“WHEREVER WE GO, SOMEONE DOES US HARM”

Violence against refugee and migrant children arriving in Europe through the Balkans

CIS University of Sarajevo
Professor Zdravko Grebo
Center for Interdisciplinary Studies

Save the Children

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Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub
Belgrade, August 2022

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Firstly, our gratitude goes to the children who took part in this study. They gave us their confidence and shared their migration experiences, feelings and hopes, in conversations that were analysed to create the body of content that makes up this research. We are thankful for their openness and courage to tell us their stories, and we admire their resilience and the strength they demonstrate in the face of the incredible challenges they are facing to create better future for themselves and their families.

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Names used in this report

To protect their privacy, each child who took part in this research was encouraged to choose a name that they would like to be used to refer to them in this research. All children's names used in this report are the names that the children chose for themselves.

IMPRESSUM

Save the Children works in over 120 countries. We save children's lives. We fight for their rights. We help them fulfil their potential.

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The Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub (BMDH) was established to ensure visibility and support for children on the move in the Balkans. Drawing on experience gained in responding to the refugee and migrant crisis, BMDH monitors trends in migrations across the Balkans and conducts research on particular issues related to children in mixed migrations. The hub issues regular reports, documents good practices, improves learning and knowledge sharing, and promotes emergency preparedness. By developing partnerships and liaising with other stakeholders that work with children on the move, BMDH provides and promotes robust advocacy for children, ensuring that their needs are put at the forefront.

Find our reports at:
https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net
Keyword: BMDH

This research study was carried out by Save the Children's Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub and the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Sarajevo.

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FOREWORD

"I'd love it if they listened to us a little better."
Hassan, boy, 15

Children who migrate to Europe from areas of conflict and deprivation in the Middle East, Asia and Africa are at a strikingly high risk of suffering violence - including physical, emotional and sexual violence or abuse. Keeping in mind that violent experiences can have profound effects on children's health and long-term wellbeing and that children make up about one-third of all refugees and migrants arriving in Europe, surprisingly little research has been carried out on this topic, particularly from the perspectives of children. A literature review shows that there is also a significant gap in our knowledge of the different types of violence that children in this vulnerable position experience.

Many children migrate due to violence, which acts as a push factor forcing them and their families out of their homes. Migration routes are constantly shifting due to ever-changing border practices and migration management policies. Almost every child who crosses the Balkans route strives to reach Western Europe. Their suffering does not stop them from trying to reach safety. It only makes them more vulnerable and exposed to exploitation. For example, a recent study on Girls on the Move published by the Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub showed that many girls migrate due to violence, insecurity and discrimination, but they are also exposed to great risks of violence and abuse during their journeys.

We present this study, which was created in partnership between Save the Children and the University of Sarajevo, to contribute to closing the research gap concerning violence against children on the move. This report analyses the different forms of violence that children experience, as well as the factors that contribute to this violence.

The main aim of our research was to empower children on the move to speak up about their experiences, listen to them, and give them space to act as agents of change. We intend to continue working with children to create a child-friendly version of the study findings that will help those who find themselves in such adversity in the future. It should also serve as a valuable source of information for all those dedicating their work to protecting children on the move.

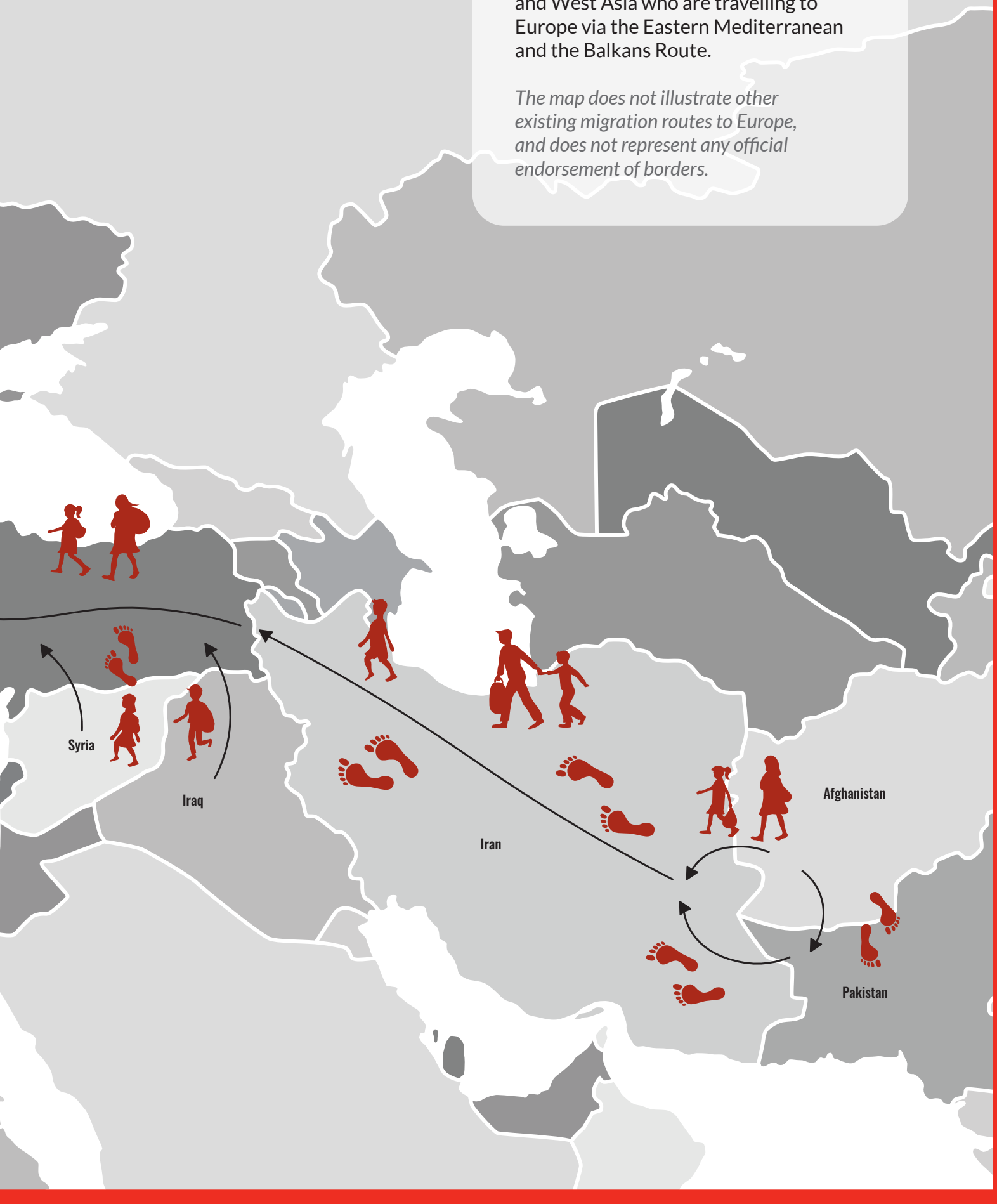
We would especially like to thank all the children who agreed to share their personal stories with us. This report was made possible because of their courage to speak up and their perseverance to reach safety and achieve better lives. The resilience of all children on the move, and in particular those who have suffered violence, is an inspiration behind this study, which we hope will advance discussions on what must be done to protect them. As a first step, we call for immediate action through a set of recommendations for governments, organisations that work with refugees and migrants, and researchers, to strengthen the support available to children on the move and protect them from violence.

Bogdan Krasic
Programme Director, Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub
Save the Children in North West Balkans


Hungary
Slovenia
Croatia
Romania
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Serbia
Montenegro
Kosovo*
Bulgaria
North Macedonia
Albania
Greece
Türkiye

The map illustrates migration movement of children from the countries of South and West Asia who are travelling to Europe via the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans Route.

The map does not illustrate other existing migration routes to Europe, and does not represent any official endorsement of borders.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children, including thousands of unaccompanied and separated children, make up about one-third of all refugees and migrants arriving in Europe. A significant percentage of these children come through the Balkans route, travelling through countries including Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. These are seen as transit countries by refugees and migrants, as they try to continue their way towards Western Europe.

In 2015 alone, about half a million refugees and other migrants, mainly from South, Central and Western Asia, crossed the countries on the Balkans route. Since 2016, however, the policies and practices of the European Union and national governments in Balkan countries have sought to deter refugee and migrant arrivals in Europe. These policies have reduced – but not stopped – the arrival of refugees, and have dramatically increased their vulnerability and exposure to violence.

In this report, Save the Children and the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Sarajevo present in-depth research into the level and types of violence that children experience while attempting to reach Western Europe via the Balkans route, the circumstances of that violence, and the policies and practices that exist to support children. They also make recommendations for governments, NGOs and other stakeholders, to strengthen the protection and support available to these children.

The research was conducted in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, key transit countries on the threshold of the European Union and on the way to Western Europe. It is based on in-depth interviews with 48 children aged between 13 and 19 years old, including 30 unaccompanied boys, and 8 boys and 10 girls travelling with their families or close relatives. Interviews were carried out by field researchers, supported by interpreters and cultural mediators, according to an ethical protocol that ensured children's voices were heard in a safe and respectful way.

This report also draws on focus group discussions with 27 professionals in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, mostly field workers who had extensive experience working with refugee and migrant children, and an extensive literature review. The findings of this research were analyzed thematically and interpreted within several keys: using ecological systems theory, an approach based on the rights of the child, and on trauma and resilience-based knowledge.

Every child who participated in this research recounted being subjected to physical, psychological, sexual or other types of violence, directly or indirectly. This violence occurred in their country of origin, during their journey, when crossing borders, in reception, asylum and detention centres, in squats, in the street and in the workplace.

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I VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN ON THE BALKANS ROUTE

On average, the children interviewed for this study said they had been travelling for 4 years. Along the way, they experienced, witnessed and heard accounts of multiple types of violence.

Police and border guard violence against children

"We were apprehended by the police. They told us to sit down, and we all sat down; then they selected two people in the group and beat them... Then they told us, come on, let's go, towards some road. We started moving, one of them stood to the side with a rod, told us to go in a single file, and as people passed him by, he hit them."
Basit, boy, 16

The most common violence reported by children was physical violence by border police officers. This occurred along the entire Balkans route, most often during children's

Perpetrators of violence are most commonly border police officers and smugglers and their accomplices.

attempts to cross informal border crossings only to be violently expelled in so-called 'pushbacks.' Interviewed children describe being stripped naked, forced to stand in the cold, and being given electric shocks and beatings with sticks, which led to serious physical injuries such as fractures or severe contusions.

Children describe border police violence as being stripped naked, forced to stand in the cold, and being given electric shocks and beatings with sticks, which led to serious physical injuries such as fractures or severe contusions.

Most of the children have tried to cross the border from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia more than three times, with the largest number of attempts recorded being nine. There is a visible tendency for children's anxiety and fear to grow as their number of unsuccessful attempts to cross the border increases.

Children call these attempts to cross borders the 'game'. Preparations for departure generally take a long time; children and families collect food and money and then walk in the dark, usually through the woods or other difficult terrain, for several kilometres until they reach the border. According to the children, if border police spot and apprehend them, they commonly confiscate their belongings, beat them, use derogatory words and make them return on foot, with no clothes, food, money, mobile phones or other personal items.

Some interviewed children mentioned gunshots, while several children said that those who beat them the hardest were police officers wearing black masks; some children referred to them as *'commandos'*, saying '*...they look like mafia... carrying knives.*'

Violent behaviour by police was not limited to preventing children's attempts to cross the border. Although children tended to differentiate between the police in cities, who may offer some protection and *'only'* extort money and ask for bribes, and the police in charge of deportation, who would subject them to beatings in the same manner as border police.

Violence perpetrated by people smugglers and their assistants, peers and others

"When they [children] make noise, or when they don't listen to him [the smuggler], he just slaps and slaps them. They should not make noise, disturb or disrespect someone older than them."
Omar, boy, 13

Smugglers commonly beat children on the road, while those who could not physically withstand the journey, were hurt or sick, or did not have the money to continue the journey could be left behind or even killed.

More than 1 in 3 interviewed children described violence at the hands of smugglers and their fear of them. Smugglers commonly beat children on the road when they start lagging behind or when they are loud or 'disobedient'. Several children testified that the smugglers would kill or leave adults and children in conditions that they would not be able to survive on their own, because they could not physically withstand the journey, they were hurt or sick, or did not have the money to continue the journey.

Alongside smugglers (*'agents'*) were their assistants, pathfinders, accommodation providers and local drivers. Children also met kidnappers and bandits on their journey. Four out of the 48 children interviewed said they had been kidnapped for ransom, and several respondents described child kidnappings on the road and the ways in which these were carried out.

While perpetrators of violence are most commonly police and smugglers and their accomplices, other adults and children can also be a threat. Although children themselves rarely speak about peer violence – it was reported only by the three youngest boys who were interviewed - professionals in focus groups described peer violence as one of the dominant forms of violence among children, and professionals working in the field report significant prevalence of peer violence in reception centres. The different perceptions of children and professionals about the scope and intensity of peer violence, may indicate children's inability to recognise certain behaviours as violent and their readiness to accept peer violence as part of everyday life.

Sexual abuse and violence

The girl was yelling, trying to save herself, but that smuggler sexually abused her, we saw it."
Hasnen, boy, 15

Although no interviewed child said that they had been a victim of sexual abuse themselves, almost two-thirds listed one or more incidents where they recognised or witnessed sexual abuse of a child in their immediate environment, including the violent separation of girls or boys that smugglers then abused sexually.

Interviewed children said that in exchange for sexual services, smugglers bribed them with money, privileged status compared to others travelling with them, protection, or a 'free' pass across the border. According to children's accounts, this practice is prevalent on the Balkans route, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where children stop after a long and arduous journey without the means to continue safely.

Smugglers and other predators on the migration route stalk children of both sexes, particularly those in especially vulnerable situations. Children travelling with families are exposed to this kind of violence, as well as unaccompanied children. However, children interviewed in this research predominantly talked about unaccompanied boys as the victims of sexual abuse happening along the journey.

Sexual abuse of children is a taboo subject that is very often concealed, even from close relatives. Children interviewed on the Balkans route deny it, or sometimes normalise it as an expected abuse of power, making this kind of violence particularly difficult to identify.

Smugglers and other predators on the migration route stalk children of both sexes, particularly those in especially vulnerable situations, while sexual abuse of children is a taboo subject that is very often concealed, even from close relatives.

Psychological violence

Every child that was interviewed described being either threatened, blackmailed, humiliated or insulted by smugglers, police officers and members of the local population. Four out of the 48 children said they were abducted for ransom on the route, and several other children witnessed kidnappings or knew children who were kidnapped on the migration route.

Children also faced ethnic, religious and other forms of discrimination that they recognise and perceive to be unjust and degrading, while on the Balkans route.

Economic exploitation and child labour

"Me, my brother who is younger, even the youngest one who's 11 years old, we went picking fruit from morning to evening."
Gul, girl, 19

Along the journey, many children of different ages reported that they had to work, especially those older than 10 years old and unaccompanied boys. Children see this labour as inevitable and necessary, as they need to make money to continue their journey.

Children report that they were most often involved in labour in countries where they had stayed for longer, after the agreement between the European Union and Türkiye in 2016. In Türkiye, the children worked in factories and in Greece, they worked on farms. Almost one in three interviewed children witnessed recruitment for activities by smugglers, primarily related to border crossings and, far less frequently, for selling drugs.

The conditions children work in are often unsuitable, inhumane and prohibited by international conventions regulating child labour.[1] Children sometimes work long shifts, even for up to 14 hours, in dangerous conditions that have consequences for their physical and mental health and severe effects on their development. People who employ children

Along the journey, many children work, especially those older than 10 years old and unaccompanied boys in countries where they had stayed for longer. The conditions are often unsuitable, inhumane and prohibited by international conventions regulating child labour.

[1] Including the Convention of the International Labour Organization no. 138 on the minimal age for employment from 1973, Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989, Convention of the International Labour Organization no. 182 on the worst forms of child labour from 1999.

blackmail them by postponing their wages, paying them far less in wages than other workers who are in a regular position, or not paying them at all.

In addition to dangerous work, the interviewed children reported that some refugee and migrant children are engaged in other forms of the worst types of child labour, including commercial sexual exploitation and begging.

How boys and girls experience violence in different ways

Boys more commonly reported being subjected to physical violence, more often subject to economic exploitation and child labour, while the girls mainly witnessed violence towards members of their families, and were subject to humiliation and insults.

"You get a smuggler and when you're changing locations, you have to stay at that smuggler's apartment or accommodation for two days before you head out, and that type of abuse mostly happens during that time. It is mostly against girls travelling with a brother or travelling with a sister, for example."
Gul, girl, 19

"So, it's better for the girls not to come on this way, on this route..."
Mahdi, boy, 17

There are far fewer girls than boys on the Balkans route and they are rarely unaccompanied. Girls mostly travel with parents, brothers and sisters, and often with husbands and children of their own.

Boys interviewed for the research more commonly reported being subjected to physical violence themselves and were more often subject to economic exploitation and child labour, particularly if they were unaccompanied.

Both boys and girls are at risk of being sexually assaulted or raped, and unaccompanied boys are exposed to a particular risk of sexual abuse.

Although cases of physical violence against girls and women have been described in other reports about refugees and migrants on the Balkans route, the girls who participated in this research mainly witnessed violence towards members of their families, and were subject to humiliation and insults. Nearly all children said that it is much harder for girls in puberty and women than men, mostly because they are considered physically frail, quickly get tired and lack the energy to suffer hunger and cross the borders in difficult conditions.

While children said that both boys and girls are at risk of being sexually assaulted or raped, and that unaccompanied boys are exposed to a particular risk of sexual abuse, other sexual abuse is gender specific. Child marriage practices are intensified in situations of uncertain and complex migration journey, which particularly endangers girls. Unaccompanied girls sometimes get married, often to older men, or pretend that they are travelling with their husbands, believing that this contributes to their safety. Whether it is an early marriage or human trafficking that the girls are more or less aware of, travelling in such an arrangement carries a significant risk of violence and exploitation.

Evidence suggests that unaccompanied girls join other families on the road and try to keep a low profile, as they are at a higher risk of sexual abuse[2]. However, even girls travelling with families are exposed to sexual violence, whether from smugglers who separate them or through attacks in reception centres. Boys are also exposed to sexual violence, particularly if they are travelling without their family.

Many unaccompanied refugee and migrant children, especially boys, come from families where the eldest male child is considered 'responsible' for their younger and older family members.[3] There is a clear expectation that the child will, regardless of difficulties, be capable, efficient and resilient, fulfil their tasks and thus secure a better future for the whole family.

[2] Save the Children (2021) Girls on the Move in the Balkans, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/girls_on_the_move_balkan.pdf.

[3] Ibrahim, F. A., & Heuer, J. P. R. (2013) The assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of mental disorders among Muslims. In F. A. Paniagua & A.-M. Yamada (Eds.) Handbook of multicultural mental health: Assessment and treatment of diverse populations (367–387) Elsevier Academic Press.

Children travelling unaccompanied must take decisions that are often beyond their emotional and social maturity, knowledge and life experience, which makes them particularly vulnerable to multiple forms of abuse.

Violence against children travelling with families

"If the kid is totally alone in the group, doesn't have any cousin or friends, someone, usually the smuggler, tries to use him. He tells him to do this or that, he uses him. If he has someone, then he is protected."
Ali, boy, 16

Children who travel with families are better protected than unaccompanied children, according to the accounts of both children and professionals, although they share many of the hardships of unaccompanied children. Their parents' presence is probably the most important protective factor for them. However, children in families gave personal accounts that smugglers and police officers had beaten their parents, brothers and sisters; they had witnessed the humiliation and separation of families; and they had to carry younger brothers and sisters who could not walk for long.

The journey also affects parental skills and competences. Due to the difficulties and experiences that parents are exposed to, they are sometimes unable to recognise the needs of their children and may even fail to provide the basic conditions that are at their disposal.

II OTHER HARDSHIPS AND ADVERSITY ON THE ROUTE

"A child, simply, cannot go on... Mountains, up, down... After 15 days, you look at your feet, you no longer recognise yourself. That's how exhausted you are."
Abdurahman, boy, 17

Children said they often don't have enough food and water during their journey, and that they are often deprived by smugglers. They experience hunger and thirst most acutely when they travel on foot to cross borders, when they carry only the bare minimum of things. In addition, they often do not have access to adequate and safe shelter.

Several children mentioned that they saw dead bodies on the route; people who had died as a result of the effort involved with the journey or had otherwise perished. Children said they had to travel in overloaded cars, sleep in the woods where they are at risk from wild animal attacks, and stay in squats where they are threatened with abuse. During some sections of their journeys, children cross large bodies of water in inadequate and crowded vessels, facing a real danger of drowning.

The parents' presence is probably the most important protective factor for children.

Reception centres that are inhumane and ill-suited to children

"It [a reception centre] was a horrible place for everyone, children in particular."
Zehra, girl, 16

The conditions at facilities where children are accommodated or detained after they are apprehended on the borders, and other accommodation along the Balkans route, are often inhumane, degrading, and not adapted to meet the needs of children. Children said these facilities are often cold, without beds or heating, and with limited opportunities for freedom of movement and hygiene maintenance. These conditions became worse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During their stay in reception or detention centres, children are interviewed, but are not given clear instructions or explanations of their rights, including their right to legal counsel. Their status as a child is often denied, with or without the use of violent methods.

Children said that violence in reception centres was less common than at borders, especially in those with well-developed security procedures and a functioning security service that provides suitable protection.

Children claim that they feel safe in centres if the security staff do their jobs, and that they enjoy having access to educational and recreational activities and assistance from international organisations.

However, children did describe negative experiences in facilities in Greece and highlighted that the now-destroyed Moria camp on the island of Lesbos was especially dangerous. In addition to a lack of services, protection and support, they described a climate of fear of sexual violence, especially against children, robberies, mass fights and even murders. Violence against children was reported even in better organised Greek reception centres with a more substantial police presence, and several respondents particularly highlighted sexual abuse of prepubescent boys.

Age assessment procedures carried out at reception centres can sometimes include invasive methods, which can cause children physical and psychological harm. In countries where age assessment procedures are undeveloped, or in some cases completely absent, children are endangered by the prejudice of decision makers and the propensity for errors in age assessments. Many unaccompanied children are wrongly identified and classified as adults, and vice versa, some young adults are classified as children and accommodated with children, significantly increasing the risk of violence.

III HOW CHILDREN COPE

"There were children who harmed themselves, they would take razor blades and cut themselves. There were even cases I heard of where children threw themselves off bridges because of the despair and misery, because of the pitiful way of life."
Amin, boy, 16

The children interviewed in this research displayed a number of symptoms associated with prolonged exposure to traumatic events, or identified these symptoms in their siblings (especially younger children) and peers. Strong and harmful stimuli, physical and psychological vulnerability due to physical and sexual violence, high levels of stress, and prolonged fear can overwhelm the capacities of children of all ages and impact their ability to influence their emotions. Extreme intimidating events, especially if repeated, affect the developing brain by creating distortions in the brain's neurological development so that survival mechanisms become more dominant than

learning mechanisms. [4] Such powerful and adverse experiences during early and middle childhood and adolescence are usually associated with long-term mental and physical health difficulties and impaired cognitive, emotional and social functioning. [5]

In younger children, reactions to violence usually include excessive fear, difficulty falling and staying asleep, somatisation of tension and hypersensitivity through rapid heartbeat, fainting, and so on. Older children reported that they had repeated unwanted memories of traumatic experiences (flashbacks) and experienced feelings of helplessness, lack of prospects, resignation, loss of previously adopted values, beliefs and views of the world and interpersonal relationships, as well as one's own position, role and value.

Children have developed a set of coping strategies. The most frequent adaptive strategies that were identified in this research include seeking social support, trusting one's own abilities, threat analysis, distancing oneself to get a better view of the problem, planning to overcome difficulties, making sense of events, and focusing on goals.

In addition to these adaptive strategies, children show negative coping strategies. A striking number of professionals in the focus groups and children, especially those who were travelling unaccompanied, gave examples of self-harm, suicide attempts, and abuse of psychoactive substances as passive strategies for coping with stress and difficulty. Some children sought protection by becoming involved in criminal and sexual activities with smugglers and other adults.

In order to survive, children develop a set of adaptive coping strategies, but also negative coping strategies - self-harm, suicide attempts, abuse of psychoactive substances, as well as becoming involved in criminal and sexual activities with smugglers and other adults.

Normalisation of violence and other adaptation strategies

Both children's interviews and the narratives provided by professionals indicate that children see violence as an integral and an almost inevitable part of their experience and so they normalise it. There are multiple reasons for this, including:

- Ignoring abuse is a survival mechanism, which allows children to maintain their basic psychological resilience in extremely difficult conditions.
- There is often a lack of protection and support available to these children, so they deny that they need support in the first place.
- Children believe that they need to appear strong and capable, as they think that they would be at more risk of violence if they were seen as weak or feeble.

Children see violence as an integral and an almost inevitable part of their experience. They accept abuse as an integral part of the journey and normalize violence as an adaptation strategy.

In many interviews, children tried to normalise violence through laughter; this is an attempt to regulate strong, upsetting emotions as well as a gesture of 'disassociation' from the traumatic experience and the pain it causes. [6] In this context, laughter differs from humour, which was noted in only a very small number of interviews as an adaptive coping strategy.

Crying was far less common than laughter, with only eight out of 48 children crying as they recalled the violence and hardships they had endured on their journey.

Children found it easier to recognise and talk about violent experiences that they were geographically, socially and emotionally distanced from. They found it easier to talk about other children's experiences with violence, and abuses committed by people who they perceived as 'others' or 'foreign,' including members of other ethnic and religious groups and police officers.

[4] Atkinson, J. (2013). Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource 21). Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

[5] Cook, A., Spinazzola, J., Ford, J. D., Lanktree, C., Blaustein, M., & Cloitre, M. (2005). Complex trauma in children and adolescents. Psychiatric Annals, 35(5), 390-398.

[6] Gross, J. J. (2013) 'Emotion regulation: Taking stock and moving forward' Emotion 13: 359– 365.

On their journey, children are forced to adapt to survive. This means developing self-protection mechanisms such as increased submissiveness to the more powerful people they depend on; accepting abuse as an integral part of the journey; removing themselves from situations that are potentially dangerous; and no longer being assertive in relationships with others. An example of a survival strategy is the fact that many children report a different country of origin depending on their assessment of what is more likely to gain them help, support or favour.[7]

Another adaptation strategy relates to the way that children report their experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the interviews for this study took place. More than two-thirds of children that were interviewed said that of all the countries they had travelled through, they fared the best in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although no child expressed readiness to stay there. This is a strategy called 'endearing'. By contrast, their view of other countries varied. The research conducted in Serbia showed similar findings, with migrant children reporting that Serbia was the best place for them, while they had quite a bad time in other countries.[8]

IV HELP AND SELF HELP

"No one, no one helps us. No one. Until you call someone, some organisation, they will come and help you, otherwise, you are on the road, people will pass by, and they won't help."
Mehdia, girl, 13

Adults in their immediate environment who have the power to help, such as smugglers and police officers, are often those who commit acts of violence against the children.

A striking proportion of the children that were interviewed (about 1 in 3) have developed a belief that no one and nothing can (or wants to) help them on their journey, and some even believe they are no longer able to help themselves. Many are comforted by their faith in God and universal justice, with this deterministic approach allowing them to make sense of their suffering and supporting their belief that things will work out in the end.

Adults in their immediate environment who have the power to help, such as smugglers and police officers, are often those who commit acts of violence against the children. This causes them to lose trust that responsible adults can or want to help them. Unaccompanied children rely primarily on themselves, other children, and spiritual support far more than on adults.

There are limited prospects for accountability or redress for the violence that most of these children have experienced, so one might conclude that these children's mistrust is justified. In cases of violence identified in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a requirement for careful documentation and submission of a report to competent authorities, centres for social work, and police, in order to initiate criminal or other proceedings. In Serbia, there are standard operating procedures in place that institutions must follow to protect migrating children. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, standard operating procedures were introduced at the end of 2021 aiming to respond to the lack of coordination and gaps in protection. In the previous period, including in the period when the research for this study was conducted, there were no consistent procedures throughout the country, as the different centres had procedures of their own. The staff in the centres monitored the situation and if indicators of violence were identified, children were referred to available support services, which were often insufficient. The effectiveness of these measures will need to be assessed in the future.

According to the professionals interviewed for this study, the social protection system is not sufficiently flexible when it comes to violence against children. The slow pace of the justice system and the mobility of children mean that reported cases are rarely followed through.

[7] For example, sometimes children from Afghanistan say they are from Pakistan (or vice versa), sometimes that they are from Iran, depending on the country they are in.

[8] Žegarac, N., Isakov, B. A., Perišić, N., Marković, V. (2022) Response system for the migrant children in Serbia: challenges for the rights-based approach, in Children in migration: perspectives from South East Europe.

Even when there is evidence and hard proof that children have experienced violence, children rarely stay long in one place, which makes provision of adequate assistance and support difficult. According to several of the interviewed children, this further discourages them from reporting violence.

Children also consider inconsistent rules, and frequent changes to rules concerning their status, without even consulting them or the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are in direct contact with them, as a particularly great injustice. When government stakeholders make the rules unilaterally, children further lose trust not only in state stakeholders but in these NGOs as well.

Children's views of services and protection

The interviewed children mainly see official institutions, such as healthcare institutions, schools, public child protection services, and centres for social work, as insufficiently interested, disinterested, or as a potential threat (due to police violence or administrative services issuing official documents). Children often trust official institutions – and those whose role it is to help or protect them – far less than people that they know, partly because these institutions and their staff are present in children's lives only sporadically, and have only limited mechanisms to protect them from violence.

The interviewed children mainly see official institutions, such as healthcare institutions, schools, public child protection services, and centres for social work, as insufficiently interested, disinterested, or as a potential threat.

In organised accommodation, where children have access to doctors, their experience of the healthcare system varies considerably. The approach that doctors take with them ranges from humiliation and insults, through indifference, to dedication and a desire to help. Access to mental health care is a particular problem. In Serbia, it is very difficult to secure appropriate medical support for refugee and migrant children facing mental health issues, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina it is almost impossible.

As children perceive official institutions as disinterested, they rely on international and local humanitarian organisations. Their experiences with these organisations vary. Some children feel that they receive valuable and useful information, material support (such as food, medicines and clothes), and psychological support, especially in the form of psycho-educational, cultural, sports and recreational activities. Children feel closer to field workers from civil society organisations and others who assist them if they meet them regularly. When these individuals have gained the children's trust, the children rely on them for information and advice.

However, children also say that assistance is not available to them in certain highly demanding situations – for example, when crossing borders or immediately after – or that the help that is available is unsuitable or insufficient. Their requirements for assistance and support are sometimes not recognised or seriously considered, which undermines their already fragile trust and belief in the good intentions of the people helping them.

Children also say that assistance is not available to them in certain highly demanding situations – for example, when crossing borders or immediately after – or that the help that is available is unsuitable or insufficient.

Professional aid workers and others who assist children understand that they will only occasionally manage to form a relationship of trust with children; that children on the Balkans route do not have sufficient information available to them; and that more needs to be done to improve the identification and reporting of violence. Importantly, for a child to report violence, they need to be given a lot of information and assured that someone can help them, a process in which trust plays a key role.

Some unaccompanied children who had established good relationships with their guardians in reception centres were prepared to share their problems with them, underlining the importance of this role. Cultural mediators can also be positive role models and play an important role in recognising and addressing violence.

Informal forms of help and self-help

Peer help is of extreme importance for children.

Alongside help from their immediate family, peer help is of extreme importance for children as it fosters the feeling of belonging to a group, a belief that they will not be left behind on the road, and a certain emotional stability. Children expect solidarity and reciprocal assistance when they are in a group with people with whom they have family ties, or peer ties. When such help is not there, because it has been lost (due to separation from their family or group of close compatriots), or when it fails (when others refuse to share scarce resources for survival, refuse help or abuse trust), children feel there is a failure of humanity, solidarity and integrity.

Children also mentioned the local population of countries they pass through as reliable sources of practical and emotional support. Help along the way, and gestures of respect and acceptance, make it easier for children to deal with hardships. Support from local communities is particularly important to children when they are pushed back from borders and travel back to reception centres. In these situations, local people have sometimes taken them into their home to rest, given them food, drink and clothing, or provided them with transportation to the reception centre.

