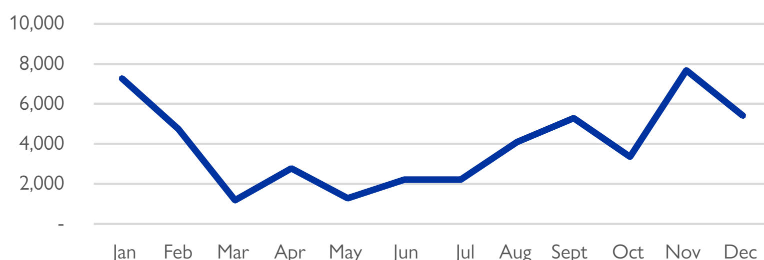
STORY

A young girl from Mali, was only 13 when she arrived in Mauritania, and faced significant challenges when she migrated alone to support her family. She travelled overland with extremely harsh conditions, facing language barriers and financial struggles which were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Forced into small, unstable jobs, she stated, *"sometimes we have to borrow money to buy goods to sell, but the earnings barely repay the debts, leaving us trapped in an endless cycle."*

Another girl from the Central African Republic described her migration journey as extremely difficult and dangerous. Her route involved traversing multiple countries, encountering exploitation, food scarcity and threats from traffickers. In Mauritania, she endured harsh domestic labour conditions, including inadequate food and withheld wages: *"the family accused me of stealing when I wanted to leave and refused to pay me."* Despite their immense hardships, their hopes remain vibrant. Both dream of establishing their own businesses, reuniting with their families, and creating secure, dignified lives. Their advice to other children contemplating migration is clear and poignant: they strongly caution against undertaking dangerous migration journeys alone, urging younger children to seek safer, supported pathways.

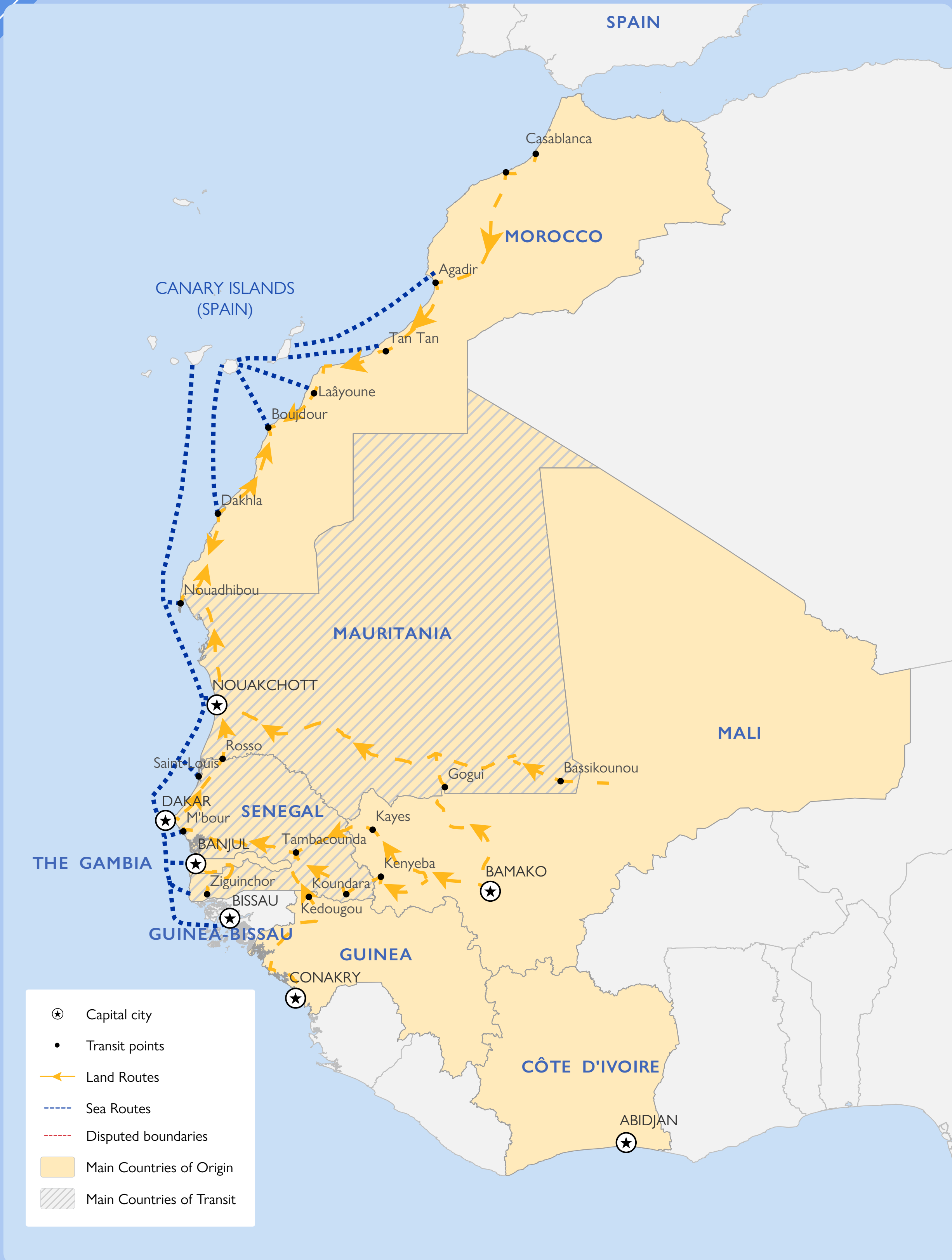
3.2. MIGRATION TRENDS

Figure 36. WAAR Monthly Migrant Arrivals to the Canary Islands (Spain) for 2024



Source: DTM Monthly Europe Arrivals 2024, n=47,512.

WESTERN AFRICAN ATLANTIC ROUTE MAP



Source: *The Annual Global Overview of Migration Routes 2024*.

Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration and United Nations Children's Fund.

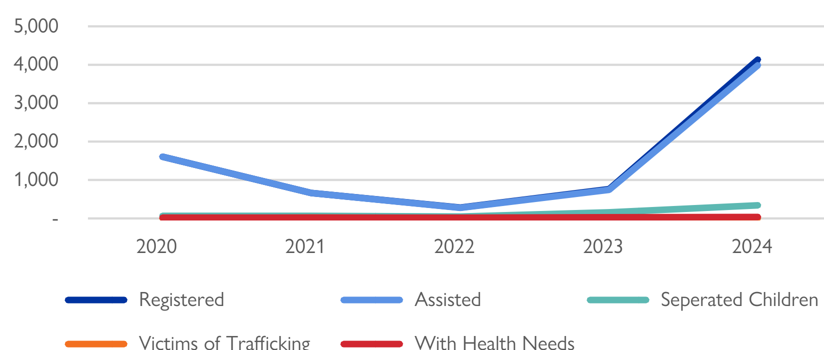
The WAAR has become increasingly fatal in recent years with unseaworthy, boats, and rescue as rare, many who depart are never seen again. It is one of the most deadly and opaque migration corridors globally where children from Senegal, Guinea, Mali and the Niger migrate through Senegal, Morocco or Mauritania towards the Canary Islands of Spain.[337] In 2024, 1,166 migrants were reported dead or missing on this route, yet only 363 individuals were formally identified – meaning 69 per cent (803 individuals) remain unidentified. [338] This makes WAAR the least traceable route in terms of identification, posing severe barriers to humanitarian response and violating migrants' rights to recognition, dignity and family tracing. In 2024, seven children were recorded as dead or missing on the WAAR however only one child could be identified as from the Gambia, from while six children (86%) had unknown or mixed nationality – highlighting the extreme challenges in tracing and identifying children lost along this route.

Between 2014 and 2024, 5,292 migrants were recorded as dead or missing along this route, including 513 women (10%) and 171 children (3%).[339] In 2024, 1,166 people died or went missing during sea crossings to the Canary Islands, including 27 women (2%) and 7 children (1%). Most deaths were caused by drowning (517), starvation, or dehydration (307) after days adrift at sea. The WAAR also recorded 253 deaths with unknown or mixed causes.

Most children on this route face extreme risks during prolonged sea journeys in overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels. Deaths from dehydration, heat exhaustion and hunger highlight the total absence of rescue infrastructure, medical care, or basic humanitarian safeguards – conditions that directly contravene children's right to life, protection and humanitarian assistance. Among those identified in 2024, the primary countries of origin were Mali (10%), Guinea (10%) and the Gambia (5%). However, 75 per cent of those identified were listed with mixed or unknown nationalities, obscuring migration trends and limiting the ability to respond with country-specific protection measures.

Additional 2024 data confirms that most of those who died or went missing on this route were young males. Migrants from Guinea, Mali and Senegal made up 60 per cent of all recorded deaths and disappearances. Most were between the ages of 18–25, and more than half had attempted the journey at least once before. The number of children travelling this route has increased compared to 2023, particularly those under age 18 departing from Senegal.

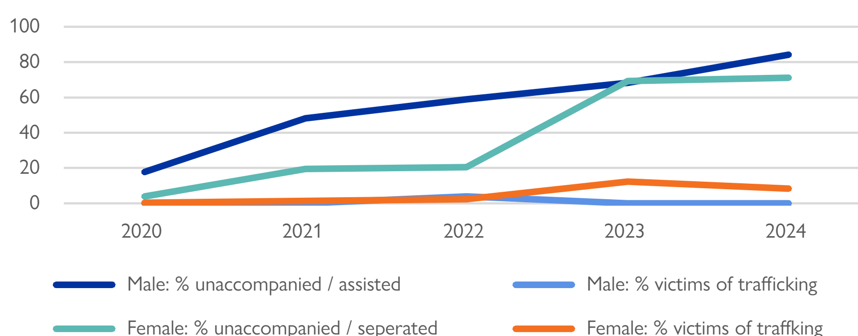
Figure 37. Number of IOM Vulnerable Migrants Assisted on the WAAR by year (2020–2024)



Source: MiMOSA Number of IOM Vulnerable Migrants Registered and Assisted, Total: 4,136.

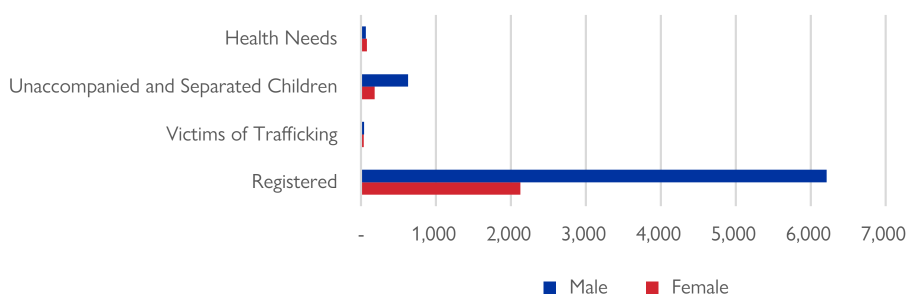
[337] IOM, 2025a.
[338] Ibid.
[339] Ibid.

Figure 38. Categories of Vulnerable Migrant Children, by Gender, WAAR



Source: MiMOSA Number of migrants registered and assisted – year, n=487.

Figure 39. Vulnerable Migrant Children, by Gender and Categories on WAAR (2020–2024)



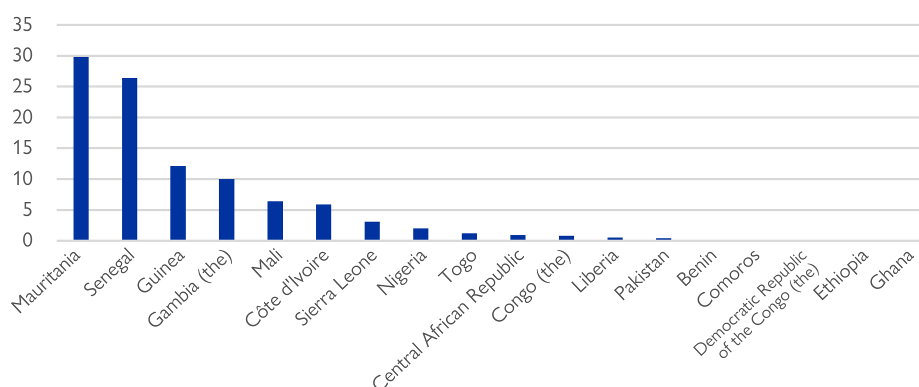
Source: MiMOSA (2020–2024), n=8,339.

The WAAR involves migrant children originating mainly from countries such as Senegal, Guinea, Mali and the Niger.[340] Migrant children this route to travel to Mauritania and through, to the Canary Islands and/or mainland Spain. However, this route entails hazardous sea journeys from Mauritania or Senegal to the Canary Islands, often using overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels, leading to frequent shipwrecks and high fatality rates.[341] Children on this route face severe risks during their overland journeys to departure points and during perilous sea crossings. IOM reports an increase in unaccompanied children arriving in the Canary Islands, many severely traumatized by their experiences.[342]

The arrival of children in Europe over the past ten years peaked in 2016, and declined until 2022, which has since increased from 2023, notably through the WAAR route to Spain (DTM). Migrant children under 18 years represent approximately 12 per cent of all arrivals, who are predominantly males (90%), unmarried (92%), and who are travelling unaccompanied (55%).

