

Women and girls on the move

A gender analysis of mixed migration from the Middle East to Europe

Introduction

This briefing paper focuses on the experience of women and girls travelling to Europe, in order to provide a more detailed understanding of factors surrounding the decision to leave home, the type of journey undertaken, and their experience along the way. Produced by the Joint Analysis Unit on behalf of the newly established Mixed Migration Platform¹, this briefing paper is the first in a series of studies examining specific issues pertinent to migration to, from and within the Middle East region.

While gendered studies of migration are far from new, the prevalence of migration among women and girls varies by region and has also changed significantly over time. Since 2014, the characteristics of mixed migration from the Middle East towards Europe have shifted considerably in scale, composition and gender balance, and merit further investigation.

Between 2014 and 2016, women and girls have made up a relatively small proportion of arrivals to Europe, accounting for less than a third of all first time asylum applicants. Despite the availability of some sex- and age-disaggregated data on arrivals by sea and formal asylum applications, relatively little is known about the specific drivers, triggers and experiences of women and girls travelling to Europe and how they may differ from those of men. In order to address this information gap, this paper draws upon existing data about women's migration in general, together with more recent studies conducted in transit and arrival countries to examine the characteristics and concerns specific to women and girls travelling to Europe as part of mixed migration flows, primarily from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Key messages

- Women and girls make up just under a third of asylum applicants in the EU, a small but growing proportion.
- There is no evidence to suggest that recent policy changes have discouraged women and girls from migrating to Europe – the proportion of female asylum applicants has continued to increase since the launch of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016.
- Vulnerability among refugees and other migrants is influenced by multiple factors, not just gender. Women and girls face different risks to men and boys at different points along the journey, leaving them both more and less vulnerable to specific threats.
- Tightened restrictions on entry to Europe place all those who continue to travel at greater risk of violence and exploitation than prior to the closure of the Western Balkans route.
- Humanitarian responders and government policy-makers should do more to account for other factors affecting vulnerability, such as socio-economic status, access to livelihoods, basic services and assistance.

Methodology

This briefing paper draws upon available secondary data about the migration experience of women and girls, where relevant, including comparisons with men and boys. While primarily focused on the characteristics of migration to Europe from the Middle East region in the past two years, this desk review also makes reference to wider global and regional trends to place findings in context. Consulted sources include academic literature, government policy papers, and humanitarian analyses of needs and trends, as

¹ For more information see: www.mixedmigrationplatform.org

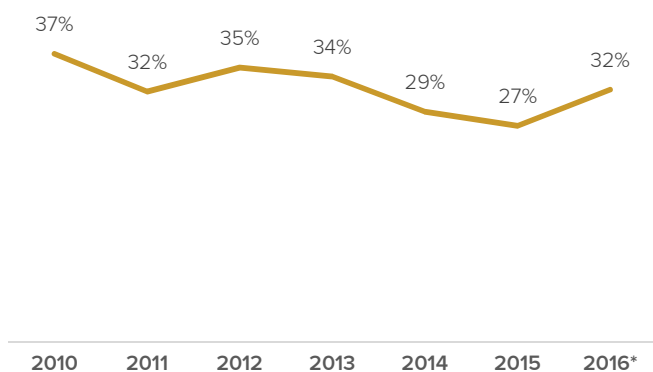
well as statistical data on arrivals by sea (UNHCR)² and asylum applicants to EU countries (Eurostat).³

Several limitations have affected the way in which data is presented in this study. First, statistical data on arrivals and asylum applications are not directly comparable – the total number of asylum applicants is far greater than the total number of arrivals by sea and the demographic groupings used by both sources are different. Since UNHCR figures categorise arrivals as either *women*, *men*, or *children*, this study draws primarily on Eurostat data, which is disaggregated by both sex and age. However, it is important that while individuals travelling through or from the Middle East make up the majority of asylum applicants since 2015, not all are recent arrivals to the EU, nor have they travelled through irregular means.⁴ Second, very few studies focus on the different experiences and motivations of women and men, and almost never of girls and boys, highlighting significant data gaps. Where insufficient information is available to draw conclusions, this is clearly stated.