V CHILDREN'S HOPES, RESILIENCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The goals children set for themselves, or that their families have set for them, inspired and empowered them to persevere in spite of the many expected and unexpected adversities.

"My request to the Croatian police is to open the borders and let us go across. And, please, don't punish us."
Mehdia, girl, 13

"I'd love it if they listened to us a little better."
Hassan, boy, 15

The children interviewed for this study started their journey to Western Europe from countries that were faced with economic and political instability and conflict. Many went to extraordinary lengths to overcome difficulties and survive the journey, and displayed tremendous resourcefulness and resolve. Children often stated their hopes for a better life in Western Europe, like Sultana, age 16, who said, "*I have heard from my friends that in Germany they care more, they really care about children. Over there, children can go to schools, they can continue their education, they are free.*" The goals they set for themselves, or that their families have set for them, inspired and empowered them to persevere in spite of the many expected and unexpected adversities that arose during their journey.

One in four children interviewed said it was important to them that their viewpoints and perspectives be taken into consideration and all interviewed children showed their need to be heard. Their recommendations range from improvements to reception centres, to what civil society organisations can do to help prevent violence at the border. For example, Mansoor, age 17, said it was important to have freedom of movement in reception centres and "*not make it like a jail, but something with good services and protection, so that children can leave the centre and later come back, especially on weekends.*" When discussing what they need, children emphasised psychological support, sincerely expressed care, physical activities and entertainment.

VI CONCLUSION AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Every child involved in this research has survived violent events and circumstances on the Balkans route that were experienced as physical or emotional threats to their survival. Other studies have also found similar forms of violence against children on the Balkans route.[9]

Child protection services, national and international humanitarian organizations and others that seek to assist these children can play a critical role in helping them recover from the traumatic events they have been subjected to. They must invest time and effort to build children's trust and truly listen to what these children need.

Ultimately, however, the deterrence and containment policies prioritised by the European Union and countries along the Balkans route are at the root of the violence that migrant and refugee children systematically face on their journey through the Balkans. These policies have resulted in direct violence perpetrated by state agents such as police or border guards, and to indirect violence perpetrated by others – because with safe and legal routes closed off, refugees and migrants must rely on networks of people smugglers who exploit and abuse them.

Inadequate and often inhumane reception conditions in prison-like or underserved camps exacerbate the suffering of these children, and the lack of adequate mental health and psychosocial support along the Balkans route increases the risk of lasting and irreparable harm.

The deterrence and containment policies prioritised by the European Union and countries along the Balkans route are at the root of the violence that migrant and refugee children systematically face on their journey through the Balkans.

[9] See for example, Amnesty International (2019) Pushed to the edge: Violence and abuse against refugees and migrants along the Balkans Route London: Amnesty International; Jovanović, K. (2020) Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Western Balkans Route Beograd: Save the Children International, Save the Children North West Balkans; Bjekić, J., Vukčević Marković, M., Todorović, N., Vračević, M. (2020) Mental health of refugees and migrants Beograd: Red Cross of Serbia.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Union and national governments should:

- Reverse policies and halt practices that are hostile to refugees and seek to deter their arrival, including unlawful pushbacks, reliance on third countries to outsource refugee hosting, inhumane reception conditions and restrictions on access to asylum.
- Provide refugee and migrant children with access to safe, regular and legal migration pathways so that they do not need to depend on smugglers or be forced to engage in labour, including the worst forms of child labour.
- Ensure all policies and operations related to securing the borders comply with human rights law and respect the principle of non-refoulement.
- Establish an effective and truly independent border monitoring mechanism, in consultation and with the participation of children and international and local civil society organisations
- Ensure that civil society organisations that support refugee and migrant children have access to border crossing areas so that they can provide protection and assistance to children in need, including those who experience pushbacks.
- Invest in and promote capacity building for border police and all other relevant stakeholders. Training should be provided on human and child rights and child protection, in collaboration with civil society organisations
- Ensure that child refugees and migrants who have been victims of violence and torture or other ill-treatment committed by the border police have access to justice.
- Invest in early identification and assistance of children at risk of violence, abuse or exploitation, and ensure that child refugees and migrants who have been victims of violence have access to inclusive and gender responsive support.
- Ensure that children have access to safe and dignified accommodation wherever they are, and avoid detention and restrictions on movement. Unaccompanied children should not be placed in shared accommodation with adults.
- Promptly appoint a guardian for any unaccompanied and separated children. This should be an interested and caring adult who is able to protect their rights and best interests.
- Invest in building trust of refugee and migrant children, and regularly review and evaluate mechanisms for full participation of children in decision making processes of interest for them.
- Involve local communities in efforts to tackle and prevent stigmatisation and discrimination against refugee and migrant children.
- Develop and strengthen child protection services, ensuring they are well resourced, inclusive and that the workforce is trained and supported to work with refugee and migrant children. This includes increasing the number, reach and skill of trained child protection workers.
- Only perform age assessments according to established procedures, employing a multi-disciplinary approach, with the benefit of the doubt applied to outcomes.
- Ensure prompt access to safe education as an important protective factor for children.
- Provide access to high-quality health care, including psychosocial support and mental health care for children and their families.

Stakeholders who provide support and implement protection programmes for refugee and migrant children should:

- Introduce mechanisms for regular consultations with children and give children the opportunity to advocate for themselves.
- Review and improve existing procedures, and elaborate new ones, for taking specific action in cases of reporting violence or harassment by adults who are accountable for children in reception centres and other forms of accommodation.
- Ensure that professional knowledge about trauma in working with refugee and migrant children is the basis for providing adequate psychosocial support.
- Invest the time that is necessary to build trust with children so that they can speak about difficult experiences.
- Affirm healthy responses as a response to stress, primarily through encouraging habits such as healthy eating, regular physical activity, playing, and engaging children in activities in the community.
- Dedicate more resources and importance to the roles of cultural mediators and interpreters, who are the forefront of interventions for refugee and migrant children.
- Support parents and carers in situations of migration to provide conditions for children's wellbeing and their protection from violence, and to facilitate and support communication and exchange between family members.
- Improve information exchange with children on their rights, available services and accommodation, and protection and reporting mechanisms in case of violence.

1. INTRODUCTION

Children, including thousands of unaccompanied and separated children, make up about one-third of all refugees and migrants arriving in Europe.[10] Migration is the result of complex push factors, including violence, persecution, and economic uncertainty, which are prevalent in the countries that most of these children come from.[11] In 2015 alone, about half a million refugees and other migrants, mainly from South, Central and Western Asia crossed the countries on the Balkans route of mixed migrations, [12]which is part of the Eastern Mediterranean route towards Western and Northern Europe. The countries on the Balkans route including Greece, Bulgaria, and Croatia, which are members of the EU, are mainly seen as transit countries by refugees and migrants, as they try to continue their way towards the more developed countries of Western Europe.

Since 2016, policies and practices of the European Union and national governments along the Balkans route have increasingly sought to deter refugee and migrant arrivals in Europe.[13] These policies have reduced – but not stopped – the arrival of refugees, and have dramatically increased their vulnerability and exposure to violence.[14]

Children on the move face unlawful, forced and, very often, violent return-pushbacks from borders;[15] lack of access to services and international protection; detention; overcrowded and inadequate shelter facilities; and health and mental health issues. Child and adult refugees and migrants who experience violence and pushbacks often have their valuables and personal items confiscated or destroyed and their explicit requests for asylum ignored.[16]

The countries on the Balkans route including Greece, Bulgaria, and Croatia, which are members of the EU, are mainly seen as transit countries by refugees and migrants, as they try to continue their way towards the more developed countries of Western Europe.

[10] According to United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) data, until 2020, among all forcibly displaced persons worldwide, 42% were children; in Europe, that percentage was 38%, of which 18% were girls. This includes thousands of unaccompanied and separated children. For more detail, see: UNHCR (2021) Global Trends in Forced Displacement – 2020, available at: https://www.unhcr.org/60b638e37/unhcr-global-trends-2020

[11] For more on the causes of migration and related processes see for example: McAuliffe M., Koser, K. (eds.) (2016) A long way to go: Irregular migration patterns, processes, drivers and decision-making Acton: Australian National University, available at https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.12657/30709/643773.pdf?sequence=1#page=175

[12] For more information, please see UNHCR's Operational Data Portal, available at https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/southeasterneurope.

[13] The emblematic EU-Türkiye statement in 2016 was a key moment in the hardening of European refugee policy, which has increasingly focused on deterrence and containment. EU-Türkiye statement, 18 March 2016, European Union https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-Turkey-statement/

[14] Oxfam, BCHR (2016) Closed borders: The impact of the borders' closures on people on the move, with a focus on women and children in Serbia and Macedonia, September 2016 Belgrade: Oxfam, available at: https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620155/rr-closed-borders-migration-serbia-macedonia-241116-en.pdf; Oxfam, BCHR, MYLA (2017) A dangerous 'game': the pushback of migrants, including refugees, at Europe's borders, April 2017 Belgrade: Oxfam, available at: https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/dangerous-game-pushback-migrants-including-refugees-europes-borders; Myers, S., Aoun, I. (2017) A tide of self-harm and depression: The EU-Türkiye Deal's devastating impact on child refugees and migrants Save the Children, available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/tide-self-harm-and-depression-eu-turkey-deals-devastating-impact-child-refugees-and-migrants/; UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Felipe González Morales (2021) Report on means to address the human rights impact of pushbacks of migrants on land and at sea, A/HRC/47/30, 12 May 2021 https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/47/30.

[15] The data collected in 2017 included 41.4% (of a total 564 respondents) of refugee and migrant children aged 15 to 17 in Serbia and showed that among traumatic experiences there are instances of beatings (49.1%) and exposure to frequent or continuous sniper fire (46.6%). PIN (2017) Refugees' mental health: 2017 research report Belgrade: Psychosocial Innovation Network, available at: https://psychosocialinnovation.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/REFUGEES-MENTAL-HEALTH-%E2%80%93-2017-RESEARCH-REPORT_compressed.pdf.

[16] In June 2020, the UN asked the Croatian government to investigate allegations of abuse against migrants crossing from Bosnia and Herzegovina after reports of Croatian police allegedly spray-painting the heads of those trying to cross the border irregularly. See more in United Nations (2020) Croatia: Police brutality in migrant pushback operations must be investigated and sanctioned – UN Special Rapporteurs, press release, 19 June 2020, available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2020/06/croatia-police-brutality-migrant-pushback-operations-must-be-investigated-and. Pushbacks are also documented on other borders, for

Children and adults hide from the police and border patrols as they move, picking roads that are hard to reach and risky to travel along.

With legal routes almost non-existent, refugee and migrant children must rely on smugglers and traffickers, who control each aspect of the journey,[17] multiplying threats to their wellbeing.

Women and children, including many unaccompanied children and those separated from parents or guardians, make a significant number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe through the Balkans.[18] Unaccompanied children registered on this route are often older male children in their families of origin, whose parents have deemed them old enough to take responsibility for their own wellbeing and for the wellbeing of their entire families. [19]

Due to the lack of primary care provided by parents or guardians, unaccompanied children are at a particular risk from violence, particularly sexual violence and other forms of abuse and exploitation, as shown in some previous research.[20] Although little is known about the prevalence of these types of violence against children on the Balkans route, research from other countries shows that sexual violence, as well as gender-based violence in general, forms an integral part of contemporary migrations.[21,22] Although some of the research conducted did not include children, the findings are still an important indicator of the extreme vulnerability of refugees and migrants, with more than half reporting that they experienced such traumatic events.

With legal routes almost non-existent, refugee and migrant children must rely on smugglers and traffickers, who control each aspect of the journey,

According to UNHCR data, in Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania, North Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, close to 80,000 refugees and migrants were registered as newly arrived in 2019, 30% more than in 2018. There was also a marked increase in the number of new refugee and migrant arrivals to the Balkans in the first months of 2020, but migrant and refugee arrival figures significantly decreased when the COVID-19 pandemic started. By the end of 2020, around 16,000 new refugee and

more information see, among other sources: UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, available at https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/southeasterneurope; BVMN - Border Violence Monitoring Network (2020) Illegal push-backs and border violence reports, Balkan Region, available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/push-back/BorderViolenceMonitoringNetworkSubmission.pdf; PRAB – Protecting Rights at Borders, available at https://drc.ngo/our-work/resources/pushbacks/prab; Lighthouse Reports, Unmasking Europe's shadow armies, 6 October 2021, available at https://www.lighthousereports.nl/investigation/unmasking-europes-shadow-armies/.

17 Smugglers decide when children can move, decide on the vehicles for transport, allow specific times for phone calls, bathroom breaks, eating or drinking, etc. Around half of children who experienced violence stated that it was at the hands of smugglers and most often included 'kicking or slapping children when they were not quite enough or did not move fast enough' during irregular border crossings, while two boys reported instances of sexual violence. ibid.

18 Oxfam, BCHR (2016) Closed borders: The impact of the borders' closures on people on the move, with a focus on women and children in Serbia and Macedonia, September 2016 Belgrade: Oxfam, available at: https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620155/rr-closed-borders-migration-serbia-macedonia-241116-en.pdf.

19 Jovanović, K., Besedić, J. (2020) Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Western Balkans Route Belgrade: Save the Children International, Save the Children North West Balkans, available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/struggling-survive-unaccompanied-and-separated-children-travelling-western-balkans-route/. See also: MSF (2017) Games of violence: Unaccompanied children and young people repeatedly abused by EU member state border authorities Brussels: Médecins Sans Frontières, available at: https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/serbia-games-of-violence-3.10.17.pdf

20 Jud, A., Pfeiffer, E., Jarczok, M. 'Epidemiology of violence against children in migration: A systematic literature review' (2012) Child Abuse & Neglect 108: 104634, available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104634.

21 Keygnaert, I., Vettenburg, N., Temmerman, M. 'Hidden violence is silent rape: Sexual and gender-based violence in refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in Belgium and the Netherlands' (2012) 108: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care 5: 505-520, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13691058.2012.671961.

22 de Oliveira Araujo, J., Mattos de Souza, F, Proença, R., Lisboa Bastos, M., Trajman, A., Faerstein, E. (2019) 'Prevalence of sexual violence among refugees: a systematic review' Revista de Saúde Pública 23, 53:78. DOI: 10.11606/s1518-8787.2019053001081.

migrant entries had been registered, about one-fifth of the arrivals registered in 2019.[23]

The numbers picked up in 2021, when close to 94,000 arrivals were registered in the region. [24]

A review study covering 30 years of research on children in migration from 1989 to 2019,[25] shows that numerous studies have looked at the troubles of migrant children, mostly those who travel unaccompanied. Many of these studies focus on human rights, particularly the rights of the child and international refugee law, as well as the best interest of the child and the right to have the children's views heard and respected. Yet very few have studied violence against children. According to other studies,[26] there is a striking discrepancy between the importance of the topic of violence against children in migration and the availability of data. The scarcity of data and research becomes even more prominent in the regional context of the Balkans. Most literature produced in the last 10 years addresses children who seek asylum and the right to asylum, education and/or integration, as well as the psychological wellbeing of asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children.

1.1 AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THIS RESEARCH

This report focuses on the many forms of violence that refugee and migrant children survive on their attempted journey to Western Europe via the Balkans route and makes recommendations to strengthen the protection and support of these children.

There is a striking discrepancy between the importance of the topic of violence against children in migration and the availability of data.

The aim of the research was to investigate and interpret violence against migrant and refugee children through its key characteristics and factors that contribute to violence and/or protection of these children on their dangerous and long journey across borders.

The main objectives were to:

- Provide insight into the level of violence against child refugees and migrants on the Balkans route, as well as existing policies and practices of support from the perspectives of the children and of the service providers;
- Identify the specific types of violence against refugee and migrant children and circumstances and places where such violence most often occurs;
- Establish the foundations for a national and regional framework for designing, implementing and evaluating gender- and culture-sensitive policies and practices that will strengthen support and protection of these children.

The main question that the research authors looked at was:
Which aspects of protection of children against violence require improvement, in order to respond to the needs of migrant children arriving in Europe, with a focus on South East Europe, especially Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina?

[23] Refugees and migrants at the Western Balkans Route regional overview 2020, available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/balkans-migration-and-displacement-hub-data-and-trend-analysis-refugees-and-migrants-western/

[24] Refugees and migrants at the Western Balkans Route regional overview 2021, available at: https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/balkans-migration-and-displacement-hub-data-and-trend-analysis-regional-overview-2021/

[25] Brittle, R., Desmet, E. (2020) 'Thirty Years of Research on Children's Rights in the Context of Migration: Towards Increased Visibility and Recognition of Some Children, But Not All?' 28 International Journal of Children's Rights 1: 36-65, available at: https://brill.com/view/journals/chil/28/1/article-p36_36.xml.

[26] Jud, A., Pfeiffer, E., Jarczok, M. (2020) 'Epidemiology of violence against children in migration: A systematic literature review' 108 Child Abuse & Neglect e104634, available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104634.

Terminology

This report uses the definition of a **child** as any person under the age of 18. Other terms that refer to children are exclusively used in citations, only when a specific respondent used them. [27]

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.[28]

The report uses a definition of **violence** as "all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse."[29]

Psychological violence is defined as psychological maltreatment, verbal abuse, or emotional abuse or neglect.[30]

Physical violence includes fatal and non-fatal physical violence, for example corporal punishment, torture and other ill-treatment, physical bullying and hazing by adults or other children. [31]

Sexual abuse and exploitation include the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful or psychologically harmful sexual activity; the use of children in commercial sexual exploitation; the use of children in audio or visual images of child sexual abuse; child prostitution; sexual slavery; sexual exploitation in travel and tourism; trafficking (within and between countries); and sale of children for sexual purposes and forced marriage.[32]

In this study, **child marriage** or **early marriage** is considered a form of gender-based violence,[33,34] and also **discrimination** as excluding children from the full enjoyment of their political, civic, economic, social or cultural rights and freedoms.

*Quotations in the report reflect the language that the children who participated themselves use. Thus, children refer to reception facilities as **camps or single-man camps**. These are colloquial expressions for reception or asylum centres in different countries, some of which are designated explicitly for accommodating adult men who travel without their families. **Agents** usually refer to members of the organised smuggling groups that facilitate transfers across borders in exchange for compensation. The children refer to individuals who 'assist' them, including to cross borders and reaching the place they are headed, as **helpers**. Also, children repeatedly used the term **jungle** to describe certain forest terrains they crossed. Finally, the term **game** was used by both children and professionals involved in this research to refer to attempted border crossings.*

[27] The word minor is used almost exclusively in criminal and misdemeanour legislation and asylum legislation in both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

[28] Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) General Comment no. 6: Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin, CRC/GC/2005/6, 1 September 2005, para 7.

[29] Committee on the Rights of the Child (2011) General Comment no. 13: The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence, CRC/C/GC/13, 18 April 2011, para. 4.

[30] Ibid., para. 21.

[31] Ibid., paras. 22 and 23.

[32] Ibid. para. 25.

[33] Save the Children Sweden - South and Central Asia Region (2007). Children and Gender-based Violence: An overview of existing conceptual frameworks. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/1530.pdf.

[34] Malhotra, A. Elnakib, E. (2021) Evolution in the evidence base on child marriage. UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Child-marriage-evidence-report-2021.pdf.

2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

"I am glad that my words will reach some organisation, some people who would help, who would make things easier for some new child that would come after me."
Sarina, girl, 16

The research methodology included an extensive review of available literature and a secondary analysis of existing data. At a later stage, it also included qualitative research through in-depth interviews with 48 children in migration, including 30 unaccompanied boys, and 8 boys and 10 girls travelling with their families or close relatives. Focus groups were held with 27 practitioners who had extensive experience of working, directly or indirectly, with refugee and migrant children on the Balkans route.

Interviews with children were conducted in reception centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where, at that time, it was possible to provide a safe, interactive and child-focused space, in line with the rights of the child.[35] The interview findings reflect the children's experiences along the entire Balkans route and are relevant to contribute to conclusions that are drawn in that context.

The methodology framework was designed to include boys and girls; unaccompanied children and those travelling with their families; and children from age 12 to 17. The aim was to include children from different countries of origin including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Learning about the experiences of unprivileged, vulnerable and marginalised[36] children and understanding the context in which they are coping with numerous development challenges and threats, required the research team to overcome several barriers to study recruitment, such as availability and visibility of children in data and in the field; negotiating with gatekeepers; access to particularly vulnerable or 'hidden' subgroups; and gaining fully informed consent from the children themselves, as well as their parents or guardians.

To ensure the inclusion of different groups of child respondents, a purposive and venue-based sample was used.[37] In order to shed light on refugee and migrant children's experiences with violence on the Balkans route, reception centres where the children were accommodated were selected as the interview location. International and national legal norms in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, as well as Save the Children's ethical guidelines,[38] require informed consent to be obtained from a child's legal guardian prior to including that child in the research. All respondents were asked for their informed consent; in the first stage, informed consent was sought from parents or legal guardians of children, and subsequently, from children themselves.

The sample was therefore compiled in line with availability of children and their willingness and expressed desire to participate in the research, after they were informed

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The aim was to include children from different countries of origin including Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria.

[35] Avramović, M. (2014) Kad smo pitani, a ne ispitivani: Konsultacije sa decom u pokretu Belgrade: Atina – Citizens' Association for combating trafficking in human beings and all forms of violence against women, available in Serbian at http://www.atina.org.rs/sites/default/files/konsultacije-s-decom-u-pokretu.pdf.

[36] Auerswald, Piatt & Mirzazadeh refer to them as DVMAs: disadvantaged, vulnerable and/or marginalised adolescents. Auerswald, C. L., Piatt, A. A., Mirzazadeh, A. (2017) 'Research with Disadvantaged, Vulnerable and/or Marginalized Adolescents' Innocenti Research Briefs – Methods 5, available at https://www.unicef-irc.org/adolescentresearch-methods.

[37] Salway, T.J., Morgan, J., Ferlatte, O., Hawkins, B, Lachowsky, N. J. and Gilbert, M, (2019) 'A Systematic Review of Characteristics of Nonprobability Community Venue Samples of Sexual Minority Individuals and Associated Methods for Assessing Selection Bias' LGBT Health 6(5) DOI: 10.1089/lgbt.2018.0241.

[38] Save the Children (2021) Nine basic requirements for meaningful and ethical children's participation, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/nine-basic-requirements-meaningful-and-ethical-childrens-participation.

about it by designated Save the Children staff in the accommodation centres where the research was conducted.

According to available data, unaccompanied girls are mostly invisible and inaccessible, both for the provision of support and protection, and for participation in research; however, their inclusion in this study was important for identifying and understanding gender-based violence against refugee and migrant children.[39]

A two-day training course was developed for field researchers, interpreters and cultural mediators (who translate researchers' questions in a culturally appropriate way, without modifying them), to clarify their roles on the study; to practice responses to conflicts or difficult situations; and to provide full information on the research process and objectives. An important part of the training looked at the methods of maintaining research integrity with regards to safety, absence of harm, consent, autonomy, privacy, confidentiality, and empowerment and welfare of children, together with the issues regarding preservation of data validity and reliability.

2.1 DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by field researchers - Save the Children caseworkers and cultural mediators, who are child protection experts.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by field researchers - Save the Children caseworkers and cultural mediators, who are child protection experts with relevant educational backgrounds and experience working with refugee and migrant children travelling the Balkans route. The field researchers also completed training on how to conduct such interviews. Interviews were conducted by five field researchers (four women, one man) in cooperation with seven interpreters/cultural mediators (four women, three men). Field research was carried out over a three-month period, from October to December 2021. Researchers interviewed a total of 48 children and youths, ranging from 13 to 19 years old. The most common age of respondents was16 years old – (18 of the children); 12 were 17 years old, three were 13 years old, four respondents were 14 years old, and six were 15 years old. Five respondents were adults, aged either 18 or 19 years old. As they had just come of age and had spent the majority of their journey as children, and because they expressed a desire to participate in the research, their experiences were recorded as valuable for the findings of this research.

Regarding the children's family status, 30 respondents were unaccompanied children (all boys) and 18 children were travelling with their families or accompanied (including 8 boys and 10 girls).

All the children who took part in the study were accommodated in reception centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina at the time of their interview. Twenty children were interviewed in the Una-Sana Canton, in the Miral (Velika Kladuša) and Borići (Bihać) reception centres. Eight children were interviewed in the Doboj Istok reception centre for children and youth in the north of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Doboj), and 20 children at the Ušivak reception centre in Hadžići (Sarajevo).

The information acquired through interviews with children about the violence they had survived varied drastically depending on the reception centres where the children were accommodated, as well as the amount of time they had spent in Bosnia and Herzegovina and on the road in general. Children accommodated in reception centres in the Una-Sana Canton, which is closest to the border with the EU, mostly reported violent pushbacks to Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Croatian border police.

On the other hand, children accommodated in the Ušivak centre in Sarajevo, most of whom had only recently arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina and had not stayed in the Una-Sana Canton, mostly reported violence against children in the areas of Iran, Türkiye, Bulgaria and Greece. In addition, these children talked more about how traffickers

[39] See Save the Children's Girls on the Move Research Series at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/girls-move-research-series, and specifically Save the Children (2021) Girls on the Move in the Balkans, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/girls_on_the_move_balkan.pdf.

behaved towards children, about sexual violence, and violence in their countries of origin and in closed-type accommodation centres, but less about their direct experience of violence on the Balkans route. Among the respondents at the Ušivak reception centre, there were unaccompanied children who had left Afghanistan four to six months prior to arriving in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who were affected by the conflict and instability caused by the change of government in Afghanistan.[40]

Of the total of 48 interviewed children, there were 10 girls and 38 boys. The difference in the number of boys and girls that were interviewed stems from the fact that, at the time of the research, girls were not present at reception centres or there were no adequate interpreters needed to interview them (e.g., to translate into Kurdish).

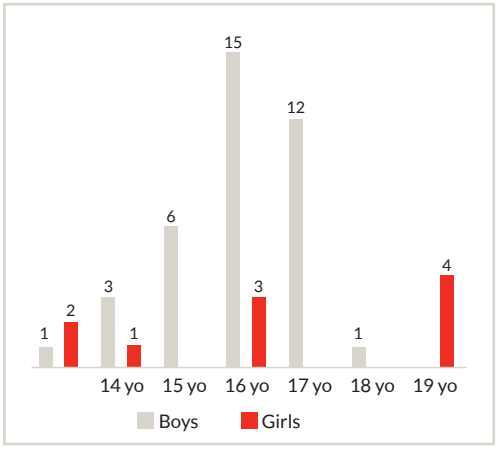

Figure 1: Respondents by age, disaggregated by sex

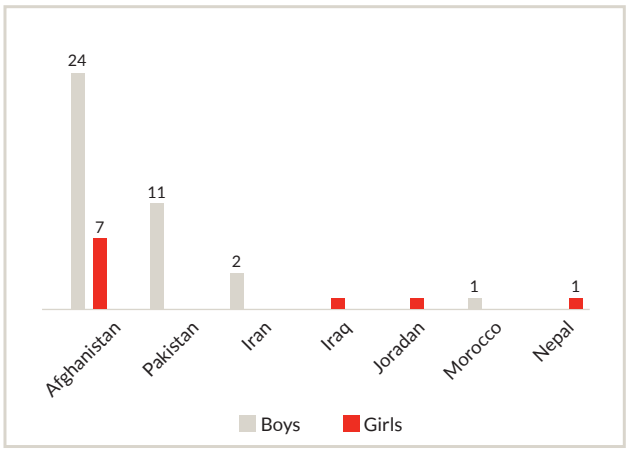

Figure 2: Respondents by country of origin, disaggregated by sex

Field research teams used a private space in the reception centres, educational zones or offices in the centres used by Save the Children North West Balkans. Interviewers equipped the interview rooms so that they would ensure privacy and, so far as possible, create an atmosphere of trust. All interviews were audio recorded, with prior consent from the respondents and their parents or guardians. The collected data were safely stored and safeguarded by passwords, with access restricted to research team members.

[40] The withdrawal of international troops and establishment of a de facto government in Afghanistan was preceded by a record number of conflict-related casualties in 2021 and a drastic deterioration of the humanitarian situation. By September, almost 670,000 Afghans had been internally displaced, adding to some 2.9 million existing internally displaced persons (IDPs), and thousands had fled into neighbouring countries. Source: UNHCR

As the purpose of this research was to hear children's first hand, non-filtered accounts of their experiences in their own voices, consents were obtained from parents and guardians but they did not participate in the research directly.

In parallel with in-depth interviews with children, the study's methodological framework included focus groups with employees from government bodies, NGOs and other organisations engaged in field work with migrant children in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a qualitative form of research that would draw its key source of analysis and interpretation from the interaction of participants.

Five focus groups were held during December 2021, two in Bosnia and Herzegovina and three in Serbia. Focus groups were held online on the Zoom platform, as the COVID-19 pandemic conditions prevented live meetings. They lasted between 90 minutes and two hours, depending on the dynamic of each group. A total of 27 practitioners (20 women, 7 men), who either worked directly with, or had worked with children in migration, participated in the research. Twenty respondents worked for or with international and local NGOs, and seven for government bodies that deal with migration and other social issues, as part of the social welfare system.

Three major themes were explored in the focus groups: the prevalence and level of violence; protection and support systems; and culture-sensitive protection of children. Within these topics, there were discussions about the occurrence and types of violence against children in migration, the extent of children's vulnerability in relation to their personal characteristics (sex, age, ethnicity), and manifestations and intensity of violence relative to location (reception centres, outside of the centre, at the border).

2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data was analysed using thematic analyses based on predefined topics and subsequently using topics derived from the material gathered.[41] Semantic (explicit) and latent (interpretative) content was identified. Field researchers prepared transcripts of interviews with children from the audio recordings, together with their field reports. These reports showed data relating to the dynamics of interaction between organisers, interpreters and children, as well as observations and reflections of field researchers on the course and structure of the interviews. Two senior researchers identified topics, working separately and in parallel to the interview teams, performed the analyses and then cross-referenced them with other findings. Through joint review, discussion and reconciliation of views, in a persevering recursive process, themes that had crystallised from interviews with children were identified. They are presented in Table 3.

Focus groups with professionals from government institutions and international and local NGOs, were mediated by the two researchers who provided a summary report of the findings following the completion of work in focus groups. The material was further analysed by two senior researchers in line with predefined thematic units. After analysis, the findings and content of interviews and focus groups were compared and cross-referenced, and further analysed and interpreted in the light of theoretical and empirical knowledge from previous research using methodological and analytical triangulation,[42] to improve the reliability of findings and develop a complex understanding of the phenomenon of violence against children on the Balkans migration route.

Research findings are presented in line with the topics that emerged from an analysis of the children's narrative, and in line with the statements gathered in focus groups referring to the same or related topics.

[41] Braun V, Clarke V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology' Qualitative research in psychology 3(2), 77:101.

[42] Rothbauer, P. (2008) Triangulation. In Lisa Given (ed.), The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Qualitative Research Methods. Sage Publications, 892-894.

Figure 3: Review of themes and subthemes identified in interviews

Best practice for involving children in research is to strive for authentic children's voices through enabling children to act as informants about their own life.

2.3 RISKS AND CHALLENGES OF RESEARCH WITH CHILDREN

"I had a good feeling, because I went back along that road and I saw what I had accomplished, where I was now."
Nurillah, boy, 14

The value of studying children's experiences from their own perspectives is well recognised, although challenging due to theoretical and policy implications of treating children as social actors in their own right.[43] Best practice for involving children in research is to strive for authentic children's voices through enabling children to act as informants about their own life. In addition to suitable research design, which takes into account the construction of childhood in the relative context of children migrating along the Balkans route, it is necessary to consider the power relations between researcher and research subject, ethical issues, the status of children in research, and children's own perspectives about the research context.[44]

[43] Christensen, P. & James, A. (2008). Childhood diversity and commonality: Some methodological insights. In P. Christensen, & A. James (Eds.), research with children: Perspectives and practices (pp. 156-172). London: Routledge Flamer

[44] Woodhead, M. (2008). Childhood studies: past, present and future. In K. M. Jane (Ed.), introduction to childhood studies (pp. 17-31). Berkshire: Open University Press.