[340] UNHCR et al., 2024.
[341] Ibid.
[342] IOM, 2025c.

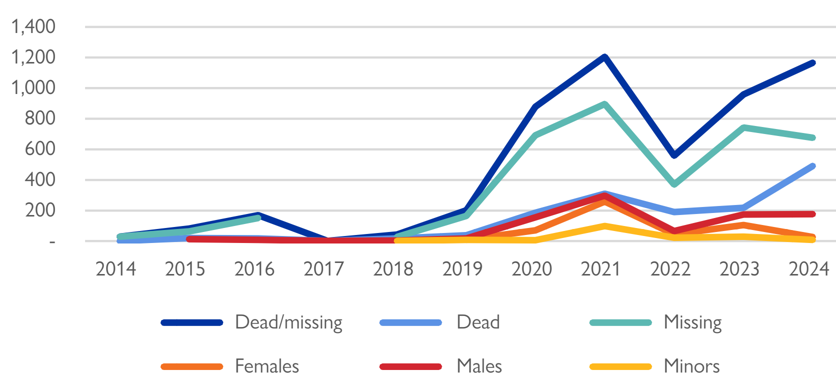
Figure 40. Origin Countries for Registered Children on the WAAR



Source: MiMOSA (2020–2024), n=1,493.

The most vulnerable group according to the case management database were boys from 14 to 17 years old. The MiMOSA data shows that the majority of migrant children who migrated along the WAAR, based on the past four years, originated from Mauritania (30%), Senegal (26%), Guinea (12%), the Gambia (10%), Mali (6%), Côte d'Ivoire (6%), Sierra Leone (3%), Nigeria (2%) as well as Togo, and the Central African Republic, the Congo and Liberia with (1% each).[343]

Figure 41. Migrant Deaths and Disappearances on WAAR (2015–2024)



Source: Missing Migrants Project (2015–2024), n=5,292.

3.3. MIGRATION DRIVERS

3.3.1. Economic Survival and Family Expectations

The main reason for 67 per cent of youth leaving their home countries on the WAAR was linked to economic circumstances.[344] Familial economic desperation in some Central and West African countries significantly propel child migration along this route. Children are often seen as their family's sole hope through migration, which is also viewed as a way of creating a better life for their children. Families frequently borrow money or sell assets to fund migration, intensifying pressure on children to succeed financially abroad.

[343] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA Data set.
[344] UNCHR, 2023.

"Children internalize from childhood they must become the family's economic saviour, creating enormous psychological burdens and desperation to migrate successfully."

Frontliner in Mauritania.

3.3.2. Gender-Based Violence

Harmful cultural practices like forced marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and other forms of gender-based violence serve as critical migration drivers. Girls from Guinea and Mali often migrate through Mauritania to escape forced marriages and violence enforced by male relatives. Young girls fleeing forced marriages and familial violence describe migration as their sole option for safety.

3.3.3. Knowledge Hub for Education

A uniquely powerful driver for children to migrate on this route, is for education purposes with the traditional Koranic schools (Mahdras) in Mauritania. Many families send their children on this route from countries like Mali, Senegal and Guinea, for education. The sheikhs are often given custodian guardianship while children live in the schools. The schools typically require payments, however others still welcome boys without financial compensation, which can be an excellent opportunity for families who do not have the resources. However, many schools expect and in fact, require boys to work to cover expenses.

"Many children from Senegal, Guinea and Mali migrate specifically to Mauritania for religious education at Madares facing potential exploitation under customary guardianship."

Frontliner in Mauritania.

3.3.4. Personal Violence and Familial Stress

On the WAAR, one major migration driver for 20 per cent of migrant youth, was personal violence.[345] Comparatively, there were 8 per cent of children and young adults who were displaced by personal and targeted violence, while 4 per cent cited war and conflict.[346]

Escaping from intimate family violence is one key driver, in particular women with children. Recent migration patterns reveal an increasingly gendered dimension with an increased number of women on this route, who migrate with young children from Mali, Senegal and Guinea via Mauritania towards the Canary Islands, specifically to flee severe domestic abuse in countries of origin. Stress related to droughts, floods, and environmental degradation severely impact livelihood in Mali, Mauritania and Senegal. This often leads to internal and cross-border displacement of families and children, with some families pushing their children towards migration as a coping mechanism. As one expert key informant shared; *"increasing droughts and floods in West Africa have displaced entire communities, intensified economic hardship, forcing families to send children abroad."*

"Women travelling with very young children flee domestic violence, making this route distinct in its family-driven and gender-based motivations."

Female frontliner, Mauritania.

3.3.5. Trafficking and Exploitation Networks

Trafficking networks actively target children migrating along this route, often deceiving them with promises of safe passage, employment, or education in Europe. Mauritania particularly serves as a transit point where traffickers exploit vulnerable children under traditional informal guardianships where they would live and study for many years with family and or religious leaders.

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[345] UNHCR et al., 2024, p. 3.
[346] IOM, 2023a.

"Unaccompanied children in Mauritania are often deceptively recruited by informal guardians (sheikhs or distant relatives), increasing their vulnerability to exploitation."

Protection Specialist in Mauritania.

3.3.6. Aspirations for Vocational Training and Professional Careers

Similar to other routes, children along the WAAR expressed extremely strong desires for vocational training and employment in countries such as Mauritania and Morocco which seen as transit and destination countries, as well as in Europe, where Spain is seen as a place to gain specific career skills, stability and ultimately achieve meaningful professional futures. Senegalese boys explicitly express aspirations to pursue vocational training and professional sports careers in Europe and the many deceptive recruitment strategies play to these hopes and dreams.

3.3.7. Limited Agency and Guardianship Exploitation

Children migrating to Mauritania for Koranic studies frequently fall under informal guardianship arrangements with sheikhs or distant relatives, leading to a unique vulnerability to exploitation and limited personal agency in their migration decisions.

"Unaccompanied children frequently migrate to Mauritania to study under sheikhs, often experiencing severe exploitation under traditional guardianship."

Frontliner in Mauritania.

3.3.8. Climate Crisis and Displacement

Among the top reasons that migrant youth left their countries of origin along the WAAR, was war and conflict (13%), as well as environmental pressures, where 5 per cent cited slow-onset environmental change.[347] Frontliners working across the WAAR raised concerns about the compounding effect of environmental disasters, food insecurity, and chronic instability has on the increasing child mobility in the region. In 2024, flooding displaced hundreds of thousands across the region affecting 11 West African countries, many of which are origin countries, such as Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea and Sierra Leone, disrupting education, livelihoods and social protection systems. [348] In Mauritania and other coastal areas, the floods in September 2024 intensified pressures to migrate, severely disrupting infrastructure, displacing large populations, and impacting child mobility along key sea departure points toward the Canary Islands.[349]

Female frontliners in Morocco and Mauritania, expressed grave concern for girls who have been displaced in both origin and transit countries who are at heightened risk – describing countless cases where girls were either forced into marriage for protection and/or fled forced marriage, only to be exposed to exploitative situations including domestic servitude, begging and/or sexual exploitation or forced marriage upon arrival. In Mauritania, unaccompanied migrant boys who experienced traumatic situations, in Madrasas, and became homeless, wanted to return to their home countries, but many had had no safe place to return to. Family tracing and reunification were described by frontliners as nearly impossible for children whose families were themselves displaced, unreachable, and/or living in disaster, conflict-affected or insecure contexts.

[347] UNHCR et al., 2024, p. 3.
[348] Ibid.
[349] Global Protection Cluster (APC), 2024, p. 6.

3.4. PROTECTION RISKS AND VULNERABILITIES IN TRANSIT

3.4.1. Overland and Maritime Dangers

Migrant children making the perilous journey to the Canary Islands face extreme maritime risks, with four children drowning or disappearing in 2024 during the dangerous crossings.[350] Survivors report prolonged isolation at sea, overcrowding and dehydration, all of which contribute to severe trauma. Children making the perilous journey to the Canary Islands face deadly maritime risks, including overcrowding, dehydration and high mortality rates. Boats are frequently overcrowded and ill-equipped, resulting in high fatalities from drowning, dehydration and starvation. As one migrant boy from Mali boy shared his own experiences; *"I drowned in the ocean. A lifeguard saved me. I still remember the salt water."*

In 2024, seven children were confirmed among the dead or missing: four drowned, two died from starvation and heat exposure while stranded at sea, and one was recorded under mixed or unknown causes. These are consistent with a decade-long pattern, where drowning accounted for at least 98 child deaths, followed by 24 from environmental exposure, and 12 from unknown causes – typically due to a lack of forensic evidence or unrecorded recoveries. As one 16-year-old Sengalese girl shared, *"we spent days with no food or water, watching friends collapse. We had to keep walking or we'd die in the desert."*

Expert KIIs shared significant concern for the lack of resources for the reporting of missing migrants, as well as the family tracing and return of the deceased. This is particularly, pertinent with migrants disappearing for ever which becomes another driver for family members to take similar dangerous migration routes to search for them. Even if physical bodies are verified, they may still remain unidentified and remain unresolved forever. If they are identified, there are no mechanisms to return the bodies to their place of origin, particularly if they came from a conflict or insecure area. The key informant interviews and focus groups showed that missing migrants and disappearances had significant effects on children and families, who often try to migrate irregularly to find them. For bodies that were recovered, even if they identify the country of origin, family tracing is challenging, and there is no mechanism to nor return them to the countries, or to inform the families. In many African countries, nationally reported missing persons cases are dismissed if they have migrated overseas, and simultaneously, many cases are not linked with the migrants identified abroad.[351]

Migrant children, primarily from Mali, Senegal, Guinea and the Central African Republic, embark on perilous sea crossings that expose them to unpredictable weather, mechanical failures, and insufficient provisions, intensifying their physical and psychological vulnerabilities. Malian and Senegalese children often migrate multiple times through Mauritania and towards the Canary Islands. Frontliners and migrant children all shared that those who travel by boats that are "pushed back" or "pulled back" are often detained or dropped at unfamiliar borders crossings that exacerbate protection risks:

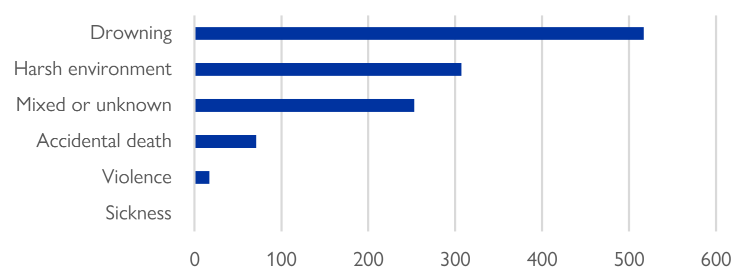
> *"...they are dropped at the wrong border, with no money and no one who speaks their language."*
>
> Frontliner in Mauritania.

> *"We saw people die at sea. We were so thirsty and weak; some didn't make it."*
>
> Unaccompanied Migrant Girl from Mali, in Mauritania.

350 IOM, 2025a.

351 Key Informant Interviews, specialized agencies.

Figure 42. Cause of Deaths on WAAR (2014–2024)



Source: Missing Migrants Project data set (2014–2024).

3.4.2. Dangerous Experiences and Child Protection Risks

About 13 per cent reported attacks by strangers during the journey on this route.[352] Physical violence was common, reported by more than half of children and young people interviewed (54%).[353] In addition, there was over one third (36%) who worked without getting the expected payment and 14 per cent reported to have been forced to work against their will (primarily in Libya, Tunisia and Algeria).[354]

Thirty-one (31) per cent of youth migrants were held against their will, often relating to kidnappings and ransom.[355] All along the WAAR, particularly in Mali and the Niger, cases of trafficking for forced labour, kidnapping and extortion have been documented against children.[356]

Children passing through Mauritania rely heavily on informal survival mechanisms such as begging, exploitative labour, or assistance from community members, NGOs and the Government. They experience precarious living situations that are tied to their immediate economic survival, not necessarily the continuation of their journey as on other routes. Most children did not dream of moving onwards to the Canary Islands, instead most wanted to study or work in Mauritania, or return home.

Migrant children frequently experience forced relocation within Mauritania and towards international borders, often separated from family members during these movements. Many find themselves abandoned by smugglers in remote desert regions or isolated coastal areas. Children from Mali and Senegal reported being deserted without food or water, left vulnerable to starvation, dehydration and exposure to extreme environmental conditions. Persistent economic desperation compels families and children to undertake hazardous journeys despite well-known risks. Frontliners shared how children on the move are compelled to repeatedly attempt dangerous crossings, fully aware of the risks involved, reflecting a calculated desperation: *"despite deportations and hardships, children repeatedly attempt the journey, underscoring their relentless determination to achieve safety and economic stability in Europe."*

Many boys reported being left by uncles or relatives with Quranic teachers for education, and being forced to beg. As one migrant boy from Mali shared *"They made us beg at traffic lights. If we didn't bring back money, we were beaten."* As another boy from Mali explained, children experience critical yet preventable health concerns, trauma and disconnection: *"I was sick with malaria and thought I was going to meet God."*

352 IOM, 2023a. DTM Flow Monitoring Survey.
353 Ibid.
354 Ibid.
355 Ibid.
356 IOM et al., 2024, pp. 50–51.

"Begging in Mauritania's cities becomes not just a survival mechanism, but also a desperate effort to finance onward migration to Europe."