What is the prevalence of women and girls migrating to Europe?

While women and girls make up around half of refugees worldwide⁵ and nearly half of global migrants are understood to be women⁶, the balance between men and women among refugees and other migrants differs considerably across regions and cultures.⁷ Of the 1,257,030 first time asylum applicants to European Union (EU) countries in 2015, females accounted for only 27%, the lowest proportion for eight years.⁸

Figure 1: Proportion of females applying for asylum in the EU ⁴



² UNHCR data portal: Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response - Mediterranean

³ European Commission / Eurostat, Asylum and Managed Migration Data. [Accessed: 10 December 2016].

⁴ Nationals of Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, OPT, Israel made up 59% of all applicants in 2015 and 2016. Eurostat (2016) First time asylum applicants by citizenship and sex. Monthly data (rounded) [migr_asyappctzm]. Data for 2016 excludes monthly figures for November and December as data was not yet available at the time of writing.

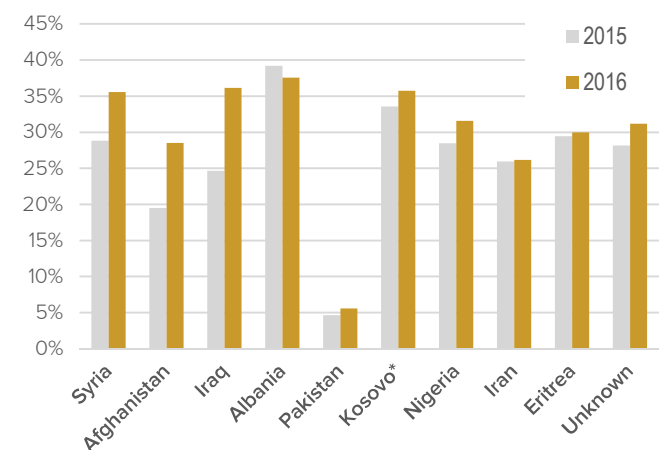
⁵ In 2015, women were estimated to make up 47% of all refugees for which data was available. UNHCR (2016) Global Trends Report 2015.

⁶ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2016) International Migration Report 2015: Highlights.

⁷ K. M. Donato and D. Gabaccia (2016). "The Global Feminization of Migration: Past, Present, and Future" in Migration Policy Institute Online Journal, June 2016.

Between January and October 2016, however, the proportion of females increased to 32% of all asylum applicants – an 18.5% increase compared to 2015.⁹ With around 60% of refugees and other migrants arriving in Europe in 2016 understood to have entered via “covert” means, these women and children are not just arriving by sea, but entering Europe in a variety of ways – either paid for by family members already in Europe, smuggled overland, or overstaying other types of visa.¹⁰

Figure 2: Proportion of women applying for asylum in the EU between 2015 and 2016 ¹¹



When examined by country of citizenship, the shift is even more apparent. Comparisons of data from 2015 and from January to October 2016 show an increase in the proportion of women and girls among asylum applicants for the top ten nationalities, with the greatest change observed among Iraqis and Afghans, among which the proportion of females increased by 47% and 46% respectively.¹²

While family re-unification – among the main reasons for migration to the EU for the past twenty years¹³ – clearly plays a role, the fact that many young men left ahead of other family members in the first place is influenced by a number of factors. These include changing social and cultural norms; access to protection, basic services and assistance; and perceptions of exposure to risk along the way. The following section discusses each of these factors in turn, including how they have been influenced by changing policies in countries of departure, transit and destination.

⁸ Eurostat (2015) First time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex. Annual aggregated data [migr_asyappctza].

*Data for 2016 excludes monthly figures for November and December as data was not yet available at the time of writing.

⁹ Eurostat (2016) First time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex. Monthly data (rounded) [migr_asyappctzm].

¹⁰ Cosgrave, J et al. (2016) Europe's refugees and migrants Hidden flows, tightened borders and spiralling costs, London: ODI.

¹¹ Eurostat (2016) First time asylum applicants by citizenship and sex. Monthly data (rounded) [migr_asyappctzm]. Data for 2016 excludes monthly figures for November and December as data was not yet available at the time of writing.