Research involving children comes with many risks, especially when sensitive topics like violence are being investigated. This is particularly true when it comes to sexual violence against children. Risks can be mitigated if the research takes place in a safe environment that provides privacy, when the rule of thumb is to initiate the interview with general questions and continue towards more sensitive and focused questions, once a good rapport is established between the researcher and the child. Before, during and immediately after the interview, the researcher is obligated to keep account of the potential impact of the risks associated with the child's participation in the research, with precise and previously agreed rules regarding privacy limitations and clear referral mechanisms, should it prove necessary to protect the child or should the child need medical or psychological assistance. The child's welfare takes precedence over the goals of the research, and thus proper risk assessment and management is necessary.[45]

This research shows that many children are able to describe sexual abuse if the questions are asked carefully, non-suggestively and with focus[46] and this research pays particular attention to this by providing joint training sessions for interviewers and cultural mediators/interpreters. This part of the training was the most sensitive, since the participants openly expressed their fear of speaking with children about sexual abuse.

2.4 ETHICS AND LIABILITY

As the data collected in this study came from direct work with children who had survived or witnessed violence, it was important to tackle a number of ethical issues prior to the performance of field research, to ensure a child-focused approach, fully informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and protection. [47]

Each interviewed child was encouraged to choose a name they would like to have used to refer to them in this research. All children's names mentioned in the report are names that children chose for themselves.

Data confidentiality and privacy of children participating in the research were ensured using a specially designed identity encoding system for each of the respondents, so that their identity would be fully protected. Each interviewed child was encouraged to choose a name they would like to have used to refer to them in this research. All children's names mentioned in the report are names that children chose for themselves.

Each of the 27 focus group participants were given a 'code' that would inform the researchers where the interview or focus group had taken place. In case of children, the codes also contained the chosen pseudonym, age and gender, and for adults, their gender and position in the protection system. The collected data were preserved and safeguarded by passwords, with access restricted exclusively to the research team.

Since the research collected experiences that were or may have been traumatic for children, it was necessary to undertake a series of measures to prevent secondary traumatisation and other potential harms for the children. All these issues were presented to the Council of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Sarajevo, the partner institution that coordinated the research process, together with the methodological draft for the research, informed consent forms, interview and focus groups instruments; the Council also provided their ethical consent to the implementation of this research.

It was necessary to undertake a series of measures to prevent secondary traumatisation and other potential harms for the children.

During the training, researchers were advised to provide safe spaces for children, and all children were asked to sign the consent forms although they had previously orally agreed to participate. It was advised that children talk to researchers without other adults present, so that they would have an opportunity to express their opinion without

[45] Powell, M.A., Fitzgerald, R., Taylor, N.J., & Graham, A. (2012) International Literature Review: Ethical Issues in Undertaking Research with Children and Young People (Literature review for the Childwatch International Research Network) Lismore: Southern Cross University, Centre for Children and Young People / Dunedin: University of Otago, Centre for Research on Children and Families.

[46] DeVoe, E. R., Faller, K. C. (2002) Questioning strategies in interviews with children who may have been sexually abused. Child Welfare, 81(1), 5-31.

[47] Hugman, R., Pittaway, E., Bartolomei L. (2011) 'When 'Do No Harm' Is Not Enough: The Ethics of Research with Refugees and Other Vulnerable Groups' British Journal of Social Work 41, 1271–1287 doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcr013; Gomez, A. (2014) 'New Developments in Mixed Methods With Vulnerable Groups' Journal of Mixed Methods Research 8(3), 317–320 DOI: 10.1177/1558689814527879.

pressure or barriers, except if the child asked for one of the adults to be present during the interview. Refreshments were provided for children during the interviews, and the researchers were also advised to provide children with paper and coloured pencils to make notes, or just to allow them to relax better. Children were given a chance to terminate their interview at any point, and each child was encouraged to decline to answer questions, ask for a break or interrupt the interview if they so desired.

Another issue that had to be resolved was the issue of COVID-19 risks for both field researchers and children. To prevent any risk of viral infections, strict hygiene measures were put in place for the data collection, and ethical standards prescribed by the World Health Organization were observed.[48] Ethical questions also came up regarding the protection of field researchers from indirect trauma; they were addressed during the training for the implementation of research and later, during individual and group debriefing sessions and consultations with the head investigator.

2.5 LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. The sample encompasses only children who were, at the time of the field research, staying in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in reception centres Miral, Duje, Borići and Ušivak. However, all interviewed children have travelled through the countries on the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans route. Also, most of the interviewed children had also spent some time in these countries and could share those experiences as well.

Since the sample had been predetermined as appropriate, it was expected that boys would be more represented than girls; thus, only 20% of the sample were girls, with an average age of 15 years (ranging 13-19 years old). Therefore, the sample did not include younger children, who would require a different, adapted methodological approach that wasn't envisaged for this research. In addition, very few of the children who were staying at these centres at the time were from Iraq and Syria, so although the research plan was to involve them as well, this was not possible.

Another limitation was that researchers did not always have the opportunity to select the space where the interview was to take place, or to maintain the dynamic of the interview without interruptions of people coming in or going out. This affected their ability to create and maintain an environment that was appropriately adapted for children. Although the researchers demanded privacy and informed the guardians of the impact that coming in or going out had on the dynamic of the conversation, these interruptions did occur in a number of interviews and distracted both the children and the researchers.

[48] World Health Organization (2020) Ethical standards for research during public health emergencies: distilling existing guidance to support COVID-19, available at https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-RFH-20.1.

3. CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE ON THE ROUTE

Violence against refugee and migrant children is a severe violation of their rights and can have far-ranging psychological, social, physical, and economic consequences. While most of the refugee children interviewed for this study had been exposed to violence in their home countries, according to a number of studies,[49,50,51] migrant children most often survive physical violence when they are preparing to cross borders and during border crossings.

Most of the children who were interviewed said that their journey was long and extremely challenging. Some set out on the journey as a 4 or 5-year-old child and had been travelling for over 9 years. For others, the journey is quicker. The shortest journey recorded in this research was from Afghanistan to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 4 months. On average, the children said they had been travelling for 4 years. This implies that the journey that children undertake is not always linear; the length of their journey depends on how many times they are pushed back from borders, whether they spend longer periods in one country gathering resources to move on, or they have to change routes due to difficulties faced in crossing the border in a particular country (for example, if the terrain is too dangerous, or it is highly guarded by the police or military). [52]

3.1 POLICE VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

"Wherever we went, the police beat us, abused us physically. Iranian police, Greek, Turkish, even here."
AliDi, boy, 16

"For them, all refugees are the same. There is no difference if they are children, everybody is treated the same."
Ahmad, boy, 16

Every child who participated in this research had personally experienced violent, even cruel behaviour by the border police.

Children who participated in this research were most open about, and discussed in most detail, their own and other migrant children's experiences with police violence, which included:

- Police violence during pushbacks, whether the child had experienced the violence themselves, witnessed it, or heard about such events from others (usually peers);
- Violent behaviour of police outside border zones, including extortion, detention, deportation, use of force and physical violence during relocations;
- Denial of children's status, with threats and intimidation.

Children described the police violence they suffered as excessive, degrading and brutal.

Every child who participated in this research had personally experienced violent, even cruel behaviour by the border police. About one-third of the children interviewed

[49] Bogucewicz, M. (2020) The consequences of the migration crisis on the Balkan route and human rights: The current situation and prospects in Serbia. Eastern Review 9: 149-167, available at: https://doi.org/10.18778/1427-9657.09.10.

[50] Panico, A., Prestt, E. (2019) Violence at Europe's external and internal borders: The dehumanization of migrants in border-control operations and its effects on people and policies' in Gouvias, D., Petropoulou, C., Tsavdaroglou, C. (Eds.) Contested Borderscapes:Transnational Geographies vis-à-vis Fortress Europe Thessaloniki-Mytilene: Research Group Invisible Cities, available at: https://bit.ly/3ydM35G.

[51] Arsenijević, J., Schillberg, E., Ponthieu, A., Malvisi, L., Ahmed, W. A. E., Argenziano, S., Zamatto, F., Burroughs, S., Severy, N., Hebting, C., de Vingne, B., Harries, A. D., Zachariah, R. (2017). A crisis of protection and safe passage: violence experienced by migrants/refugees travelling along the Western Balkan corridor to Northern Europe, Conflict and Health 11(1), available at: https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-017-0107-z.
BCHR, Macedonian Young Lawyers Association, OXFAM, (2017). Dangerous „Game". The pushback of migrants including refugees, at Europe's borders. Available at: https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp-dangerous-game-pushback-migrants-refugees-060417-en_0.pdf.

[52] UNHCR (2018) Desperate Journeys: Refugees and Migrants arriving in Europe and at Europe's border. Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/desperatejourneys/

– mostly unaccompanied children – described physical violence of various degrees of brutality, that they had mostly experienced themselves. Children travelling with parents mostly talked about witnessing violence that the police committed against their parents or other family members. Boys who were travelling with their families also reported that they had suffered physical violence, despite being underage and travelling with their parents. Almost all interviewed children had been in situations in which they were directly intimidated, or had witnessed acts of violence against other companions.

"I saw with my own eyes how the Croatian police abused my friends, harassed them... How some people had their legs injured, or received blows to the head, the eyes."
Eshsan, boy, 17

Interviewed children frequently said that children they knew personally had been victims of severe physical violence from police officers, with clear elements of torture and other ill-treatment, in terms of inflicting pain or severe physical and mental suffering, intimidation, pressure or punishment.[53]

3.1.1 Pushbacks: violent unlawful returns on the Balkans route

Violent pushbacks from the borders of countries in the Balkans, including European Union member states, have been a daily occurrence for refugee and migrant children for years.[54]

The UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants defines pushbacks as measures undertaken by countries, sometimes including third countries or non-government stakeholders, that lead to migrants, including asylum seekers, being forcibly returned through shortened proceedings, without individual assessment of the need to protect their human rights, to the territory of a country, or to the sea, whether this implies territorial or international waters, where from they had attempted to cross or had crossed the international border.[55] This prevents their access to the territory of the country, which is one of the most important aspects of the right to asylum.

Allowing access to asylum implies the obligation of governments to accept refugees on their territory, so that their status and need for international protection can be ascertained in line with legal procedures. Access includes reception of refugees, i.e., assistance and provision of basic living needs. Denying asylum seekers access to their territory is a breach of the principle of non-refoulement, one of the basic principles of refugee rights, listed in the Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951, modified in the 1967 Protocol.[56]

Even though this practice of pushbacks is contrary to international law, pushbacks were recounted as common experiences by the interviewed children, and children speak of them as particularly inhumane and cruel.

Even though the practice of pushbacks is contrary to international law, pushbacks were recounted as common experiences by the interviewed children, and children speak of them as particularly inhumane and cruel.

[53] Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, in its Article 2, states that: "... the term "torture" means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions."

[54] Op cit fn 7. See also Bogucewicz, M. 'The consequences of the migration crisis on the Balkan route and human rights: The current situation and prospects in Serbia' (2020) Eastern Review 9: 149-167, available at: https://doi.org/10.18778/1427-9657.09.10.

[55] UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Felipe González Morales (2021) Report on means to address the human rights impact of pushbacks of migrants on land and at sea, A/HRC/47/30, 12 May 2021 https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/47/30.

[56] Lalić Novak, G. (2015) Načelo zabrane vraćanja i pristup sustavu azila: dva lica iste kovanice, Migracijske i etničke teme 31, 3: 365–385

Of the 48 children participating in the research, about three-quarters explicitly discussed their own experiences of pushbacks from borders, and many said they had been pushed back multiple times. They were most often reported by interviewed children from reception centres at the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, who were travelling unaccompanied.

All interviewed boys in reception centres near the Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia border (20 of them), described recent experiences of pushbacks.

Interviewed children described these events in vivid, graphic detail, talking about pushbacks from the borders between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, but also other from other borders along the route.

"They [police] beat [migrants] so hard that they inspire such fear, that people never even consider going there ever again."
Omid, boy, 17

Focus group participants also raised children's experiences of violence at the borders. They emphasised that almost all children migrating in the region have at least one experience of a pushback during their journey. The examples that were discussed involved physical violence, dog bites, electric shocks, detention and similar.

"A boy reported that, during the winter months, Croatian police first made him stand in the snow bare footed. Later, they made him lie down, facing the ground and policemen burned the soles of his feet with electric shockers."
NGO field worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Pushbacks involve physical violence, verbal abuse, dog bites, electric shocks, detention, confiscation and destruction of belongings and personal items and other forms of abuse and degrading treatment.

Pushbacks from borders on the Balkans route, as described by the respondents, included interception (sometimes using night-vision cameras, sensors in forests, or similar), being surrounded, and children and adults who were running away being chased and caught, sometimes with the help of dogs.

Children described police and border guards selecting people to be beaten in front of everyone.

In addition, pushbacks involve being stripped naked and forced to stand in the cold, confiscation and destruction of clothes and footwear, as well as confiscation of phones, memory cards, money and personal items. Police would also subject the children to shouting, threats, curses, and other forms of physical and verbal abuse and degrading treatment.

In addition, the interviewed children mentioned gunshots, while several children said that those who beat them the hardest were police officers wearing black masks; some children referred to them as *'commandos'* with the description: *'...they look like mafia... carrying knives.'* According to the children's accounts, they have an intimidating impact on all migrants, but especially young children.

Children said that those who beat them the hardest were police officers wearing black masks.

A boy who tried to cross the border between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia 11 times said:
"They beat us, not every time – five or six times they beat us. They hurt our knees... And there was one old man, he beat us the most, deported us to the jungle and he burned our shoes, our bags, our jackets, and asked us to run and beat us from behind."
Haris, boy, 17

A boy who tried to cross the border between Bulgaria and North Macedonia told the following story:
"We were apprehended by the police. They told us to sit down, and we all sat down; then they selected two people in the group and beat them... Then they told us, come on, let's go, towards some road. We started moving, one of them stood to the side with a rod, told us to go in a single file, and as people passed him by, he hit them."
Basit, boy, 16

Children's experiences at the borders are corroborated by the participants in all focus groups, who encounter children that either do not recognise the violence they've been subjected to, or are reticent to talk about it:

"Children usually say that they had no problems on the journey and that they had not encountered violence – because they usually do not recognise violence. Then we have to get them to talk about it by asking additional questions, we ask – were you beaten, did you have your things taken from you?"
Field worker, Serbia

Single men suffer the harshest treatment, while older unaccompanied boys who travel with them get the same treatment in most cases.

According to the respondents, single men suffer the harshest treatment, while older unaccompanied boys who travel with them get the same treatment in most cases. According to children's statements, police are often non-selective in their use of force, but they use physical violence somewhat less frequently against unaccompanied boys who look like younger children, as well as against children in families.

"They beat children, but not that badly."
Abas, boy, 16

"When the police come, they wear masks and they don't want to figure out if someone is adult or a child.' They don't look and they don't care."
Haris, boy, 17

"My mother was beaten by the Croatian police, my brother, my father. Not me, because my brother 's tall, so they thought that I'm too young, s' that is why I think they didn't beat me."
Naza, girl, 19

"[Unaccompanied] minors and single men get more, families get a little less, but everyone gets beaten. Single men always get beaten. I was with a family and they deported us separately so that they could pummel us."
Harun, boy, 17

Crossings of families with children differ to those of men-only groups, and come with many risks. Large families carry more things and travel with children of different ages, for whom physical exertion and lack of food and water are hard to cope with. Children cannot run from the police, so there is a great threat of the families getting separated in such a situation.

"It was snowing, we walked for a long time, and there was a guide who led the way. Police came, they caught us. They told us to take out our phones and they took my father's phone. There was another family from the camp, they took their phones too, and they also took all my mother's make-up [laughter] and things. They took our food, water. They took all these things and burned them as we watched. It was snowing and it was slippery and my little brother and sister, they were all dirty and were left without boots."
Lian, girl, 13

"Families get abused, too. They don't get beaten, but for example, they put them in a deportation car and instead of deporting them, they drive them around for half an hour, to torture them, to wear them out. Then people get sick, they throw u'."
AliDi, boy, 16

Children describe the separation of families as the most stressful situations on the route.

As a particular form of violence against children, respondents cited incidents during which police beat fathers or other family members in front of the children.
"After I saw my father get hit, I got up, and they pushed me."
Amin, boy, 16

Children describe the separation of families as the most stressful situations on the route. Some children fall behind, or trip over as they run. Sometimes, some members of the family cross the border but other members of the family fall behind and are arrested. There were also accounts of situations where unaccompanied children join families to make it easier for them to cross the border. Sometimes, those unaccompanied children carry small children from the family they joined, and while trying to escape the police they fall behind and get lost, so the younger child gets separated from their family.

Families that are caught crossing borders are sometimes deported separately:
"I have experienced a situation, the worst kind. They deported us separately. Mother and [the] smaller children were deported with our father, while myself and my brothers, 14 and 15 years old, were deported separately. I have never seen my younger brothers suffer so much in my life... they were abused, quite badly, during this deportation. When they had beaten us up, they pushed us down a slope, and there were some thorns there. Since I was the oldest, one of them took up a boxer and hit me in the bottom part of my jaw. My entire jaw was bloody."
Harun, boy, 17

One of the girls who was interviewed said that her parents had sent her and her sister (aged 13 and 14 years old) to cross the border on their own, as they had 'learned the way' after five unsuccessful crossing attempts, but the police caught and deported them. Several interviewed children described serious injuries in detail, some even requiring hospitalisation, that were inflicted on themselves or other children during pushbacks. These included severe contusions, bone fractures, eardrum ruptures, jaw fractures, and injuries from dog bites. According to the children's personal accounts, healthcare workers and staff at reception centres do not report visible signs of torture and other ill-treatment to the competent authorities. International organisations sometimes make some notes, but nothing ever goes further than that.

Interviewed children described serious injuries in detail, some even requiring hospitalisation, that were inflicted on themselves or other children during pushbacks. These included severe contusions, bone fractures, eardrum ruptures, jaw fractures, and injuries from dog bites.

Although the children refer to border crossings as 'the game', these events are cruel, repetitive and futile, and often result in the feeling of complete helplessness.

"Those who can run fast, they just run away, but those who are not fast, they beat them with a stick (laughter)."
Abas, boy, 16

"They harass us, especially when we know we are close, that we are so close to making it."
AliDi, boy, 16

"He takes pity on you and doesn't kill you at the moment he has beaten you up. He takes your things, and you come to a point where there's really nothing you can do."
Nurullah, boy, 14

Nevertheless, children continue with attempts to cross the borders as almost all of them 'have a friend' or 'know of someone' who, after multiple attempts – and despite deportations, physical violence, humiliation, and losing all their possessions – has somehow crossed the border and continued to Western Europe.

3.1.2 Denial of the child's status

"There's not much discussion with them in the forest. They catch us, take us to the station, interrogate us there, interrogate us in the vehicle, we sign documents there, but they don't give us any documents."
Ehsan, boy, 17

According to international law, migrant children crossing borders should be identified and specific, child-related procedures should be initiated for their protection. There are specific protections for unaccompanied and separated children.[57]

Children stated that police treated them worse if they declared themselves as children.

In interviews, some children stated that police treated them worse if they declared themselves as children. In the children's accounts, there are frequent situations in which the police refused to accept their declared age and wrote an older age in the documents. They also recount numerous intimidation experiences at all borders on the Balkans route,

[57] General comment no. 6 on the treatment of unaccompanied children outside of the countries of origin, of the UN Commission for the rights of the child from 2005, envisages seven principles applicable to the treatment of unaccompanied and separated children, pertaining to: legal obligations of the countries on their territory and measures for their implementation; prohibition of discrimination; primarily considering the principle of the best interest of the child in the process of finding short-term and long-term solutions; the right to life, survival and development; right of the child to freely express their opinion; adherence to the principle of non-refoulement and protection of privacy.

such as being driven at high speed in the police van following their arrest and detention to force them to declare themselves as adults.

"They will say: 'are you really 15?' and then slap me twice. Then they say: 'You are lying, you are not 15, you are 20.'"
Ahmad, boy, 16

"In Greece, I was caught by police and then they were telling me, 'don't say you are under 18, if you do' we will put you in prison. If you don't, we will let you go.' But I was in prison for 24 hours anyhow. They threaten children to make them say they are adults."
AliDi, boy, 16

"I wrote my age, that I'm a minor, but they still deported me. They took the pencil, so they can write '18' after I leave."
Ali, boy, 16

"I claimed I was 15 years old but I was in that prison [in Bulgaria]. They were doing a corona [COVID-19] test, procedure for quarantine, and after that, they took us to a real camp. There were kids around 14, 15 years old, but I blame the interpreter who was working with us, he told them that we were not children."
Subhan, boy, 16

In detention-like units and closed camps, children experience extreme fear and discomfort, especially if children are not properly separated from adult men.

"It was like a prison, which they called a closed camp. The zone for minors and the zone for adults were very close, and it was terrible as you were not separated in any way, ever. You're always afraid of these adult men. If you are not really little, they don't believe you're not 18."
Abdurahman, boy, 16

3.1.3 Experiences of police violence at locations other than border crossings

Children talk with gratitude about police that were not violent or provided some form of assistance.

Children participating in the research differentiated between police treatment in cities ('they are good') and their treatment by the border police and the police in charge of deportation ('the police that deport us, they beat us.') Experiences of unaccompanied children somewhat differ from those of children, especially girls, who are travelling with families; additionally, experiences with the police in different countries also vary. Children talk with gratitude about police that were not violent or provided some form of assistance, even when they were being extorted for money.

"The police officers were nice, they were honest and they said, 'we want a bribe, if you pay us, we will let you go, we will not touch you, just give us some money' – and we liked that."
Sarina, girl, 19

Parents sometimes use the threat of police as a deterrent for their children:
"It's so absurd in our camp, when parents want to put their children to sleep, when they want to scare them somehow, they say, 'sleep now, or police will come.'"
Harun, boy, 17

Children saw protection of human rights in Europe as a great value.

Approximately one in four children that were interviewed said they understood the role and tasks of the police to guard the borders of their country and their citizens, but insults, humiliation, beatings and intimidation were seen as deeply unjust and unfounded. Children saw protection of human rights in Europe was seen as a great value.

"The entire planet knows why we are on the move, we are smuggled, everyone knows the situation in Afghanistan, and still, this happens."
Gul, girl, 19

"The worst countries are Iran, Afghanistan and Türkiye. This is where the worst abuse of children and women happens, they are somehow oppressed. From Greece to here, young men who come are harassed, they are truly abused, their phones confiscated, they get beaten. Still, since we've come closer to Europe, we see less and less abuse."
Sarina, girl, 19

3.2 VIOLENCE AT THE HANDS OF SMUGGLERS AND INTERMEDIARIES

According to the statements made by interviewed children, smugglers and the people around them are amongst the most frequent perpetrators of violence, alongside the police.

More than 1 in 3 interviewed children described violence at the hands of smugglers and their fear of them. Several children stated that smugglers would kill or leave adults and children in conditions that they would not be able to survive on their own, because they could not physically withstand the journey, they were hurt or sick, or did not have the money to continue the journey.

Alongside smugglers (sometimes called *'agents'*), were their assistants, pathfinders, accommodation providers and local drivers. Children also met kidnappers and bandits on the road. Sometimes it was difficult for the children to differentiate between these two categories. Criminals were described by children as cruel people, who only care about money:

"Before we started the journey with the smugglers, they were the best people in the world. But when you start your journey with them, they are the worst people. They only want their money."
Haris, boy, 17

Children on the road are more protected if they are accompanied by parents, older cousins or brothers, or when they have money and they reach smugglers through 'recommendations.' In these cases, there are 'unwritten rules' regarding the protected ones, whereas children without protection suffer violence and exploitation.

"This smuggler of ours was a friend of my father's, he was someone we know. And, so, we were protected. Let me explain what the road actually looks like. Let's say that the refugee boy is this biscuit [points his finger at the table]. This biscuit is handed over to someone and left somewhere [points his finger to the floor]. You leave that biscuit there, say you leave for 20 days, and you tell him, 'stay there'. In 20 days, the biscuit is still there. And nobody, nobody touches it and nobody makes any trouble, but unwritten rules are just generally known, so to speak."
Hassan, boy, 15

"If the kid is totally alone in the group, doesn't have any cousin, or friends, someone, usually the smuggler tries to use him. He tells him to do this or that, he uses him. If he has someone, then he is protected."
Ali, boy, 16

Smugglers commonly beat children on the road when they start lagging behind or when they are loud or 'disobedient,' which - according to children's statements - is normalised because the route is dangerous and those in power use their position undisturbed:
"You're walking and you get hurt and they kick you, or hit you with a stick"
Ali, boy, 16

Children stated that smugglers would kill or leave adults and children in conditions that they would not be able to survive on their own, because they could not physically withstand the journey, they were hurt or sick, or did not have the money to continue the journey.

"When they [children] make noise, or when they don't listen to him [the smuggler], he just slaps and slaps them. They should not make noise, disturb or disrespect someone older than them."
Omar, boy, 13

"They have the upper hand."
Abdurahman, boy, 17

Several respondents gave accounts of child kidnappings on the road and the ways in which these were carried out. Although there were statements that 'smugglers do not do these things, they get a picture of the person they're taking and that's it' (Abdurahman, boy, 16), it seems an entire network around smugglers takes part in kidnappings, especially on the route through Pakistan and Iran. According to the children's accounts, there are entire villages engaged in smuggling and providing logistical support to smugglers, which is particularly dangerous for children who are travelling on their own.

Respondents described very similar situations, whether they had experienced a child from their environment being kidnapped or whether they had heard about a child kidnapping on the road. Four of the 48 interviewed children said they were kidnapped and 'ransomed' themselves during the trip.

Children are kidnapped on the road for blackmail purposes.

Children are kidnapped on the road for blackmail purposes. Videos are sent to their parents or cousins, where they are threatened with mutilation, rape or death if the family does not pay a ransom, and the families are left with very little time to raise the money:
"There they kidnapped one of the children. The adults made a video of him, and then said they would send the video to his family. If they [the family] were not going to send 300,000 Pakistani rupees, the guys were going to rape the boy. They only gave them three hours to send the money."
Arham, boy, 17

A girl travelling with her sister and brother-in-law gave an account of her own kidnapping experience:
"When we wanted to cross the border between Iran and Türkiye, I was separated from my sister, so I was deported. Some smugglers were there, they caught me. I was with smugglers for some time and because I was all alone, they created problems for me. They were violent. They wanted some money. So, when we gave money to them, they asked me to go. I reached my sister in Türkiye. I was 15 years old."
Sultana, girl, 16

Kidnappings happen on the Balkans route as well. One of the boys who took part in the study was kidnapped in Greece and ransomed after four days, and several children reported hearing about kidnappings in Serbia. Fear of kidnapping is also present in boys who have been on their own on the road for years. They mostly come from very poor families, their parents' financial resources have already been invested in their travel and are now exhausted, and some have broken contact with their families, and are trying to anticipate and avoid situations in which they can be kidnapped or blackmailed:

"I was just thinking in my head - your dad had a taxi and he sold it for you, they have nothing else to give if you get caught, they will kill you, nobody can pay for you."
Abdurahman, boy, 16

Smugglers and their helpers do not behave the same way on all sections of the route – according to children's accounts, there is another set of rules in Europe.

Smugglers and their helpers do not behave the same way to migrants on all sections of the route. In Asian countries, children say they are not allowed to give up the road and return but –according to children's accounts, there is another set of rules in Europe.
"Smugglers came, took our phones, locked us up and said, 'there's no going back, we're crossing the border however many times it takes, there's no going back.'"
Ahmad, boy, 16

"On the European continent, including the Balkans, it's not that you must forcibly go with the smuggler. If you would like to stop your journey in the middle of the way, you can go back, they don't force you."
Hanan, boy, 17

Since 2015, as a result of both EU and national government policies, crossing borders to Western Europe through Greece, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina has become more uncertain,[58] perilous and expensive, as confirmed by the recent Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime report.[59] There has been a significant decline in the number of refugee and migrant arrivals in Europe since that year, and there was an even further decline in the number of arrivals during 2020. The policies that deter arrivals make the journey more difficult for refugees and migrants, and appear to have encouraged the creation of new smuggling networks, which seem to be the only realistic option for those wishing to get to Western Europe.

Children interviewed for this study reported that individuals in these smuggling networks are highly dangerous, interconnected and vindictive. Policies that deter and contain migrants, and inadequate efforts at service provision and integration, create conditions of extreme marginalisation, and make children particularly vulnerable to abuse and worst forms of child labour. Several boys reported during their interviews that they were recruited to criminal networks by smugglers, putting them at particularly high risk of violence and the worst forms of child labour, which they should be protected from.

"In Greece, we as the younger kids did not get any funding, we had no money. Some went with some people, there were like mobster gangs, and they were involved in all sorts of things. These mobster gangs come and say, 'come, we'll pay you, steal this, beat this one or that one up.'"
Nasirulah, boy, 15

Children describe smuggler gangs as criminals and bandits, who are most dangerous during the border crossings, when they require unquestionable obedience, extort additional money, and beat up, insult and threaten people.

Smuggler gangs, as the children call them, are ethnically homogeneous and smuggle their compatriots. Children describe them as criminals and bandits, who are most dangerous during the border crossings, when they require unquestionable obedience (so that the attempt of crossing the border does not fail), extort additional money, and beat up, insult and threaten people. Several children said that the criminals are connected and that there is no running from them if someone gets on their bad side:

"The smugglers are not Bosnian... They are usually from Morocco, they are Pakistanis, they are Afghans. The smugglers from Morocco help people from Morocco."
Abdullah, boy, 17

"Those people are actually on drugs, they drink alcohol, and then they attack people, take their stuff."
Subhan, boy, 16

The criminals are connected and there is no running from them if someone gets on their bad side.

"These people are also migrants but they are really connected across the Balkans route. If you escape from them, they have your photo, they have your videos, they will send photos and videos to Greece, and their people will catch you there. If you escape, they have people in Bulgaria. If you escape from there, they have people in Serbia. All of them are like a big chain, they are connected and they contact each other to rob you or take your stuff."
Arham, boy, 17

Interviewed children interpret these circumstances as the consequence of their inability to get employment and earn money in the Balkans. After a long and financially demanding journey, some migrants were left without resources and found ways to survive by engaging in smuggling, larceny, selling drugs, etc. One of the interviewed boys testified that the smugglers recruited him to join them soon upon arrival at a reception centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but that he refused after consulting with his parents.

[58] While the beginning of 2020 was marked by an increase in the number of new refugee and migrant arrivals to the Balkans, the figures significantly decreased once the COVID-19 pandemic started. By the end of 2020, around 16,000 new refugee and migrant entries were officially registered in the Balkans, amounting to one-fifth of the arrivals registered in 2019. Source: Refugees and migrants at the Western Balkans Route Regional Overview 2020, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/balkans-migration-and-displacement-hub-data-and-trend-analysis-refugees-and-migrants-western/.

[59] Kemp, W., Amerhauser, K. and Scaturro, R. (2021). Spot Prices: Analyzing flows of people drugs and money in the Western Balkans. Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Spot-Prices-Analyzing-flows-of-people-drugs-and-money-in-the-Western-Balkans-1.pdf.

"I got an offer from one smuggler to be his helper, because his helper got injured. He said, 'you will help me 2-3 times and you will earn money; I'm going to give you money and you will reach Italy without paying anything, you will go for free.'"
Arham, boy, 17

He also refused because he knew other boys and young men who helped smugglers in the hope of getting a 'free game' after some time, who were still with the smugglers after several months or years (*'they are still doing the same thing, they don't have any other life'*), and because it was *'haram money'*, or money obtained in a dishonest way, which conflicted with the principles of Islam.

Beside the smugglers, guides, and drivers who try to *'pack as many people as they can in their vehicle,'* there are also bandits on the road. Children fear them because they extort them for money, threaten them with violence, or use brute force. Children described such encounters in each of the countries along the Balkans route. These bandits were both migrants and members of the local population, who would occasionally threaten them with police or present themselves as police officers.

"We were entering Albania. We had many children in our group. They [the bandits] made something out of metal and it was in the forest, and a bell would ring when someone touches that. Several hundred meters down the road, people came out and asked us for money. They presented themselves to be the police and they hit the men, they wouldn't let us move on, they said we have to pay them. It cost our group about 1,000 Euros. Those who did not pay would get beaten."
Zehra, girl, 16

Children also shared their experiences regarding sexual abuse of children by smugglers and their helpers, which are outlined in section 3.5 of this report.