Frontliner in Mauritania.

3.4.5. Deception, Debt Bondage and Recruitment Tactics

Migrant children in Mauritania, especially those separated from their families, are often forced into begging by traffickers or exploitative guardians. These children often face severe physical abuse from their guardians if they do not meet the expected begging quota. Many children leave the reception centres prematurely to reach specific destinations, which increases their vulnerability to exploitation and criminal influence. These children are often detained upon arrival in other regions or countries, or deported back to Morocco, deepening their sense of disillusionment and despair. Food insecurity drives children into forced begging, often under the control of traffickers who exploit them in exchange for minimal sustenance.

In Mali alone, 219 victims of trafficking were identified in 2020–2021, with 91 per cent being women, and in the Niger, 76 cases were identified, including minors. Victims are often deceived by smugglers and then coerced into forced labour, sexual exploitation, or ransom situations, including in and around gold mining areas where exploitation is deeply entrenched.[357] Key hotspots reported include Agadez, Gao, Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey, where children were identified as particularly at risk of being detained and exploited by networks operating with limited oversight. In some locations, families were forced to sell belongings or borrow money to secure their child's release, further reinforcing cycles of debt bondage.[358]

3.4.6. Child Trafficking

Seventeen (17) per cent of child victims of trafficking were controlled by traffickers in transit on the WAAR with sexual exploitation, while 3 per cent with physical, psychological and sexual abuse.[359] Nine (9) per cent of children were controlled though false promises, 3 per cent through forced labour and 2 per cent by denying children basic needs.[360]

Migrant girls shared their experiences of high rates of domestic servitude, unpaid labour, and manipulation by employers: *"They told me I stole so they wouldn't pay me."* (Migrant girl in Mauritania, from Guinea). Frontliners confirmed that many of the girls who were trafficked for domestic servitude and housekeeping, had families who were aware, involved and complicit:

"...the parents were involved. The girls were trafficked to work in houses. They were paid barely enough for food."

Frontliner from Mauritania.

In FGDs the migrant girls who were exploited and/or trafficked into domestic servitude, shared their fears and experiences of being reported. The girls shared their experiences of domestic servitude, sexual exploitation and manipulative employers: *"They didn't pay me for months. Then they accused me of stealing to avoid paying, and threatened to call the police..."*

Victims of trafficking for domestic work were often sent by their parents and remained unpaid or partially paid, with money going directly back to families: *"…the parents were involved… they thought it was normal that their daughters work as housekeepers."* They shared specific nuances of how girls were controlled through psychological pressure, hunger and forced silence: *"…she cooked food for the family, but wasn't allowed to eat it. She went hungry."*

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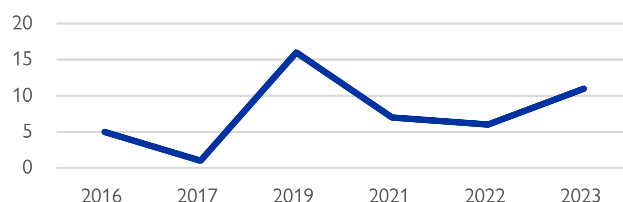
357 IOM et al., 2024, pp. 36, 50–51.
358 Ibid., p. 24.
359 CTDC, n.d. (accessed 4 April 2025).
360 Ibid.

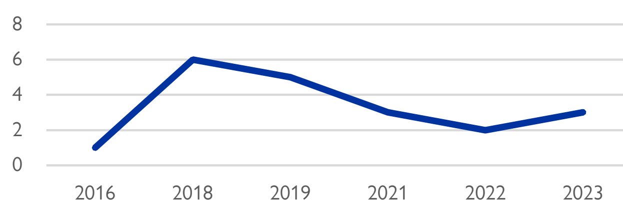
Front-line actors noted an increasing profile of young women (around 22) arriving in the Canary Islands with very young children – often with siblings aged 1 to 2 years old – who were fleeing domestic violence. These family-like travel profiles may mask trafficking or exploitation risks, particularly when the relationships are not formally verified. The lack of formal identification mechanisms for potential trafficking among accompanied children enhances this risk. There is also an absence of formal child return systems or bilateral agreements (as with the Gambia), limiting protection-based alternatives to detention or irregular return.

Figure 43. Trends in Girl Victims of Trafficking on the WAAR by Year (2016–2023)



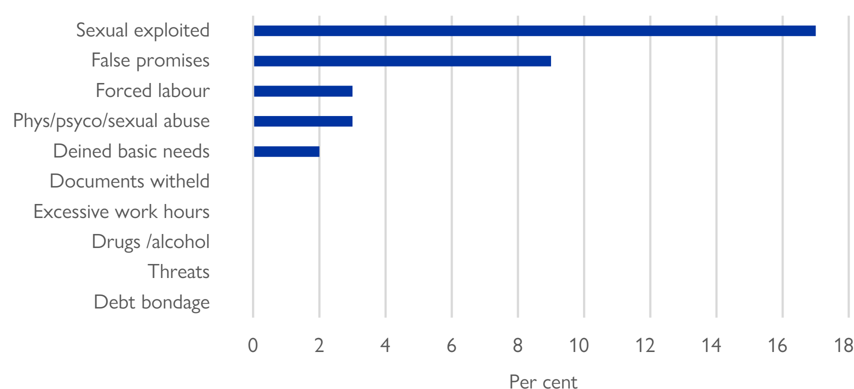
Source: CTDC, n.d. (2016–2023), n=46.

Figure 44. Trends in Boy Victims of Trafficking on the WAAR by Year (2016–2023)



Source: CTDC, n.d. (2016–2023), n=20.

Figure 45. Ways that Traffickers Controlled Child Victims of Trafficking on the WAAR (2016–2023)



Source: CTDC, n.d. (2016 to 2023).

Sexual Exploitation

Girls migrating along this route experience heightened vulnerability to trafficking for sexual exploitation and forced marriages. Nigerian, Malian and Somali girls are frequently targeted by traffickers, who exploit their economic desperation and lack of protection mechanisms. These girls endure severe abuse, systematic rape and violence along their journey, exacerbating their trauma and leaving lasting physical and psychological impacts. Girls often endure domestic servitude and forced marriage, "akin to slavery." In the FGDs, girls shared collective fears of sexual exploitation and pregnancy across a multitude of experiences:

> *"Sometimes the girl gets pregnant…" and "…If she's lucky, the boy stays. If not, she's alone."*
>
> Migrant Girl from Mali, in Mauritania.

The risks of persecution and re-trafficking for girls are pertinent, one girl explained how employers for domestic work, used false accusations and police threats to control her and others.

> *"They said they'd call the police if I complained. I had to leave without being paid."*
>
> Migrant girl in Mauritania, from Guinea.

Similarly, family pressure and shame drove some girls to keep working even when rescued. One frontliner shared how the

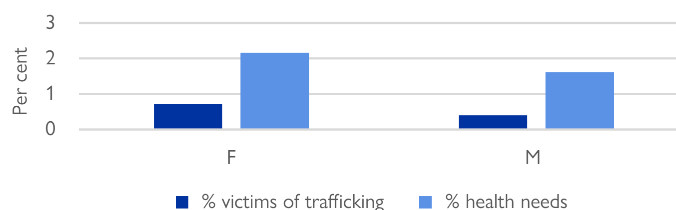
> *"...girls didn't understand why they couldn't work. They felt punished for helping their families."*
>
> Frontliner from Mauritania.

The fact that they were rescued did not mitigate the pressures, and risks if they did not earn.

The distinct vulnerabilities along the WAAR arise from its isolated maritime passages, food insecurity, exploitation embedded in traditional educational systems, severe gender-based risks and forced relocations. Addressing these multifaceted risks requires targeted, culturally sensitive child protection responses and strengthened humanitarian support tailored to this route's unique context. Many children, particularly girls, are coerced into domestic servitude or forced labour in sectors such as construction and agriculture. These exploitative conditions involve severe physical abuse, confinement, and isolation, profoundly violating the fundamental rights and freedoms of the affected children. This exploitation is deeply rooted in cultural acceptance, making it challenging to identify, address and eradicate.

> *"Girls travelling alone are often promised safety, but many end up being forced into marriage or exploited. They have nowhere to report because they fear authorities."*
>
> Frontliner, Mauritania.

Figure 46. Migrant Children Cases: Medical and Victims of Trafficking, on WAAR (2017–2024)



Source: MiMOSA (2017–2024).

Forced Labour

According to focus group discussions, girls, particularly from Mali and Senegal, face forced labour and abuse before migrating and when in transit. Some girls are also coerced into domestic servitude or transactional sex work. Girls in Mauritania face systemic abuse, including being sold into slavery or trafficked for forced labour, and domestic servitude, all while living in extreme poverty. Girls are often working in unsafe exploitative conditions within the home as invisible indentured workers, and some are simultaneously forced to beg for food as their employers will not allow them to eat the food they are cooking.

Boys often face homelessness, living rough on the streets, in squats, forests, in informal shelters and in migrant communities across all cities, often without access to basic services. To survive, they are forced to engage in exploitative and/or forced domestic work, agriculture and/or begging. Most boys arrive at the educational hub expecting to complete their education under the *Mahdara* system, a traditional form of education. However, this system often exploits children for forced begging and many of them experience torture and harsh corporal punishment. If they escape, they often remain on the street and need to beg for food and other aspects of basic survival. Boys shared that they were often abandoned by relatives, forced into begging by religious leaders or guardians, and physically punished. Frontliners showed graphic photos and videos of young boys being tortured, and the physical ramifications with their bodies burned, scarred, or broken. They explained that *"they were sent to beg at traffic lights. If they didn't bring enough money, they were beaten."*

During the focus groups with unaccompanied migrant children, most boys were fixated on food, which was their main priority and challenge, and response to most questions, and they were notably exhausted and dehydrated. They were often exploited by traffickers and forced to work under harsh conditions, with little to no pay. Many boys were trafficked and forced into labour in remote areas, far from their homes, where they were vulnerable to exploitation. *"I had to work long hours. If I didn't do what I was told, I was punished."* Migrant children, especially from Mali and Senegal, were forcibly enrolled in Mahdara by their families, reported experiencing corporal punishment, severe abuse and forced begging. Children are often accepted into the schools without financial compensation; however, children are often required to work to cover expenses.

One survey of over 15,000 female migrants who were interviewed in Mali and the Niger, showed that 3 per cent of self-identified as being victims of forced labour, compared to 1 per cent of male.[361] Only 18 per cent of these women had identity documentation compared to 82 per cent of male. Most women never had documents (35%), were travelling without (26%), had lost it (22%), or it was confiscated and not returned (14%). Two (2) per cent were girls (1% boys) and 28 per cent of females were between 18 to 24 years (compared to 22% male) showing that females migrate younger. Their final destinations were West and Central Africa followed by North Africa including Mauritania and the Niger, not Europe.

[361] IOM, 2024j.

Traditional Schools

INSIGHT

"They promised us safety, but we ended up in a Mahdara, forced to beg. If you refuse, they beat you. Many kids escape but have nowhere else to go."

14-year-old boy from Mali.

The *Mahdara* system in Mauritania is a long-standing and culturally revered form of Islamic education in Western and Central Africa. For many families – both within Mauritania and from neighbouring countries such as Senegal, Mali, Guinea and the Central African Republic – sending a child to study in a *Mahdara* is not only considered a respected rite of passage, but also a survival strategy.[362] In contexts marked by conflict, instability, poverty, or limited access to education, the *Mahdara* is often seen as a perceived safe haven – offering structure, religious grounding and a path forward.

While some *Mahdara* schools operate more formally, many are informal and function independently. These schools often rely on donations, child labour, or begging by the students themselves to sustain their operations. Families are frequently unaware of these arrangements or the extent of the protection risks involved. Boys are placed under the authority of a Cheikh or local guardian, who typically exercises full control over the child's daily life with little to no oversight or standardized safeguarding mechanisms. However, the formal mahadras that are recognized by the State are subject to control and monitoring, and often even receive funding for childcare.

Children in these environments have reported experiencing a wide range of abuses. These include harsh corporal punishment, public humiliation, psychological abuse, and – in some cases – treatment that may amount to torture. Instances of sexual exploitation and trafficking have also been documented. Children may face severe restrictions on food and movement, and do not access basic health care due to poverty or education beyond their religious instruction. Some Cheikhs or guardians retain children's identity documents and withhold family contact information, either deliberately or due to informal practices, which can prevent children from returning home and may contribute to situations of trafficking.

When boys attempt to flee or exit the system, they frequently do so without support, and often face further trauma and exploitation. Many end up in precarious situations – engaged in begging or informal labour, exposed to street violence, and lacking any formal protection or care. Reintegration into their home countries or communities is especially difficult for those sent across borders at a young age, who may no longer remember their family's whereabouts or even their native language. Efforts to trace and reunify families are regularly obstructed by the absence of documentation, withheld information, and transnational barriers. Although the *Mahdara* system remains a deeply respected institution with cultural and religious significance, its current use as a pathway for unregulated child mobility – combined with minimal oversight and reliance on informal care arrangements – raises serious protection concerns.