* Under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244/99

¹² Applicants from these ten countries account for 75% of total applications in 2015 and 2016.

¹³ European Commission (2016) Migration and Home Affairs: Family reunification

What influences the decision for women and girls to migrate?

Social and cultural norms

Women's opportunities to migrate in the first place are affected by traditional gender roles and cultural norms, as well as the existence of a 'culture of migration', in which some families or communities have come to consider migration as a viable strategy to counter suffering and increase opportunity.¹⁴

The extent of the influence of differing social and cultural dynamics can be clearly seen when comparing the proportion of female asylum applicants by nationality. In 2015 for example, females made up 29% of Syrian asylum applicants in EU countries, compared to 20% of Afghans and 5% of Pakistanis.¹⁵

As well as influencing the likelihood that women will migrate at all, socio-economic background, society and culture in countries of origin underpin the decision-making process for those who leave.¹⁶ *"It's a society that believes the man should go out to work and the woman should look after the home and the children [...] She doesn't even think about [migrating]"* explained one Senegalese man interviewed for a recent study by ODI, when asked about the uneven gender balance among migrants from his country of origin.¹⁷

Despite the existence of such stereotypes, women are frequently active, rather than passive agents in the decision to migrate.¹⁸ While decision-making varied on a case-by-case basis, married women in mixed migration flows interviewed in the Western Balkans often explained that the decision to leave home was made jointly with their husbands.¹⁹ A common theme in much of the literature reviewed, however, was how exposure to risk in areas of origin was also a key consideration in the decision-making process, often leading an entire family to move due to greater danger faced by men or boys, who are often more likely to be caught up in active conflict or called up for military service. However, in a small minority of cases, women deliberately left ahead of other family members, based on the assumption that they and their children would more easily gain asylum, enabling their husband to join them later.²⁰

Cultural norms change, and attitudes to migration are no exception. Ironically, widespread media coverage of the so-called 'European Refugee Crisis' in the summer and autumn

of 2015 served to confirm to many that travel to Europe was achievable, shifting attitudes and acting as a catalyst to further migration into 2016.²¹ Despite the significant risks involved, news of the relative ease of the journey raised awareness of migration among those left behind and contributed to a growing cultural acceptance of migration. At the same time, growing numbers of arrivals to the EU increased the likelihood of potential migrants knowing someone else that had already made the journey, a factor widely acknowledged as an important influencing factor.²²

For women, changing perceptions about the relative ease of the journey are important in several ways. First, since women are more likely to be travelling with children and other family members,²³ perceptions of safety are clearly very important. Second, the growing social network of friends, family members, and others of the same nationality who have safely arrived in an intended destination increases the viability of migration as a concept, as well as the potential for family-reunification, a historical driver of women's migration.²⁴ Third, the temporary separation of families is a common strategy to manage the risk inherent in any migration. Especially when resources are limited, the idea of men risking the first journey ahead of other family members – in order to establish themselves, find work and housing, and save money to bring other family members later in greater comfort – is a common strategy at a global scale.²⁵

Finally, legal restrictions, tied to cultural norms, in many countries of origin limit the rights of women compared to men. According to data from the World Bank, married women in Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq (among others) must all seek permission from their husbands in order to travel outside the home, while in Afghanistan and Pakistan married women are restricted from applying for either a national identity card or a passport without their husband's permission.²⁶ While such restrictions appear not to have prevented large numbers of Syrian, Iraqi and Afghan women from travelling to Europe – perhaps due to the fact that many travelled by irregular means – those without access to official documentation are forced to travel overland, often exposing them to greater risks and higher costs.²⁷ A lack of access to official documentation can also increase vulnerability prior to departure. Birth certificates, for example are often a pre-requisite to accessing housing and a range of basic services, but in some countries, such as Jordan, married women are not able to register children's births or confer citizenship.²⁸

¹⁴ De Haas, H "Euro-Mediterranean migration futures: The cases of Morocco, Egypt and Turkey" in Bommes, M et. al (Eds.) (2014) *Migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe*. Amsterdam: AUP; Cohen, R. and Jónsson, G. (2011) 'Introduction: Connecting Culture and Migration', in R. Cohen and G. Jónsson (eds.) *Migration and Culture*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

¹⁵ Eurostat (2015) First time asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex. Annual aggregated data for 2015 (rounded) [migr_asyappctza].