The hardest experiences described by children were from the Moria centre on the island of Lesbos in Greece, while violence against children was also reported in other Greek centres. Respondents particularly highlighted sexual abuse of prepubescent boys, with no protection provided to the children.

3.3 VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN RECEPTION CENTRES AND DETENTION UNITS

"It's a camp, but basically, it's like a prison. It's fenced, –here are containers inside where people live - on one side children, on the other side single people. There are no social workers, only police."
Hanan, boy, 17

When sharing their experiences from reception centres, the interviewed children characterise them as 'good,' 'bad' or 'horrible' and they form this impression based on the quality of the accommodation, the food, cleanliness, security and staff behaviour.

A significant portion of interviewed children stayed in reception centres in Greece and Serbia, so experiences from these countries dominated their narratives. Children who stayed in several official centres within a certain state can clearly compare where and how they felt better, but those who stayed only in one centre often generalise their impression of a country based on their experience at that particular reception centre.

'The hardest ('horrible') experiences described by children were from the Moria centre on the island of Lesbos in Greece,[60] primarily due to the unorganised and unsafe way of life and lack of staff charged with maintaining security and order, hygiene and nutrition, which created a basis for various forms of violence. A girl described her memory of arriving at that reception centre as 'going into Hell.' Walking out at night was extremely dangerous. Interviewed children described the climate of fear of sexual violence, especially against children, robberies, people snatching things, mass fights between members of various ethnic groups (fights between Arabs and Kurds, and between Afghans and Pakistanis were mentioned), as well as murders.

[60] Mória Reception and Identification Centre

"...It was a camp that did not have a warden or people working there, we never saw anybody... It was a horrible place for everyone, children in particular."
Zehra, girl, 16

"Someone was for sure sitting there to snatch your mobile, to snatch whatever you have, your money."
Akbar, boy, 16

"If there is 24 hours fight, how can we feel protected?"
Mahdi, boy, 17

Violence against children is also present in other Greek centres that have a more substantial police presence, and several respondents particularly highlighted sexual abuse of prepubescent boys, with no protection provided to the children.

The children highlighted limited freedom of movement, arrogant treatment from individual security workers, theft of items due to the inability to store them safely, and cases when their complaints were not seriously considered, as the most important security problems at the centres.

In a reception centre, children care about being treated with kindness and not suffering contempt, shouting, rude, arrogant, insulting and careless behaviour. They consider these deeply unjust and unnecessary:

"From every angle, their behaviour was very bad. The words they said were difficult to tolerate. You can speak in a normal way, not disrespectfully – and this is what we faced."
Makbul, boy, 16

In focus groups, a field worker described a situation where state stakeholders decided to relocate unaccompanied children from a centre near the Croatian border, where they wanted to stay (Borići) to a centre far away from the border (Duje):

"When the relocation from Borići to Duje started, they relocated one group and left others at the Borići centre. Then the children were attacking us, how we were the ones who decided who was going to go and who would stay, and so they attacked us that we were colluding against Afghanistan to protect Pakistan. The rules changed on a daily basis and minors suffer such traumas with such actions, and then we feel guilty because there is nothing we can do."
Representative of a local social work centre, Bosnia and Herzegovina

"A Hazara boy was sent to an asylum centre mostly populated by Pashtuns. He slept in a tent with them and was raped on the same night. We had situations where a dark-skinned African boy was relocated to a camp where everyone else was Afghan. It was a poor initial assessment and I am positive that it would not be the case if nongovernmental organisations had been involved."
NGO field worker, Serbia

In a reception centre, children care about being treated with kindness and not suffering contempt, shouting, rude, arrogant, insulting and careless behaviour. Children consider inconsistent rules, and frequent changes to rules as a particularly great injustice.

Children consider inconsistent rules, and frequent changes to rules that concern them directly, as a particularly great injustice. When government stakeholders make rules unilaterally, without consulting them or the NGOs that are in direct contact with them and know their needs well, children lose trust in state stakeholders and NGOs, whose credibility is threatened. All stakeholders who provide support to children are at risk of losing contact with them and being unable to provide the protection they need. Relief workers in focus groups underscored the importance of ensuring that those who have the experience, understand cultural and other specificities, and are well aware of the potential risks for the children, as well as the best ways to help them, participate in decision making.

Interviewed children also felt the need to highlight the places where they felt good and where they were welcomed.[61] The 'good' reception centres are the ones where migrant children feel safe, where the staff and relief workers recognise their needs

[61] In certain countries children did not stay at reception centres and they spoke of their experiences from detention centres (Bulgaria, Albania). Some of the interviewed children travelling with their parents stayed briefly at a reception centre in Montenegro.

and react to declared issues, and where the staff communicate with migrants with respect

"We even sit together with doctors to have food, to eat together."
Naza, girl, 19

Accommodation centres can be a safe place if children are treated with respect, have access to services that are adapted to their needs, there is adequate supervision, and accommodation facilities are adapted for children. Children travelling alone must be separated from adults, especially from migrants who are presenting themselves as minors, in order to feel safe.

Children can get a certain level of protection in reception centres with functioning security staff. In cases when humanitarian organisations work in the centres, they often take over supervision and–mediate in cases of security incidents. Verbal and - to a much lesser extent - physical altercations are recorded in regulated centres, where there is around-the-clock supervision and protection.

Unaccompanied children spoke in praise of the centres where they quickly received guardians, who could address their issues and needs.

Overall, interviewed children claim that they feel safe in centres if the security staff do their jobs, and that they enjoy having access to educational and recreational activities and assistance of international organisations. Unaccompanied children spoke in praise of the centres where they quickly received guardians, who could address their issues and needs.

Although at times staying in a centre is viewed as a 'necessary evil' ('wherever I was, I felt like in a prison'), it seems that children, especially those travelling alone who were accommodated in centres for unaccompanied minors, appreciate the opportunity to ask the security service for help and protection but feel unsafe outside of the centres, since other migrants that they may be in conflict with could be waiting for them on the road.

"It's easy to report these things to the security guard. The security will catch them [the perpetrators], but the thing is, after I move to go to the game, they [the perpetrators] have people there."
Arham, boy, 17

Violence happens on all sites but risk factors are much higher outside of reception centres. Staying outside of the reception centre means there is no continuity in provision of support and protection.

There are no guarantees of safety outside accommodation facilities. This was particularly highlighted by focus group participants from NGOs, who claim that violence happens on all sites but that risk factors are much higher outside of reception centres. Staying outside of the reception centre means there is no continuity in provision of support and protection.

Children are exposed to adults from the migrant and local populations. The risk and the circle of potential bullies expands when children stay in squats, starting with the people around the child, through the local population, to potential police violence. In terms of major risks to the welfare of children, professionals from focus groups spoke of insufficiently regulated accommodation centres that did not have adequate conditions for children, coupled with a lack of developed mechanisms for the identification of migrating children to ensure they are relocated to appropriate accommodation.[62]

[62] As examples of high-risk accommodation, field workers from Bosnia and Herzegovina mentioned Vučjak, a temporary reception centre - container facility in the Una-Sana Canton where up to 2,000 people, including children, were accommodated at some point in exceptionally inhumane conditions, as was highlighted by the Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner, among others: see https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/bosnia-and-herzegovina-must-immediately-close-the-vucjak-camp-and-take-concrete-measures-to-improve-the-treatment-of-migrants-in-the-country

3.4 SEXUAL ABUSE OF CHILDREN ON THE BALKANS ROUTE

"We had two smugglers in our group. One of the smugglers was telling us to go forward, and another took out a knife and tried to abuse a girl. Took her to the side and the girl was yelling, trying to save herself, but that smuggler sexually abused her, we saw it."
Hasnen, boy, 15

Numerous studies indicate that exposing sexual abuse is more a process than an event or episode to children. The child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome (CSAAS), proposed by Summit, is used to understand the process of exposure.[63] The typical event pattern points to five reactions of the sexually abused child: secrecy, helplessness, an 'entrapped state', delayed and unconvincing disclosure, and finally retraction, when the child denies the previously exposed abuse. This is understood as accommodative behaviour of the child attempting to survive abuse and the pressures emerging from sexual taboos, feelings of guilt and shame, confusion, fear, rejection and disbelief in the family and community.

Of the 48 children interviewed, 10 of them, specifically eight boys (five of whom were travelling unaccompanied) and two girls, very quickly stated they were unaware of any sexual violence against children on the road they travelled. In line with their instructions, most interviewers did not insist on continuing the conversation on this topic, according to recommendations to respect the children's statements.[64]

In spite of numerous challenges, the careful preparation of the research contributed to a large proportion of the interviewed children (around two-thirds) sharing their experiences and knowledge of child sexual abuse on the route.

None disclosed that they were victims of sexual abuse. This was expected, considering how taboo this topic is in nearly all cultures. A boy vividly described how this was not talked about to anyone, not even your loved ones, because of shame, family duties and possible consequences:

"We have a way of thinking, or mentality, not to share this [experienced violence] with people. My example: if four people would catch me, and they would want to sexually abuse me, I would have said that they should have killed me. That would be better for me... Say that this sexual incident would happen to me, and I would share it with my cousin, okay? He would take care of me, but, one day, I would be getting married, having kids, and then, that person may, as a joke, or maybe if we had a bad relationship, maybe he would say, 'you are that person who was raped in Bosnia.' That is the worst, you would be in big trouble. Maybe you would kill yourself with a gun, or you would kill that person, and then it would cause a big fight between us, our tribes. That is why they [the children] would never share this information, this incident, they would keep it to themselves, not share with father, nor mother."
Arham, boy, 17

Two-thirds of the interviewed children gave accounts of child sexual abuse on the route that they had heard about from others or directly witnessed.

[63] Summit, R.C. (1992) Abuse of the Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome, Journal of Child Sexual Abuse: Research, Treatment, & Program Innovations for Victims, Survivors, & Offenders, 1(4), 153–163. https://doi.org/10.1300/J070v01n04_13

[64] Researchers were instructed to continue with further additional questions in line with their assessment whether or not the children wanted to 'shut down' the conversation about the topic of sexual abuse, or whether or not they were ready to share some opinions and views. Researchers may facilitate the exposure of information with children from various cultures by being open, respectful, non-judgmental and providing an opportunity for the children to be interviewed in their language. Powell, M.A., Fitzgerald, R., Taylor, N.J., & Graham, A. (2012) International Literature Review: Ethical Issues in Undertaking Research with Children and Young People (Literature review for the Childwatch International Research Network) Lismore: Southern Cross University, Centre for Children and Young People / Dunedin: University of Otago, Centre for Research on Children and Families.

Two-thirds of the interviewed children did, however, give accounts of child sexual abuse on the route that they had heard about from others or directly witnessed. Some respondents also stated they were in situations where money or favours were offered to them in exchange for sexual services.

"This exists, of course, I heard about it, I believe I even saw it, I am not sure... Because when you're little and when two or three people come to you, they can abuse you sexually and use you and you cannot complain about it. A lot of it happens, not just among us Afghans, there are also Arabs and Kurds on the road."
Abdurahman, boy, 17

Children also stated they were in situations where money or favours were offered to them in exchange for sexual services.

Child abuse on the road happens to both unaccompanied children and those travelling with families, but according to the children, those travelling alone are more vulnerable because they are completely at the mercy of smugglers:

"Unaccompanied children are all alone. You are totally dependent on smugglers, so they do these kinds of things."
Makbul, boy, 16

Sexual abuse is followed by threats of open force (most often cited is separating children from the group and using a knife) or blackmail.

Child abuse on the road happens to both unaccompanied children and those travelling with families, but those travelling alone are more vulnerable.

"Usually, on the way, they scare kids. "We will not put you in the taxi if you won't have sex with me.'"
Ali, boy, 16

"My friend, when he went to the game, somewhere in Banja Luka, next to the river, they forced him, they took out a gun and they were trying to scare him to abuse him."
Hanan, boy, 17

"Children who are protected (because of family ties, money, etc.) are in a better position, whereas those who do not have those 'guarantees' become victims. It depends on the smuggler, if he [the smuggler] says to the next person [another smuggler] that someone shouldn't have these problems... Otherwise, everyone knows they would abuse kids on the way."
Itaf, boy, 16

Interviewed children mentioned child sexual abuse incidents that they had heard about or witnessed in nearly all countries along the route: Iraq, Pakistan, North Macedonia, Greece, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Several statements point to widespread sexual abuse of children on the road between Iran and Türkiye, where migrants find accommodation on their journey and when children are 'separated' for abuse, specifically girls without strong family protection, but boys as well:

"You get a smuggler and when you're changing locations you have to stay at that smuggler's apartment or accommodation for two days before you head out, and that type of abuse mostly happens during that time. It is mostly against girls travelling with a brother or travelling with a sister, for example."
Gul, girl, 19

"Mostly in Iran. It was like a dormitory... for people who are there illegally. They would take the girls in the morning and bring them back in the evening... What we saw was that they'd come, start shouting, take them, their father or brother or whoever is there cannot say anything, just let them go and then in the evening they bring the girls back."
Abdurahman, boy, 16

"In those dormitories in Türkiye, I was there with my family, the rooms were locked from the inside and we couldn't go out or in, but we heard in the room where the young men were, once we even heard a boy calling for help, but we couldn't help him."
Nasirulah, boy, 16

"...the smuggler took that young boy to the jungle and the helper of that smuggler told us that we should move, continue our way, and after one hour, they came back, both of them."
Itaf, boy, 16

Several respondents reported child sexual abuse in migrant asylum-seeking centres in Greece, including abuse of prepubescent children. Leaving children unattended and using the toilet were considered particularly risky.

Reception centres for unaccompanied boys are also mentioned in several interviews:

"It happened in Greece. For example, there was a minor, we were in this zone for minors and he went out with three older men. And then he came back crying and said they raped him. However, the police did not want to accept this."
Nasirulah, boy, 16

When children lack other options, they resort to irregular migration, and must try to remain invisible (under the radar of the police). This forces them to become wholly dependent on smugglers and creates a breeding ground for sexual exploitation of children from the migrant–population. Years of staying in some countries along the route - such as Türkiye and Greece, where they often have no status and inadequate support, and where they fervently, even desperately want to leave so that they can move on to Europe - exposes these children to additional risks.

As a consequence, some children give accounts of migrant children of both sexes selling sexual services in Istanbul and in Athens.

"Specially, there is locality with the name of Zeytinburnu [a neighbourhood in Istanbul]. Over there they hide refugees."
Akbar, boy, 16

"In Greece, there is a park named Victoria, some migrant girls are coming there for prostitution."
Hanan, boy, 17

When it comes to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, three of the interviewed children stated that they personally received solicitations to provide sexual services in exchange for a free game.

"In Serbia, a smuggler offered me, two times,' I will sexually abuse you if you will agree, and then I will take you to the game for free.' Both times I rejected this offer. I said I didn't need money, I had money."
Hasnen, boy, 15

Several respondents mentioned that they knew children (mostly older unaccompanied children) who exchanged sexual services with adult men, usually those in positions of power in the migrant community, because they were involved in smuggling, narcotics trafficking or other crime.

"They [the smugglers] are offering them [the children] some money, offering to buy them clothes, etc. Children are going to them to be stronger, in that group."
Hanan, boy, 17

According to the interviews, all children, especially unaccompanied children, are exposed to risks of sexual violence, especially in countries where they stay for a longer period of time in reception centres:

"Kids don't have money, so the smugglers are offering them, let's say 60 Euros, and then they are sexually abusing them. They very well know that, if the minor leaves the camp, he will go to another camp, so for sure he is going to be in some camp."
Arham, boy, 17

The threat of sexual abuse is continuous and a part of children's daily lives. They are afraid of complaining or asking for help because the smugglers will certainly catch up

Some children give accounts of migrant children of both sexes selling sexual services or exchanging sexual services with adult men, usually those in positions of power in the migrant community, because they were involved in smuggling, narcotics trafficking or other crime.

with them when crossing the border, if not before. As a rule, sexual abuse and rape is not reported to the authorities because of the fear of being deported and due to the fear of smugglers, among other things.

As a rule, sexual abuse and rape is not reported to the authorities because of the fear of being deported and due to the fear of smugglers, among other things.

"It happened near the camp. The child was at the gas station to buy something. Three people arrived and asked the child to come with them. This incident happened near the camp, at the farm. After that, the boy arrived in the camp and started crying in the room. He told us about what happened with him. We didn't inform any security personnel inside the camp."
Abdullah, boy, 17

A conspicuous number of children (about 1 in 3) reported that children on the road are especially endangered if they are considered to be 'beautiful':
"When they see someone looking nice, they pull them to one side and they do whatever they want with him. Also, with the girls."
Hasen, boy, 15

"Kids around 12 [years old] are usually victims of violence. When there is a beautiful boy, they abuse him and the police are not doing anything. It doesn't matter if the child is with family or alone. If he is beautiful, that's enough [to be targeted for sexual abuse]."
Hanan, boy, 17

There is a prominent narrative, repeated in interviews, about the special vulnerability of children in migration who are considered 'attractive' or 'beautiful.' This seems to follow the dominant (and seemingly internalised) portrait that victims of sexual violence are to blame, but also that children have little space to be protected. This narrative further endangers children, as it normalises violence and creates a false image of the 'inevitability' of violence and the 'voluntary' participation of victims. It also implies that children who have not been sexually abused on the road may think that they are 'not attractive', and therefore not a target, which certainly makes them more vulnerable and susceptible to further abuse.

Children interpret sexual violence as abuse of power.

Children interpret sexual violence as abuse of power. In their interviews, children often described this abuse as motivated by ethnic conflicts, perpetrated by someone belonging to a different ethnic group to the interviewed child - whether Pakistani, Afghan or Kurd. Drunk men are also often cited as logical perpetrators. Alcohol is forbidden and viewed as sinful in some cultures, so people who get drunk may be seen as immoral.

Several boys tried to explain sexual abuses through the lens of harmful practices such as *bacha bazi*. Although illegal under Afghan law, this practice remains present both in Afghanistan and on the migrant route:

"They have knives and they usually take mobile phones and things from a minor. Especially those guys, people who like boys, they would like to have a sexual relationship with them, and to abuse them, like bacha bazi."
Subhan, boy, 16

In three out of the five focus groups, professionals shared their knowledge of the bacha bazi[65] practice, which they characterised as present and perceivable on the route. Adult men who have power (on the migrant route, these are often smugglers), dress boys as girls and put makeup on them, ask them to dance and entertain them, and set up the environment for sexual abuse. Interviews with migrant children indicate that, although this practice is banned, it does not seem to be recognised as violence in the specific context of the migrant community. Therefore, it is rarely reported.

In addition, the taboos connected with sexual violence, especially against boys, make this kind of violence particularly difficult to identify. Even when it is exposed, it is difficult to provide adequate assistance and support, since children rarely stay long in one place before they leave to continue their journey. If the procedure for proving abuse takes a very long time (as is the case in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, according

[65] Simone Borile (2019) Bacha Bazi: cultural norms and violence against poor children in Afghanistan, International Review of Sociology, 29:3, 498-507, DOI: 10.1080/03906701.2019.1672346

to the statements of professionals who took part in the focus groups), this is a major challenge for practitioners.

Even when there are clear procedures for reporting violence, problems can occur if the protection system is slow to react; if professionals in the reporting system are not sufficiently trained to interview children; and if preliminary investigations cannot be completed as preconditions for pressing charges because trained interpreters are not present. Additionally, a major issue when children are in countries perceived as transit countries (such as Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) is that they frequently leave the country before their case is processed.

Even when there are clear procedures for reporting violence, problems can occur if the protection system is slow to react.

Securing a safe environment for sexually abused children is another challenge, due to limited adequate accommodation and because children strongly refuse to be separated:

"In two out of three cases, the child who was removed from the offender wants to get back in the camp at all costs. A new stage sets in once they spend some time in protected accommodation; self-harm is very frequent then, and there are suicide attempts. The stage when the child starts 'functioning' comes after that stage. If the child was worked with and provided with full support, then they start becoming aware what happened to them was not normal."
NGO field worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina

3.5 DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN DURING MIGRATIONS

Children only occasionally referenced domestic violence in their accounts of violence experienced on the Balkans route. Domestic violence is more easily observable in reception centres than in other settings, and it is noticed if parents shout at their children, curse or humiliate them. Sometimes the children explain these situations as dissatisfaction with married life or alcoholism. Some children know the police intervenes in these situations.

Children only occasionally referenced domestic violence in their accounts of violence.

"Since they could not fight each other, they would release all that anger on their children, abuse them and we were so sorry."
Abdurahman, boy, 17

"...that drunkard beats his family."
Haris, boy, 17

"I saw him shouting at the children. He hit his son once and the police came."
Liyan, girl, 13

Children gave accounts of girls being forbidden to leave their room in a reception centre, and accounts of girls being punished with physical violence and isolation for romantic relationships that were not approved by their parents, as illustrated by this example from the Moria centre in Greece:

"A girl and a boy, they fell in love, and the boy wanted to come to the family and he bought a ring for the girl. But she was inside the container for two weeks, nobody saw her, and when she came out her face was swollen. Someone had beaten her brutally. Because of the wounds she had all over the face, she wore glasses and the mask and hijab."
Naza, girl, 19

During focus groups with professionals, there was much more discussion on the issue of violence against children who are travelling with families. According to them, the most striking is 'pretend families' who say they are a family during registration, but are in fact smugglers or third persons travelling with children. Passively recording migrants' statements without a proper procedure to identify unaccompanied children creates favourable conditions for various abuses and violation of children's rights. Professionals said that they often recognise that children do not belong to 'families' with exclusively male members ('male-headed families'), but separating and protecting these children is a huge challenge.

'Pretend families' say they are a family during registration, but are, in fact, smugglers or third persons travelling with children.

"It cannot be proved if they are indeed a family or if they are in fact smugglers travelling with them."
NGO field worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Professionals who work with children recognise that child neglect is widespread in families.

Professionals who work with children on the Balkans route also recognise that child neglect is widespread in families. It is a challenge for field workers to react to this in the context of families who are in transit, due to the migrants' unregulated legal status, lack of resources, and the prevailing viewpoint that the families will quickly leave the country. Interventions are often considered futile and a failure in advance.

"It is observed in such a way that we do not have the resources and mechanisms. How can we dislocate the child from the family when they are not our citizens; should we separate them if they want to continue the journey?"
NGO field worker, Serbia

Parents exposed to heightened stress levels can be overcome with feelings of helplessness and depression, which increases the risk of violent parenting practices and neglect.

Circumstances of extreme poverty, uncertainty and prolonged exposure to adversity, diminish parental competencies, which increases the risk that parents on the move will neglect their children's physical, health-related, educational and emotional needs, and fail to ensure their safety. It is well known that continuous exposure to stress leads parents into a situation where they are unable to overcome it with their internal coping skills and available resources. The circumstances of migration produce a breeding ground for heightened parenting stress,[66] which increases tensions, changes the parents' relationships and disrupts the family dynamics.

Parents exposed to heightened stress levels can be overcome with feelings of helplessness and depression, which increases the risk of violent parenting practices[67] and neglect as a passive stance towards the child's state and needs.[68] According to the interviews with children, when faced with a number of risks and dangers on the migrant journey, parents constantly question themselves and weigh decisions that are in the best interest of their children (since they started the journey to provide a better and safer future for the children). They feel guilt and shame, because they are unable to provide their children with better care and protection. The challenges they are faced with often overcome their resources, and help and support are not sufficiently available.[69]

3.6 CHILD MARRIAGE

The girls emphasised that uncertainties during the migration intensify practice of child marriage.

None of the migrating boys that were interviewed for this study spoke about child marriage. Three of the 10 interviewed girls said they had married at the age of 16. The girls emphasised that, in addition to the customs related to child marriage, war and unfavourable socio-political and economic circumstances encourage and intensify this practice. Girls are not able to continue their education after the age of 14 or15 and war, political instability and violence in their country encourage families to find husbands for the girls as soon as possible.

"We are girls whose lives are limited. Our community does not allow us many things. After ninth grade, we don't have the right to go to school anymore. Then you turn 16, suitors come and go... And then you sit at home doing nothing. You do not have the right to work, you do not have the right to educate yourself, you do not have the right to make friends or socialise, and the only logical thing is to get married, pick one of those who offer marriage."
Sarina, girl, 19

[66] McKenry, P. C., Price, S. J. (2005) Families & change: Coping with stressful events and transitions SAGE.

[67] Rodriguez, C. M. (2010) 'Parent–child aggression: Association with child abuse potential and parenting styles' Violence and Victims, 25(6), 728–741.

[68] Berzenski, S. P. R. Bennett, D. S. Marini, V. A., Sullivan, M. W. & Lewis M. (2013) 'The Role of Parental Distress in Moderating the Influence of Child Neglect on Maladjustment' Journal of Child and Family Studies, 23, 1325-1336. DOI 10.1007/s10826-013-9791-5

[69] Ristić, T. and Besedić, J. (2017) Parenting on the move: Testimonies of refugee parents in Serbia Save the Children, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/parenting_on_the_move_bmdh.pdf

Several girls from Afghanistan mentioned barriers to education in their home country as a reason to get married, and said that family members were concerned about their safety and finding a 'caring husband' was considered the safest option for girls.

"The situation is not good for children in Afghanistan, they just want us to marry as soon as possible... Usually, someone from the family, like an uncle, they force us to get married, because they feel that the conditions are worst for girls, so it is better to marry as soon as possible. They are scared in their hearts; they are not comfortable with sending us to school. It's better for us to marry. If you get a good husband, that's very good."
Zehra, girl, 16

Interviewed girls mentioned that migration can precipitate early marriage, since the family is trying to provide security for the girls in a way that is accessible to them. There were forced marriages as well, when older wealthier men, who already have several wives, marry girls from poorer families with compensation, or come for them with threats ("he comes and says, 'if you do not give me your daughter, I will kill her and you as well'").

Professionals who took part in the focus groups, especially those attended by women, insisted that violence is often hidden behind cultural practices and justified using cultural norms. Hence, girls who get married at 13 or 14 years old already have children of their own at the age of 15 or 16, so the system of protection tends to view them as mothers and women, rather than as children.

"It appears overlooked that these girls are still children. And generally speaking, the situation where she is married at the age of 15, 16 and living with this 40 to 50-year-old man is tolerated."
NGO field worker, Serbia

Instances of forced marriages with close relatives were also recorded, as was the fact that girls were unaware of where they could turn for assistance in this situation while travelling the Balkans route. Additionally, it was highlighted in focus group discussions that early marriages threaten both girls and boys. There is a dominant belief that early marriages are a very complex problem for the protection system, and that determining the best interest of the child is very difficult. When assessing the best interest of the child, other options and resources available to the child outside of the forced marriage need to be determined, but it seems these are limited or the system does not provide for these sufficiently.

When assessing the best interest of the child, other options and resources available to the child outside of the forced marriage need to be determined, but it seems these are limited or the system does not provide for these sufficiently.

Earlier studies point to different types of mimicry and concealment, including pretending to be married, that unaccompanied girls use to remain invisible, both in groups they travel with, and in the eyes of authorities and those trying to assist them. [70]

3.7 CHILD LABOUR

"There are many children who work and there are many children who start this journey with no money and make money themselves, so they can pay the smugglers."
Omid, boy, 17

Under the Convention of the Rights of the Child, protecting children from violence includes protection from exploitation of child labour.[71] The International Labour Organization provided a basis for understanding the concept of child labour in its Minimum Age Convention No 138 [72] and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No 182.[73] Generally speaking, economic activities that do not harm the child's health and wellbeing are considered favourable for the children's development and welfare. This implies

[70] Insight into available segregated data on children in migrations on the Balkans route has shown that there are far fewer girls registered in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina than in Greece. See more in Jovanović, K., Besedić, J. (2020) Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Western Balkans Route

[71] Article 19.

[72] International Labour Organization (1973).

[73] International Labour Organization (1999).

that children work on jobs that are suitable for their age, which are safe for the children and in which they can make appropriate earnings. Minimum age limits for dignified child labour were set out (in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina it is 15,[74] but it is 14 in numerous developing countries), and criteria to determine inappropriate child labour engagements were defined.

In contrast to dignified child labour, the International Labour Organization defines hazardous child labour as "work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children." The worst forms of child labour include slavery or practices similar to slavery, involving children in prostitution and pornography, child exploitation in perpetrating crimes (such as the production and trafficking of narcotics) and hazardous child labour.[75]

Every child who participated in this study mentioned children working on the route ('I saw more children working than not working'). Most children shared their own experiences of working during their journey, and they all described experiences of other children such as their friends, brothers or sisters, or other experiences of child labour that they had heard about or seen.

Every child who participated in this study mentioned children working on the route, mostly in Iran, Pakistan, Türkiye and Greece. The work they do differs from one country to the other, and according to the child's age.

On the route, children mostly work in Iran, Pakistan, Türkiye and Greece. The work they do differs from one country to the other, and according to the child's age. In Türkiye, children mostly work in garment factories, shops, markets, and also in waste collection. Several children pointed out they saw some migrant children begging in Türkiye. In Greece, children mostly work on fruit and olive plantations, and much less frequently in the tourism industry (and only if they speak English). In Pakistan and Iran, children worked in construction. Interviewed children said that waste picking was an option in all the countries along the route ('it is dirty work, but the money is good').

Children also highlighted some gender differences: girls mostly do the 'easier' work, such as fruit picking, garden work, or working in tailor shops or the garment industry, especially in Türkiye and Greece.

Boys travelling alone or with families emphasised how they worked in their countries of origin as well on the migration route.

Boys travelling alone or with families emphasised how they worked in their countries of origin as well on the migration route. They said that this was expected behaviour of children in their countries because they have to help the family, especially the firstborns or older children in situations of poverty, or where there is illness or death of a parent.

"I worked (in Afghanistan) of my own will, but I was forced to do it because of the situation in our family and we had to work."
Nurullah, boy, 14

"In the morning I am at school, in the afternoon I go and work to help the family... When you're the eldest kid, you have to do it."
Harun, boy, 17

"They are all children without fathers, or they have to feed their mothers."
Amir, boy, 14

Working conditions are often hard and unfair to children. Nearly all children spoke about being paid less than adults.

Working conditions are often hard and unfair to children. Nearly all children spoke about being paid less than adults.

"If the daily wage is 50 Euros, the employer will give you only 15 Euros."
Jan, boy, 17

[74] Pursuant to the Employment Act, Official gazette of the Republic of Serbia No. 24/05, 61/05, 54/09, 32/13, 75/14, 13/17 - CC ruling, 113/17 i 95/18 - authentic interpretation, Article 24; as well as standing labour legislation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e. the Labour Law, Official Gazette of Federation BH No. 26/2016, 89/2018, 23/2020 - CC ruling, 49/2021 - oth. law and 103/2021 - oth. law, Article 20, and the Labour Law, Official Gazette of the Republic of Srpska No. 1/2016, 66/2018 and 91/2021 - Republic of Srpska Constitutional Court ruling No: U-66/20 as of 29 September 2021 and 119/2021, Article 26.

[75] International Labour Organization (1999).

According to the children's accounts, they were mostly paid on a daily basis at a rate that amounted to between 2 and 3 Euros per hour. They would often work in high temperatures for up to 8 hours, or even up to 14 hours in some cases. According to the children's estimate, they completed a high volume of work. They believe their employers gave them a lot of work because they knew that they needed the job and that they did not have legal status in their country, so could not complain about the working conditions. Moreover, some children claimed that working conditions would worsen over time, because the requirements and difficulty of the work required from both children and adults would increase.

Children claimed that working conditions would worsen over time, because the requirements and difficulty of the work required from both children and adults would increase.

"Go wherever you like, complain, you will get nowhere with it."
Omid, boy, 17

"They abuse it in terms that one person does the work of four."
Ahmad, boy, 16

Child labour exploitation, especially in Türkiye ('slave-labour, inhumane conditions') was also identified by professionals in focus groups. According to field worker's accounts, very young children (from 11-12 years old) work in factories in 14-hour shifts with small and inadequate compensation and in extremely dangerous conditions (including dangerous machines and chemicals), impacting their psycho-physical health. Some children said that pay from their employers was late and irregular.