[362] IOM and UNICEF, 2025, p. 77.

3.4.7. Immediate Survival Needs and Inadequate Access to Services

Severe food insecurity forces children from countries such as Mali, Senegal and the Central African Republic into survival strategies, including begging. Many children reside in rough conditions within Mauritanian communities, often with little to no access to food or adequate shelter. The desperation for basic necessities propels them into exploitative labour conditions or begging to survive, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Migrant children often live in extremely harsh conditions within host communities, facing malnutrition, illness and exposure to unsafe environments, significantly impacting their physical and psychological health. Food insecurity exacerbates vulnerabilities for migrant children, who are often dependent on begging for survival. The lack of access to proper nutrition and medical care leaves many children in poor health, which only increases their vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

There are critical emergency shelter gaps for children, for victims of trafficking with no national shelters. Instead, unaccompanied children are temporarily housed with foster families, which is an innovative new approach to the gap in shelter, yet for victims of trafficking there is limited.[363] There is also a severe lack of psychosocial support and limited actors, leaving victims without access to sustained care, recovery, or legal assistance.

Local integration of migrant children in Mauritania is challenging with significant barriers due to inadequate access to social services. Migrant children often lack access to education, health care and psychosocial support, which leaves them vulnerable to further exploitation and abuse. Many children who migrate through Mauritania, especially those who stay in informal settlements, are at risk of being exploited in labour markets or forced into begging. Frontliners were concerned that many children do not have access to civil documentation, nor contact details of family, especially if they had escaped from untenable situations such as Madrasas or other places they were living in transit, where they someone held their documents.

Frontliners in Mauritania shared their innovative alternative foster care system for unaccompanied migrant children has been a significant relief and support for children who were living on the streets in communities. Frontliners in Spain shared concerns around the guardianship system being fragmented, particularly across autonomous communities, as children's eligibility for assistance is connected to the location where they registered, leading to difficulties in the equitable distribution of care in either the Canary Islands and/or in Spain if children continue to move.

Children who arrive in the Canary Islands face restrictions on moving to mainland Spain for guardianship purposes, which limits opportunities for support and integration. Once in the Canary Islands, migrant children encounter barriers to integration and education. Many children are unable to access formal schooling or vocational training due to their undocumented status or lack of resources. The frontliner focus was on children's urgent requirements for improved accommodation conditions, timely health care and psychosocial services. Integration is impeded by limited educational and vocational opportunities, legal documentation issues, and restrictive guardianship regulations. Expanding specialized reception capacities and improving interregional cooperation offer valuable opportunities to address these issues effectively.

> *"We spent days with no food or water, watching friends collapse. We had to keep walking or we'd die in the desert."*
>
> 16-year-old Senegalese unaccompanied migrant girl, in Morocco.

3.4.8. Limited Protection in Reception and Return Contexts

Children often migrate to Mauritania independently from other regions and by the time they arrive from maritime and overland migration, there are many challenges with facilitating urgent and medium-term shelter and concerns with detention. Upon arrival in the Canary Islands, many children face severe

[363] Davy, 2025, pp. 35–36.

isolation and limited support services. The reception facilities are overwhelmed, which results in delays in providing age determination, and children face significant psychological distress from the uncertainty regarding their legal status. Severe overcrowding delays age determination and protection, prolonging children's uncertainty and trauma. Overcrowding in reception centres significantly affects the well-being of migrant children. This leads to lack of privacy, poor living conditions, and inadequate access to essential services such as health care and mental health support. Children are often left without adequate supervision, increasing their vulnerability to further exploitation.

Front-line workers noted that once children arrive in the Canary Islands, they are effectively "stuck" there, as Spain's constitution delegates guardianship to the autonomous community of arrival. This legal structure severely limits relocation or reunification options. These structural barriers exacerbate isolation, and strain services, including housing and education. Protection actors also observed that many children who arrive appear to be around 17 to 18 years of age, though they likely began their journey many years earlier as children. Due to poor documentation and prolonged travel, many are treated as adults upon arrival, without proper age assessments. Misclassification undermines access to appropriate child protection services.

Front-line and civil society actors reported that many children arriving in the Canary Islands suffer from severe psychological distress due to their traumatic maritime journeys. Yet, most reception centres lack adequate mental health services, with overcrowding and understaffing compounding the issue. Legal restrictions – stemming from Spain's constitutional rule assigning guardianship to the autonomous community of arrival – prevent children from transferring to mainland Spain, further limiting access to services and increasing their isolation. Additionally, due to prolonged journeys and poor documentation, many children are misclassified as adults upon arrival, excluding them from vital child protection systems.

On the WAAR, 63 per cent of youth arriving in Europe were without identity documents.[364] Most left without them or never had them (55%), others were lost (5%), stolen (1%), or others had control over them (2%).[365] In another survey, only 23 per cent of respondents said that they had control over their documents upon arrival in Europe.[366] Almost half (48%) wanted assistance with documentation as their primary necessity.[367]

3.5. RESILIENCE AND COPING STRATEGIES

3.5.1. Future Aspirations

Many children risk migration to achieve a better life for themselves and their families, often driven by economic hardship or family pressures. This strong motivation and hope for a better future in Europe can be a significant internal resource fostering resilience in the face of adversity. Some children see migration as their "salvation" and are determined to persevere despite difficulties. Their "obsession" to reach Europe and improve their economic situation suggests a strong will to overcome obstacles.

3.5.2. Resourcefulness

While specific positive coping mechanisms used by children are not detailed in the caseworker interviews, one caseworker noted that the majority of migrants they met were "well educated" and had a clear objective of saving money, indicating a degree of resourcefulness and planning. This suggests an inherent capacity to navigate challenging situations.

364 IOM, 2024d, p. 23.
365 Ibid.
366 UNHCR et al., 2024, p. 5.
367 IOM, 2023a.

3.5.3. Support from Associations and NGOs

Migrant children often seek help from associations, individuals and NGOs. In Morocco, organizations exert efforts to provide health services, highlighting a support system that could extend to Spain and the Canary Islands. Recommendations are made to increase the number of specialized shelters to accompany children in their integration and provide various forms of assistance, which could bolster their resilience.

3.5.4. Educational Opportunities

While access to education is a major challenge for migrant children, with many not being enrolled in schools due to legal status and integration difficulties, efforts by organizations to provide education suggest that some children may access learning opportunities. Education can be a crucial factor in building skills and fostering a sense of normalcy and hope for the future, thus contributing to resilience.

3.5.5. Community Support

Migrant children in Mauritania are often supported by local diaspora, as well as Mauritanian communities, who help to feed them, and arrange football and other activities. Some move between Morocco and Mauritania, and in one instance, found a community of other migrant girls, highlighting the potential for informal support networks among migrant children. These can provide emotional and practical assistance.

3.5.6. Desire to Integrate and Build a New Life

Despite facing challenges in integration, the fact that "95 per cent of persons do not wish to go back" to their country of origin on this migration route (different to the CMR) suggests a strong desire to establish a new life. This determination can fuel their resilience in overcoming integration barriers.

3.6. CHILDREN'S DREAMS AND VIEWS

While many migrant children in Mauritania continue to prioritize basic needs – such as food, shelter, and safety – they also hold powerful, clear and personal aspirations for the future. Despite the hardship of long journeys, exploitation risks, and prolonged separation from loved ones, children consistently voiced dreams grounded in dignity, family, education and self-reliance.

Boys expressed strong ambitions in sports and digital literacy. Several dreamed of becoming professional footballers – clearly identifying roles like midfielder and striker, referencing international leagues, and naming their football heroes. Others emphasized the importance of gaining digital skills, especially learning to use computers and email, in order to find work and support their families. Others were timid yet held onto their dreams:

> *"I want to be a striker and play in the best championship in the world."*
>
> Migrant boy in Mauritania, from Mali.

Girls spoke of starting small businesses, supporting their families, and reuniting with siblings. Their dreams often reflected a mix of self-determination and caregiving responsibility. One girl shared her dreams:

> *"I want to open my own business and find my brothers again."*
>
> Migrant girl in Mauritania, from Mali.

> *"No matter the place, I just want to be with my family."*
>
> Migrant girl in Mauritania, from the Central African Republic.

In addition to these long-term goals, children articulated everyday needs often taken for granted: a safe place to play, access to school, and opportunities to express themselves. Many children shared a desire for access to education – particularly in languages they understand – and digital tools that could help them learn or stay connected. They also expressed a wish for spaces to feel safe, social and like children again:

> *"We need a park. A place to play. To feel normal again."*
>
> Migrant boy in Mauritania, from Mali.

Despite the trauma many have endured, children demonstrated striking emotional maturity and self-awareness when reflecting on their journeys and offering advice to others. Girls, in particular, spoke with realism and protective instinct – warning others about the difficulties of irregular migration and the risks they themselves had endured.

> *"If you are determined to leave, just know it is very difficult. You won't have food, you won't have housing, and work is hard to find."*
>
> Migrant girl in Mauritania, from Guinea.

Boys were often more hopeful but still grounded in reality, especially around the emotional cost of migration and barriers to education:

> *"Mauritania is a good place. But be ready – you will miss your parents a lot. And there's no school."*
>
> Migrant boy in Mauritania, from Mali.

Children also spoke candidly about grief, loss and trauma – describing moments that had changed them, including illness, near-death experiences and abandonment. Their deepest pain, across gender and age, was the absence of family.

> *"The hardest day was when I got malaria. I thought I was going to meet God."*
>
> Migrant boy from Mali, in Mauritania.

Children consistently expressed a desire to be included in decisions that affect their lives and called for meaningful support that aligns with their goals. Their voices reflect a clear need for improved access to education – especially in languages they understand – and opportunities to develop digital skills. They asked for vocational and business training to help them build independent futures, as well as safe, child-friendly spaces where they can rest, play and feel secure. Many also spoke about the importance of reconnecting with family, urging for more support with reunification and communication where they feel safe. Underpinning all of these needs was a call to strengthen local social services and ensure ongoing support for children in foster care or living independently.

> *"If you want to help, start with us. Ask us what we need. We miss our parents the most."*
>
> Migrant boy in Mauritania, from Mali.

This section underscores that children are not passive recipients of protection – they are thoughtful actors navigating extraordinary adversity. Their dreams, insights, and advice offer a direct road map for more responsive, inclusive, and child-centred migration and protection programming.

> *"I want to learn how to use a computer and have an email so I can find a job and help my family."*
>
> 14-year-old unaccompanied boy from the Central African Republic, in Mauritania.

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THEMATIC HIGHLIGHTS

The following three thematic snapshots expand some of the most pertinent themes that arose across all migration routes. These snapshots include child trafficking and arbitrary detention as well as unaccompanied and separated children.

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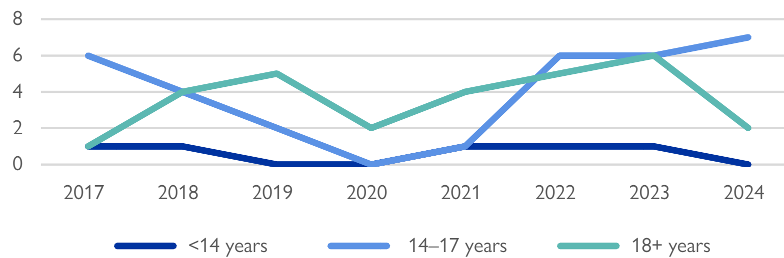
1. CHILD TRAFFICKING SNAPSHOT

"'If you are not good enough to clean, I will sell you for prostitution work." they said.

Former unaccompanied migrant girl from Nigeria, in Libya.

Figure 47. Potential Victims of Trafficking Registered by IOM, by Age, by Year (2017–2024)



Source: MiMOSA (2017–2024).

As the third most lucrative as well as invisible trade in the word, human trafficking remains one of the most severe and underidentified protection risks for children on the move across North Africa. Trafficking thrives in regions where conflict, displacement and migration intersect with weak child protection systems and limited accountability. Quantifying these gross violations of children's rights are extremely difficult in cross-border, regional and/or humanitarian contents where the focus is on response and protection.[368]

The primary forms of trafficking affecting children include forced labour, which accounts for 43 per cent of all identified cases.[369] Sexual exploitation disproportionately affects girls, comprising 30 per cent of female child cases, compared to 7 per cent among boys.[370] The main methods of coercion and control used by traffickers include false promises (59%), psychological abuse (56%) and physical violence (51%). These patterns are consistent across multiple countries and routes. Boys are more likely to be trafficked through threats of harm (28%), physical or psychological abuse (32%), and forced labour (33%), while girls are more frequently subjected to sexual violence (33%), threats of violence (26%), and denial of basic needs such as food, shelter and medical care (18%).

According to case management data from IOM's MiMOSA database, between 2017 and 2024, 3.4 per cent of all vulnerable migrants assisted across the region were identified as potential victims of trafficking, with children accounting for 13 per cent of all trafficking cases. The highest proportions were registered in Libya and Tunisia (4% each), followed by Egypt (3%), and Morocco and Algeria (1% each).[371] These figures reflect only identified and assisted cases, with the true scale of trafficking likely to be significantly higher due to the challenges of detection, underreporting, stigma and fear of reprisals among victims.