¹⁶ Boyd, Monica & Grieco, Elizabeth (2003) "Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory" in Online Journal of the Migration Policy Institute.

¹⁷ Hagen-Zanker, J and Mallett, R (2016) *Journeys to Europe The role of policy in migrant decision-making*. London: ODI.

¹⁸ Gerard, A. (2014) *The Securitization of Migration and Refugee Women*. Oxford: Routledge; Robinson, V and Segrott, J (2002) *Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers*. London: Home Office.

¹⁹ UN Women (2016) *Gender assessment of the refugee and migration crisis in Serbia and FYR Macedonia*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ REACH (2015) *Migration trends & patterns of Syrian asylum seekers travelling to the European Union*

²² Gubert, F and Nordman, C, *Migration from MENA to OECD Countries: Trends, Determinants, and Prospects*. World Bank.

²³ According to data collected in the Western Balkans between December 2015 and May 2016, women travelling without family members accounted for only 6% of interviewed groups, compared to groups of men (21%), and complete or partial nuclear families (73%). REACH (2016) *Consolidated report on migration to Europe through the Western Balkans*

²⁴ Fleury, A. (2016) "Understanding Women and Migration: A Literature Review." KNOMAD Working Paper 8. World Bank.

²⁵ Ghosh, J. (2009). "Migration and Gender Empowerment: Recent Trends and Emerging Issues." Human Development Research Paper 04. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

²⁶ World Bank (2015) "Women, Business and Law 2016: Getting to Equal."

²⁷ Achilli, L. (2016) *Displacement Trends of Syrian Asylum Seekers to the EU*. San Domenico di Fiesole (FI): European University Institute.

²⁸ World Bank (2015) "Women, Business and Law 2016: Getting to Equal."

Access to protection, employment and services

The availability of gender-disaggregated data on influencing factors is very limited, providing no concrete evidence to suggest that access to protection, employment or basic services hold differing weight for women or men. Variation in the relative importance of these factors can be seen by nationality, however, with Syrian and Iraqi groups (which include higher proportions of females) more likely to cite active conflict as the primary push factor than Afghans and people of other nationalities, who tended to report a wider range of influences, including generalised violence and insecurity, limited livelihood opportunities and a lack of access to basic services.²⁹

With these limitations in mind, evidence from interviews and focus group discussions points to some areas in which issues related to protection, employment and access to services for women and girls – particularly education – may have had a particular influence on the decision to migrate.

Safety and security have been overwhelmingly reported by refugees and other migrants as the primary reasons for travelling to Europe. Even for those not fleeing situations of active conflict, many reported significant exposure to risk and a lack of access to protection in their areas of origin. These situations of generalised violence and insecurity are characterised by several themes: terrorism and armed violence, recruitment to armed forces, and the risk of kidnap, which present differing levels of risk for women, men, boys and girls.³⁰ In interviews conducted with refugees and other migrants in 2015, the actions of non-state actors, such as the so-called Islamic State, were considered a particular threat to women and girls, especially for those who refused to comply with strict laws concerning dress and behaviour that had been imposed by armed groups.³¹ On the other hand, recruitment or conscription to armed forces is often an issue directly affecting males, and commonly reported by young men from Syria, Eritrea, Iran and Afghanistan. While less likely to be recruited to fight, it is also important to note that women may also be associated with armed groups for a range of daily tasks, as well as sex.

Often as a result of conflict and insecurity, a lack of access to livelihoods was a commonly reported reason behind flight from countries of origin, while opportunities for employment were a common factor influencing travel to Europe.³² While forced migrants often lack sufficient access to livelihoods to enable them to meet their basic needs and women tend to suffer disproportionately, this study found no evidence to suggest that women's access to employment was a specific

reason behind migration, although this was undoubtedly the case for some individuals.