"I worked for one man [for] eight months and he didn't pay me regularly. I would get my salary four months late."
Omid, boy, 17

At the same time, a number of interviewed children shared their experiences that on some jobs, their 'bosses' would not pay them for the work they did, especially when they wanted to quit working to continue the journey. In these cases, aside from losing their earnings, some children were verbally attacked and abused, others were even beaten.

"One day, when I finished my work, I asked the boss to give me my money and then the boss shouted at me and told me not to come tomorrow."
Akbar, boy, 16

According to the children, it is difficult to obtain the documents that are required for employment in Greece, so they worked in places that were hidden from the labour inspectorate, mostly in individual family households. Employment seems to be more easily obtained in Türkiye, where children say that fewer checks are made.

"In Greece, it is very, very hard for children. You have a problem with the government, you can't get the papers, so the children are working on the farms, to pick oranges from the trees, and they are sleeping in the jungles over the night."
Arham, boy, 17

Children find work in several ways, most often through their compatriots who have been in a country for some time already and have found work. According to children, there are 'specialised' (but informal) job-finding intermediaries from the migrant community.

There are 'specialised' (but informal) job-finding intermediaries from the migrant community.

"You never go in blindfolded. Every town has its person, you call that person and tell him, 'I am here, come get me, I need this, I need that,' and then they connect you with the chain."
Hassan, boy, 15

Children also find work on the route through offers of work from the local population. This is typical for temporary jobs on plantations and farms in Greece, especially for fruit and olive picking. Several children pointed out a certain square in Istanbul ('labour chok') where job seekers congregate, waiting for someone to hire them.

In terms of their perception of work, most of the interviewed children already had work experience in their country of origin. They always underlined that they worked voluntarily and described an obligation to help their family, or said they needed to earn mon-

ey to continue their journey. Multiple children stated that their parents or cousins tried to talk them out of working at a young age. However, the duty they feel to help their families sometimes forces them to refuse obedience and ignore warnings from family who are trying to protect them from inadequate and excessive work. Many children also expect that in the future, they will be in a situation to earn to help their parents, brothers I sisters, who remain in their homeland.

"I wanted to help them. We needed the money... Not for myself but for the family, they are my blood, I have to work for them."
Harun, boy, 17

"I told my cousin that I also wanted to work and he said, 'no, you are too little, just stay at home.'"
Zain, boy, 14

"Once I even did hard construction labour and hid it from my parents. My parents wouldn't let me work because I was too little."
Harun, boy, 17

Most of the children said that they were proud when they earned money. But feelings of responsibility and survival instinct led some children to overstep some norms of behaviour and do jobs they believed to be improper or 'haram,'[76] such as working in a shop that sold alcohol ("I even did some things I was not proud of," Ehsan, boy, 17).

Most of the children said that they were proud when they earned money.

The most important reason why children work on their journey seems to be the need to make money to continue the journey to their desired destination country. They claim that they often spend available funds on the road, or that their parents only had funds for the journey up to a certain point. Also, where children were kidnapped, some families went into debt to pay their ransom. Extended stays in some countries (especially in Türkiye and Greece) and a lack of support for migrants in terms of accommodation, nourishment and other assistance, sometimes forced all family members to work to continue their journey.

"We were in Greece for a year and a half without a house, with no water, no electricity, no resources at all. We did not have any documents. Me, my brother who is younger, even the youngest one who's 11 years old, we went picking fruit from morning to evening - it's manual labour, you know - and we would get 20 Euros for it."
Gul, girl, 19

"Living is really expensive in Türkiye and you have to work to remain fed, not die of starvation."
Zehra, girl, 16

In terms of forced labour, interviewed children mostly said they knew of other children who were forced to work in their country of origin or on the journey. They mostly spoke of their own working experiences with pride, since they believed they had fulfilled their duty to family in this way. At the same time, they understand that poverty in the family created this necessity, and they differentiate between parents who take care that their child's work is not excessive or dangerous, from those who do not acknowledge their child's developmental needs.

"His family sent him by force to go out and do a much harder job than mine. And he was always somehow anxious because he was forced to do it."
Hassan, boy, 15

Another aspect of child labour that emerged in discussions among professionals, relates to the child's relationship with their family and their family's expectations. According to the professionals, the work some migrant children do in their home countries often exceeds their capacities and may be considered exploitative. Leaving their country of origin is frequently their family's decision. They do not have the means for living and hope that if their child leaves the country, they will be able to financially support the family one day. Unaccompanied migrant children with this background are especially vulnerable, and professionals call them 'children on a mission.' Often,

[76] Haram is an Arabic word that means forbidden or banned actions or behaviour.

they do not have any control in terms of when they cross borders or where will be their destination country, as their actions are guided by parents.

"There were children who were one step away from relocation, mostly to Sweden, who would leave the programme to continue their journey irregularly. Parents, fathers, would rarely agree, because they say it is important the child starts working as soon as possible to be able to send money back to the country of origin, and that would not be possible in Sweden."
NGO field worker, Serbia

According to children's accounts, finding a job is not easy in every country on the route. In Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they stay longer in front of the closed borders of Hungary and Croatia, 'there is no work to be found.' Simultaneously, child labour is limited by regulations and it is complicated to get a permit for dignified work for children, even if they are older than 15 and could work according to local regulations.

"Nobody will ask you for work (in Bosnia). Also, you don't have the right to work here."
Mahdi, boy, 17

The inability to obtain legal earnings opens avenues for further abuse of children who become 'stuck' in the Balkans. Several boys shared their experiences (both personal and vicarious) of children who were forced to help to smuggle people across borders to earn money. Some children are recruited to join smugglers while others offer their help, follow smugglers several times to learn the job, and then start smuggling people themselves, seemingly postponing or abandoning their journey to Western and Northern Europe.

"They go with a smuggler for a few times, and later, they become smugglers themselves... Then they forget about Europe, they take people and cross the borders."
Arham, boy, 17

The inability to obtain legal earnings opens avenues for further abuse of children who become 'stuck'. Some children are recruited to join smugglers or drug dealers.

Aside from smuggling as the worst form of child labour, some children mentioned that smugglers and drug dealers recruit boys on the route because they know they need the money, and children receive more lenient criminal treatment in Europe. According to the children's accounts, this form of exploitation of children frequently happens in Athens, Greece.

"They are selling drugs, and whatever comes. Usually, mafia is using children to sell, because they know that, if the police would catch them, the maximum they would get is 10, 15 days, and then they would be released."
Hanan, boy, 17

3.8 DISCRIMINATION AS AN UNDERLYING VULNERABILITY

"I wish my country was a safe country, that there was no war, that there were none of these conflicts and that I did not become a migrant."
- Omid, boy, 17

Discrimination – unequal or different treatment of a person or a group due to a certain characteristic they possess – is a constant experience for children in migration. It follows them along the journey and permeates various aspects of their lives. Studies into the discrimination experienced by refugee children in various countries indicate that they are frequently referred to as black (as an insult), enemies, sick, filthy, foreign, and so on.[77,78] At school, children avoid sitting next to them and they are called names during

[77] George, M. A., Bassani, C., & Armstrong, R. W. (2012). Influence of perceived racial discrimination on health and behaviour of immigrant children in British Columbia. International Journal of Population Research Vol 2012, pp. 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1155/2012/274963; Hamelin Brabant, L., Lapierre, S., Damant, D., Dubé-Quenum, M., Lessard, G., Fournier, C. (2016) 'Immigrant Children: Their Experience of Violence at School and Community in Host Country' Children & Society 30(3), 241-251. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12131.

[78] Hamelin Brabant, L., Lapierre, S., Damant, D., Dubé-Quenum, M., Lessard, G., Fournier, C. (2016) 'Immigrant Children: Their Experience of Violence at School and Community in Host

break times. At work, children are discriminated against when compared to the local population, with hard labour, long hours for low pay, and irregular payment. They also face discrimination in the community, from neighbours and from healthcare institutions, among others.[79]

Experiencing discrimination during childhood can severely affect a child's educational achievement and their general development and wellbeing.[80]

The children that were interviewed for this study were aware that they were not welcome in host countries, that they were not safe, that they met people 'who do not like foreigners', and that their access to services accessible to others was sometimes limited because 'refugees cannot do it here' (e.g., shop, ride the bus, get a haircut, order food in a restaurant).

The children that were interviewed for this study were aware that they were not welcome and safe in host countries.

According to their statements, some migrant children encountered discrimination and persecution in their country of origin as well, which was their main reason for leaving. Children from the Hazara ethnic group stated that they were persecuted in Afghanistan and Pakistan as an ethnic and religious minority (Shia), and children from Afghanistan spoke about how they were 'poorly treated and humiliated' as Afghans in Iran.

"Their behaviour towards the Afghans is like they are dirty or inferior."
Sultana, girl, 16

The children were aware that they are different by the language they speak. They are mocked in languages that they do not understand, but they know they are being mocked.

"In Türkiye, we didn't understand the language of the Kurdish people, and they cursed us because we speak Farsi or Pashto. They disrespected us."
Itaf, boy, 16

According to statements from several interviewed children, aside from their nationality, religious differences are the main cause of discrimination, disagreements and even conflicts (for example, among South and West Asian Muslims).

Children also experience ethnic and religious disrespect, verbal abuse and humiliation, during pushbacks at borders.

Their already disrupted education becomes additionally stressful to migrant children if their peers and teachers do not accept them at school:

"In Greece, I tried to go to school. However, the Greek children never accepted us, we could feel the difference and that we were not wanted... Nobody paid any attention to you, nobody talked to you, you couldn't understand a thing. The teacher taught in Greek, even if she knew English, she was not trying at all. You'd just go there."
Zehra, girl, 16

Children also experience ethnic and religious disrespect, verbal abuse and humiliation, during pushbacks at borders.

"When we went to cross the border between Bosnia and Croatia, police said very hard words to us, 'you Afghans are dirty people and you don't have the right to enter into the European Union'."
Mehdia, girl, 13

Country' Children & Society 30(3), 241-251. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12131.

[79] Selcuk, D. B. and Volkan, O. (2019) 'Syrian Refugees Children in Türkiye. Why and how are they Discriminated Against and Ostracized?' Child Indicators Research 12, 1989-2011. doi:10.1007/s12187-019-9622-3

[80] Killen, M. Rutland, A. and Yip, T. (2016) Equity and Justice in Developmental Science: Discrimination, Social Exclusion, and Intergroup Attitudes Child development, 87 (5), 1317-1336

4. HARDSHIPS ON THE ROUTE

"One [route] is called 'Mountain Problem'... And as I went, I saw two dead people. That's true, no wonder this route is called 'Mountain Problem'."
Basit, boy, 16

According to the focus group participants, children travel in stages. Composition of the groups in which children travel is unstable, as it is smugglers who decide who passes the border at which time, who will be in which car and in which group.
Around two-thirds of the interviewed children stated that they had reached the Balkans by a route that started in Afghanistan and/or Pakistan, and passed through Iran, Türkiye, and Greece. From there, they passed through either North Macedonia or Bulgaria, and then through Serbia to reach Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some children who had reached Bosnia and Herzegovina shortly prior to their interview, mostly originating from Afghanistan, stated that after Greece, they had come through Albania and Montenegro as transit countries on their route to their current location. Only a few children (4) reported they arrived in Bosnia and Herzegovina by plane from Jordan or Iran, or that they used air transport from Dubai or Cyprus before entering the Balkans route.

Children travel in stages, and it is smugglers who decide who passes the border at which time.

"I came from Pakistan to Iran, from Iran to Türkiye, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia. The same way everyone did."
Arsalan, boy, 15

"I spent a month in Iran; a month in Türkiye; on the island of Lesbos in Greece I spent about two months, and I travelled another two months from Greece to here. From Greece, I went to Macedonia; from Macedonia to Montenegro; from Montenegro to Bosnia."
Ali, boy, 16

Specific longer stays were noted in Türkiye and Greece, both in reception centres and outside of them, where testimonies note several cases of child labour and economic exploitation of children (see section 3.8 for more details).

In addition to the physical strain of their journey, and the uncertainty and fear that they experience, children described dangerous experiences such as having to travel in overloaded cars, sleep in the woods where they are at risk from wild animal attacks, or stay in squats where they are threatened with abuse. During some sections of their journeys, children have to cross large bodies of water in inadequate and crowded vessels, facing a real danger of drowning.

As they travel, children are often subjected to procedures conducted by authorities that treat them as adults, and force them to grow up before their time. They rarely have the opportunity to attend school or to receive formal, organised education; and they have few chances to develop friendships with their peers, and even fewer to maintain such friendships.

4.1 GROWING UP ON THE ROAD

For many interviewed children, uncertainty, the insecure conditions of travelling and frequent changes in their environment were the key context of their childhood, within which their physical, emotional and social development took place:

"When I was 4 years old, I came from Afghanistan to Iran. So, five years in Iran, then two months in Türkiye, then two and a half years in Greece."
Arsalan, boy, 15

As they travel, children sometimes lose track of time. They rarely have the opportunity to attend school or to receive formal, organised education; and they have few chances to develop friendships with their peers, and even fewer to maintain such friendships.

Children are often forced to use risky and life-threatening means of transport due to the lack of a better choice. Thus, during several interviews, the children mentioned hiding in 'special places' in the train passing the Greece – North Macedonia border and riding in overcrowded cars:

"They put five persons in the trunk of the cars... they cannot even get enough oxygen. They also put 15-20 people together in those vehicles. A lot of accidents are happening and people get injured."
Subhan, boy, 16

They also state that 'a lot of people' travel by hiding under the chassis of large freight trucks as they pass borders from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Slovenia via Croatia, mostly without the truck driver's knowledge:

"... if the scanner catches you, you're done, you get returned; if it doesn't catch you, you travel on to Slovenia, Italy, and then you arrive..."
Hasnain, boy, 15

On their journey, adolescents reach sexual maturity. Some fall in love, although children mentioned these peers, so-called 'love birds', in only a few interviews. This was mentioned especially in family centres where people stay longer. These 'love birds' sometimes 'cause trouble' for their families, especially if they are not of the same ethnicity. This was not a topic that was discussed at length with children during this research, but it should be certainly noted that, not only do we know very little about the general physical, emotional and social development of children on the road, but the process of individuation and sexual development of migrating adolescents also remains quite unknown.

On the road, children are often subjected to procedures conducted by authorities that treat them as adults, and force them to grow up before their time. Both children and the professionals that were interviewed emphasised that unaccompanied children are treated the same way as adults, especially when crossing borders.

Age assessments, which are carried out to determine migrant status and enable migrant children, especially unaccompanied and separated children, to exercise their right to asylum,[81] can sometimes include invasive methods that can cause the child physical and psychological harm.

Unaccompanied children are treated the same way as adults, especially when crossing borders.

Lack of procedures, or procedures that are not adapted to the age and maturity of the child, together with asylum-seeking policies in destination countries, leads to situations where children hide their under-age status so that they will not be registered in countries that they are transiting, or so that they can continue their journey as soon as possible. Several interviewed children reported that there were occasions when they had declared themselves as adults, or refused to go to reception centres or other accommodation for children, because they did not want to be separated from the group that they were travelling with, or because the location of the children's accommodation would have slowed their journey due to its distance from the border or lack of access to smugglers. Three of the interviewed children stated that they had stayed in reception centres for single adults, either irregularly or on the basis of their false statements.

"They said, if you want, we can take you to a camp. But, when I found out where the camp was [a long distance from the border], I realised that this was not worth it, in any way.
Hassan, boy, 15

4.2 FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY ON THE ROUTE

There are many challenges along the Balkans migration route towards Western Europe and violence, whether suffered, witnessed or threatened, features in the experience of every child that was interviewed. However, the most difficult aspects of travelling that children describe are the physical strain, and the fear and uncertainty. Violence is mostly seen as an 'accompanying', or even expected part of the journey.

"Each part of the road is difficult."
Akbar, boy, 16

[81] Žegarac, N., Perišić, N., Isakov, B. A., Lončarević, K., Marković, V. (2021) Zaštita dece u migracijama Belgrade: University of Belgrade Faculty of Political Science, pp. 380.

Some children describe that the hardest part is crossing the border, as it comes with most anxiety and fear. In their words, one has to be prepared to obey the smugglers flawlessly, to run, to hide from the border police, to be separated from one's family or group, and to cross swift and cold rivers (and according to interviews, many children do not seem to have developed swimming skills, or are afraid of water). Physical strain and extreme fatigue and exhaustion are described as the hardest aspects, as there are no opportunities to rest and recover. Those who get tired are sometimes left behind, with no assistance or resources to continue their journey or survive. The majority of children noted that the physical strain is particularly hard on younger children.

"A child, simply, cannot go on... Mountains, up, down... After 15 days, you look at your feet, you no longer recognise yourself. That's how exhausted you are."
Abdurahman, boy, 17

"Sometimes we are hungry, sometimes we are thirsty. We have to sleep in the jungle. During summer time, there are mosquitos who bite and leave holes everywhere."
Mehdia, girl, 13

Besides physical strain and hunger, girls travelling with their families (parents, husbands or other family members) talked about the difficulties related to menstrual pain and hygiene on the road.

When children are on the road, it is difficult when they are 'pushed back' from the border after extreme effort and several days spent in the 'jungle', with no food or water, and inadequate footwear and clothes. Children also stated that the border crossing between Iran and Türkiye (in the Maku region) is particularly difficult, that forests and mountains in Bosnia and Herzegovina are hard to cross, and that the rivers between Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia are dangerous. The borders between Türkiye and Greece, and between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, arouse the highest level of anxiety among children.

Children describe that the hardest part of the journey is crossing the border, as it comes with most anxiety and fear.

In addition, over the last decade, the EU and its member states have spent hundreds of millions of Euros on technologies for tracking and keeping refugees at bay from their borders,[82] despite the recognised and well-documented failures of the European migration and asylum policy and violations of human rights.[83] Anxiety comes from the fear of pushbacks after extreme strain, and often because of multiple failed attempts to cross the border, as well as fear of violence by the border authorities.

"Whenever someone asks me 'let's go for a game', I immediately feel fear in my heart and also, I feel some kind of stress. During the night, especially. I immediately imagine all of these things: they will catch us, they will beat us, they will take all my belongings from me."
Akbar, boy, 16

[82] The expression 'Fortress Europe' is important for the understanding of this dynamic; it refers to a concept and practice launched by the Schengen Agreement in 1985, which established the freedom of movement between European signatories. This promoted the freedom of movement and mutual trust inside European borders, while at the same time reinforcing external borders through stricter measures and enhanced border control. According to a recent detailed research report, European Union member states and the Schengen zone have built nearly 1,000 km of walls since the 1990s, to prevent migrations of displaced persons to Europe. These physical walls are accompanied by even longer 'maritime walls' (maritime operations patrolling the Mediterranean) as well as 'virtual walls' (border control systems that aim to stop people from entering or even travelling within Europe and control the movement of the population). Benedicto, A. R, Pere, B. (2018) Building walls, fear and securitisation in Europe Centre Delàs d'Estudis per la Pau.

[83] Jünemann, A., Scherer, N. and Fromm, N. (2017) Fortress Europe? Challenges and Failures of Migration and Asylum Policies Springer.

4.3 INADEQUATE SERVICES AND INHUMANE CONDITIONS IN RECEPTION CENTRES

Along the route, services are available to children in reception centres or in detention centres, and very rarely in informal shelters where migrants hide (whether in settlements or outside of settlements, usually in the forest). The standard of services is not the same in all countries along the route and they are often not adapted to children's needs. Sometimes, the fact that children use, or refuse to use, services can lead them into new risks. The interviewed children stated that there are no reception centres in some countries, so people sleep *'in the jungle'*, while in other countries, numerous reception centres for refugees and migrants have been closed.

Children complained about poor, often inhumane, living conditions in many reception centres along the route.

Children complained about poor, often inhumane, living conditions in many reception centres along the route, with cold and dirty rooms; poor hygiene; poor quality food (and not enough of it to meet their nutritional needs, especially for adolescents and older boys); limited freedom of movement; lack of educational and recreational activities (especially for boys considered 'past the age' for mandatory education); and inadequate clothing and footwear available.

"The rooms were really dirty. The container for children - it was very cold over there."
Naza, girl, 19

"There were just two bathrooms and two toilets there. In the morning and in the evening, there was a queue for washrooms... it was a really, really dirty place."
Muhammad, boy, 15

"If I wanted to go out, I would have to talk to my guardian, so that the guardian would talk to the police, send them an e-mail that I wish to go out. And I would get the permit to go out only the next day."
Omid, boy, 17

"When they bring us clothes, they bring either clothes that are too small, or clothes that are too big to wear."
Ali, boy, 16

Government decisions often leave children outside of teh reception centres, and result in services which are not adapted to a child.

Professionals in the focus groups particularly discussed the inadequate services that are available, especially with regard to accommodation. They pointed out two main issues. One was the location of reception centres, which are often remote from urban environments and transport. This is why children avoid being registered and prefer informal accommodation to facilitate their onward journey. The second issue is the general lack of child-only accommodation that is available. Both professionals and children agree that children choose not to register, or register as adults, when child-only accommodation is far from the border crossings. An additional problem lies in long entry procedures (which was further complicated by COVID-19 prevention measures) and other government decisions, which, on occasion, leave children outside of reception centres for days.

"The question is, what is our priority, protection of the child or procedure? We need to consider the child's intentions, whether it is their will or the will of their family, as they sent children to Sjenica in the south, 400km from Belgrade, for a long time – while the children wanted to go north. Therefore, this is not a service that is adapted to the child."
Field worker, Serbia

The COVID-19 pandemic, in the words of professionals in Serbia, contributed to an increase in violence because in most child-only institutions, children were only allowed to leave for two hours per day. Movement restrictions led to increased tensions among children, which sometimes escalated into violent incidents. In addition, they had to spend 14 days in isolation even if they had a negative PCR test, which is why children often chose not to go to safer accommodation.

Professionals stated that the risk of violence was increased in 'mixed' accommodations intended for men travelling alone, unaccompanied children, and sometimes families as well. The challenges of mixed accommodation were specifically reiterated in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a few such centres were operated, often without adequate separation of spaces for children. Registration of unaccompanied children at border reception centres was often quite limited. These circumstances left professionals quite frustrated, as they were unable to help children despite their desire to do so:

"We identified 100 or more children in front of the Miral,[84] but they had not been registered, so we were frustrated because we had the capacity to help, to accommodate (children), but we were not allowed. Our opinion is just not taken into consideration."
Representative of a local centre for social work, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The risk of violence is increased in 'mixed' accommodations intended for men travelling alone, unaccompanied children and families.

[84] Miral Temporary Reception Centre hosted mostly single men in Velika Kladusa Municipality in Una-Sana Canton, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

5. HOW CHILDREN EXPERIENCE AND SURVIVE VIOLENCE

5.1 HOW CHILDREN UNDERSTAND AND NORMALISE VIOLENCE

At the beginning of the interviews, children were asked this open question: *'what's your understanding of violence against children?'* The interviewed children recognised violence as physical and sexual, most commonly, but some children also talked about emotional or psychological violence.

Some of the children who were interviewed understand violence as a result of an imbalance of power, where adults who are aware of the power they have over children (who need protection) use that power to abuse and exploit children.

"When we say 'child', we believe that someone who is above that child should protect them, not abuse them... In fact, people, when they see that someone is weaker, they abuse the power and try to exploit the children."
Harun, boy, 17

Children understand violence as a result of an imbalance of power, where adults, aware of the power they have over children, use that power to abuse and exploit children.

A number of children, especially from Afghanistan, said that violence against children was widely present in their country of origin. Examples included general political violence and conflict, domestic violence, and violence in schools: '

"The Taliban came to our country and occupied it. Violence is being committed against adults and against children, especially girls in Afghanistan, they have no right to go to school. They have to cover up, they have no right to leave their house, they have no rights at all. And there's another thing, forcing girls to get married."
Zehra, girl, 16

"One of our neighbours, he used to beat his children."

Violence is also understood as a violation of peace of mind:

"Children can't just sleep peacefully, and every possible right is taken from them."
Gul, girl, 19

In the accounts given by several children, situations where children were in danger due to physical difficulties during their journey, or lack of water and food, were also interpreted as violence.

Many interviewed children were very open to sharing their experiences of violence on their journey, from the very beginning of their interview:

"Should I speak [about violence] country by country, or should I speak [about violence] the whole way?"
Arham, boy, 17

When asked the general question about violence, around one-third of the respondents declared that they had not experienced violence themselves and had not witnessed violence, but that they had heard from their friends, acquaintances and peers about the various forms of violence on the journey. In interviews, children normalised, justified or sometimes even trivialised a whole series of violent situations that they had personally experienced, witnessed, or heard of.

In interviews, children normalised, justified or sometimes even trivialised a whole series of violent situations that they had personally experienced, witnessed, or heard of.

"I did not see it personally, but I have heard many stories from my friends who had heard about such cases, and I believe them to be true."
Nurullah, boy, 14

Three of the interviewed children talked about the internet, and the YouTube platform in particular, as a source of information about violence against migrant children, as they had watched videos of violent pushbacks, beatings of children at borders, kidnapping situations, and so on.

In terms of their specific experience, children in migration link their statements about violence primarily to the police, and especially to their own personal experiences of pushbacks, followed by smugglers ('agents') and smuggling intermediaries. Their reports of violence in reception centres are much less common, and peer violence was only briefly touched upon by the three youngest boys interviewed. On the other hand, peer violence was quite widely discussed in focus groups with professionals, as the dominant form of abuse among children, together with the experiences of violent pushbacks.

Child labour during the migratory journey was reported by almost all interviewed children. The children see it as valued, normalised and only extremely rarely considered it child exploitation.

Sexual violence was recognised by nearly two out of three interviewed children, who were able to describe incidents that they had somehow witnessed or 'heard of'. Several children quickly closed the door on the topic, claiming that they 'neither saw, nor heard' of sexual violence on the Balkans route. No child involved in the research declared that they had personally been a victim of sexual abuse.

Violence is such a regular and integral part of children's lives that they normalise and internalise it. Normalisation of violence and the failure to recognise it is one of the reasons why it is so seldom reported.

Only the girls talked about child marriages, while domestic violence was least often mentioned. Contrary to that, discrimination – whether experienced in their country of origin or during their journey – featured in the accounts of many children as a comprehensive topic and multidimensional experience.

Normalisation of violence against child migrants dominated as a topic in focus groups as well. According to the statements of professionals, violence is normalised as it occurs quite often. They emphasised that it was a major issue that official stakeholders in the field, as well as children themselves, were insufficiently perceptive of violence and its omnipresence. Violence is such a regular and integral part of children's lives that they normalise and internalise it ('the only question is, who is susceptible to which kind of violence, but everyone is susceptible to violence'; '...violence is so omnipresent and normal, that it is not normal').

Normalisation of violence and the failure to recognise it is one of the reasons why it is so seldom reported. Mistrust in institutions is seen by professionals as the second important reason. Staff in reception centres, facilitators, and teachers – not even all professionals seem to be sufficiently trained to recognise violence; not enough is invested into the development of skills to recognise indicators of violence. A major challenge for professionals is to teach the children and adults in their surroundings what violence is, how to recognise it and who to report it to.

Refugees and migrants, adults and children, recognise collective violence far more readily, especially when police are beating them in groups, pushing them back from the borders. Violence that is directed against individuals is more difficult to recognise, and they are less open to talking about it.

As the most difficult challenge, professionals emphasised normalisation of certain forms of violence by perceiving them as rooted in harmful, but widely spread practices.

Refugees and migrants, adults and children, recognise collective violence far more readily, especially when police are beating them in groups, pushing them back from the borders. Violence that is directed against individuals is more difficult to recognise, and they are less open to talking about it. Children focus on continuing their journey, both mentally and emotionally, and many of them do not want to start conversations, engage in discussions and revisit experiences of violence they have endured.

There are also various taboos related to violence, especially gender-based violence and sexual violence. Taboos related to sexual violence, particularly against boys, make that type of violence extremely difficult to identify.

"The saddest thing is, they start to normalise the violence. They see it as something normal, something they have to go through to help their families when they reach their desired destination, and they find various excuses for their bad treatment."
Field worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina

"We had a case in camp where an underage boy could not distinguish sexual violence from exploitation. During his work with a psychologist, it was determined that he saw it as the only way of ensuring his survival, of getting money."
NGO field worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina

5.2 HOW DIFFERENT CHILDREN EXPERIENCE VIOLENCE ON THE MIGRANT JOURNEY

"You get a smuggler and when you're changing locations, you have to stay at that smuggler's apartment or accommodation for two days before you head out, and that type of abuse mostly happens during that time. It is mostly against girls travelling with a brother or travelling with a sister, for example."
Gul, girl, 19

Children who were interviewed for this study said that different groups of children and adults faced different risks and types of violence on the route as well as relative advantages. Most of the children emphasised that the journey is most suited to young adults who are healthy and physically strong, and primarily young men because of their physical stamina and their easier tolerance of hunger and long periods of walking on rough and less accessible terrain:

Different groups of children and adults faced different risks and types of violence on the route as well as relative advantages.

"When you're an adult, I think it's easier, because I see adults can go without food for five to six days."
Abdurahman, boy, 16

Single adult men do not have to care for others during their journey and are only responsible for themselves. They are more flexible to adapt to changing conditions on the journey and are focused primarily on crossing the borders. They are, however, the primary victims of physical violence by smugglers and the police, as indicated by various reports from NGOs that are present on borders.[85]

Regardless of whether they were travelling with their families or on their own, all respondents said that the journey is difficult for unaccompanied children as they do not have the physical, emotional and informative support of their parents, brothers and sisters or other relatives during the many unknown and risky situations on the road.

"... It's harder for a child without anyone. Not only that the journey is extremely difficult– but there is also the feeling of loneliness."
Zehra, girl, 16

Numerous respondents believe that unaccompanied children have a harder time compared to children travelling with their families. Examples they mentioned included police using physical violence against unaccompanied children, because there was nobody to protect them, and unaccompanied children being treated as adults, and denied their rights as children, in various procedures. Unaccompanied children often travel with single adults and - according to the children's statements - border police forces usually treat them as adults as well, unless it is obvious that they are children.

"When they understand that the child is around 17 or 18 years old... when they understand the child is unaccompanied, that he is all alone... police create a problem for them and they beat them, brutally."
Muhammad, boy, 15

"They do not look if you're an adult or a minor, they see a man and the police beat him up regardless of if he is a bit younger or older."
Zehra, girl, 16

According to respondents, unaccompanied children apply various strategies to evade violence at the borders. One of those strategies is joining families to cross the border together.

Unaccompanied children apply various strategies to evade violence at the borders. One of those strategies is joining families to cross the border together.

[85] Op. cit. fn. 7.

Journey is much harder for women and girls in puberty than men, mostly because they are considered physically frail, quickly get tired and lack the energy to suffer hunger and cross the borders in difficult conditions.

Nearly all children said that the journey is much harder for women and girls in puberty than men, mostly because they are considered physically frail, quickly get tired and lack the energy to suffer hunger and cross the borders in difficult conditions. Boys and girls mostly said that this is not a journey that girls and women should take without being accompanied by their families or husbands, because it is hard to avoid some form of sexual abuse in these circumstances.

It is rare to see a girl travelling along the route unaccompanied, but several of the interviewed boys mentioned that they had seen African girls travelling on their own. The children said that unaccompanied girls often travelled *'invisibly,'* or joined families with whom they were unrelated to cross the borders. Save the Children came to similar findings in recent studies on girls on the move.[86] This phenomenon is not only connected with girls; widowed women who are travelling alone also usually join families for safety reasons.

The children said that unaccompanied girls often travelled 'invisibly,' or joined families with whom they were unrelated to cross the borders.

According to the respondents, although somewhat more protected, girls travelling accompanied by their fathers or husbands, and younger (prepubescent) girls are also exposed to the risk of sexual violence, mostly by smugglers.

"They're easier to molest, and that is why, sadly, they are more exposed to rape and other forms of abuse."
Amin, boy, 16

"Overall, it is easier for a family because family members stay together, but for girls like me who are without a husband, without family... It's very difficult for us because somebody could sexually abuse us."
Naza, girl, 19

Interviewed children recognised that unaccompanied boys are also exposed to the risk of sexual abuse, also by smugglers. Children travelling with their families are also at risk, although this was mentioned less often.