Children aged 14 to 17 years consistently represented the most trafficked age group. In 2024 alone, 41 per cent of all vulnerable girls registered by IOM were identified as potential victims of trafficking. While trafficking historically affected girls more frequently, particularly in cases of sexual exploitation, trends since 2020 show a notable shift, with boys increasingly being trafficked, particularly for forced labour, criminal activities, and in some cases, sexual exploitation. This reversal reflects evolving

[368] IOM, n.d. (accessed 1 May 2025).
[369] Digidiki et al., 2023, p. 47.
[370] Ibid., p. 41.
[371] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.

dynamics along key migration routes and the ability of trafficking networks to adapt to changes in migration controls and humanitarian responses. The biggest analysis on trafficking in the world, documents the irony was that enforced begging actually happens in broad daylight and is highly visible, yet it is still hidden under the shroud of illegality.[372]

CTDC data confirms a steady rise in the number of children trafficked since 2020, following a temporary dip during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 4,300 trafficking cases recorded in North Africa between 2016 and 2023, Libya accounted for the vast majority (3,407 cases), followed by Tunisia (357), Egypt (203) and Morocco (127). Algeria reported no cases to CTDC during this period, likely due to political sensitivities and barriers to data reporting. The increasing presence of boys among identified victims is especially marked in Libya, where 47 per cent of trafficked individuals were male – a significantly higher proportion than in any other country in the region.

The forms and duration of trafficking vary by country. In Libya, children are commonly trafficked into bonded labour, domestic servitude, and sexual exploitation, often following periods of detention. In Egypt, most children are trafficked for labour exploitation, particularly in hospitality and domestic work. In Morocco, trafficking is frequently linked to forced begging and community-based exploitation, where children are housed by informal leaders or smugglers who force them to beg in order to repay rent or other debts. In Tunisia, cases tend to involve shorter periods of exploitation, typically under one year, although severe abuse is still reported. By contrast, trafficking in Morocco often lasts for over two years, especially for boys who are exploited in street work or forced to live under long-term control. In Libya and Egypt, although exploitation may be shorter, it is often marked by extreme violence and control.

Debt bondage plays a significant role in the trafficking of children from West Africa, particularly Nigerian children transiting through Libya. In many cases, families are coerced into financing their children's travel through informal loans, with traffickers then claiming repayment through forced labour or prostitution. Front-line workers in Libya and Tunisia report frequent cases where children's salaries are entirely redirected to smugglers or traffickers, leaving them trapped in cycles of exploitation. In Morocco, frontliners describe children being exploited by community leaders who provide shelter and food in exchange for forced begging, with reports of extreme violence, including children being thrown from buildings when their families fail to pay ransom demands.

Although children were historically more likely to be trafficked in destination countries, recent data shows that countries of transit are now major sites of exploitation. Egypt, while a destination for some, was also recorded as a major country of exploitation, with 22 per cent of all North African child trafficking cases identified by CTDC occurring there. The nature of trafficking in Egypt is often linked to deceptive recruitment for apprenticeships or low-wage jobs that mask exploitative conditions.

Despite growing awareness, trafficking remains a largely invisible crime, particularly in humanitarian and migration contexts where unaccompanied children are misclassified, misidentified, or detained without proper screening. Trafficking in persons in North Africa occurs both in the shadows and in plain sight – enforced begging, exploitative labour, and coercion are often visible on the streets, yet rarely result in identification or assistance. Child trafficking persists not only because of weak enforcement but because it is actively denied, obscured, and normalized within migration systems that continue to prioritize border enforcement over child protection.

[372] Digidiki et al., 2023, p. 46.

2. ARBITRARY DETENTION SNAPSHOT

Across the CMR, WMR and WAAR, migrant children – particularly those who are unaccompanied and separated – are subjected to arbitrary detention and detention-like situations in official and unofficial facilities, and by State and non-State actors. Despite all transit countries being parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, detention remains a widespread and systemic practice. These practices persist in the absence of safe, regulated alternatives and amid major protection gaps in referral systems, formal care options, and oversight mechanisms. All children have the right to protection, regardless of their status "immigration detention is never in the best interests of the child and constitutes a child rights violation."[373]

On the CMR, it is well documented that children are exposed to exponential protection risks in arbitrary detention, with the ICC noting potential crimes against humanity and war crimes.[374] Children are regularly detained with unrelated adults, heightening risks of violence, exploitation and trauma.[375] Eighty-seven (87) per cent of migrants who had been detained before their maritime journey, had experienced physical violence, compared to 6 per cent who experience sexual violence and 7 per cent psychological violence.[376] On the CMR, children as young as ten are held in overcrowded cells of up to 675 people, sleeping in bathrooms or upright due to lack of space in with dirty and unhygienic cells, flooding of septic tanks, and clogged toilets. Overcrowded centres create and exacerbate chronic medical, psychological and psychiatric conditions, including sleep deprivation, hallucinations, disorganized behaviour and agitation.[377] Access to water and food is often denied for days. Migrants report extreme fatigue, illness and psychological deterioration. Upon release, children are frequently physically ill and mentally shattered, exhibiting signs of acute trauma, depression and disassociation.

Abuse in detention settings is widespread. Children have described routine beatings, psychological humiliation, and punishment for basic requests. Médecins Sans Frontières has documented systematic strip searches of children upon arrival at detention centres, including intimate body searches and incidents of sexual assault.[378] Girls face particular risks of sexual violence, both in detention and upon release – often being re-targeted by traffickers. Frontliners noted cases where women and girls were "sold" to men or forced to work for months in exchange for freedom. Migrant children in detention have reported regular, indiscriminate violence from male and female guards, including inhumane and dehumanizing treatment, violence, beatings, torture.[379] This was used as means of punishment for requesting food and help as well as punishment for disobeying orders. Other concerns include exploitative unpaid and forced labour in detention centres, torture and human trafficking and extortion, with women and children being relocated, and women sold to men by guards, to work for six months before being released, while others were paid "payment- for-release" scheme, amounting to extortion.[380]

In many transit countries, arbitrary detention was often indiscernible, where children did not know whether it was formal or informal, by kidnappers or criminal groups. Frontliners reported Nigerian, Somali and Eritrean children face particularly brutal treatment. Somali and Nigerian children are regularly kidnapped by armed groups for ransom. Somali boys reported *"being held by armed groups, forced to call their families begging them to pay. If they didn't pay quickly, they were tortured."* Research also showed that kidnapping is intimately interlined to detention situations of extortion. Children reported extreme confusion, as did recent research projects, around what country or migration

373 OHCHR, 2017.
374 IDC and UNICEF, 2022, pp. 21, 42.
375 Davy, 2025, p. 57.
376 MSF, 2023c, p. 11.
377 MSF, 2023c, p. 5.
378 MSF, 2023c, pp. 7, 8.
379 Ibid.
380 Ibid.

route children were held captive, and detained, forced to work and/or held for extortion. There was confusion around whether enforcers were authorities, or criminal. Frontliners shared that girls in detention are often at risk of being forced into sexual exploitation.

The frontliners were overwhelmingly concerned for unaccompanied and separated migrant boys, as in Libya, *"boys are detained more than girls… they're caught in public spaces, looking for work."* On the CMR boys are generally more visible compared to girls who can be more invisibly, in domestic work. In other transit countries, migrant children are often detained when crossing borders, or seas, or being returned. Despite girls being more invisible, there are different risks once they leave detention, as female frontliners shared in Libya, *"girls released from detention are re-harassed by the same traffickers."* Another emphasized the physical mental effects of detention on all unaccompanied and separated children, *"some children spend 6–7 months in detention. When they're released, they're extremely sick and mentally shattered."*

Frontliners shared that children experience particularly traumatizing experiences on the Sahara Desert, with both State and non-State arbitrary detention including the CMR and WMR, noting the recent research that showed respondents had a hard time differentiating armed groups from official, and what country they were in at the time.[381] Previous research published explained the overall confusion in the North Africa, that frontliners, children and official researchers had differentiating official detention centres from situations where children were held captive for kidnapping, extortion, forced labour and other purposes.[382]

On the WMR, detention of children often follows maritime interceptions, border crossings, or returns. Despite legal provisions in some countries that prohibit child detention, enforcement remains inconsistent and access to alternative care remains limited. Frontliners and former migrant children reported children experiencing expulsions, pushbacks, removals and relocations internally and internationally on a routine basis, without due process. Children are frequently arrested and transferred from cities, to remote border crossings or locations, without engagement with guardians or service providers, and often to countries in the opposite direction to their origin country, where they are stranded in locations with unknown languages. They do not have notice, or the option to contact family, guardians, NGOs nor advise anyone of the situation. They are relocated without their belongings, documentation or access to family tracing and reunification procedures, leading to prolonged separation and disappearance from formal systems and significant protection concerns including exploitation, as well as extreme environmental hazards.

In transit countries on the WAAR, including Mauritania and Morocco, detention risks are compounded by weak referral systems and limited child protection infrastructure. Research and field reports indicate that children, especially UASC are often held in adult facilities or in police custody due to a lack of formal shelters. In Morocco, despite legal frameworks for child protection, implementation remains uneven, and family separation continues to occur, especially during deportation or sea interception procedures. In Mauritania, children detained in temporary holding centres face long delays before referral to child protection actors, and reunification with families is rarely prioritized. Informal care initiatives exist but remain underfunded and lack legal recognition or structured oversight, and many are relocated or live on the streets in the community without support.

Across the board, "there is no formal referral system in place for children intercepted at sea."[383] Children are intercepted, pushed back, pulled back, expelled and deported from transit and destination countries alike. In one transit country, children who are intercepted at sea are briefly detained before referring them, to child protection delegates or IOM – especially in cases of suspected trafficking.[384] In

381 IOM et al., 2024.
382 Ibid.
383 IDC and UNICEF, 2022, pp. 21, 42.
384 Ibid.

other countries there are various alterative care initiatives including community-based structures and foster care. Some countries have accommodation centres that function as alternatives to detention, allowing children to move freely during the day where an overstretched guardianship system exists.[385] Other countries prohibit the detention of refugee and migrant children, referring them instead to the national child protection system and alternative justice pilots.[386]

Across all three routes, however, frontliners have consistently described children arriving in destination countries deeply traumatized and almost always related to experiences crossing borders, whether overland or maritime in transit. One social worker in Italy said plainly: *"Libya breaks them. It is the worst part of their journey. They arrive in Italy physically safe but emotionally destroyed."* Arbitrary detention remains a defining feature of children's migration through North Africa – marked by violence, trauma and legal invisibility. It is a regional protection crisis requiring urgent investment in regulated, child-sensitive alternatives to detention, cross-border case management, and the formal prohibition of child detention under all circumstances.

One concern that UNICEF highlights is that migrant children are frequently detained with and treated as adults, denied access to critical health-care services, psychosocial support and legal representation, in addition to exacerbating additional protection risks. In the process of bridging the gaps in providing alterative care systems for children, some transit countries such as Egypt, Libya, Morocco and the Sudan, have created community-hosting initiatives for unaccompanied migrant children, which is often supported by United Nations agencies and NGOs.[387]

Authorities routinely deport migrants, including children and women, without adequate procedures for ensuring family unity, family tracing or reunification, significantly disrupting family structures. Migrants, including unaccompanied and separated children, are frequently transported to remote border regions, exacerbating their vulnerability and risk of exploitation. Internal displacement within transit countries further disrupts integration efforts, deepening vulnerabilities and perpetuating cycles of movement and detention.

Migrants on all three routes experience dangerous and rigorous deterrence measures including pullbacks, pushbacks, detention and deportations from transit as well as destination country authorities, on overland and maritime routes.[388] They often use threats, violence, and forceful measures against migrants, including targeting vessels attempting sea crossings, leading to deaths and disappearances. Smuggling or criminal networks exploit the desperation of migrants, charging exorbitant fees for hazardous journeys. Front-line accounts consistently document violent actions targeting migrants, including direct aggression against boats and migrants themselves, resulting in significant loss of life.

385 Ibid., pp. 4, 53, 58.
386 Ibid., pp. 22, 35.
387 UNICEF and International Detention Coalition, 2022, pp. 3–4, 7–10.
388 MSF, 2024.

3. UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN SNAPSHOT

First Separated then Unaccompanied

STORY

In 2024, a 12-year-old girl named Fanny migrated to North Africa from Sierra Leone where she transitioned though multiple transit countries (including Libya and Tunisia) brought to an IOM office by a woman from her community. Fanny arrived in critical condition – unable to stand or speak, she collapsed upon reaching safety. Hospitalized the next day, she slipped into a coma lasting three months. Doctors diagnosed her with tuberculosis and meningitis; illnesses often associated with harsh migration conditions. Though intensive medical care eventually stabilized her condition, the trauma of her experience left her almost completely paralysed, able only to move her head and neck. Months of physiotherapy brought limited improvement as Fanny remained bedridden in her hospital room.