While lower rates of female employment were already the norm in Syria prior to the crisis,³³ and Syrian refugee women across the region are less likely than men to have access to formal employment,³⁴ in many cases, the conflict appears to have disrupted traditional gender roles with regards to work. Within Syria, many women responded to the changing situation by taking on more active roles in their communities, transforming their daily lives, outlook and aspirations. *“Our lives were predictable... Then this conflict occurred, and it has turned everything on its head. I can never go back to doing what I did before; I can never be so meek and ordinary,”* explained one woman from Aleppo, who became responsible for aid-distributions for up to 10,000 families a month.³⁵ In displacement, some women have also taken on the role of breadwinner. In some cases, particularly in Lebanon, scarce opportunities and significant gender pay gaps allow some women to undercut males in the informal labour market³⁶ while in other contexts, such as camps in Jordan, women have benefitted from employment or cash-for-work programmes provided by aid organisations. Some evidence suggests that this switch in gender dynamics has been problematic, lowering men's self-esteem and testing family relationships;³⁷ while others suggest that women's employment has resulted in positive developments, increasing household incomes and countering boredom.³⁸ Such examples illustrate how in some cases conflict has shifted gender roles, perceptions of opportunity and aspirations, but the precise nature of the relationship between these attitudes and migration requires further investigation.

Access to education emerged in many studies as an important factor influencing the decision to travel to Europe, both for those with children and those without. Its relative importance compared to other factors appears to vary somewhat by nationality, with refugees and other migrants from Afghanistan, Pakistan and North African countries more likely to report education as a pull factor than either Syrians or Iraqis.³⁹ In a study by the Mediterranean Migration Research Programme (MEDMIG), several participants mentioned the closure of schools due to escalating conflict as a push factor.⁴⁰ Even in cases when education was still available prior to departure for Europe, common barriers include the inability to afford school fees and supplies, a lack of qualified teaching staff, high transportation costs and unsafe access routes, while for displaced children, language was also a common issue.⁴¹ For one group of Syrian women

²⁹ REACH (2016) Consolidated report on migration to Europe through the Western Balkans

³⁰ Crawley, H, Düvell, F, Jones, K, McMahon, S and Sigona, N. (2016) 'Destination Europe? Understanding the dynamics and drivers of Mediterranean migration in 2015', MEDMIG Final Report.

³¹ Crawley, H, Düvell, F, Jones, K, McMahon, S and Sigona, N. (2016) 'Destination Europe? Understanding the dynamics and drivers of Mediterranean migration in 2015', MEDMIG Final Report.

³² Hagen-Zanker, J and Mallett, R (2016) Journeys to Europe The role of policy in migrant decision-making. London: ODI.

³³ World Bank data: Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate).

³⁴ IMPACT (2016) Social Context Analysis of Social Cohesion and Livelihoods Impacts in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq as a Result of the Syria Crisis.

³⁵ Haddad, W (2014) How the crisis is altering women's roles in Syria. Forced Migration Review Online.

³⁶ According to a 2014 study by ILO, Syrian women in Lebanon were found to be earning 40% less than men. ILO (2014). Assessment of the impact of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and their employment profile. Beirut: ILO.

³⁷ El-Masri, R. Harvey, C. Garwood, R. (2013) Shifting Sands: changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon. OXFAM/ABAAD.

³⁸ Statton, B (2016) "Gender roles for Syrian refugees are changing in Jordan's camps" in Middle East Eye, 3 August 2016

³⁹ REACH (2016) Consolidated report on migration to Europe through the Western Balkans

⁴⁰ Crawley, H, Düvell, F, Jones, K, McMahon, S and Sigona, N. (2016) 'Destination Europe? Understanding the dynamics and drivers of Mediterranean migration in 2015', MEDMIG Final Report.

⁴¹ See for example: Unicef/REACH (2014) Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon; Unicef/REACH (2015) Access to education for Syrian refugee children and youth in Jordanian host communities; Unicef/REACH (2016) Baseline assessment for education cash transfer programming for IDPs in Dahuk Governorate.

interviewed by researchers from the Overseas Development Institute, education was “clearly the most influential factor driving their movement towards Germany.”⁴²

What are the risks faced by women and girls on the move?