It was mentioned on several occasions that better treatment awaits girls in Europe, when they arrive in the country that children perceive as their desired destination:

"Europe takes much better care of women and girls than men and boys, it gives women rights."
Amin, boy, 16

Interviewed boys and girls of younger pubescent age, who were travelling with their families, claimed they saw no difference between boys and girls in their family, as during the journey they all face hardships and adversities.

"I faced the same hardships my brothers faced."
Mehdia, girl, 13

"It makes no difference whether I'm a boy or some girl."
Amir, boy, 14

One of the girls claimed that it is harder for boys who are travelling with their families than girls, because they have more responsibilities and carry more luggage, while girls take care of their younger siblings. It can be perceived that responsibilities of the children of both sexes grow with age. Respondents agreed that it is hardest for the youngest children, especially children between 7 and 10 years of age. Several reasons for this were highlighted, including their inability to walk on difficult terrain (such as forests, mountains, rivers) for consecutive days, sometimes in adverse weather (including rain, snow, and very high and low temperatures).

"These groups of 6, 7 or 8-year-old children can't walk very long, and yet they are too heavy to be carried by parents [during the walks]."
Sarina, girl, 19

[86] See Save the Children's Girls on the Move Research Series at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/girls-move-research-series, and specifically Save the Children (2021) Girls on the Move in the Balkans, available at https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/girls_on_the_move_balkan.pdf.

Younger children are not exposed as often to physical violence by the police at the borders, but they are exposed to psychological violence, mostly because they see the physical violence that their parents and older brothers and sisters endure at the borders.

Both respondents travelling with their families and unaccompanied children stated that it is hard for families. Parents have to take care of their children's safety, accommodate and feed them. Families are sometimes forced to take sick children with them when they attempt to cross borders and because there is a lack of adequate nourishment, they may need to give their children unsanitary water and food, which is a health hazard. Children are especially concerned about situations where they get separated from their families, due to lagging behind or losing contact during a border crossing attempt. Children also say that parents often silence their children to avoid tragic outcomes and the smugglers' anger.

"[...] While travelling on a boat in the dark, when the police must not see or hear us, one of the children started crying in the mother's arms. The smuggler took the child from the mother's arms and threw him [her?] overboard to silence the child or to protect himself. The mother started arguing with him, tried to scream, and then the smuggler pushed her overboard as well and nobody knows where they are now. It is a true story nobody knows about."
Sarina, girl, 19

Younger children are not exposed as often to physical violence by the police at the borders, but they are exposed to psychological violence, mostly because they see the physical violence that their parents and older brothers and sisters endure at the borders.

Children noticed the relative vulnerability and strength of refugee and migrant children, because:

"If you're a family, you're very vulnerable, but then again, if you're not in a family, you're also vulnerable, each in his/her own way."
Ahmad, boy, 16

Children and adults with disabilities are only occasionally mentioned as particularly vulnerable. Most respondents had not met any disabled people on the route, and those who had stated that they were 'young and healthy boys and men,' who got hurt or disabled during their journey. Girls have more experience in this regard because they had an opportunity to stay in reception centres, where there were sometimes families with children who had a disability. Their impression was that these people travelled more quickly, mostly using some form of transportation, and that their survival depended on their family.

Finally, many respondents stated that they believe younger children have, or will have, developmental consequences as a result of their difficult childhood, missed opportunities to play and learn, and a lack of feeling protected in their most vulnerable period.

"When a child asks you for chocolate and you tell them they can have it in 10 minutes, that chocolate does not taste the same after 10 minutes, that's not it, the point is lost."
Amin, boy, 16

5.3 TRAUMA: "I JUST AGED 30 YEARS"

The violence that children experience in the context of migration is traumatic and can have a serious impact on their mental health.

Although it is difficult to specify all events that are considered traumatic, due to the fact that individual responses to these events and their psychological consequences are different,[87] there are certain incidents that can be considered traumatic for most people. Traumatic experiences can be divided into collective experiences, - which are common to most people coming from a particular country (for example, events related to war or disasters affecting entire communities) and individual experiences, which happened to one person or several people.[88] Children in migration are exposed to physical, emotional and sexual violence, and in addition there are specific forms of violence related to the context of migration such as detention, pushbacks and specific manifestations of gender-based violence.[89,90]

The events that children are exposed to during migration along the Balkans route are far removed from ordinary childhood and adolescent experiences.

[87] Bjekić, J., Vukčević Marković, M., Todorović, N., Vračević, M. (2020) Mental health of refugees and migrants. Belgrade: Red Cross of Serbia, available at: https://bit.ly/2Y07NWj.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid.

[90] The data collected in 2017 included 41.4% (of a total 564 respondents) refugee and migrant children aged 15 to 17 years-old and showed that among traumatic experiences there are

The children interviewed in this research displayed a number of symptoms associated with prolonged exposure to traumatic events. The events that children are exposed to during migration along the Balkans route are far removed from ordinary childhood and adolescent experiences. Interviewed children were clearly straining their personal capacities to integrate their emotional experiences about survived events due to the threats they have faced to their own lives, physically and psychologically, and threats they have witnessed to other members of their families.

Interviewed children were clearly straining their personal capacities to integrate their emotional experiences about survived events due to the threats they have faced to their own lives, physically and psychologically, and threats they have witnessed to other members of their families.

Every interviewed child experienced a series of traumatic events on their journey along the Balkans route. More than half of the children stated that they personally experienced serious physical violence from the police or smugglers. Other children were present during mostly physical violence against their fellow travellers or family members, while a smaller number of the children *'heard about'* these experiences.

None of the children explicitly stated that they survived sexual abuse; however, a number of interviews featured clear indications that they were in fact victims of sexual violence.[91] One in three children said they witnessed sexual abuse, and most knew other children who were sexually abused on the journey, mostly by smugglers. A number of children heard about other children who experienced such abuses.

Four of the 48 children interviewed stated they were personally victims of kidnapping and deprived of their freedom for ransom and extortion purposes during the journey. Other children stated they knew about such cases but they had not experienced them personally.

Several children mentioned that they saw dead bodies of people who had died of the effort involved with the journey or otherwise perished, while a number of children experienced gunshots in their immediate vicinity, and several children gave accounts of violent deaths of other people. Ransom, extortion, robbery, threats of violence (occasionally using a knife), insults, curses and humiliation, torture, with various forms of discrimination, are all part of the interviewed children's experiences.

Children mentioned that they saw dead bodies of people who had died of the effort involved with the journey or otherwise perished, that they experienced gunshots in their immediate vicinity, and gave accounts of violent deaths of other people. Ransom, extortion, robbery, threats of violence, insults, curses and humiliation, torture, with various forms of discrimination, are all part of the interviewed children's experiences.

Strong and harmful stimuli, physical and psychological vulnerability due to physical and sexual violence, high levels of stress and prolonged fear can overwhelm the capacities of children of all ages and affect their ability to influence their emotions. It is known that extreme intimidating events, especially if repeated, can impact the developing brain by creating distortions in the brain's neurological development so that survival mechanisms become more dominant than learning mechanisms.[92] Such powerful and adverse experiences during early and middle childhood and adolescence are usually associated with long-term mental and physical health difficulties and impaired cognitive, emotional and social functioning. [93]

A number of children in this research displayed worrying symptoms associated with experiencing trauma or identified them in their siblings, especially in younger children and peers. In younger children, these symptoms usually include excessive fear, difficulty falling and staying asleep, somatisation of tension and hypersensitivity through rapid heartbeat, fainting, and so on.

In older children, symptoms of trauma can be divided into several groups. The primary symptom was flashbacks of traumatic memories, accompanied by feelings of excessive fear:

instances of beatings (49.1%) and exposure to frequent or continuous sniper fire (46.6%, see: PIN (2017) Refugees' mental health: 2017 research report Belgrade: Psychosocial Innovation Network, available at: https://bit.ly/3zkJOPq.

[91] For example, during certain parts of the interviews, some children would repeatedly come back to saying how they were 'offered' to take part in sexual activities with adults for protection, better travelling conditions, money, etc.

[92] Atkinson, J. (2013). Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource 21). Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

[93] Cook, A., Spinazzola, J., Ford, J. D., Lanktree, C., Blaustein, M., & Cloitre, M. (2005). Complex trauma in children and adolescents. Psychiatric Annals, 35(5), 390-398.

"Whenever I go outside, I hear a car stops by or is moving slowly, I get scared. I still fear that those people will kill me or do something [bad to me] ... It stayed in my mind."
Hanan, boy, 17

"I have a one-year-old brother and a seven-year-old brother, they are really little... My brother screams the moment he wakes up, every time. The other brother, as soon as he sees something scary, he starts screaming."
Harun, boy, 17

This was followed by increased stimulation and irritability; in other words, hyper-excitability of the autonomous nervous system, which causes excessive tension and sensitivity, concentration impairment, and a constant state of fight or flight readiness. This manifests itself through physical symptoms such as an accelerated heart rate, cold sweat, increased respiration tempo, and increased awareness.

"Whenever we want to go to the game, we feel stressed even two days before [...] [On one occasion] when the police wanted to deport us, my little brother's heart was beating so fast and he was unconscious for a moment while we were in the deporting van, and the police called the ambulance."
Zehra, girl, 16

"Whenever someone asks me to go for the game, I immediately feel the fear inside of my heart and also, I feel a kind of stress and also during the night. I imagine the police catching us, beating us, taking all our belongings from us."
Akbar, boy, 16

Children also feel a deep and implacable sorrow and sense of helplessness.

"When I saw how much the number of dead people actually rose on the border I crossed twice, this hit me so hard psychologically, and I felt so bad that I could not continue my journey for a while."
Ahmad, boy, 16

"Why am I so miserable to be born in Afghanistan, I am literally sick of life? I feel bad for being alive. [...] But it's normal, sometimes a person can just not do anything about it."
Harun, boy, 17

They are also troubled by overall changes in how they understand life, with the loss of their previously developed values, beliefs and world view.

"Wherever we go, someone does us harm. We sort of don't have any emotions any more. We cannot filter this."
Hanan, boy, 17

"Now that I think about it, this journey was one big lesson, now it's much easier for me to make correct decisions. In fact, the journey was good for me, it taught me something... Well, it proved that the family is in fact not by your side and that you simply have to endure all the bad stuff that's happening, you can't trust anybody. I realised you shouldn't trust anybody."
Ahmad, boy, 16

Feelings of hopelessness, disorientation and resignation also dominated many children's statements.

"You see a 16 or 17-year-old kid coming and asking God to take away his life when he becomes depressed (sigh) [...] Every wish I had, and every wish a kid could have, it's all gone, there are no more wishes."
Amin, boy, 16

"I hate trees, I hate the forest, we walked so much, I hate nature. Can you believe that sometimes in the evening, when I go to bed, I look above myself [and think] whether trees or a roof are above me?"
Gul, girl, 19

As a result of experiencing adverse experiences, younger children display excessive fear, difficulty falling and staying asleep, rapid heartbeat, fainting, while older children have flashbacks of traumatic memories, excessive tension and sensitivity and concentration impairment.

Children feel a deep and implacable sorrow and sense of helplessness, reporting harmful coping strategies, including alcohol and drug abuse, self-harm and suicidality.

"Just in these six years, so many people arrived, so many people left. I see now that things are not getting better, but are getting worse day by day... I'm tired of everything already, I'm tired of war, I'm tired of the fight, of everything [...] I can't bear all of this now."
Makbul, boy, 16

Several respondents reported harmful coping strategies, including alcohol and drug abuse, self-harm and suicidality.

"There were children who harmed themselves, they would take razor blades and cut themselves. There were even cases I heard of, where children threw themselves off bridges because of the despair and misery, because of the pitiful way of life."
Amin, boy, 16

According to the accounts of the children, the only professional mental health support that is available seems to be limited to prescribing psychopharmaceuticals:
"Half of the camp population is taking tranquilisers."
Harun, boy, 17

5.4 CHILDREN'S HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS: "EVERY CHILD WHO COMES HERE HAS A WISH"

The children who took part in this study started their journey to Western Europe from countries that were faced with economic and political instability, war, high levels of violence, widespread human rights violations, and uncertain future prospects. On their journey, many children went to extraordinary lengths to overcome difficulties and survive the journey, and displayed tremendous resourcefulness and resolve.

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The goals they set for themselves, or that their families set for them, inspired and empowered them to persevere in spite of the many expected and unexpected adversities that arose during their journey. Their ultimate goal was the 'future and better living.' They wanted a better life than the one they had in the countries that they left behind, and definitely a better life than they experienced on their journey. Better living implies possibilities, not only in terms of survival but also in terms of progress. A number of children mentioned education as their aspiration and intent, as well as opportunities for self-actualisation, through dignified living and working.

"A person can make their future over there."
Akbar, boy, 16

"If you don't have education, you can't reach anywhere. [On the other hand] if you study, the work will follow, the work will find you."
Makbul, boy, 16

Children had weighed up the dangers and risks of the journey against the benefits, and come to the conclusion that the potential benefits outweighed the risks, including the risks of violence on their journey.

"We have to go somewhere I can get an education. I want to go to Germany [...] I heard nobody cares how you dress and you can be the master of your own destiny there."
Gul, girl, 19

The interviewed children are aware that achieving their aspirations will take initiative, effort, sacrifice, and even luck. Children had weighed up the dangers and risks of the journey against the benefits, and come to the conclusion that the potential benefits outweighed the risks, including the risks of violence on their journey.

Various desired destinations were mentioned in the children's interviews. Most often Germany and Switzerland, followed by Belgium and Italy, but also Norway, Sweden and France. The principal motivating factor for choosing their destination was a wish to re-join families, relatives or sometimes friends, who were already living there and were expected to support them during their adaptation to a new way of life. This

sometimes results in the development of a 'great agenda,' whereby a child wants to achieve success in their new country to help family members who stayed behind in their home country:

"I have an uncle there; I will study and also bring my mother and father later."
Itaf, boy, 16

According to the children, certain benefits that specific countries offer to certain ethnicities, are also important. The beneficial treatment of children and women in some European countries is something that all interviewed girls and several boys spoke about.

The beneficial treatment of children and women in Europe is something that all interviewed girls spoke about.

"What I heard was that they help, send you to school, encourage you to do sports you want to do, make you learn the language, and care in general."
Amin, boy, 16

"I have heard from my friends that in Germany they care more, they really care about children. Over there, children can go to schools, they can continue their education, they are free."
Sultana, girl, 16

Several children stated they did not have a fixed destination in mind but that they would like to be 'somewhere in Europe', or they had several countries in mind, or they were just looking for a place where things were 'better.' Some children stated that they had given up their previously planned destination and they just wanted to 'survive' and make it to the next stage in their journey, i.e. successfully cross the border and enter Croatia and Slovenia.

Some children stated that they had given up their previously planned destination and they just wanted to 'survive' and make it to the next stage in their journey.

Children had been informed about the situation in their desired destination countries by parents, relatives and friends, although some sceptically claimed that they did not actually know what was ahead of them, because there was no reliable information about the country they were heading towards.

"We do not ask around for conditions [in the countries where we are headed] so much, because now my only mission is to get there. I don't want to pass judgment until I get there, I won't say anything until I see it."
Abdurahman, boy, 17

Interviewed children mentioned benefits of their journey only occasionally. Several displayed bitterness and disappointment due to the multiple traumatic experiences that had occurred during their journey, and their inability to reach their desired destination in spite of the enormous efforts they had invested. Several children used these difficult experiences to think about themselves as future helpers for children and adults in distress.

"I want also to help people because I have seen the suffering of this journey. I have this experience of the difficulties, the hardships of this journey, so maybe in future I also could join some organisation and help people. You are a kind of motivation for me."
Sultana, girl, 16

Their journey can also be a dream and a legacy.

"It was my mother's dream, now it is my dream also. I want to help poor, ordinary people, common people, not only for myself but for the dream of my mother."
Jan, boy, 17

6. HELP AND SELF-HELP

"On the road, for example in the jungle, how can you call someone to come and to help?"
Mahdi, boy, 17

6.1 CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF AVAILABLE HELP ON THE MOVE

During interviews, children were asked who was helping them on their journey. Most children spontaneously said that no one could help them during their actual travel, which was difficult, arduous and uncertain.

"The road is such that no one can help anyone."
Basit, boy,16

In addition, they were usually not in a position to help others with their journey. They interpreted this as inevitable; the only important thing was to keep going and if someone fell behind or faltered, they could not count on the help of others as resources for providing such help were unavailable. Many found it helpful to rely on faith, which empowered them to continue their journey:

The only important thing was to keep going and if someone fell behind or faltered, they could not count on the help of others as resources for providing such help were unavailable.

"I think no one is helping them, only God."
Amin, boy, 16

Children's experiences on the road have taught them not to seek help from others and not to believe that an adult could help them, with adults mainly perceived as a threat. This is particularly pronounced in unaccompanied children, but it was also seen in other children who took part in the study. Those who travel with families rely primarily on the protection of their parents and older relatives, but generally perceive other adults as a threat. People in positions of power, such as smugglers and police officers, are often the perpetrators of violence against children on the route. More than 1 in 4 of the interviewed children specifically pointed out that no one (except God) could help them while they were crossing the borders. During these high stress and high-risk situations, they are left to their own survival skills.

"Even a brother doesn't help his brother during the game. Everyone thinks of themselves more than of helping others."
Amir, boy, 14

"I saw people staying on the road and dying, no one helped them [...] I had to keep going, as that was, in a way, the circle of life."
Nurullah, boy, 14

6.2 ASSISTANCE ON THE BALKANS ROUTE

Smugglers are a source of danger and are often perpetrators of abuse, but they are also a companion during children's journeys. Children are aware that a potential conflict with a smuggler may mean death for the person who is trying to protect the child, so they think no one can help them if the smuggler decides to hurt or abuse them. At the same time, the children tend to view the smugglers as a source of help as well, as they allow them to reach their destination. Smugglers are perceived as 'good' when they don't beat anyone, or in situations when they help families to carry personal belongings and similar.

"They help you cross [borders]."
Hijraj, boy, 17

"He is very nice and he doesn't beat anyone; he is actually good with families."
Itaf, boy, 16

Children are used to the people that they meet on the road being a threat, so they see people as 'good' if they do not abuse them.

It seems that children are used to the people that they meet on the road being a threat, so they see people as 'good' if they do not abuse them.

"Actually, people are okay both in Serbia and Bosnia. They didn't help us but they also didn't torture us."
Arsalan, boy, 15

Similarly, children grade countries that they have travelled through as 'better' or 'worse' depending on whether they experienced good or bad treatment, were provided with assistance or not, were shown kindness or unkindness, or were respected or disrespected by official institutions and the local population.

When children were asked how official institutions help children during their journey, their responses indicated that most often they do not perceive institutions as helpful. They did not recognise efforts that have been made in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to develop and implement standard operating procedures, and build a network of public services and institutions, and international and local humanitarian organisations, to ensure protection of migrant children.

"When a group of refugees appears somewhere, the government and public officials call humanitarian organisations and say, 'the refugees are here, come, help,' and then they come and provide us help; but if they are not there, then there's nobody helping us. I have never seen anyone from a government institution come and say, of their own volition, 'here, I will help you.'".
Abdurah, boy, 17

6.3 MUTUAL ASSISTANCE AND SELF-HELP ON THE ROAD

Children develop strategies of self-help and association for the purposes of mutual assistance during their journey, to empower themselves, overcome adversity and navigate high-stress situations.

A stressful situation is characterised by anxiety, complexity and uncertainty, and strategies that children develop to tackle these situations head on, help them to cope. Coping comes from harnessing your personal cognitive and emotional resources and perceived social support, to develop a plan and undertake certain actions that will help you, more or less constructively, to survive and maintain psychological balance in a problematic situation.[94]

There are two main types of coping strategy: strategies that aim to resolve the problem (confrontation, analysis and planned resolution of the problem, seeking social support) and emotion-directed strategies (attempts to regulate negative emotional reactions through self-control and distancing). In addition, there are avoidant coping strategies, which involve withdrawal or denial.[95] Coping strategies are usually identified as more or less adaptive, or maladaptive (negative coping strategies).[96]

[94] Lazarus, R. S. and Folkman, S. (1984). Stress, appraisal and coping. New York: Springer.

[95] More or less adaptive strategies pertain, for example, to problem analysis, preservation of self-respect, optimism, cooperation, seeking assistance and altruism. On the other hand, maladaptive strategies include denial of emotion, self-accusations, aggression, subservience, withdrawal, active avoidance etc. In short, coping strategies that are problem-focused are seen as adaptive, while those that are emotion- and avoidance-focused are assessed as mostly maladaptive behaviours, linked to long-term adverse mental health outcomes. See: Jackson, Y., Huffhines, L., Stone, K. J., Fleming, K., & Gabrielli, J. (2017). Coping styles in youth exposed to maltreatment: Longitudinal patterns reported by youth in foster care. Child Abuse & Neglect, 70, 65–74

[96] In literature, social support is usually identified as instrumental (concrete), emotional support, support with guidance or information, financial support, provision of care, moral

The main strategy used by the interviewed children is to seek social support (personal interactions or resources) that will help them to face their problem. Seeking social support is a coping method.[97] Children seek and receive social support, first of all, within their primary family group. It is common for older children to look after younger children, lead them by the hand, help them to carry personal items and so on, which can be tough.

Children seek and receive social support, first of all, within their primary family group.

"It's really difficult for me to walk, because I carry my bag and my younger brother's bag, and sometimes my other younger brother's bag too, and I am also still a child (starts to cry)."
Zehra, girl, 16

This type of support is accompanied by emotional support, sharing common narratives and finding meaning in events when one of the family members finds themselves in trouble:

"We will start making jokes, we will talk to each other, somehow emotionally help each other, we will say that it happened for a reason, or that it could have been expected."
Sahil, boy, 16

Families often travel in larger groups on the road. Members of different families then help each other, especially if one of the family members is injured during the journey or no longer able to walk. They also exchange food and water, but to a limited degree and cautiously.

"It depends... There are certain kinds of help that we share, while, for example, you don't give food or water to anyone, because it is natural that you should think [primarily] about yourself and your family."
Zehra, girl, 16

Perception of availability of social support and mutual assistance seems to be both cautious and tactical among the families, as reciprocity is expected, so if one family has helped another, the favour is returned ('so we behave accordingly,' Naza, girl, 19).

Children travelling with families prioritise helping their brothers and sisters, while when it comes to other children, they mostly exchange information, help each other with homework, and so on.

"I can't help someone else, because I already have younger brothers and sisters."
Mehdia, girl, 13

Children emphasise that help is exchanged primarily, within the family, and some children say that true support can only come from that place. At the same time, some children travelling with families recognise that unaccompanied children may sometimes join forces and help each other, as if they were family.

Unaccompanied children may sometimes join forces and help each other, as if they were family.

"I don't have such a hard time as they do, I have my family by my side and they try to ease each other's burden by becoming brothers; they don't have families, fathers, or mothers, or anyone of their own."
Harun, boy, 17

It seems that children who do not travel with their families endeavour to preserve the group they are travelling with, especially if they come from the same place, which is something they perceive as an important comparative advantage.

"I have a lot of friends; they are always with me because we came from the same village. Children who don't know anyone can't protect themselves, especially in a single-man camp."
Arham, boy, 17

support and support to self-respect, as well as preservation of social ties. See: VanMeter, F, Handley, E. D. and Cicchetti, D. (2020). The role of coping strategies in the pathway between child maltreatment and internalizing and externalizing behaviors Child Abuse & Neglect 101 104323

[97] Thompson R. A. (2015) Social support and child protection: Lessons learned and learning, Child Abuse & Neglect 41 19–29.

Alternatively, children join forces with other children and families that they are not related to, for the purposes of mutual help and support. Unaccompanied children stated that they are extremely vulnerable if they remain on their own.

"If I'm sick, and it is a game day and my friends leave, then I have no one. I can't be left alone, then I am very vulnerable."
Hassan, boy, 15

During the journey, in reception centres and when crossing borders, information and personal items are exchanged, and tangible help is provided through exchange of clothes, food, water, carrying bags, helping those falling behind and injured to keep moving, and encouraging those who are faltering. A friend is someone who monitors another person's needs and is capable of giving up essential resources because 'it is natural that we help each other.'

"If we are going for the game and I eat more and he eats less, or the other way around, and one of us runs out of food, we share the food."
Hassan, boy, 15

Interviewed children recognise the importance of support they can provide to others, even when they have no material resources

Interviewed children recognise the importance of support they can provide to others, even when they have no material resources, for example, they can help with encouragement and embrace.

"There's not much we can do, not much that's in our hands. But, for example, we can be there to give someone a hug."
Ali, boy, 16

Field workers who took part in the focus group discussions pointed out that they have insight into the way that refugee and migrant children seek and provide help for each other, so they view their support as secondary; something that comes into play when the network of informal and mutual support gives way.

"I think the first line of support is that which they get in the migrant community that they travel with, and that all of us others are just there as auxiliary means."
NGO field worker, Bosnia and Herzegovina

There's a particularly interesting, but only occasionally mentioned, practice of one child helping another child in trouble without expecting reciprocity, after an assessment of one's own strengths and the overall situation. One interviewed boy described in detail how he had helped another boy who was sexually abused over several nights. He hid the boy with his acquaintances in the reception centre and falsely informed the perpetrators that the boy had gone to attempt a border crossing. The boy explained that he was motivated to do this, because he felt like he was helping his younger brother. At the same time, he assessed that he was unable to confront the perpetrators directly, as they were stronger than him, and he didn't feel ready to safely report the abuse to officials at the reception centre.

"It was actually not a big thing, but of course, it was helpful for him. I couldn't perhaps raise my voice or raise my hands, but in some way, I could help and I did."
Arham, boy, 17

The interviewed children who shared situations in which they helped other children, expressed a feeling of pride, self-efficiency and resourcefulness, and even gratitude for the chance to provide help to others.

The interviewed children who shared situations in which they helped other children, expressed a feeling of pride, self-efficiency and resourcefulness, and even gratitude for the chance to provide help to others.

However, almost half of the interviewed children thought that it was impossible to get help at all, and said that they did not trust other children and people. Some had even experienced people whom they had helped later abandoning or cheating them; thus, caring for others on the route was perceived as an additional burden.

"This journey is not simple for trust. Have you been on this journey? If you were to go on this journey once, you'd see that no one was thinking of you and no I cared about you. A person is only important to himself."
Ahmad, boy, 16

"And, you know what I saw on this journey? Even a brother can't help his brother anymore [...] He can't bear to carry himself, let alone an additional burden."
Nurullah, boy, 14

Providing help to travelling companions can also be dangerous, as those who are 'powerful' – smugglers and their assistants – are willing to use brutal force and are capable of causing harm to any child who opposes them. In several interviews, children shared that they had witnessed physical and sexual violence against other children, but did not dare help them out of fear of retaliation.

Children shared that they had witnessed physical and sexual violence against other children, but did not dare help them out of fear of retaliation.

In addition to seeking and providing support within families and peer groups, and sometimes from the local population, interviewed children also mentioned various self-help strategies. Children described more experiences where they employed self-help than where they sought help from others, and described them in greater detail. This reflects the previously described conviction that assistance cannot be reliably obtained nor provided on the road, so reliance on one's own strength is sometimes the only available strategy.

Children said that sometimes, they would try to distance themselves from the situation, raise their tolerance threshold for hunger, thirst and pain, ('when you're hungry, when you're injured, you have to take it,' Basit, boy, 16), or choose to submit and wait for the storm to pass. Thus, some children listed avoidance strategies, submission, not reacting to provocations, obedience to smugglers and thugs, surrender to police officers and similar, as their coping strategy. Children opt for these strategies when they think there is no other way to protect themselves, as a last resort.

"If someone physically attacks me, I am not going to answer. I will let him do it, let him slap me, let him beat me. I'm not going to do anything, so he will stop by himself.
Omer, boy, 13

Some children occasionally face the impression that they cannot cope with certain situations, that their powerlessness exceeds their capacities and that they cannot find a source of strength.

"And then I catch myself not being able to do anything and that is, simply, the worst part."
Harun, boy, 17

About one-third of the interviewed children described cognitive and behavioural strategies that they use to solve problems. They mentioned self-efficiency assessments, analysis of the situations that put them at risk, and elaboration of exit strategies.

"I think, I can (laugh) save myself."
Ibar, boy, 16

"He is going to take me to the game for free. He offered me twice to have sexual relations with him, but I refused and said that I don't need the money [...] I will change my smuggler."
Hasnain, boy, 15

"When terrible things are happening, I try to move away from that space and that environment. I go as far as I can, then I think about things and see what I will do next."
Nurullah, boy, 14

Analysing difficulties as an integral part of the journey and making sense of negative experiences enables children to develop self-encouragement strategies to overcome difficulties. Focusing on their goal helps children to stay and survive on their journey, which keeps getting harder with each stage.

Focusing on their goal helps children to stay and survive on their journey, which keeps getting harder with each stage

"I just tell myself this one line. Every mountaintop has a downward slope. I know that wherever this road goes, there will be times when I will be on the top, and times when I will be on the bottom. That just has to happen."
Gul, girl, 19

In addition, children encourage themselves by using examples of others who have managed to cope in certain situations, or try to calm themselves down and release their stress and fear, using self-regulation strategies. They keep encouraging themselves to overcome fears, continue their journey and achieve their goals.

"I calm myself down somehow, because if I don't have that peace of mind, I can't do anything. To achieve any goal and to become someone, I have to be calm in any problem situation."
Abdurahman, boy, 17

Family obligations and expectations can also be a powerful motivator, whether children are travelling with their families or are fulfilling the family legacy to ensure a future for themselves, and in some cases their relatives, in a developed European country.

"I must continue and I must be patient for the hardships of this journey. This is how I can help myself. Two things always motivate me. One is my family who is always available for helping and supporting me. The second are thoughts about my future, about my future aims and goals."
Sultana, girl, 16

6.4 CHILDREN'S RECOMMENDATIONS

"I'd tell them that children have fragile hearts, they can easily get hurt."
Gul, girl, 19

Children emphasised that it was important to them to have freedom of movement, and listed access to education, psychological support, sincerely expressed care, regular and engaging physical activities, and relaxation and entertainment as important forms of assistance.

A key aim of this research was to learn how children perceive the efforts of official institutions and NGOs to provide them with the assistance and support they need, and understand what children want to say to those who help them on their journey, and to policy makers and decision makers. A large share of the interviewed children (about one-third) stated that the authorities and relevant organisations already know what children on the Balkans route need, because they regularly ask them. As a result, the children expect to receive adequate assistance.

"They know because they already asked perhaps 120 people. All these people [helpers] are already informed what kind of circumstances they [refugees and migrants] faced. I am expecting [your assistance] because you know what is good for my health and my wellbeing. You should do the things accordingly."
Makbul, boy, 16

The children who took part in this study felt that these institutions mostly do not respond to their expressed needs, complaints or suggestions. In several interviews, children described that they had requested specific goods (such as clothing or food) or services, which were not provided. They especially complained about a lack of appropriate clothing (it was either too small or too large), and the insufficient number or timing of meals for adolescents in reception centres.

Children emphasised that it was important to them to have freedom of movement. This freedom is as important to them as their safety in reception centres, so they are most uncomfortable with reception centres that have strict house rules and are far from settlements.

"Not make it like a jail, but something with good services and protection, so that children can leave the centre and later come back, especially on weekends."
Mansoor, boy, 17

Almost half of the children listed psychological support, sincerely expressed care (especially for unaccompanied children), regular and engaging physical activities, and relaxation and entertainment (listening to music, watching films and similar) as important forms of assistance.

"There are three ways you can support a child. One way is through psychological support, to have the child see a psychologist, to have them draw or participate in such activities. The second thing is physical, that the child is engaged in sports activities, such as football.

And the third thing is mental. That they can watch films, relax a bit, perhaps with music or something else. I believe that it is necessary for a child to be asked, how are you?"
Haris, boy, 16

"To organise group sports classes, that's very interesting."
Amir, boy, 16

Younger children mentioned the importance of education and inclusion in the educational process, as that gives structure to their daily life. Older children often expressed that they were unhappy about the lack of possibilities to continue with their education. They suggested that they should be given the opportunity to learn languages that they expect may be useful in near future.