Fanny's journey began as a separated child: her mother, unaware of the true risks involved, entrusted her to a family acquaintance who planned the hazardous migration journey through the Sahara Desert. She was identified in Libya by another woman from her community and was found abandoned, alone, barely conscious, amid a group of adult migrants crossing the dangerous desert route from Libya into another transit country. The exact circumstances of how she was left by her family friend remain unclear, highlighting the hidden dangers children face when trusted caregivers vanish, leaving them stranded and vulnerable. IOM traced Fanny's mother, discovering her back home, living in extreme poverty, without stable shelter or income. The mother's inability to provide care initially blocked any possibility of reunification.

However, through coordinated efforts between IOM and their counterparts in Fanny's home country, a detailed reintegration and medical care plan was developed. Crucially, financial assistance was secured for her family, laying the groundwork for a hopeful reunion. Fanny, once left invisible and alone, is now expected to return safely home, equipped with ongoing medical support and the stability she desperately needs. Her story underscores both the profound vulnerability of children left behind during migration and the critical necessity of robust, child-sensitive protections to ensure no child remains stranded along the world's most dangerous migration routes.

UASC face heightened exposure to severe risks such as violence, trafficking in persons, exploitation, and significant mental health trauma due to isolation and absence of familial protection. In 2024, IOM registered 15,691 vulnerable migrant children for assistance in the seven key transit countries in North Africa, which included 2,989 unaccompanied and separated children.[389] In 2023, 55,704 children arrived in Europe, including 35,510 unaccompanied or separated children (UASC) — more than double the number in 2021. In 2023, Italy alone received nearly 27,000 UASC, almost triple the 2021 figure, with the Central Mediterranean Route as the epicentre. The overarching

[389] UNICEF, 2025d.

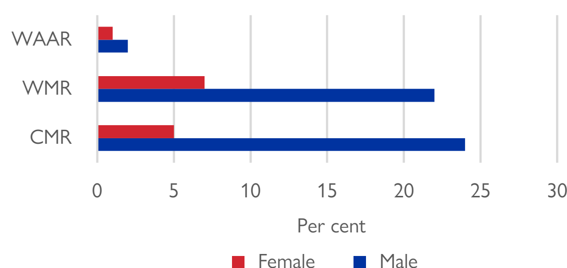
majority have experienced compounding human rights violations including violence, exploitation and abuse, forced labour, child trafficking, detention and deportations.[390]

Between 2017 and 2022, IOM assisted 1,768 UASC returning to West and Central Africa through assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes, accounting for 11 per cent of all children who returned to their origin countries.[391] Of these, 81 per cent were boys, and 76 per cent were between 15 and 17 years old, primarily returning from the Niger (43%), Mali (18%) and Libya (9%). In North Africa, IOM registered over 68,000 migrants from 2017 to 2020, with approximately 14 per cent classified as highly vulnerable, including UASC.[392] The main nationalities among these vulnerable groups were Sudanese, Nigerian and Guinean.

Family separation substantially exacerbates vulnerabilities. In transit countries like Morocco, families are frequently separated during arrests and deportations without adequate mechanisms for family tracing or reunification. A front-line worker in Morocco described a distressing situation involving Ibrahim, a 16-year-old boy from Côte d'Ivoire, forcibly separated from his sister: *"Some children are separated from their families as arrests don't take into account if they have relatives."* Mauritania provides notable examples of addressing these vulnerabilities through culturally sensitive foster care systems. Cases involving siblings from Mali illustrate effective, culturally appropriate alternative care arrangements that respect children's religious, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, providing a viable alternative to detention and forced separation. Data from MiMOSA and qualitative interviews consistently reveal significant distress resulting from family separation. Children often report severe feelings of abandonment, fear, and prolonged psychosocial trauma due to isolation and inadequate care within detention centres and informal camps.

Insights from front-line workers and protection experts across the region emphasize the urgent need to address these vulnerabilities comprehensively, highlighting the real and immediate risks faced by UASC across North and West Africa. Children are also separated when they are "left-behind," as one frontliner explained in Libya, "a father was detained, the mother was trafficked, and the children were left alone in the house for a month..."

Figure 48. Percentage of Unaccompanied and Separated Children, by Gender and Route (2017–2024)



Source: IOM MiMOSA Case Management Data, Registered Vulnerability Cases, Total Number: 13,054.

[390] UNHCR et al., 2023, pp. 2–4.
[391] IOM, 2024i.
[392] IOM, 2025d. MiMOSA data set.

4. GENDER, AGE, DISABILITY AND INCLUSION SNAPSHOT

Children on the move through key migration routes are exposed to risks that are not only severe, but deeply unequal. Age, gender and disability are not just characteristics – they are determinants of visibility, access, violence, survival as well as resilience. These identity markers dictate not only what risks children face, but whether they are seen, supported, or erased from systems meant to protect them.

MiMOSA registration data from 2017 to 2023 reveals a striking trend: the largest number of children registered in North Africa were under five years old – over three times higher than children aged 12 to 17, contrary to what the media showcases. These very young children are largely overlooked in migration policy yet face extreme dependency risks. When caregivers are injured, arrested, deported, or die during the journey, children are often left behind, abandoned in border areas, or fall into the hands of traffickers. The case management data also showed that the proportion of children who were trafficked, between 14 to 17 years of age had significantly increased, while the trends remained stable for adults. Females (11%) were more likely to be trafficked overt his timeframe, compared to males (1%). There were higher proportions of girls identified as potential victims in Tunisia (14%) and Libya (13%) than other countries.[393]

Older adolescents face a different set of exclusions. As they approach adulthood, they often "age out" of child protection frameworks entirely, without documentation, housing, or transition support. This is especially true for boys aged 16 to 17, who are routinely detained, exploited, or pushed into survival labour. Front-line workers in Morocco and Italy consistently raised the alarm: *"When you turn 18 in Italy, you are suddenly nothing. No papers, no shelter, no protection. This is when they find you."*

Girls aged 14 to 17 also face escalating risks as they move through transit countries. They are frequently targeted for sexual exploitation, coerced marriage, and forced domestic servitude. Intergenerational irregular status and statelessness is exacerbated by fears and challenges in accessing services and birth registration for babies. Additionally, for girls who are unaccompanied, they may be seen as unfit to be guardians, which further exposes them to risks and leaves newborn children undocumented and stateless.

Gender sharply determines children's exposure to violence and exploitation. Across all three routes, girls and boys face different yet equally dangerous threats – but with drastically different recognition and support. Girls face layered risks that include trafficking, sexual violence, forced pregnancies and denial of reproductive health care. In 2024, 41 per cent of girls on the CMR were identified as victims of trafficking – a sevenfold increase from the year before. On the WMR, girls from Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire are trafficked into domestic servitude and sex work, deceived with false promises of education or jobs. On the WAAR, girls report sexual coercion during overland travel and upon arrival in Mauritania.[394] Sexual and reproductive health services are virtually non-existent. Pregnant girls often give birth in forests, shelters, or domestic work placements – alone, undocumented, and unsupported. Girls also report cycles of re-trafficking after being released from detention, re-exploited by the same networks that first entrapped them.[395]

[393] Ibid.
[394] Digidiki et al., 2023.
[395] IOM, 2024c.

Boys, while more visible, are routinely criminalized rather than protected. Adolescent boys are more likely to be detained for working, sleeping outdoors, or attempting to cross borders. On the CMR, 31 per cent of trafficked boys in 2023 were controlled through debt bondage – a sharp increase from 7 per cent in 2021. In Libya, Tunisia and the Niger, boys are beaten, extorted, or held for ransom, often forced into labour or coerced recruitment by militias or trafficking groups. Despite their exposure to violence and exploitation, boys are often overlooked for services due to assumptions of independence or resilience. As one front-line worker in Morocco said: *"They are caught begging, detained, and deported – then they try again. And again. And again."*

Despite these challenges, children develop remarkable coping mechanisms and demonstrate resilience in unique ways shaped by their gender. Girls form micro-networks in shelters and transit zones to share food, information and protection. They rely on peer solidarity and collective strategies to shield one another from sexual violence. Many carry strong aspirations – to become lawyers, social workers, or teachers – as a source of motivation and healing: *"My dream is becoming a lawyer because I want to fight trafficking. I want my country to be proud."* However, girls often internalize shame and avoid disclosure, especially around sexual violence or pregnancy. They face stigma that silences them, and only in safe spaces do they advocate for education or asylum.

Boys adopt hyper-independence as a survival strategy. They organize their own travel, form survival pacts, and take on dangerous labour to continue their journeys. Their resilience is expressed through self-reliance, mobility and protecting younger peers. Yet this same strength often isolates them, as they distrust service providers due to repeated detentions, they are less likely to seek mental health or psychosocial support, and they cope through silence, stoicism, and at times, risky behaviours.[396] Both girls and boys demonstrate extraordinary strength in the face of repeated trauma – but their resilience often goes unsupported or misunderstood.

Girls face compounded vulnerabilities rooted in gender-based violence, social invisibility and the denial of reproductive rights. Yet they also draw upon powerful peer-based support and future-oriented aspirations as sources of resilience. Boys, on the other hand, are often criminalized and forced into exploitative labour or held for ransom – experiencing repeated detention and rejection by systems that presume they do not need help. They cope through independence and practical alliance-building, though this often leads to isolation and avoidance of services.

Children with disabilities face the harshest exclusion. When caregivers are detained, deported, or disappear, these children are often left behind in border zones, shelters, or detention sites – unregistered, immobile and ignored. Girls with disabilities are at particularly high risk of sexual exploitation, often trafficked into domestic servitude or coerced sex work. These patterns directly contravene the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which guarantees equal access to protection and assistance.[397] Yet across all three routes, there are no inclusive services for children with disabilities. Children hide their identities out of fear – and many children migrate because of this, or from being discovered, but hiding in transit also excludes them from all forms of protection.

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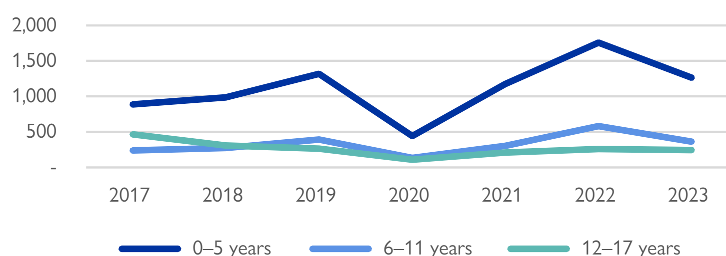
[396] IOM, 2023a.

[397] United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), A/RES/61/106 (2006).

All call for inclusive, gender-responsive, and child-centred protection frameworks. Yet the current system falls short, leaving specific groups of children to navigate complex and violent journeys with little support. These urgent protection gaps stand in direct contrast to international standards and principles set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Global Compact for Migration and ACRWC. Each of these frameworks upholds children's rights to safety, dignity, access to services, and participation – regardless of their migration status, gender, or disability.[398]

Figure 49. Children IOM Registered by Age, in North Africa



Source: MiMOSA Registrations (2017–2023) Number: 13,054.

"Children with disabilities are among the most invisible. Many are left behind in Libya or are never registered because they cannot advocate for themselves."

Frontliner in Italy.

[398] UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), A/RES/44/25 (1989). UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (2018), African Union (1990). African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

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CONCLUSIONS

All three migration routes through North and West Africa, are intimately connected to movements across the Sahara Desert, and/or the seas, presenting preventable protection concerns for migrant children, regardless of how the nature and intensity of the risks and their experiences differ. The overarching priority, and one that is predictable and escalating, is that highly vulnerable children are at risk, regardless of where they are on the migration journey. In 2024 alone, 15,691 vulnerable migrant children were registered across seven key transit countries in North Africa. Among them were 2,989 unaccompanied and separated children, 979 children with critical health needs, and 396 identified as potential victims of trafficking. At least 98 children (3%) and 211 women (6%) were reported dead or missing. These are not isolated incidents – they point to systemic failures in protection and access.[399]

The CMR remains the most frequently used and the most dangerous, with children routinely exposed to extreme forms of violence, trafficking in persons, and exploitation – particularly during the overland Sahara crossing and maritime journey. Prolonged transit, arbitrary detention, and psychological trauma are recurring patterns along this route. Emerging patterns pertaining to deceptive recruitment, smuggling and human trafficking exacerbate existing risks and vulnerabilities. Social media and the misperception of reality in destination countries has a huge influence, and the promises of opportunity contribute to cycles of abuse, especially for adolescent boys and girls. With the increase in child mobility and rapidly changing trends children are exposed to new types of protection risks overland and by sea.

Along the WMR, particularly in urban and peri-urban environments, vulnerabilities like food security and shelter are urgent and pronounced where there are significant numbers of highly vulnerable children who do not have access to emergency shelter in transit countries. The relocations and movement of children and the rate of violence and family separation from movements internally and internationally, contributes to protection risks. Meanwhile, the WAAR is increasingly characterized by economic desperation and rising child mobility, linked to the erosion of traditional livelihoods. It is quite covert as exploitation takes place within closed environments like the home or the traditional schools, and simultaneously other forms of exploitation like begging has become normalized on the streets. Although overall numbers are lower, protection risks cannot be compared, particularly during long maritime crossings and in remote transit zones with limited child protection infrastructure.

Across all routes, age, gender and type of vulnerability, critically shapes children's experiences, underscoring the urgent need for coordinated, route-specific protection responses that are child-sensitive, gender-responsive, and grounded in international child rights standards.