For most refugees and other migrants, migration to Europe involves considerable risk, regardless of age or gender. Journeys typically cover thousands of miles and frequently include traumatic events and unexpected challenges that affect the physical and psychological wellbeing of people on the move. It is important to recognise that women and girls face all these challenges, although often to a different extent and in different ways to men and boys. In fact, available data on protection incidents faced by women and men contradicts the assumption that migrant women may be more vulnerable to violence,⁴³ showing that men face greater risk of assault, theft, physical violence, detention, kidnap and forced labour along the journey to Europe, likely exacerbated by their tendency to travel alone.⁴⁴ Instead, much of the available literature on migration to the region in recent years focuses on three specific risks for women and girls: health complications—particularly for pregnant women; sexual exploitation; and gender-based violence.⁴⁵

Sexual and gender-based violence

Exposure to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is reported to affect a minority of all refugees and other migrants arriving in Europe, but appears to be a significant issue for those travelling northward across Africa and the Central Mediterranean route, particularly for women. Reports from multiple actors suggest that “refugee women and girls, particularly sub-Saharan Africans, faced significant societal, sexual, and gender-based violence,”⁴⁶ often at the hands of smugglers.⁴⁷ According to MEDMIG researchers, “over 80% of Nigerian women interviewed in Europe described experiences of exploitation including having to engage in transactional sex to pay for their journeys, as well as sex trafficking”, although it is important to note that this figure comes from a small subset of the overall sample.⁴⁸ Awareness of the potential risk of sexual abuse, including rape, also appears to be high, with up to 63% of female potential migrants interviewed by the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat indicating “that they would definitely take contraceptives in preparation for the migration journey.”⁴⁹

⁴² Hagen-Zanker, J and Mallett, R (2016) Journeys to Europe The role of policy in migrant decision-making. London: ODI.

⁴³ Fleury, A. (2016) “Understanding Women and Migration: A Literature Review.” KNOMAD Working Paper 8. World Bank

⁴⁴ IOM. (2016). The human trafficking and other exploitative practices prevalence indication survey. June-September 2016.

⁴⁵ UN Women (2016) Gender assessment of the refugee and migration crisis in Serbia and FYR Macedonia.

⁴⁶ UN Women (2016) Gender assessment of the refugee and migration crisis in Serbia and FYR Macedonia; US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (2016) 2015 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Egypt.

⁴⁷ IOM (2016) Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A global review of the emerging evidence base. Geneva: IOM.

⁴⁸ Crawley, H, Düvell, F, Jones, K, McMahon, S and Sigona, N. (2016) ‘Destination Europe? Understanding the dynamics and drivers of Mediterranean migration in 2015’, MEDMIG Final Report.

⁴⁹ RMMS (2014) The Letter of the Law: regular and irregular migration in Saudi Arabia in a context of rapid change.

While limited data is publicly available about the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence among women and girls travelling to Europe from the Middle East, anecdotal evidence suggests similar concerns. A joint assessment conducted at sites in Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia reported that women had been forced to provide sexual favours and engage in transactional sex to fund their journey – including having to “pay for” travel documents.⁵⁰ A CARE assessment of primarily Syrian women in Greece found that “some mothers travelling on their own...had to resort to forming sexual relations in order to travel under the protection of a man.”⁵¹ Uneven power relations between smugglers and clients, long migration journeys and inadequate access to shelter while in transit only exacerbate such risks.

Even upon arrival in Europe, conditions in transit sites and reception centres can be challenging. The Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan describes how women with inadequate access to appropriate services face heightened risks of sexually transmitted infection, unwanted pregnancies, and complications during pregnancy and delivery.⁵² Testimonies collected by Amnesty International illustrate the vulnerability of women refugees and other migrants to sexual advances from smugglers. In the words of a 23-year old Syrian woman: “*At the hotel in Turkey, one of the men working with the smuggler, a Syrian man, said if I sleep with him, I will not pay or pay less. Of course I said no, it was disgusting. The same happened in Jordan to all of us.*”⁵³ According to one study of reception facilities in Germany, forced prostitution and human trafficking were reported within the centre, while “overcrowding and the lack of space and privacy create a situation in which it has become easier to commit sexual assault against women and children.”⁵⁴

Exploitation by smugglers

Smuggling may also present particular risks for women and girls, particularly for economic reasons. Since wealthier individuals can afford safer and more comfortable smuggling options,⁵⁵ and female-headed households tend to have access to fewer resources, this could have several possible consequences for single or widowed women.⁵⁶ In some cases, women may opt for the only smuggling package they can afford, thereby increasing their likelihood of exposure to risk along the way. In others, women may wait longer in order to save money for a safer route, which may partly explain the lower proportion of women among earlier migration flows towards Europe. In both cases, those with

⁵⁰ UN Women. “Report warns refugee women on the move in Europe are at risk of sexual and gender-based violence” Press release, January 2016.