"You are already doing the best thing and that's teaching us. School is the most important thing for a child. When a child is thinking, and their day is full, there's nothing better for the child."
Nurullah, boy, 14

"Everyone only stays here until they cross [the border], everyone wants to go somewhere else. Maybe additional classes of French, Belgian and German; that would be great, because those are the countries that children later go to."
Amin, boy, 16

Children expect that assistance should come 'from the heart' and be honest and authentic.

Younger interviewed children (aged from 13-15 years old) also spoke about how important it was for parents to have someone they can consult about assistance for their children.

The most common responses suggest that it is important for children on the move to have someone who honestly and benevolently dedicates themselves to helping them; someone who asks them how they feel regularly, occasionally spends time with them, and is interested in their wellbeing and their needs. Children with dedicated guardians list this assistance as a significant and empowering experience, which they believe all children on the move need, especially those who are travelling alone.

"If I don't show up for breakfast, he [the guardian] immediately comes looking for me, asks me where I am, why I haven't eaten and if I'm sick. This is really good; I wish all people were like that."
Hijraj, boy, 17

Children expect that assistance should come 'from the heart' and be honest and authentic. Also, that children should not experience discrimination, personal disrespect or neglect of their expressed needs. A number of children emphasised, unequivocally, the need to be accepted as a part of a community.

"It's natural that they would put their heart in helping"
Abdurah, boy, 17

Children said that their behaviours and attitudes are shaped, to a large extent, by how others treat them.

Children said that their behaviours and attitudes are shaped, to a large extent, by how others treat them. This is because through that treatment, they build their view of the country they are in and its inhabitants. They often feel unwelcome or discriminated against, but they would love to feel accepted and respected by the community they are in.

"We [children] are like a flower…The way that people behave towards that flower will determine how the flower will grow. If the people treat the flower badly, the flower will be bad, unfortunately. However, if they are good, the flower will be good too."
Gul, girl, 19

One in four children noted that it was important to them that their viewpoints and perspectives were taken into consideration, that they are treated equally and humanely, and that they are allowed to create a peaceful life for themselves.

Children often know best what they really need and what is useful to them, whether in terms of concrete support (food, shelter, ensuring safety), information, or emotional support (care, attention, solace).

"When you are teaching us our rights, you are giving us more than enough."
Arham, boy, 17

"They should just listen to the children. Children know what they need and trust me, they will seek help themselves, because they are children. So, all they need to do is listen, as the child knows best what they need in that moment."
Abdurahman, boy, 16

Children want politicians to contribute to peace, so that children would not have to leave their home. Concrete suggestions include preventing child deportation and 'deterrence' from crossing the border, as these practices are humiliating, multiply threats, and create new risks for children.

Children also had recommendations for civil society organisations, including the need for representatives of international and local NGOs to be present at border crossings, so that they could provide protection and assistance after the high-stress experience of violent pushbacks.

As for politicians, children want them to contribute to peace, so that children would not have to leave their home. Concrete suggestions include preventing child deportation and 'deterrence' from crossing the border, as these practices are humiliating, multiply threats, and create new risks for children.

"My request to the Croatian police is to open the borders and let us go across. And, please, don't punish us."
Mehdia, girl, 13

"Protection of children could be, in my opinion, that they leave the children in camps to rest for 7 - 10 days, to be protected there, and after that, sent to Europe."
Haris, boy, 16

"I have only one plea, that these problems be solved. Even little children and adults, we are all tired, we are tired from breathing."
Harun, boy, 17

Some of the children (around one-third) were unable to formulate their own suggestions for decision-makers or for organisations that try to assist or protect them. This was perhaps due to the fatigue and exertion that these children had suffered on the road, and because some children had developed a belief that no one could or would like to help them.

"These children I see, there's no helping them."
Ahmad, boy, 16

"I can't say anything right now, as a message for the future."
Amin, boy, 16

Every child that was interviewed demonstrated the need to be heard, for their perspectives to be respected, and for their voices be equal to the voices of local people.

Several children said that they only wished that assistance would continue, as any support was precious and contributed to their survival. They especially emphasised that they felt supported in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they were interviewed, and that they were getting all they needed, as well as that they wished they got such support in all places.

Every child that was interviewed demonstrated the need to be heard, for their perspectives to be respected, and for their voices be equal to the voices of local people, on several occasions during their interviews.

The findings of this research point, to a large extent, to discrimination against refugee and migrant children and to violations of their basic rights as children. Denial of their rights contributes to children losing faith in the adult world and being left to their own capacities to develop self-protection strategies and/or to experience even deeper trauma. Children's wellbeing is significantly threatened by such acts, and the consequences are as uncertain as the children's future.

Children considered these interviews useful to them, as they felt respected and that their voices had been heard. Some emphasised that no one had ever asked them about their experiences on the road. In addition, children expressed their gratitude and relief at being given the opportunity to unburden themselves from difficult emotions and to view their current position in a new light.

"I had a good feeling, because I went back along that road and I saw what I had accomplished, where I was now."
Nurillah, boy, 14

"I enjoyed… I always wanted [to speak to] someone who can hear my voice […] When you close your anxiety, your anger inside, you will burn yourself […] So, when someone comes to you and asks you, and allow you to speak about whatever you have inside, it's always good."
Akbar, boy, 16

Almost half of the interviewed children emphasised that it was important to them to have been given a chance to speak for other children on the road, and they believed their experiences could help other children to get adequate help.

"I am glad that my words will reach some organisation, some people who would help, who would make things easier for some new child that would come after me."
Sarina, girl, 16

Interviewed children emphasised that it was important to them to have been given a chance to speak for other children on the road, and they believed their experiences could help other children to get adequate help.

7. KEY FINDINGS

The purpose of this research is to use the study findings to establish a better national and regional framework for the design, implementation and evaluation of gender- and culturally-sensitive policies and practices for the protection and support of children on the move. The personal accounts of children and helpers on the Balkans route, gathered through interviews and focus groups, have provided direct insight into the difficulties, unmet needs and denied rights of children on the move, and the breadth and severity of the trauma that migrant children go through.

The findings of this research have been interpreted within the following keys:

The ecological systems approach provides a conceptualisation of factors that act at different levels of the child's ecology (individual, family, community and society level), in the context of exposure to violence. It implies that children are affected differently by violence, depending on the interaction of risk factors and protection factors (compensation) at each level of the system, and between individual levels of the system. This affects the child's development and adaptation, recognising also the exchange between the child and the environment.[98]

The child rights-based approach recognises that children enjoy all human rights just as adults and that due to their specificity (biological, psychological, social and economic), they also need a special set of rights, based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols, and rely on the principle of maximum applicability according to available resources and other means. Children as the subjects of those rights should participate in all matters that affect the exercise of their rights. As rightsholders, states are responsible for working with other actors to ensure that children can exercise their rights, including protection from all forms of violence and exploitation.[99]

The trauma-informed approach understands the impact that exposure to adversity and traumatic stress can have on children's mental health and developmental wellbeing, and recognise and combine interventions based on that knowledge. The aim is to create a safe and supportive recovery environment that avoids or mitigates potentially retraumatising experiences for victims and helpers, and recognises and supports strengths and resilience of children and their environment.[100]

[98] Cicchetti, D., & Lynch, M. (1993). Toward an ecological/transactional model of community violence and child maltreatment: Consequences for children's development. Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes, 56(1), 96–118

[99] Collins, T.M. and Wolff, L. (2012). Canada's Next Steps for Children's Rights? Building the Architecture for Accountability through the General Measures of Implementation of the CRC, In Ellen Murray (ed.), Children Matter – Exploring Child and Youth Human Rights Issues in Canada. Calgary Mount Royal University.

[100] Atkinson, J. (2013). Trauma-informed services and trauma-specific care for Indigenous Australian children (Closing the Gap Clearinghouse Resource 21). Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

7.1 CHILDREN EXPERIENCE MULTIPLE TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES ON THE ROUTE

Children in migration on the Balkans route are faced with all of the most common types of violence (physical, psychological, sexual) and other forms of violence in their countries of origin; during their journey; when crossing the border; in reception, asylum and detention centres; in squats; in the street; and in the workplace.[101]

Most commonly, the perpetrators of this violence are police and smugglers and their accomplices, but other adults and children from their environment can also be a threat.

Every child involved in this research has survived multiple events over a prolonged period that were experienced as physical or emotional threats to their survival. These events include:

- **Being deprived of basic existential needs and threatened with separation**

During their journey, children are often deprived of food and water by smugglers; hunger and thirst are most pronounced when they travel on foot and while crossing the border, when they carry only the bare minimum of things. In addition, they often do not have access to adequate and safe shelter. Children travel in overloaded cars, sleep in the woods where they are at risk from wild animal attacks, and stay in squats where they are threatened with abuse, most often by strangers or adults who travel with them. Some children are separated from their family members while they are crossing the border, or witness other families get separated. Separation from groups of friends occurs due to requests of smugglers, interventions by police officers, accommodation in different facilities and various other situations. This deprives children of social support and protection of their peers, which is very important to children.

- **Forced detention and lack of child-appropriate accommodation**

The facilities where children are accommodated after they are apprehended on the borders, and other temporary accommodation centres on the Balkans route, are often ill-suited to children's, inhumane and degrading. They are often cold, without beds or heating, with limited freedom of movement and opportunities for hygiene maintenance. Conditions became worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. When they stay in reception or detention centres, children are interviewed, but not given clear instructions or explanations of their rights, including the right to legal counsel. Their status as a minor is often denied, with or without the use of violent methods.

[101] Answer to the research question: "To what forms of violence are children who travel along the Balkans route exposed, with a focus on Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina?"

• Suffering brutal physical abuse and witnessing many types of violence

Travelling along unsafe, irregular routes exposes children to physical violence from smugglers, their assistants and other adults and peers. This occurs on the road, in reception centres and in informal shelters. In addition to being victims of such violence, children often witness beatings of their family members or other travel companions.

A particularly adverse experience is when children make informal attempts to cross borders, also known as the 'game'. ' This involves brutal physical and psychological violence. Typically, the preparations for departure take a long time. Children and families collect food and money, then walk in the dark, usually through the woods or other difficult terrain, for kilometres, until they reach the border. When the border police spot them and apprehend them, they strip the child naked, force them to stand in the cold, give them electric shocks and beatings with sticks, confiscate their belongings, beat them, use derogatory words, and make them return on foot with no clothes, food, money, mobile phones or other personal items.

Brutal physical violence is committed by border police officers against children along the entire Balkans route. The most traumatic experiences that children and professionals working in the field described relate to attempts to cross the border from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Croatia. Most of the children have tried to cross this border more than three times, with the largest number of attempts recorded being nine. There is a visible tendency for children's anxiety and fear to grow as their number of unsuccessful attempts to cross the border increases.

Although children themselves rarely speak about peer violence, professionals working in the field report significant prevalence of peer violence in reception centres.

• Economic exploitation and child labour including its worst forms

Along the journey, many children get involved in labour, especially those older than 10 years old and unaccompanied boys. Children reported that they were most often involved in labour in countries where they had stayed for longer. In Türkiye, the children worked mainly in factories, and in Greece they worked mainly on farms. Children see this labour as inevitable and justified, since many of them had also worked in their country of origin, and they need money to continue their journey, which they have to make or acquire themselves. According to the information received from children and professionals, the conditions they work in are often unsuitable, inhumane and prohibited by international conventions regulating child labour.[102]

In addition to dangerous work, some children are engaged in other forms of the worst types of child labour. The interviewed children reported that some refugee and migrant children were engaged in commercial sexual exploitation and begging, while almost 1 in 3 witnessed recruitments for criminal activities by smugglers, primarily related to border crossings and, far less mentioned, for selling drugs along the Balkans route.

[102] Inter alia, Convention of the International Labour Organization no. 138 on the minimal age for employment from 1973, Convention on the Rights of the Child from 1989, Convention of the International Labour Organization no. 182 on the worst forms of child labour from 1999.

• Psychological violence along the entire route

Different forms of threats and blackmail, humiliation, insults and name calling by smugglers, police officers and the local population, are a typical experience among all interviewed children. Four out of 48 children said they had been abducted for ransom on the route, while several children witnessed kidnappings or knew children who were kidnapped on the migration route. In various circumstances, on the Balkans route and beyond, children have faced ethnic, religious and other forms of discrimination that they find unjust and degrading.

• Encountering sexual abuse on the route

Although no interviewed child said that they had been a victim of sexual abuse themselves, almost 2 in 3 listed one or more incidents where they recognised or witnessed sexual abuse of a child from their immediate environment. For example, children witnessed violent separation of both girls and boys that smugglers abused sexually. Victims of sexual abuse are mostly unaccompanied children, without protection from individuals they travel with. However, children of both sexes travelling with families are not necessarily protected by that fact, as smugglers or other predators notice and target vulnerable children.[103]

Interviewed children have witnessed sexual abuse, as a rule directed against unaccompanied children, in situations where smugglers corrupt them and, in exchange for sexual services, offer them money, privileged position and protection from other people travelling with them, a 'free' pass across the border etc. According to their accounts, this phenomenon is prevalent on the Balkans route, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina where children stop after a long and arduous journey, without the means to continue safely.

Sexual abuse of children is a major taboo that is concealed even from close relatives, whenever possible. Refugees and migrants on the Balkans route deny it, and sometimes normalise it as an expected abuse of power. In some cases, boys tried to explain sexual abuses through the lens of harmful practices such as bacha bazi. Although prohibited by law in Afghanistan, this practice (which involves adult men who have power dressing boys up as girls, asking them to dance and entertain them, and setting up the environment for sexual abuse) is still present on the migrant route and does not seem to be recognised as violence in this context.[104]

[103] Some of the interviewed children stated that predators target 'beautiful' and 'attractive' children, regardless of who they travel with. This might indicate the acceptance of the dominant narrative that the victims themselves are to blame for the violence suffered, which children seem to internalise.

[104] 'Bacha bazi' dancing boys, for more, see Child Rights International Network (CRIN) (2013) AFGHANISTAN: An in-depth look at the practice of 'bacha bazi' (dancing boys), available at: https://archive.crin.org/index.html. See also: United Nations Security Council (2021) Children and armed conflict in Afghanistan, Report of the Secretary-General S/2021/662 16 July 2021.

7.2 VIOLENCE IS PRESENT ON EVERY PART OF THE JOURNEY

The violence that children experience on the road is manifested in each segment of their journey. There are no circumstances during their journey in which children are totally protected from violence. Unaccompanied children are at a particular risk from violence, especially those who have failed to establish closer contact with an adult they did not know before.

Violence can occur during transport by vehicles and while travelling on foot, in temporary accommodation and shelters, at borders and in accommodation centres. Reception centres with well-developed security procedures and a functioning security service seem to provide an appropriate level of protection within their facilities, but outside of the centres, children are at risk, primarily from smugglers.

Centres for unaccompanied children that are not spatially and functionally separated from the accommodation for adult men travelling without families, are a fertile ground for the development of a wide range of specific risks of violence. Among them are recruiting children for criminal activities (mostly human smuggling), different forms of sexual abuse of children, confiscation of possessions and money, mass fights etc.

Both girls and boys are subject to sexual violence, especially if they are travelling unaccompanied, because predators (smugglers, intermediaries and other adults) recognise them as easy pickings due to their lack of protection. Travelling with a family, however, only partly protects children from sexual violence on the route, as there are numerous circumstances in which parents cannot protect them, especially while staying in smugglers' hideouts along the route.

Together with undeveloped (or in some cases, a total lack of) procedures for identifying children and assessing their age on the Balkans route, children are endangered by the prejudice of decision makers and the propensity for errors in age assessments due to physical markers that are different to those seen in typical people in that local environment. Hence, many unaccompanied children are wrongly identified and classified as adults, or vice versa, some young adults are treated as children and placed with other children, significantly increasing the risk of violence. Not being identified as a child prevents children from exercising their rights, while not identifying someone as underage results in the authorities avoiding their responsibilities in providing adequate support to children. Sometimes children claim that they are adults to get certain freedoms or rights. That puts them at increased risk of violence from smugglers, other refugees and migrants, and police officers.

Finally, the circumstances of a long, uncertain and dangerous journey, where on the 'doorstep of Europe,' just shy of their intended destination, children are kept against their intentions, and where they are forcedly returned, favour the development of new risks of violence and consistent violations of numerous rights of the child, including the rights to survival and development and protection from violence and exploitation, as well as to freedom from discrimination.

7.3 BOTH UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN AND THOSE WITH FAMILIES ARE AT RISK OF VIOLENCE

Children in families are better protected from violence on the Balkans route than unaccompanied children, but both unaccompanied children and children with families are at risk of violence.[105]

Children who travel unaccompanied must take on a number of decisions, which often overcome their skills, emotional and social maturity, knowledge and life experience, making them particularly vulnerable and susceptible to multiple forms of abuse. To make the journey easier, unaccompanied children often form a connection with one or several adults, who then register them as their own child, or as a relative that they are taking care of. When unaccompanied children join families who travel with children, that is an example of a protective adaptive strategy. However, sometimes children join smugglers, traffickers or other people who may harm the child. These 'pretend families,' and especially pretend all-male families when it comes to unaccompanied boys, expose children to a considerable risk from abuse and exploitation.

Many unaccompanied refugee and migrant children, especially boys, come from families with cultural patterns of strict adherence to their parents' wishes and the eldest male child is often seen as being 'responsible' for their younger and older family members.[106] There is evident expectation that the child will, regardless of challenges, be capable, efficient and resilient, fulfil their tasks and thus secure a better future for the whole family. These patterns and expectations are equally difficult and burdensome for refugee and migrant children, as they don't allow them to make different choices than the ones their parents have imposed on them.

Those who travel with their families, according to the accounts of both children and professionals, go through equally adverse experiences as unaccompanied children, but their parents' protection is an important, and probably the most important, protective factor for them. Children in families report that smugglers and police officers beat their parents, brothers and sisters; they witness the humiliation and separation of families; and they experience difficulties with younger brothers and sisters who cannot walk for long, so have to be carried.

The journey also affects parental skills and competences and can lead to failures in care and provision of safety. Due to the objective difficulties and experiences that parents are exposed to, they are sometimes unable to recognise the needs of their children and even fail to provide the basic conditions that are at their disposal.

[105] Answer to the research question: "What are the characteristics of violence experienced by unaccompanied children and children travelling with families?"

[106] Ibrahim, F. A., & Heuer, J. P. R. (2013) The assessment, diagnosis, and treatment of mental disorders among Muslims. In F. A. Paniagua & A.-M. Yamada (Eds.) Handbook of multicultural mental health: Assessment and treatment of diverse populations (367–387) Elsevier Academic Press.

7.4 BOTH BOYS AND GIRLS ARE EXPOSED TO VIOLENCE ON THE ROAD

Both boys and girls have multiple and intense experiences of violence on the road.

Analysis of the children's interviews and the accounts of professionals indicate that boys experience more physical violence, especially in attempts to cross borders. Boys are also exposed to sexual violence, particularly if they are travelling without their families. Unaccompanied boys are also more often subjected to economic exploitation and child labour. However, they see that as an integral part of their journey, their role in the family, and a necessary aspect of self-preservation, self-respect and survival.

Girls are mostly witnesses to brutal violence at the borders. While there are numerous reports in literature and practice about searches or even strip-searches of women and girls, children participating in this research reported that border police officers usually spared girls and women from brute physical force. According to children, women and girls are mostly exposed to humiliation and verbal abuse at the borders.

It is evident that there are far fewer girls than boys on the Balkans route, and that they mostly travel with parents, brothers and sisters, or with husbands and children of their own. Unaccompanied girls are rarely visible on the Balkans route. Earlier studies point to several types of mimicry and concealment that unaccompanied girls use to remain invisible, both within groups they travel with, and in the eyes of authorities and helpers.[107] They often join families on the road and try to keep a low profile as they are at a higher risk of sexual abuse. They sometimes get married or pretend that they are travelling with their husbands, believing that this contributes to their safety. Whether it is an early marriage or human trafficking that the girls are more or less aware of, travelling in such an arrangement carries a significant risk of violence and exploitation.

However, even girls travelling with families are exposed to sexual violence, whether from smugglers who note them and separate them, or through attacks in reception centres.

According to professionals' accounts and the statements of some children, especially girls, are encouraged and sometimes even forced to enter into marriage in their early teenage years, often with older men. In children's accounts, challenges and uncertainty in their country of origin and on the journey act as additional drivers for child marriages, as families try to make sure that girls are 'taken care of' through marriage. Such circumstances can further endanger girls, as they contribute to 'lowering' the desirable age for marriage, and sometimes lead parents and relatives to insist on child marriage. Professionals feel powerless when they encounter the practice of child marriage among refugees and migrants on the Balkans route. They don't feel comfortable to approach married girls and respond to their specific needs, and to identify the situations of forced marriages. Instead, they treat them as adults.

[107] Insight into available segregated data on children in migrations on the Balkans route has shown that there are far fewer girls registered in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina than in Greece. See more in Jovanović, K., Besedić, J. (2020) Struggling to Survive: Unaccompanied and separated children travelling the Western Balkans Route

7.5 CHILDREN TRUST FEW PEOPLE TO HELP THEM ON THEIR JOURNEY

When children experience violence, they need to have a far stronger faith in the source of assistance and their ability and desire to protect them, than an adult would in the same position.

Children who experience or witness brutal violence and live in utter uncertainty, learn early on not to trust others. Accounts of children in this research speak to the fact that adults around them, who have the power to help them, may also be their abusers. Since they depend on smugglers, regardless of whether they travel in families or unaccompanied, they try to maintain a submissive relationship and thus gain favour with them, which they usually perceive as the absence of harassment.

Children often trust official institutions and helpers in the field far less than the people they know. This is because these people are present in their lives only sporadically, and seem to have only limited mechanisms to protect them from violence. Their helpers speak of the importance of being present and having experience from the field. Such work contributes to the improvement of their skills and sensitivity, making them more likely to recognise signs of violence, which, together with trust they built with children in the field, facilitates the detection of violence.

If a case of violence is identified in Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina, the process for reporting it requires careful documentation and submission of a report to competent authorities, centres for social work and the police, in order to initiate criminal or other proceedings. Standard operating procedures should ensure that children have access to protection throughout the country.

However, according to the experiences and interpretations of the professionals interviewed for this study, the social protection system is not sufficiently flexible when it comes to violence against children. The slow pace of the justice system and the rapid mobility of children mean that reported cases rarely get closure. This, in turn, further discourages children from reporting violence, which several children interviewed for this report have addressed.

The process of providing systemic assistance by the government is additionally aggravated by the fact that the accused persons are frequently those that the child depends on to continue their journey, for example, smugglers. In addition, children don't generally perceive authorities as available and prepared to help them, or protect them from the violence of reception centre staff, or experts from the centre for social work, police and justice system.

Children have learned to judge other people as 'good' when they do not abuse them, and they often use their experiences in certain countries as a basis for a generalised impression of the local population, institutions and helpers, as more or less supportive, or more or less threatening.

A striking number of children (about 1 in 3) have developed a belief that no one and nothing can (or would even like to) help them on their journey, and some even believe they are no longer able to help themselves. Many are comforted by their faith in God and universal justice, with this deterministic approach allowing them to make sense of their suffering and supporting their belief that things will work out in the end.

Professional aid workers and others who assist migrant children seem to understand that they will only occasionally manage to form a relationship of trust with children; that children on the Balkans route do not have sufficient information available to them; and that more needs to be done to improve the identification and reporting of violence. It is important to take into account not only the vulnerability of children,

but also the fact that many children have lost faith that anyone, and especially an adult, could help them. That makes children additionally vulnerable, but it also makes them resourceful. This is why it is important that professionals learn to recognise the strengths and resilience that children have developed on their journey and find ways to encourage and empower them. This means respecting the child's agency and their ability to take action and make decisions that concern them.

7.6 CHILDREN MOSTLY SEE OFFICIAL SERVICES AS DISINTERESTED OR A THREAT

The deployment of protection mechanisms depends primarily on whether children and families recognise them as available and reliable.

The interviewed children mostly see official institutions, such as healthcare institutions, schools, public child protection services, and centres for social work, as insufficiently interested, disinterested or as a potential threat (such as violent treatment by the police, or administrative services issuing official documents).

In organised accommodation, where children have access to doctors, their experience of the healthcare system varies considerably. The approach that doctors take with them ranges from humiliation and insults, through indifference, to dedication and a desire to help. Access to mental health care is a particular problem. In Serbia, it is very difficult to secure appropriate medical support for refugee and migrant children facing mental health issues, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina it is almost impossible.

As children perceive that official institutions as not very committed or interested, they rely on international and local humanitarian organisations. Their experiences with these organisations vary. Some children feel that they receive valuable and useful information, material support (such as food, medicines and clothes) and psychological support, especially in the form of psycho-educational, cultural, sports and recreational activities.

However, children also state that assistance is not available to them in certain highly demanding situations – for example, when crossing borders or immediately after – or that the help that is available is unsuitable or insufficient. Their requirements for assistance and support are sometimes not recognised or seriously considered, which additionally undermines their already fragile trust and belief in the good intentions of the people helping them.

Children who establish a good relationship with their guardians in the reception centres are more prepared to share their problems with them, underlining the importance of this role. On the other hand, they do not trust the police, despite differentiating between border police, who wear black uniforms and beat them, and 'regular' police, who are mostly benevolent.

Cultural mediators play an invaluable role in recognising violence, as their knowledge of the culture of the country that the child is coming from allows them to recognise that something is wrong at an early stage. At the same time, cultural mediators are important positive role models for children to identify with.

7.7 FAMILIES, PEERS AND LOCALS CAN BE SOURCES OF HELP

In order to protect themselves from violence and overcome its consequences, children need deep understanding, respect, support from their family, peers and others including the local population, and self-protection and self-help strategies.

Research findings indicate that the primary and most important source of help for children are their families, in situations when they travel together, as well as other benevolent adult companions and peers with whom they establish friendships. Peers are the first people that children confide in. Peer help is of extreme importance for children as it fosters the feeling of belonging to a group, a belief that they will not be left behind on the road, and a certain emotional stability.

Children expect solidarity and, depending on their position, reciprocal assistance when they are in a group with people with whom they have family ties, or peer ties. When such help is not there, because it has been lost (due to separation from their family or group of close compatriots), or when it fails (when others refuse to share scarce resources for survival, refuse help or abuse trust), children feel there is a failure of humanity, solidarity and integrity.

Children also mentioned the local population of countries they pass through as reliable sources of practical and emotional support. Citizens providing concrete help along the way, and gestures of respect and acceptance, make it easier for children to deal with hardships. Support from the local community is particularly important to children when they are pushed back from borders and travel back to reception centres. In these situations, local people have sometimes taken them in to rest, given them food, drink and clothing, or provided them with transportation to the reception centre.

On this brutal journey, children are forced to adapt to survive. This means developing self-protection mechanisms such as increased submissiveness to the more powerful people they depend on; accepting abuse as an integral part of the journey; removing themselves from situations that are potentially dangerous; and general abandonment of assertiveness in relationships with others. An example of a survival strategy is the fact that many children report a different country of origin depending on the assessment of what is more likely to gain them help, support or favour.[108] The children express readiness to stand up for their rights mostly if they are in a group of their compatriots, where they feel stronger and better protected.

Another adaptation strategy relates to the way children report their experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the interviews for this study took place. More than two-thirds of children that were interviewed said that they fared the best in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they currently were, although no child expressed readiness to stay there. This is a strategy called 'endearing.' By contrast, their experiences from other countries varied. The research conducted in Serbia showed similar findings, with migrant children reporting that Serbia was the best place for them, while they had quite a tough time in other countries. [109]

In addition, children adopt a range of constructive cognitive and behavioural strategies to solve problems. These include a belief in their own strength (a high assessment of their self-efficiency), analysing the threat, distancing oneself to get a better view of the problem, planning how they will cope, giving meaning to events, and orientation towards goals, which is often related to fulfilling their family obligations.

[108] Sometimes, children from Afghanistan say they are from Pakistan (or vice versa), sometimes that they are from Iran, depending on the country they are in.

[109] Žegarac, N., Isakov, B. A., Perišić, N., Marković, V. (2022) Response system for the migrant children in Serbia: challenges for the rights-based approach, in Children in migration: perspectives from South East Europe.

7.8 NORMALISATION OF VIOLENCE HELPS CHILDREN TO COPE

Both children's interviews and the narratives provided by professionals suggest that children see violence as an integral and an almost inevitable part of their migration experience. To process it and, finally, to survive, children normalise it, and use denial and suppression mechanisms to cope. There are multiple reasons for this, including:

- Ignoring abuse is a survival mechanism, which allows children to maintain their basic psychological resilience in extremely difficult conditions.
- There is often a lack of protection and support available to these children that would respect their standpoint, so they deny that they need support in the first place.
- Children believe that they need to appear strong and capable, as they think that it would further endanger them if they were to be recognised as weak or feeble.

A number of children, especially from Afghanistan, said that violence against children was widely present in their country of origin. Examples included general political violence and conflict, domestic violence, and violence in schools. This contributes to the fact that children could see numerous forms of physical abuse as normal and necessary in cases when disobedience and disrespect are shown. Violence is probable because the person who has power can use it in whatever way they see fit, and expected because the journey is irregular and protection is not always available.

In many of the interviews, when children talked about difficult circumstances and events they had experienced, they tried to somehow normalise violence, mostly through laughter. In cases of dysmorphic expression in response to unpleasant events, laughter is an attempt to regulate strong, upsetting emotions and a gesture of 'dis-association' from the traumatic experience and the pain it causes.[110] In this context, laughter differs from humour, which was recorded in only a very few interviews as an adaptive coping strategy. Crying was far less common than laughter, with only eight out of 48 children crying as a response to the memory of endured hardships.

The research has shown that children find it easier to recognise and talk about violent experiences if they are geographically, socially and emotionally distanced from them. The interviewed children described in more detail experiences that had taken place in another country, or far away from Europe's protection and prosperity. They also found it easier to talk about other children's experiences with violence, and abuses committed by people who they perceived as 'others' or 'foreign,' including members of other ethnic and religious groups and police officers.

This is likely to be the reason why peer violence among the community they migrate with, and violence in their family were least reported. This finding requires careful interpretation and further research, as in addition to the issues of trust and preparedness to share one's own difficult experience, it is probable that children attempt to distance and protect themselves from difficult, disturbing experiences in this way.

In younger children, reactions to violence usually include excessive fear, difficulty falling and remaining asleep, somatisation of tension and hypersensitivity through rapid heartbeat, fainting etc. Older children report a whole series of additional symptoms. This includes repeated unwanted memories of traumatic experiences (flashbacks), the feeling of helplessness and a lack of prospects, resignation, thorough changes in world view, loss of previously adopted values, beliefs, views of the world and interpersonal relationships, as well as the loss of one's own position, role and value.

[110] Gross, J. J. 'Emotion regulation: Taking stock and moving forward' Emotion (2013) 13: 359– 365.

7.9 CHILDREN NEED INFORMED SUPPORT TO OVERCOME LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF ABUSE

A striking number of children, especially unaccompanied children, as well as professionals in the focus groups, stated examples of self-harm, suicide attempts and abuse of psychoactive substances as passive strategies that children adopted to cope with stress and difficulty. This is detrimental to children's mental health and their overall development, from the perspective of their future. Abuse in childhood is one of the most important risk factors for the development of long-term and severe consequences for physical and mental health, as well as long-term negative effects on behaviour, social relations and functioning. This has been shown in numerous studies that looked at negative experiences of children,[111] as well as in a recent study that investigated, in particular, such experiences in the migrant population.[112]

Refugee and migrant children who took part in this research have gone through many years of travelling, full of danger and uncertainty. As they try to continue their journey, they are 'stuck' in survival mode, waiting for a favourable moment to reach Western or Northern Europe, even when they don't know exactly where they are going and what is in store for them there. In this context, children have few opportunities and incentives to develop socially desirable and constructive behavioural patterns; they are deprived of opportunities for self-actualisation and development of interests. They are frequently left without an education; even when it is available in some countries, it is fragmented and often insufficiently adapted to children in migration.

Children in transit do not have an opportunity to face their problems, because their problems are not yet behind them, and it is uncertain when, or if, hardships will end. Bearing in mind the circumstances and their situation of migration, children's growing up is accelerated and shortened, and the research findings indicate that their self-determination and self-knowledge takes place under the circumstances of physical, psychological, emotional and sexual violence, discrimination and neglect of basic and developmental needs, and exploitation of child labour including its worst forms.