Call to Action

UNICEF and IOM call on governments, donors, and regional partners to uphold child rights and apply humanitarian and migration protection principles across all stages of children's mobility. In line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Global Compact for Migration, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, migration governance must place children's rights to protection, survival, development, and participation at its core. Migrant children face overlapping risks – violence, trafficking, exploitation and family separation – yet protection systems remain fragmented. These risks are preventable through principled, cross-border action and sustained investment.

[399] MSF, 2024.

On the CMR, urgent action is needed to prevent trafficking and violence, ensure access to safe alternatives to detention, and strengthen child-sensitive case management systems that follow children across borders. Return procedures must be voluntary, protective, and in line with the child's best interests. Bilateral cooperation should focus on early identification and reintegration support. On the WMR, legal identity, documentation, and access to services remain major barriers. Hidden exploitation – especially in informal labour and urban areas – must be addressed through gender-responsive services, non-discriminatory protection regardless of legal status, and targeted outreach to at-risk girls and boys. On the Western African Atlantic Route, children undertake dangerous sea crossings with no safe alternatives. Governments must expand education and livelihood opportunities, strengthen reception and referral systems, and provide accurate, age-appropriate information to reduce reliance on high-risk journeys.

Across all routes, we call for an end to child immigration detention, increased investment in mobile and community-based services, and the full participation of children in decisions that affect them. Regional and national systems must reflect child rights and protection at every step – from departure, through transit, to durable solutions.[400] A coordinated, child-focused approach is not only possible – it is urgent.

400 Save the Children, 2016, pp. 27 - 32.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations were informed by child protection front-line workers and practitioners working along the key migratory routes whose insights underscore the critical necessity of reforming current policies to prioritize the rights, protection and well-being of migrant children, strongly advocating against detention, deportation, push-back and pull-back practices, and urging adoption of rights-based, sustainable alternatives.

1. Cross-Cutting Recommendations

Policy and Legal Reform

- **Prevention of child abuse, violence and exploitation and child trafficking** by supporting communities at all levels: individual, family, community and structural, responding to vulnerabilities and enhancing resilience-building.
- **Advocate for increased legal pathways for children and families,** by working with States and regional intergovernmental bodies to expand safe, regular and dignified migration channels, including humanitarian visas, child-sensitive asylum procedures, family reunification and resettlement schemes.
- **Launch and scale child-friendly awareness campaigns** on safe migration routes and rights. Disseminate through trusted, multilingual and community-based networks using inclusive, age-appropriate and accessible formats tailored to children and youth.
- **Support child and youth-led advocacy** by empowering migrant children and young people to meaningfully participate in shaping national and regional migration frameworks, policies and procedures that affect their lives.
- **Institutionalize cross-border coordination** by formally involving consulates and embassies in child protection processes such as identity verification, family tracing and repatriation. Ensure consular staff are trained on child rights, protection standards and the best interests of the child.
- **End immigration detention of children** by supporting legal and policy reform across States to:
  - Prohibit child immigration detention in law and practice.
  - Scale up community-based alternatives and family-based care.
  - Ensure high-quality, rights-based alternative care options for unaccompanied and separated children.
  - Remove legal and administrative barriers to family reunification.
  - Mandate the involvement of child protection authorities in all migration and reception proceedings.
  - Integrate the Best Interests of the Child as a core principle in all decisions affecting children in migration contexts.
- **Develop transitional support programmes for youth turning 18,** including legal documentation, secure housing, vocational and higher education access, and safe employment pathways, to prevent protection gaps during the shift to adulthood.
- **Ensure migrant children's legal entitlement to services** regardless of migration status – including education, health care, psychosocial support and access to national child protection systems – through legislative reform and harmonization across migration and child welfare laws.

Access to Urgent/Humanitarian Assistance

- **Deploy mobile and rapid-response child protection teams** in high-risk, hard-to-reach areas – such as desert crossings, remote border zones and maritime disembarkation points. Prioritize age-appropriate emergency care and psychosocial first aid.
- **Establish and support specialized search and rescue operations** in both the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean/Atlantic seas, with child protection-trained personnel and referral mechanisms for immediate assistance, family tracing and follow-up care.
- **Facilitate and decriminalize community-based protection efforts,** recognizing the critical role of local actors – including migrant communities, nomadic groups and informal leaders – in lifesaving response, search and rescue, and emergency referrals.
- **Expand emergency response services for children on the move,** including: Safe shelters and emergency accommodation, accessible for all age groups, genders and migration statuses.
- **Nutrition assistance,** including culturally appropriate and child-friendly meals.
- **Medical care,** including trauma support, maternal/infant care and treatment for injuries sustained during the journey.
- **Access to water, hygiene and sanitation (WASH)** facilities, especially in border and detention settings.
- **Invest in localized community response systems** to provide early assistance and monitoring in key hotspots. Ensure front-line workers are trained in child protection, mental health support and safe referral procedures.
- **Expand psychosocial support and educational access** in key transit hubs – such as Tripoli, Nouakchott, Agadez and Tangier – to provide continuity of care, emotional recovery and pathways for reintegration or onward movement.

Protection Systems and Services

- **Adopt a route-based approach to specialized child protection services,** ensuring continuity of care across origin, transit and destination countries. Services should follow children across borders, ensuring no disruption in access to protection, case management, MHPSS and reintegration support.
- **Ensure universal and retroactive access to birth registration and identity documentation** for undocumented children, to enable access to education, legal protection, health and durable solutions.
- **Invest in national and community-based MHPSS systems** tailored to the specific trauma experienced by children on the move, including gender-responsive, disability-inclusive and culturally competent care that accounts for migration-related distress.
- **Create safe, adolescent and/or child-friendly spaces** to play and connect (parks) and access support.
- **Provide basic services at all stages of the journey,** including safe shelter, culturally appropriate meals, clothing, rest facilities and access to urgent medical care in both formal and informal reception settings.
- **Adopt an inclusive, survivor-centred approach to protection,** with dedicated support for:
  - Children with disabilities;
  - Children affected by gender-based violence as well as complex trauma.

- **Strengthen national child protection systems to be inclusive of all children,** ensuring access to services based on protection needs, regardless of migration status, nationality or documentation.

- **Build the capacity** of front-line staff and social service focal points in countries of origin, transit and destination to provide for the needs and rights of children in situations of displacement and migration.

- **Support and scale up community-based early warning networks,** particularly in border zones and informal settlements, to monitor protection risks, report disappearances and rapidly alert child protection or humanitarian actors when children go missing.

- **Improve the identification and dignified recovery of deceased children** by training border officials, police and humanitarian actors in child-sensitive recovery procedures, forensic age estimation, and culturally respectful family notification protocols. Prioritize family tracing, accountability and memorialization where appropriate.

Coordination

- **Coordinate and harmonize child protection case management systems** across agencies and borders, enabling cross-border referrals, family tracing and continuity of care – especially for unaccompanied or separated children.

- **Establish a regional child protection coordination platform** to align national systems, promote case interoperability, standardize operating procedures and facilitate real-time protection alerts across origin, transit and destination countries.

- **Improve coordination for the dignified recovery, identification and notification of deceased children** along migration routes. Develop shared, child-sensitive protocols for recovery, age and identity assessment, and family notification.

- **Enable accessible reporting of human rights violations** affecting children in migration contexts, regardless of legal status, location, or nationality – ensuring non-retaliation and child-sensitive referral pathways.

Data

- **Disaggregate all data by age, sex, disability, and migratory status** across all tools and platforms to ensure visibility of children's protection needs and service gaps. Prioritize meaningful inclusion of children in all datasets, regardless of source.

- **Strengthen cross-border data-sharing systems** along and between migration routes to track risks, trends, protection needs and service access – while upholding data privacy, consent and ethical safeguards for children and families.

- **Leverage and share existing data sources** (including administrative, operational, and big data) to inform policy, early warning systems and targeted interventions. Ensure child-specific data is accessible and actionable, while aligned with child rights principles and data protection regulations.

- **Ensure administrative and case management systems can disaggregate data by migration status.** Establish appropriate legal frameworks for data governance, oversight and secure ethical use of child protection information.

- **Integrate migrant and displaced children into national data systems,** including surveys, censuses and needs assessments, to ensure their needs are counted, planned for, and addressed.

- **Utilize IOM platforms (DTM, AVRR, MiMOSA)** to more systematically capture protection risks, service access and vulnerabilities faced by children. Ensure routine disaggregation by age, gender and disability.
- **Integrate the Missing Migrants Project (MMP)** and related systems into child protection monitoring. Prioritize child-specific analysis of deaths and disappearances to inform prevention, family tracing, accountability and regional early warning efforts.

Child Participation and Inclusion

- **Establish national and route-level youth advisory councils** to meaningfully involve children and adolescents – especially those nearing adulthood – in the design, implementation, and evaluation of migration-related policies and programmes.
- **Invest in peer-led resilience initiatives,** creative expression platforms and community-based storytelling, enabling children to process their journeys, build peer support and contribute to shaping narratives around migration.
- **Operationalize child-friendly feedback and accountability mechanisms,** including participatory complaint and response systems, adapted for children in both formal and informal care settings across key migration corridors.
- **Ensure accessible assistance channels,** such as toll-free hotlines and mobile-based help platforms, in all countries along the route. Decriminalize humanitarian support and community-based assistance to ensure children and allies can seek help without fear.
- **Develop culturally appropriate, participatory feedback tools,** co-designed with children and youth, including returnee and diaspora groups, to track and integrate their insights into programming and advocacy.
- **Strengthen and fund community-based organizations (CBOs)** working directly with migrant children, particularly in areas such as family tracing, mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), and community-led awareness campaigns.
- **Establish measurable indicators** to monitor and evaluate child participation, using data points such as:
  - Reduction in child detention rates.
  - Increase in access to education and protection services.
  - Number and reach of child-led reintegration programmes (e.g. as seen in Guinea and Senegal).
  - Uptake of child-informed policy changes and good practices.
- **Embed participatory action research** and real-time child-led monitoring into programme cycles, ensuring that children can identify their needs and propose their own solutions, especially during transitions such as return or asylum processes.
- **Amplify children's voices** through consultations that inform regional and national policies, highlighting their lived experiences and agency.
- **Use real-life stories** from children to raise awareness on trafficking, arbitrary detention and misinformation, ensuring ethical and protective storytelling principles are upheld.
- **Implement awareness campaigns on safe migration,** co-created with youth, that target communities of origin, transit and destination – addressing risks and rights in a language children understand.

- **Support community-based integrated protection and reintegration systems,** recognizing the role of families, schools and neighbourhoods in sustaining safe environments for returnee or settled children.

Funding and Resource Mobilization

- **Establish route-based funding frameworks** that prioritize coordinated responses across origin, transit and destination countries – supporting both emergency needs and sustainable child protection, including access to services, documentation and reintegration.
- **Allocate national budgets for child protection** through Public Finance for Children (PF4C), especially in origin countries, to embed migration-sensitive child protection systems within national development strategies and social welfare reforms.
- **Strengthen international and multi-sector funding streams** – including donor compacts, pooled humanitarian-development-peace funds, and multi-country funding mechanisms – to ensure predictable, flexible financing for long-term child protection, family reunification and reintegration.
- **Secure investment in durable solutions** including: voluntary return and reintegration with child-sensitive case management, education reinsertion and psychosocial support.
- **Legal migration pathways and family reunification,** especially for children stranded in transit or separated from caregivers in destination countries.
- **Local integration opportunities** for children unable or unwilling to return, particularly in Morocco, Mauritania and Italy.
- **Mobilize and fund local actors** – including youth networks, faith-based organizations, diaspora groups, media and civil society – to enhance outreach, accountability and culturally grounded protection systems.
- **Promote ethical employment and vocational pathways** for older adolescents and reintegrating youth through public-private partnerships, skills training and safeguards against exploitation, particularly in sectors with high child labour risks, and construction, agriculture industries in transit and destination.

2. Central Mediterranean Route

This route presents the highest levels of danger for children, including extreme violence, trafficking in persons, arbitrary detention and psychological trauma. Children endure long overland journeys through the desert, face systematic abuse in transit hubs and are often held in overcrowded, unsanitary detention facilities. Children reported walking across the Sahara Desert for up to 30 days on foot, from the Niger to Algeria, Libya and Morocco, including two weeks on foot to the coast. These children arrive severely dehydrated, undocumented and unable to engage with services. Adolescent girls described facing sexual coercion and a complete lack of safe, private shelters. Many children had no understanding of trafficking in persons risks or what detention meant, highlighting the need for early awareness and prevention initiatives in countries of origin.

- **End immigration detention of children in origin, transit and destination countries.** Replace detention with family-based or community supported transitional care and legislate to prohibit child detention for migration-related reasons. Separate children from adult males in any facility or detention type settings and develop alternative care proposals.
- **Streamline documentation and legal assistance** for children arriving at disembarkation points to support registration, guardianship and access to durable solutions.
- **Establish safe spaces and disability inclusive, gender-specific support services** for adolescent girls, especially those at risk of trafficking, sexual violence and coerced marriage. Include reproductive health and trauma recovery services.
- **Strengthen family tracing and reunification protocols** using regional digital platforms, with procedures initiated within 72 hours of identifying unaccompanied or separated children.
- **Establish mobile child protection and MHPSS units** at critical transit points, including Sabha, Tripoli, Medenine and inland Moroccan hubs. These should include female protection officers, social workers, interpreters and psychological first aid.
- **Provide immediate funding for child-friendly spaces** and strengthen referral systems to support vulnerable and trafficked children and reunite families.
- **Ensure integration programs** support adolescents and youth transitioning out of care systems.