⁵¹ Care International (2016) On her own: How women forced to flee from Syria are shouldering increased responsibility as they struggle to survive.

⁵² Europe Situation - Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan, January-December 2016

⁵³ Amnesty International (2016) Refugees are in urgent need of protection from sexual and gender-based violence.

⁵⁴ Bonewitt, A. (2016) Reception of female refugees and asylum seekers in the EU - Case study Germany. Brussels: EU Policy Department.

⁵⁵ IOM (2016) Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A global review of the emerging evidence base. Geneva: IOM.

⁵⁶ No comprehensive data is available on the overall proportion of female-headed households among mixed migration flows, although anecdotal data suggests this is not uncommon. For example, one assessment by CARE International estimated that female-headed households accounted for 50% of those in Oraiokastro Camp, Greece. Care International (2016) On her own: How women forced to flee from Syria are shouldering increased responsibility as they struggle to survive.

the least resources spend a higher proportion of their income or savings on smuggling, further increasing their vulnerability upon arrival. Once the choice has been made to travel with an agent or smuggler, anecdotal evidence suggests that some women, be particularly vulnerable, such as those who are pregnant women or travelling with infants and children⁵⁷.

Trafficking

According to the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, women globally are considered particularly vulnerable to human trafficking due to poverty and exclusion—factors intensified by social and cultural traditions.⁵⁸ In the EU, estimates from 2012-2013 suggest that up to 80% of victims of trafficking victims are women (67%) and girls (13%).⁵⁹ Refugees and other migrants also represent a vulnerable sub-group due to their lack of access to traditional protection mechanisms and often limited resources.⁶⁰

In the context of mixed migration to Europe, data from the Human Trafficking and Other Exploitative Practices Prevalence Indication Survey provides a useful indication of the prevalence of trafficking and related risks.⁶¹ Based on six proxy indicators—working without payment, engaging in forced labour, receiving offers of employment, being approached to arrange a marriage, being offered cash for blood or organs, or being held against one’s will—the surveys found that men (15%) were more likely than women (9%) to have experienced at least one of these issues, particularly those travelling on the Central Mediterranean route. The only indicator for which women provided more positive answers than men was for being approached to arrange a marriage, reported by 5% of women and 1% of men interviewed between June and September 2016.⁶² It is important to note that these short surveys are not exhaustive and it is highly possible that protection incidents, particularly of a more sensitive nature, may have been under-reported.

Comparisons between two rounds of data collection show a concerning picture: 14% of those interviewed on the Eastern Mediterranean route via Turkey reported exposure to at least one of these protection issues between June and September 2016, double the proportion from December to May 2016.⁶³

Access to assistance

Along the migration journey, refugees and other migrants often receive assistance from multiple actors, including members of local communities, authorities, civil society and a range of humanitarian aid organisations. The provision of

food, water, clothing, sanitation facilities, medical care and accommodation was rapidly scaled-up in 2015 to respond to growing numbers of new arrivals. It was accompanied by several services focussing on the specific needs of women and girls, such as child- and women-friendly spaces and tailored psychosocial and medical support for women.⁶⁴ Based on models developed in other humanitarian contexts, such interventions were suited to relatively static populations, and in some cases failed to adapt sufficiently to the varying needs of people on the move, who were keen to continue to their final destination.⁶⁵