Children who spend several years facing the adversity and violence that is common on the migratory journey to Europe, face potentially devastating long-term effects in terms of the formation of their identity and personality. Severe and/or protracted adversity has the potential to change brain structure and functioning; it can affect perception, trust, establishment of bonds and emotional regulation, as well as physical health. Oversaturation with distressing experiences can hinder children's sense of self-worth and their outlook on life and the future. One of the consequences of trauma is a lack of trust in one's own experiences, which makes seeking help very difficult.[113] A migration experience that includes multiple, prolonged exposure to violence may have incomprehensible harmful effects on the development of children. Growing up in such circumstances poses particular challenges for children in their adolescence, which is an important period for the development of their identity and finding answers to questions such as, who am I and where am I from, what do I want to do, what do I believe, and how do I fit into society?[114]

[111] John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (2020), The Child & Adolescent Health Measurement Initiative, Academy Health ACEs Resource Packet: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Basics.

[112] Schapiro, N. Soleimanpour, A. Navarro, S. Brindis, C. D. (2021) Screening Adolescents for ACEs: Addressing the Unique Needs of Immigrant Youth San Francisco: University of California and California ACEs Aware initiative.

[113] Hornor, G. 'Childhood Trauma Exposure and Toxic Stress: What the PNP Needs to Know' Journal of Pediatric Health Care (2015) 29(2):199-200

[114] Erikson, Erik H. (1974) Dimensions of a New Identity Jefferson Lectures in the Humanities New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Many of the children who participated in this research are at high risk of serious consequences to their health and wellbeing, unless they are provided with an urgent, long-term and appropriate **trauma-informed approach** to care and treatment.[115] Although there is a possibility that a number of children may integrate different experiences and become more resilient and richer in knowledge and experience,[116] if systematic trauma treatment is not made available to them, this will be a significantly less likely outcome. This could also undermine their capacity to get to know the destination countries and to integrate effectively, and undermine their ability to contribute to the cultural, social and political life of the destination countries.

Additionally, from the **ecological system approach**, there are strong risk factors for violence and protective factors at each level of the migrant child's ecology from the macro (society) to the micro (individual) level. At the macro level, refugees and migrants often face political and economic instability in their countries of origin and ethno-political violence that encourages or forces them to make the journey ('push' factors). Similarly, the European Union's policy for restricting the arrival of migrants and controlling external borders[117] generates and multiplies the risks of various forms of violence against migrant and refugee children, who have been stranded in the Balkans on their journey along the Eastern Mediterranean route.

There are also protective factors at the macro level, including international human rights law and refugee law (which all countries are bound by), European Union laws, national legislation on child protection, and efforts to develop policies, standards and legal solutions and build resources that seek to protect children from violence. This report confirms, however, that national and international laws designed to protect children in countries along the migratory route, are regularly disregarded or flouted.

Protection factors are present where a safe environment for living, support, education and recreation is provided. They are also present where trained and supervised staff have good relations with children from the migrant population and their families, where coordination with public services and institutions has been established, and where there is a functional case management system.

It is clear that the migrant community itself can generate risks of violence against children but it is also a source of protection when it provides information and immediate support, and actively seeks and uses available help and protection.

Family and peer group companions (for unaccompanied children) create risks when they neglect the needs of children, refuse help, when they assume the needs of the road are the essential needs of children's development, and when they abuse and neglect or exploit children. At the same time, micro-level protection is provided when family members or peers take good care of a child's needs and provide information, day-to-day care, help and emotional support, continuously consider and prevent risks, and actively seek and use available help and protection from professionals.

From a **child rights approach**, these children face numerous violations of their rights, including their rights to be protected from violence and exploitation, and be provided with conditions for their growth and development (adequate nutrition, housing, education and play). Children are often denied the right to participate in matters that concern them, and their point of view is rarely heard or considered. In the protected environments of reception and asylum centres on the Balkans route, children can exercise their rights to food, housing, and to a lesser extent to education, play, recreation and the development of preferences. The rights to protection from violence

[115] Angelöw, A., Bonerfält, L., Rempe Sjöstedt, P. and Torstensson, S. (2017). One Year of Transforming Care: An annual report about Save the Children's trauma-informed care programme in Sweden. Save the Children https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/one-year-transforming-care-annual-report-about-save-childrens-trauma-informed-care-programme/

[116] Tedeshi, R.G., & Calhoun, L.G. (2004). Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundation and Empirical Evidence

[117] Crawley, H., and Skleparis, D. (2018), 'Refugees, migrants, neither, both: Categorical fetishism and the politics of bounding in Europe's 'migration crisis'' Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 44(1), 48–64.

and participation are much more difficult to exercise due to a number of intertwined factors. The circumstances of a long, uncertain and dangerous journey, where on the 'doorstep of Europe,' just shy of their intended destination, children are kept against their intentions, and where they are forcedly returned, favour the development of new risks of violence and consistent violations of numerous rights of the child, including their right to survival and development and protection from violence and exploitation, as well as to freedom from discrimination.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Union and authorities in countries on the Eastern Mediterranean route, including the Balkans, are responsible for the systematic use of unlawful forced returns from land and sea borders (pushbacks), which violate the rights of refugee and migrant children and families.

In addition to the violence that is perpetrated during such pushbacks, the failure of these authorities to provide access to asylum prevents children from accessing the protection and support that they have a right to receive. This exposes children who are travelling alone and children who are travelling with families, to physical, psychological, sexual and other types of violence, and contributes to the perpetuation and normalisation of violence against child refugees and migrants in the name of securing borders.

Governmental institutions and Child protection services, as well as local and international humanitarian and civil rights organisations, and others that seek to assist these children can play a critical role in helping them recover from the traumatic events they have been subjected to. They must invest time and effort to build children's trust and truly listen to what these children need.

The European Union and national governments should:

- Reverse policies and halt practices that are hostile to refugees, including unlawful pushbacks, reliance on third countries to outsource refugee hosting and restrictions on access to asylum.
- Provide refugee and migrant children with access to safe, regular and legal migration pathways so that they do not need to depend on smugglers or be forced to engage in labour, including the worst forms of child labour.
- Ensure all policies and operations related to securing the borders comply with human rights law and the principle of non-refoulement. Children and their families must have access to asylum and procedures based on their individual protection needs and best interest.
- Establish an effective and truly independent border monitoring mechanism, with sufficient resources to ensure effective child protection. To achieve this, governments should initiate a transparent consultation and participation process involving all relevant stakeholders, including children and international and local NGOs.
- Ensure that civil society organisations that support refugee and migrant children have access to border crossing areas so that they can provide protection and assistance to children in need, including those who experience pushbacks.
- Invest in and promote capacity building for border police and all other actors interacting with refugee and migrant children at borders and inside the country. Training should be provided by relevant stakeholders, including civil society organisations, with expertise in human rights and child protection, among others. The training should address effective implementation of relevant human and child rights legislation, child protection and protection from gender-based violence, as well as child safeguarding.
- Ensure that child refugees and migrants who have been victims of violence and torture or other ill-treatment committed by the border police have access to justice:
  - Governments must ensure that there are clear, safe, confidential, effective and child-appropriate mechanisms for reporting unlawful returns, violence, assets seizing and other criminal acts undertaken by the border officials.
  - There must be strong, effective accountability mechanisms for police officers who violate children's rights, to ensure investigative actions are taken to determine responsibility in case of allegations of unlawful forced returns, excessive use of force, seizing assets and other abuses.
- Invest in early identification and assistance of children at risk of violence, abuse or exploitation. Instances in which adults target vulnerable children for exploitation must be identified and mitigated and there must be effective prosecution of the adult/s who are responsible for recruiting and exploiting children.
- Ensure that child refugees and migrants who have been victims of violence have access to inclusive and gender responsive support and services to foster their prospects for recovery and reintegration.
- Ensure that children have access to safe and dignified accommodation wherever they are. Unaccompanied and separated children should not be placed in shared

accommodation with adults. Detention of children and restriction of movement is never in the best interest of children and should be avoided at all costs.

- Promptly appoint a guardian for any unaccompanied and separated children. This should be an interested and caring adult who is able to protect their rights and best interests, with full participation from the child at each stage of their journey. The legislative framework should provide for independent performance of guardianship functions, and countries should consider the options for setting up a mechanism for special and separate government guardianship for children in specific situations of migration, exile, trafficking in human beings, and other cases that require complex intergovernmental cooperation in safeguarding the rights of the child.[118]
- Invest in building trust of refugee and migrant children who receive services in accommodation centres and other settings. To achieve this, children and non-governmental stakeholders should be consulted and involved in decision-making. Introduce regular monitoring mechanisms to be able to improve institutional, systemic responses to children's protection and other needs.
- Regularly review and evaluate mechanisms for full participation of children in decision making processes of interest for them, so that adequate participation models suited for them can be developed and improved.
- Involve local communities in ensuring adequate reception of refugee and migrant children and their integration, preventing stigmatisation and discrimination, and promoting human rights and solidarity with children and families in vulnerable situations.
- Only perform age assessments according to established procedures, employing a multi-disciplinary approach which takes into account physical, developmental, psychological, environmental and cultural factors, thereby allowing for the most reliable result. Individuals undergoing age assessments should be treated as children and the benefit of the doubt should be applied to the outcomes.
- Develop and strengthen child protection services, ensuring they are well-resourced, inclusive and that the workforce is trained and supported to work with refugee and migrant children. Governments should adopt a strategic approach to increase the number, reach and skill of trained child protection workers, using tools, resources and initiatives to ensure quality support and accountability. This includes supporting efforts by professional associations to enhance professional growth and development. It also includes addressing barriers to access for persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups, and ensuring that all aspects of child protection and migration and refugee systems – including laws, policies, law enforcement agencies and child protection services – take into account the violence experienced by refugee and migrant children.
- Ensure prompt access to safe education as an important protective factor for children. Governments must also ensure education and child protection sectors are proactively work together to ensure all children have an opportunity to learn at all stages of their journey. This also includes providing:
  - access to informal education and local language classes to prepare for successful school integration;
  - certificates or micro-credentials within formal education systems, which will serve as a basis for continuing education in another country;
  - more opportunities for schooling of children in middle and late adolescence, particularly girls;
  - certified courses and opportunities to gain practical experiences and professional development.
- Provide access to high-quality health care, including psychosocial support and mental health care for children and their families to prevent and address mental health challenges caused or worsened by the adversities of the journey.
- Improve information exchange with children by ensuring that children have access to child-friendly information, particularly on risks, reporting mechanisms and available support, at every stage of their journey and at all places where they can be reached.

[118] In Serbia, guardianship as a legal provision is connected to territorial jurisdiction and the local level, and does not provide for independent performance of guardianship functions, since the body performing guardianship duties (social work centre) also makes decisions regarding the children and provides services; Milutinović, N. (2018) Guardianship institute for unaccompanied children or children separated from parents/guardians: Situational analysis and recommendations for improvement Belgrade: Save the Children International.

Stakeholders who provide support and implement protection programmes for refugee and migrant children should:

- Ensure that promoting and training professionals and implementing professional knowledge about trauma in working with refugee and migrant children is the basis for providing adequate psychosocial support. Trauma-informed approaches highlight the importance of promoting physical and psychological security and stability, building trust-based relationships with children and families, ensuring peer support and cooperation, nurturing children's agency, creating space for children to unwind and be children, and promoting intersectionality in organising provision of assistance.[119,120]
- Introduce mechanisms for regular consultations with children regarding the organisation of their daily lives in reception centres, ways in which they see their needs, and the possibility to seek help and support, including protection from violence. One such model could be supporting children's associations (e.g., boys' and girls' parliaments) and ensuring that children develop skills to advocate for themselves.[121]
- Give children the opportunity to advocate for themselves and their needs within peer groups, both among refugee and migrant children where they may feel freer to vocalise their opinions and with children from local communities, which will provide them with opportunities for an exchange of experiences, better learning and intercultural exchange, and create conditions conducive to the possibility of integration.
- Improve notification and information exchange with children on their rights, available services and accommodation, and protection and reporting mechanisms in case of violence. Information should be child-friendly and accessible in various appropriate locations during the journey, including border crossing points, healthcare institutions and reception centres.
- Respect and acknowledge the cultural context of children through well-conceived consultations including children, their parents and guardians. This approach requires the implementation of ongoing training on culturally sensitive work with refugees and migrants and prohibition of discrimination, as well as on the rights of the child and child-centred activities. Recording and supporting the implementation of best practices is an integral part of this approach.
- Review and improve existing procedures, and elaborate new ones, for taking specific action in cases of reporting violence or harassment by adults who are accountable for children in reception centres and other forms of accommodation
- Invest the time that is necessary to build trust with children so that they can speak about difficult experiences. A strengths-based approach, cultural sensitivity and a genuine readiness to hear and acknowledge the children's voice must accompany this process.
- Affirm healthy responses as a response to stress, primarily through encouraging habits such as healthy eating, regular physical activity, playing and engaging children in activities in the community.[122]
- Provide ongoing supervision for everyone who is in direct contact with children who are suffering violence, and especially field workers, interpreters and cultural mediators, with an accompanying structured process.
- Dedicate more resources and importance to the roles of cultural mediators and interpreters, who are the forefront of interventions for refugee and migrant children, to ensure that children have access to well-trained staff and that these profession-

[119] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) SAMHSA's Concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach, SAMHSA Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative.

[120] ISSOP Migration Working Group 'ISSOP position statement on migrant child health' Child Care Health Development (2018) 44(1):161-170.

[121] Children Parliamentary Sessions lead to improved lives of unaccompanied refugee and migrant children in Bosnia and Herzegovina; see here: https://nwb.savethechildren.net/sites/nwb.savethechildren.net/files/library/2021_Case%20study_NWB_Boys%20Parliament.pdf

[122] Copeland W.E., Keeler G., Angold A., Costello E.J. (2007) 'Traumatic events and posttraumatic stress in childhood' Archives Of General Psychiatry 64(5):577-84. 10.1001/archpsyc.64.5.577.

als have access to continual professional development and capacity building.
- Support parents in situations of migration to provide conditions for children's wellbeing and their protection from violence, and to facilitate and support communication and exchange between family members. Programmes should provide psychosocial support to parents to support them in facing challenges of parenting on the move; ensure that parents recognise violence and build skills for parenting without violence; and are informed about mechanisms for reporting violence and seeking support.
- Develop and implement programmes that promote peer support, peer education on violence and creating peer support networks.

Recommendations for future research include:

- As migrations are a dynamic, complex phenomenon connecting a series of countries, research should be developed in such a way as to connect the countries of origin, transit and destination. This can provide better insights into the possibilities of joint interventions to protect children throughout their journey.
- Longitudinal studies should be implemented to monitor the long-term consequences of perilous journeys on the mental health and wellbeing of refugee and migrant children. Examining the consequences of traumatic experiences and the level of psychosocial adaptation and post-traumatic growth would provide a foundation for the development of syst=emic interventions in the fields of protection from violence and preserving mental health of refugee and migrant children.
- Research should be carried out on the impact of the migration journey on children growing up, including the impact on the process of individuation and sexual development of adolescents in migration, in order to create adequate programmes.
- Research on violence against refugee and migrant children should also incorporate debriefing sessions and vicarious trauma prevention strategies to avoid the burnout of researchers and cultural mediators and to conserve the reliability of research findings.
- Listen to and have dialogue with children of all genders, to ensure their experience of migration and displacement is taken into account when response plans are designed.

The most important aspects of the protection of migrant children are related to the application of laws, protection and care policies that respect the rights of migrants and refugees with a specific set of children's rights, providing health and psychosocial support, and providing educational opportunities even in transit and regardless of age.

Truthfully involving children in decision making process, making them the agents of change and active subject in policy making processes is without any doubt the best way to create the sense of joint ownership, integrate the cultural and other specificities into the decisions, to reduce the potential risks for children and support them in the best and most suitable way.

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ANNEXES

ANNEX 1. PROTOCOL – INTERVIEWS WITH CHILDREN

My name is _____ and today I am here before Save the Children to talk about what children like you, who have had to leave their home, experience as they travel to the country where they wish to stay. We do not speak the same language and that is why the translator _____ is with us, so we can understand each other as well as possible.

Children, those who are younger than 18, have different experiences and encounter different people along the way. They often need help because the journey can be difficult and uncertain. Sometimes children get hurt by adults or other children along the way, and they often do not have the opportunity to tell this to someone. We are glad to be here together today, to hear your experiences and everything you want to share with us. Many children today migrate for a variety of reasons. It is very important that their voice is heard. You are representing these children and young people here today, and you are giving them a voice because we cannot speak to all of them. Thank you for that.

It is also important for us to understand and learn about the experiences of migrant children with violence, to get to know what children need during the migration journey, what and who best helps them in situations when they experience violence while migrating, so that we know how to organise a support system for children and youth on the road. We will ask you about your knowledge and experiences, as well as about the experiences of other children with whom you have travelled or heard about from other people with whom you have travelled. We are especially interested in what is happening with children and young people on the Balkan route. Since we work with children and young people, it is important for us to learn from children what their experiences and opinions are, but it is important for us that the children themselves understand what we are doing and why.

It is important to know that this research is anonymous and confidential. This means that everything you tell us today will be used only for research purposes and nowhere will it be seen that you personally said something. So, to ensure your privacy, you can choose the name for yourself that we will use when analysing the data. The data from our conversation will be used solely to analyse and make recommendations for establishing a system that will better protect children like you from violence. It is important to understand that no one will know that you said something yourself and that I must not tell others about your personal matters. However, if in our conversation I find out that someone is hurting you or that they can seriously hurt you, it cannot remain a secret. The most important thing is that you are safe and well, so I will inform the people who are obliged to protect you if I find out that you are injured or in danger.

If you want to withdraw from our conversation at any time or you don't want to answer a specific question, that's fine, just say so. Please tell me or show me if any question or memory is making you uncomfortable (we will arrange signs of discomfort). We can always pause the conversation, move the conversation for another time, or end it altogether if you need to. I am here to respect your wishes and needs and you can help me understand how children are doing during the migration journey and what they need to be well.

We will record this conversation just to make sure that we have conveyed exactly what you told us so that we do not overlook or forget any significant parts. No one can listen to these recordings except the researchers, who will destroy those recordings when they take notes and remove all your personal data (*if the child refuses the recording of the conversation, accept it and say that then it will be important to make notes so that something is not forgotten*). I also need to tell you that the story of some events can be uncomfortable for you and that you may be upset and remember some difficult things during and after this conversation. If that happens, you can contact us (*insert here whom the child can contact*) and we will make sure that you get help from professional and reliable persons.

We have the consent of your parents/guardians to talk to you, but your consent to participate in the research is very important to us and we ask you to tell us if what we have said so far is clear and correct. We also have a written form that, if you agree, you should sign so that both you and we have a confirmation that you understand what I just explained to you, that it is clear to you what our obligations and responsibilities are when dealing with the information you give us and that you agreed.

Do you have a question for me at the moment? (*signing the form*)

INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- How would you introduce yourself? What should we call you during the conversation? Do you have a name that you suggest for yourself that we use later when we present this research to others - a special name that is not recognised by those whom you do not need or do not want to know that you participated in this research? If you can't remember or choose now, you can tell me that special name later. Okay?

- It is important for us to know how old you are, where you come from (*country of origin*) and with whom you travel (with family, relatives, friends, unaccompanied - with a group of peers or independently) (*facilitator makes a note, entering in the reporting form later or on the spot*)

FRAMEWORK QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell us how you understand what violence against children is?
(An open question)

2. Many children say they have experienced violence along the migration journey. What do you know about the types of violence that children experience on the road? *(An open question, go through the first set of answers, then add a reminder to the extent necessary)*

2.1. Physical
2.2. Emotional/psychological
2.3. Sexual
2.4. Child labour
    i. Have you heard of or seen the experiences of other children?
    ii. What experiences of violence did you face along the way?
    Has anyone threatened you?

3. We know that many children travel and have different experiences. How do you understand the experiences of different children with violence?

3.1. Boys, girls
3.2. Older, younger
3.3. With and without being accompanied by a family
3.4. Children with disabilities
    i. For which of these groups is it easier/harder? Why?
    ii. In different places on the road – transit points at the beginning of the journey, at the borders (which ones)?
    iii. In (two or three) previous countries from which the child arrived, in camps/places of accomodation, at the place child is residing now, what does he/she know, what is it like in the place where he/she wants to arrive (explore the knowledge of and experiences with the pushback practices)?

4. Along the way, children meet various people who are important to them for the continuation of their journey. Can you tell us who are those that help children who have survived violence during their journey? *(Look for an example - family, friends, official institutions, others)*

4.1. In which situations?
4.2. How?
4.3. Who helps children on the Balkan route?

5. What are the experiences of children who have experienced violence with official state institutions on the Balkan route? *(Clarify, seek examples)*

5.1. When do they meet them?
- i. Police
- ii. Social services
- iii. Reception centre staff
- iv. Health services and schools
- v. Humanitarian and volunteer organisations

5.2. What happens then?
5.3. How do they help children?
5.5. And what part of things they do does not help children? How?
5.6. What is especially important for them to keep in mind when working with children or when they meet children?

6. Besides official institutions, who else helps children? How are children helping each other? *(Clarify that this applies to people they meet on the road, groups they travel with, and other children - look for examples)*

6.1. In which situations?
6.2. How?
6.3. How do you help yourself when you find yourself in a situation of violence?

7. What do those who help children need to know in order to be able to help them in the right way?

7.1. How can they learn that best?

8. What would you say to helpers and those who are obliged or have the opportunity to help migrant children who have survived violence?

9. Do you want to share something else important with us? How did you feel while we were talking?

Thank the child for sharing his/her experiences with us and express hope that together we can improve the situation of children in migration, or similar.

ANNEX 2. CHILD CONSENT

I am _____, a researcher from Save the Children North West Balkans, which together with the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Sarajevo researches the experiences of migrant and refugee children with violence during their journey. The research is conducted within the project 'Violence against Children on the Balkans Migration Route - Solutions through Advocacy and Research', and includes advocacy for improving the position of children on the move in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

During the conversation with you and other young people, we will try to understand the experiences of children with violence, what children need during their migration journey, what and who best helps them in situations when they experience violence, especially while transiting the Balkan route. We want to give recommendations to those who help children and young people who migrate and their families.

Your participation is crucial to understanding how children are doing on this journey and what they need to be safe and protected. Ensuring anonymity and full respect for your privacy are our professional commitments. All information obtained will be completely confidential and will be used exclusively to understand the needs of children. No one will be able to access the data except the research team that compiles the report and recommendations. This conversation will be confidential, which means that neither the researcher nor the translator is allowed to tell others about your personal matters. However, if during the conversation the researcher finds out that someone is hurting you or that you are in danger, he/she will inform the people who are obliged to protect you.

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you do not want to talk about a particular topic or answer a specific question, please simply let the examiner know. Also, you can terminate the conversation at any time without adverse consequences. Since your views and experiences are important to us, if you agree, this conversation will be recorded to make sure that we did not miss anything. All participants in this research will be encrypted so that no one can find out which child said what exactly. If you have any additional questions about this research, you can ask the examiner before or during the interview. If you have any other questions about growing up, you can contact *(the name of a responsible person)*.

If you agree, please sign the following statement:
1. I agree to participate in this research.
2. I understand that my participation in the research is voluntary and that I can refuse it.
3. I understand that the research is anonymous, that personal information will be kept strictly confidential and that the data will only be available to the research team.

RESPONDENT

Name and surname _____

Signature _____

Place and date _____

EXAMINER

I confirm that I have orally provided the respondent all the information necessary to obtain full consent for participation in the research and that I have provided the respondent with a written document containing the information about the research and a copy of the consent to participate, and that he/she has agreed to participate.

Name and surname _____

Signature _____

Place and date _____

ANNEX 3. CONSENT FOR PARENTS-GUARDIANS

Save the Children North West Balkans, together with the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of the University of Sarajevo, is researching the experiences of migrant and refugee children with violence during their journey to the country they are heading to. The research is conducted within the project 'Violence against Children on the Balkans Migration Route - Solutions through Advocacy and Research', which includes advocacy for improving the position of children on the move in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

The purpose of the research is to understand the types of violence against migrant children on the Balkan route, to explain the characteristics of violence and the factors that contribute to it or that protect migrant and refugee children. Based on the results, our goal is to establish the foundations for a national and regional policy framework for the protection of and assistance to children in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

The participation of refugee and migrant children in this research is thereby crucial for understanding their specific needs. By talking to them directly, we will try to understand how it is possible to improve their protection and well-being. During the research, we will pay special attention to the protection of the rights of every child we talk to. Interviews with children will be conducted by experienced professionals with the help of trained translators. The participation of children is anonymous and voluntary, which means that their personal data will be handled carefully and that the conversation will be strictly confidential. The results of the research will be published in a report in the spring of 2022. The results will not use the real names of the children, nor any other information that may reveal the child's identity or endanger his or her safety. No one will be able to access personal data except the research team that processes the data to compile the report.

We need your consent for the child whose parent/guardian you are to participate in the research. It is also very important to us that the children who participate do so completely voluntarily and without pressure, and therefore, in addition to your consent, we must also obtain the consent of the child. If you agree, please sign the following statement:

1. I read the document with information about the research. I was informed about the nature, purpose, duration and expected outcomes of the research, as well as about possible issues. I received information about research organisers and the contact details of the person who I can inquire with about this research at a later date.

2. As a parent/legal guardian, I give my permission to the research team to contact (enter the child's name and surname) _____ and ask him/her to participate in the research.

3. I understand that the participation of the child for which I give my consent in the research is voluntary and that both the child and I can refuse to participate.

4. I understand that the interview with the child is anonymous, that personal information will be held strictly confidential, available solely to the research team and used exclusively for the report drafting.

5. I certify that I have received a signed copy of this document.

Name and surname of parent/guardian _____

Parent/guardian's signature _____

Place and date _____

Name and surname of the researcher _____

Researcher's signature _____

ANNEX 4.

CHILD INTERVIEW REPORT

GENERAL INFORMATION
Interviewer name _____
Respondent

a) Chosen name	
b) Sex	• M • F
c) Age *(years)*	
d) Country of origin	
e) Status	**• traveling with parents • traveling unaccompanied • other – fill in**
f) Accommodated in: *(Name of the camp/home etc.)*	
g) Other observations	

3. Interview location _____
4. Interview date _____
5. Interview duration _____

B. INTRODUCTION (CHECK LIST) Explain/answer:
• Research purpose, what it will be used for, agree on the duration of the interview
• Confidentiality and limitations, name encoding
• Issues of recording and data/anonymity
• Interruption of the interview
• Adequate space for the interview, without interruption or interference
Other observations

C. FINAL PART (CHECK LIST)
• Did you thank the child and ask for feedback?
• Did you feel threatened/stressed?
• What was the atmosphere at the end of the interview?
Other observations

D. INTERVIEWER'S NOTES
Organisation (communication with gatekeepers, service providers, transport, response – what happened, how it was handled and interviewer's impressions).

_____

Relationship with interpreters (contracting, course of the cooperation, events during children's interviews and after).

_____

Contact with the child-respondent (motivation, unclear questions, need for feedback – what happened, how it was handled and interviewer's impressions).
• Motivation
• Communication

_____

Interview location, events during the interview, presence of other people
• Specific events during the interview
• Respondent's reaction to note taking

_____

Suggestions, additional needs and further activities

_____

Note made by:

_____

ANNEX 5 FOCUS GROUPS PROTOCOL

I PREVALENCE AND LEVEL OF VIOLENCE AND PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

1. How prevalent is violence against children migrants/refugees that you worked with, or that you head about from colleagues or in some other way?

2. Which groups of children are more vulnerable than others, related to their personal characteristics – sex, age, ethnicity, status, disability etc? Why?

3. Which types of violence are children refugees/migrants exposed to in your country, in countries of origin and in third countries they pass along their way to your country?

4. What types of risks are children refugees/migrants exposed to?

5. Under which circumstances does violence usually take place?

6. Who are people who most often commit violence against these children?

7. Can you share with us some examples involving experiences of the refugee/migrant children you have worked with, who had survived violence on their journey or in the country they are currently in? Have you, perhaps, heard or read of all the experiences of these children?

8. Do you have a protocol or a manual with indicators that show that a child is exposed to violence? To what extent do you use it? What is your experience with recognizing violence against children refugees/migrants outside of the prescribed or learned indicators?

9. Which measures have you taken so far to protect migrant children from violence (from your professional/working position, or from the position of your organisation/institution)?

10. What are your experiences related to outcomes of the measures undertaken to protect children who have been exposed, or are at immediate risk of being exposed to violence? What happened after?

11. What are your experiences with gender-based violence when it comes to refugee/migrant children? How do you understand it and recognise it?

12. What are the greatest challenges in the context you work in (in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, children's countries of origin, countries that children pass through on their way to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, countries of destination) in: a) identification, b) protection planning, and c) working with migrant/refugee children who have survived violence?

13. What would you change and what are your recommendations for improvement in the context you work in (in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, countries of origin, countries children pass through on their way to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and in destination countries) in terms of: a) identification, b) protection planning, and c) working with migrant/refugee children who have survived violence?

II CHILD SUPPORT SYSTEMS

14. Who are the stakeholders helping children on the move during their journey?
- What is the role of police in protecting children in migrations from violence? Do they endanger children in some way?
- What is the role of child protection services, i.e., centre for social work in the protection of refugee/migrant children from violence? In what way do social workers help children on the move? Do they endanger children in some way?
- In your experience, who do children most often turn to when they survive violence on their journey to your country, and inside your country.

15. In what way can refugee/migrant children who have survived violence get medical assistance? What is the experience of these children with healthcare services?

16. In which places does violence against children usually take place? What happens with centres for accommodation of migrants/asylum seekers when it comes to children on the move? To what extent are these places safe places for children (space, equipment, staff, other migrants, local population, individuals)?

17. With which organisations do the children on the move come into most contact? When and where? Do these organisations help them and in what way? Do they endanger children in some way?

18. How would you describe the cooperation between civil society and government bodies in terms of protecting refugee/migrant children from violence? Is the approach to the protection of children who have suffered violence on their way to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia (needing help recovering) different to that for children who have suffered violence in your country (criminal prosecution, removing the child from the situation etc)?

19. What are your recommendations to improve support for refugee/migrant children?

III CULTURALLY SENSITIVE CHILD PROTECTION

20. Are cultural specificities taken into account when providing child protection, and to what extent? In what way? (In nutrition, activities, general child protection)

21. What are the major cultural challenges in providing refugee/migrant children protection?

22. What is the cooperation with bodies, services, organisations and colleagues from other countries like, in terms of providing support and protection to children who experienced violence during migration?

23. What would you recommend to improve child protection in a culturally appropriate way on the local, national and international levels?

ANNEX 6. INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN FOCUS GROUPS

Organisation Save the Children North West Balkans, together with the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Sarajevo, is conducting research on the experience of migrant and refugee children with violence during their journey towards their chosen country of destination. The research is being conducted within the project Violence against children on the Balkans migration route – Solutions through advocacy and research, encompassing advocacy for the improvement of the position of children on the move in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, with support from the Sexual Violence Research Initiative (**SVRI**).

The purpose of this research is to understand the nature of violence against migrant children on the Balkans route, to explain the characteristics of violence and factors contributing to it, or those protecting migrant and refugee children. The purpose is to set up a national and regional policy framework and foundations to child protection practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia based on the findings of this research. Within this research, four focus groups will be held with relevant participants – two in Serbia and two in Bosnia and Herzegovina, accompanied by semi-structured interviews.

The focus groups will last **90 minutes** and it is important that you are open and honest. We assure you that anything you share today will be treated as **confidential**. That means that anything you say here will be used carefully and that no one outside of the research team and the participants of the focus group will have access to our conversation. Anything you say will be **anonymous**, so please feel free to share.

If you are not comfortable or you do not wish to discuss any of the issues, or if you believe that you don't have sufficient information to discuss them, please state so without hesitation.

To make sure we don't omit any part of the conversation, the group work shall be recorded on video and audio, with your permission, to facilitate the analysis. The recorded materials, transcripts and data will be used for research purposes and will be available exclusively to the research team members. In addition, your name will not appear anywhere.

Please confirm that you have read the above information and sign this consent form prior to the start of the focus group.

I have been informed and I agree to participate in the research,

NAME _____


Save the Children