Egypt, the Niger and Tunisia

GOOD PRACTICES

The Standard Operating Procedures for the Protection and Assistance of Child Asylum-Seekers, Refugees and Victims of Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking in Persons in Egypt.

The Government of Egypt, in collaboration with UNICEF, has developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the protection of migrant children in the country.[401] This tool provides specific guidance for the protection of national and foreign trafficked and smuggled children.

Adopting a child-centered approach, the SOPs establish a national pathway for child protection case management, while ensuring coordination between national authorities, international organizations and CSOs. The procedures emphasize the importance of early identification of child victims of trafficking, providing specific indicators for the identification of child victims of trafficking.

IOM Niger Birth registration for migrant newborn children

IOM Niger, in the context of the AVRR programme, supports foreigner migrant women and parents by ensuring that their newborns receive birth certificates.[402] Firstly, IOM facilitates migrant women's access to hospitals and health-care facilities in which to give birth. Once the baby is born, IOM staff coordinate with national institutions to obtain a birth certificate and to register the baby in the Niger. The birth certificate is then given to the mother or parents before they return to their country of origin. If there is a delay in issuing the certificate, IOM Niger coordinates with IOM missions in the migrant parents' countries of origin to ensure it is delivered to the mother's or parent's residence.

Alternative care – Identification and referral of migrant children to national child protection delegates in Tunisia

In Tunisia, once vulnerable migrant children have been identified, particularly by border officials, they are referred to national child protection authorities or IOM for protection and support.[403] Tunisian child protection delegates assist in the identification of unaccompanied and separated migrant children and carry out risk assessments. The delegates then refer the children to family judges who, with the support of social workers, decide on alternative placement in cooperation with organizations such as IOM and civil society.

401 IOM and UNICEF, 2025, p. 8.
402 IOM and UNICEF, 2025, p. 7.
403 IOM and UNICEF, 2025, p. 8.

3. Western Mediterranean Route

On this route, children face hidden forms of exploitation – particularly in domestic work, construction and street economies. Legal identity gaps, age-based protection exclusions and weak urban child protection systems make children invisible. Front-line staff cited "ageing out" as a trigger for street homelessness, especially in Spain, where youth lose protection at 18. Girls described being "invisible" in domestic work, unregistered and at risk of abuse without legal guardianship or access to services. There is a lack of male-focused programming despite large numbers of unaccompanied boys working in construction and street economies.

- **Deploy search and rescue teams to the Sahara Desert and invest in emergency support and monitoring and assistance.**
- **Train teams to identify, support and assist migrant children in urban areas and informal settlements,** including Algiers, Oran and Casablanca, to identify and refer children living and working outside formal systems.
- **Access to local diverse food for children and all migrants in addition to medical needs.**
- **Facilitate access to legal identity** through emergency documentation drives and birth registration support, enabling access to schools and services.
- **Create supported transition programmes** for 16–18-year-olds in Spain and Morocco, including housing assistance, legal coaching and vocational pathways.
- **Implement specialized guardianship programs** for adolescent girls involved in informal domestic work or at risk of trafficking.
- **Provide mental health and psychosocial services** in reception and transition centres, with an emphasis on preventing exploitation, especially during the shift from child to adult systems.
- **Prioritize food security** and access to local sustainable food sources.
- **Expand medical access and health protocols** for child migrants with trauma.

Morocco

GOOD PRACTICES

Thematic coordination Groups for vulnerable migrants' protection in Morocco

The Groupes Thematique Protection (GTP) are joint coordination working groups established by UNHCR in the cities of Oujda, Tangier and Casablanca, Fes-Meknes, Marrakech and Beni Mellal. GTP members are international and local civil society organizations working on the protection of vulnerable migrants, including children on the move in Morocco.

During their monthly coordination meetings, the GTP exchange information on migration trends, discuss the needs of vulnerable migrants like children on the move and victims of trafficking and coordinate to ensure safe referral to services. The GTP also coordinate with IOM, UNICEF and local child protection authorities and organize activities such as trainings, awareness sessions and round tables.

Kafala as a form of alternative care in Morocco

In most of Muslim-majority countries the Kafala system allows for the long-term fostering of orphaned children or children without guardians. According to Islamic law, an individual or family (kafil) can voluntarily take responsibility for the overall protection of a child (makful) and provide care in the same way as a parent.

Family- and community-based foster care solutions may include traditional foster care systems like kafala. The UNCRC also recognizes Kafala as a form of alternative care.

Kafala usually is an institution reserved for children who are nationals of the country in which it is requested. However, in Morocco, guidance on Kafala specifically includes the fostering of migrant and refugee children, children seeking asylum, as well as stateless children.

4. Western African Atlantic Route

Children use this high-risk sea route to escape poverty, climate shocks and/or family obligations. Most undertake gruelling overland journeys before arriving at launch points with no support or documentation. Children reported extreme fatigue and trauma after walking from the Niger to Algeria and on to Mauritania. Girls reported coerced sexual arrangements for protection en route. Staff noted poor coordination between inland checkpoints and coastal authorities, resulting in missed protection opportunities.

- **Develop child-friendly shelters and rest stations** along inland overland routes in Mauritania, with basic services, mobile teams and referral mechanisms.
- **Invest in formal community-based foster care,** with monitored, government-led guardianship systems that replace ad hoc practices.
- **Train maritime rescue and border teams** in child safeguarding, trauma response and culturally sensitive engagement at Canary Island ports.
- **Launch multilingual awareness campaigns** in high-risk origin countries to provide accurate information about migration dangers and support options.
- **Ensure dignified reception and legal assistance** for children arriving by sea, including immediate access to interpreters, medical screening and psychosocial support.
- **Improve identification and recovery** of deceased children by training local authorities.
- **Advocacy** for stronger anti-trafficking measures, reporting and assistance for vulnerable children.
- Enhance the capacity of the madrassas, religious, on protection and child protection mechanisms.
- **Create pre-employment training** and opportunities especially in information technology communication with families will protect children through email address, access to phones/ computers and computer literacy.

Mauritania

GOOD PRACTICES

The foster care system for unaccompanied and separated migrant children developed by UN agencies and the Government of Mauritania

The Government of Mauritania in collaboration with UN agencies have established tools and procedures to ensure migrant children access to temporary foster care.[404] This solution is accessible to both national and migrant unaccompanied and separated children.

The mechanism involves a first phase of identifying host families which is conducted by partner CSOs. These families are evaluated and the evaluation is presented to a joint committee composed of child protection institutional actors, representatives from local CSOs, and representatives from UN and related agencies such as IOM, UNHCR and UNICEF.

The selected families receive technical and economic support to ensure the well-being, development, education and living conditions of the child. Families agree to host an unaccompanied migrant for 6 months or 12 to 24 months in exceptional cases.

The national Ministry of Social Affairs, Children and the Family supported by international child protection actors are currently reinforcing the existent dual system of institutional and family-based care. In line with the National child protection strategy and the Child Protection Code, the Ministry is drafting a decree regulating the status of temporary foster families for vulnerable children.

The West African Network (WAN or RAO) for protection of children on the move within ECOWAS countries

In 2005 the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its partners in the West African region established the West African Network (WAN) or Reseau de Afrique de l'Ouest (RAO), a network aimed to ensure the protection of children on the move within the ECOWAS countries and Mauritania.[405] The WAN is a transnational mechanism for the protection of children on the move in the subregion, promoting cooperation in the early identification, best interest assessment and referral of migrant children at risk. The WAN provides emergency responses to medium- and long-term interventions such as community and family support for child reintegration and personal development projects. These actions are carried out thanks to the cooperation between the child protection systems of the ECOWAS members and Mauritania. The network brings together institutional and civil society actors to strengthen regional cooperation for the protection of vulnerable migrant children and to promote the adoption of sustainable reintegration.

[404] IOM and UNICEF, 2025, p. 17.
[405] IOM and UNICEF, 2025, p. 12.

ANNEX

IOM and Global Data Systems Overview

- IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix

  The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) is a system to gather and analyse data to disseminate critical multi layered information on the mobility, vulnerabilities, and needs of displaced and mobile populations that enables decision makers and responders to provide these populations with better context specific assistance. DTM includes four standard components – each comprising various methods and tools – that can be applied, adapted and combined as relevant for a particular context and data needs.[406] In the scope of this research, DTM flow monitoring data on mixed migration flows to Europe by sea and by land has been used to show mixed migration trends by key routes with figures disaggregated by age, sex and nationality when available.[407]

  The DTM flow monitoring survey data was collected through field presence of IOM's enumerators in many countries of origin, transit and destination. One primary dataset used was the "Arrivals to Europe" which shows the proportion of migrants arriving in Italy, Malta and Spain via the CMR, WMR and WAAR. The second major dataset used was the Flow Monitoring Surveys that collect in-depth information for a proportion of youth arriving in the same countries, which shares more detail about the migrant youth respondents, on their profiles, needs, intentions and experiences during the migration journey.[408]

- MiMOSA Data

  Within Mimosa, one primary dataset used was from the Migrant Voluntary Assistance which provides details around specific support available. It highlights the number of children who received assistance from IOM, disaggregated by priority countries, age, and type of support. This dataset offers top-line statistics on the assistance received by children, broken down by various variables. It underscores the need for targeted humanitarian and specialized protection assistance, providing critical insights for policymakers and aid organizations. However, the dataset lacks detailed information about the children's journeys, feelings, desires, and needs outside the programme's support parameters, which can limit the understanding of their overall experiences and needs. The data reveals that thousands of children, especially from Libya, Egypt, and Morocco, require targeted assistance, and strong links were identified between health needs and survivors of trafficking, although the cases are limited.[409]

  The second major dataset used in the analysis was the AVRR, which includes Monitoring and Evaluation data that was used to compare and contrast experiences, countries, categories and demographics of children on the move.[410] It also enables the ability to cross-check against other data sources from a child mobility perspective as well as other indicators. This programme provides standardized information on returns across the globe, highlighting trends from smaller countries. This comprehensive data collection allows for a deeper analysis of migration patterns and the effectiveness of return programmes. However, the dataset does not provide information on the longevity or cyclical mobility patterns of children within a family setting, which could be valuable for understanding long-term migration trends and family dynamics. The data highlights significant trends and standardized information collected over time, crucial for longitudinal studies and policy formulation.

[406] IOM, 2023e.
[407] Ibid.
[408] Ibid.
[409] IOM, 2024i.
[410] Ibid.

- IOM's Missing Migrants Project

  The Missing Migrants Project is the only open-access global database on migrant deaths and disappearances towards international destinations, regardless of legal status.[411] This includes rigorously verified data that focuses on the Mediterranean region. This could be crosschecked with other data sources, which look at the push or pull factors that relate to children moving across borders.

  The data compiled includes age, sex, origin, location, and cause of death. This project provides data on migrant deaths and disappearances, which can be cross-checked with other data sources examining push or pull factors related to child migration. It highlights major hotspots for migration-related incidents, offering critical insights for humanitarian efforts and policy interventions. However, the data may be limited by the availability and accuracy of reported incidents, which can affect the comprehensiveness and reliability of the findings. Limitations also include that the precise number of missing is unknown, and vastly under reported. It may have incomplete and infrequent coverage. Additionally, data on missing migrants tend to over-represent certain parts of the world.[412]

- Overview of the Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC)

  The CTDC hosts one of the largest global case datasets on trafficking in persons, with contributions from civil society organizations, government agencies and international organizations.[413] This is one of the first global datasets that harmonizes and publishes data on trafficking in persons cases from around the world. It has been accessed from more than 150 countries. The data come from a variety of sources, including data from direct assistance activities of the organizations that contribute, such as case management services and counter-trafficking hotlines. The data are anonymized and safely published through a synthesization process which ensures the utility of the data while preserving the privacy of the individuals in the datasets. CTDC case data come from victims of trafficking in persons, identified or assisted by contributing organizations. It is challenging to infer to what extent trends within identified victim populations are representative of the total victim population, since trafficking in persons is a crime intended to be undetected and identified cases are not random samples of the population. Though identified cases are not random samples, this does not mean they are unrepresentative. Information from trafficking survivors is among the best sources of knowledge on this complex crime, providing detailed data for analysis on trafficking profiles and forms.

[411] IOM, 2025a. Mediterranean (accessed 10 January 2025).
[412] IOM, 2025a. Methodology (accessed 10 January 2025).
[413] CTDC, n.d. (accessed 10 January 2025).

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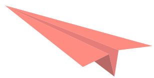

International Organization for Migration (IOM)
17 route des Morillons, P.O. Box 17, 1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland
Tel. No. +41 22 717 9111 • Fax: +41 22 798 6150 • Email: hq@iom.int • Website: www.iom.int

United Nations Children's Fund
3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA

Funded by the European Union

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