The fact that women refugees and other migrants are more likely to travel in groups—usually with other family members, and rarely without at least one man⁶⁶—had two consequences in this respect. On the one hand, group travel appears to be an effective protection strategy in itself, while on the other, it has posed difficulties for more vulnerable group members, making them less likely to stop to receive assistance for fear of being separated from their travelling companions in their haste to travel while borders remained open. Evidence from along the Western Balkans migration route illustrates how this can be particularly problematic for women’s health, with responders reporting “many cases of pregnant women refusing to stop for urgently needed medical care, because they risk missing the train for the next border and they (or their husband) do not want to be separated from their group. In several cases this has led to miscarriages.”⁶⁷

Faced with large numbers of people and limited resources, aid providers across Greece and the Western Balkans made significant efforts to prioritise those perceived to be more vulnerable, in some cases in line with national law.⁶⁸ While this usually resulted in preferential access to assistance for women and children, on some occasions, men were excluded from assistance altogether, in some cases resulting in tensions between groups of men and women on the move.⁶⁹ Other measures, such as the provision of gender-segregated latrines and separate sleeping areas for families and single men were largely appreciated by women and girls on the move, although women-friendly spaces for breastfeeding were often under-used for fear of being left behind in the haste to travel before borders closed. Members of civil society provided some innovative and gender-sensitive alternatives, such as baby carriers that could be strapped to a mother’s chest as she walked—both assisting those struggling with small children, and avoiding anxiety about family separation.

The rapid succession of increasingly restrictive policy changes in early 2016 only served to heighten people’s

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ UN.GIFT (2008) *An Introduction to Human Trafficking: Vulnerability, Impact and Action*. New York: United Nations

⁵⁹ Voronova, S, and Radjenovic, A (2016) Briefing: The gender dimension of human trafficking. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ IOM (2016) *Human Trafficking and Other Exploitative Practices Prevalence Indication Survey, December 2015 – May 2016; and IOM (2016) Human Trafficking and Other Exploitative Practices Prevalence Indication Survey, June – September 2016*.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. Overall figures disaggregated by sex were not provided.

⁶⁴ UN Women (2016) *Gender assessment of the refugee and migration crisis in Serbia and FYR Macedonia*.

⁶⁵ Despite this general trend, it is important to note that some agencies were quick to adapt. The provision of “transit kits” by Medecins Sans Frontiers is one such example, recognising that people’s need for movement often took priority over their medical needs.

⁶⁶ REACH (2016) *Consolidated report on migration to Europe through the Western Balkans*

⁶⁷ UN Women (2016) *Gender assessment of the refugee and migration crisis in Serbia and FYR Macedonia*.

⁶⁸ In Greek law, for example, vulnerable people include a) unaccompanied minors, b) Persons with a disability or serious illness, c) Elderly people, d) Pregnant or nursing women, e) Single parents with children, f) Victims of torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence or exploitation, persons with a post-traumatic disorder, g) Victims of trafficking in human beings. See: MSF (2016) *Greece in 2016: Vulnerable People Get Left Behind*.

⁶⁹ REACH (2015) *Situation Overview: European Migration Crisis, Western Balkans*.

desire to ‘keep moving’ upon arrival in Europe, motivated by the fear of imminent border closures. This affected people’s use of purpose-built facilities at arrival points, leaving centres such as the one-stop shop in Presevo, Serbia, almost empty by May 2016, as people headed towards exit points and the capital to increase their chances of onward travel.⁷⁰ Aid actors were unprepared for this shifting dynamic, and conditions in informal sites such as Idomeni in Greece, Luke Celovica Park in Belgrade, and Kelebija and Horgos on the Serbia/Hungary border were considerably worse than purpose-built transit sites and reception centres. Women, men, boys and girls in these locations suffered from limited access to adequate shelter and sanitation facilities, and had little privacy.⁷¹

Conclusion

The decision for women and girls to travel to Europe is influenced by a range of factors at the personal, household and community levels, mediated by changes to the political climate and migration policy in countries along the different migration routes.

While men continue to account for the majority of refugees and other migrants seeking asylum in the EU, the gender balance is shifting fast and implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016, appears not to have reduced the proportion of females applying for asylum in Europe. Instead, the growth of a ‘culture of migration’ in many countries of origin, alongside opportunities for family reunification, suggests that this trend is likely to continue, regardless of increasingly restrictive policies in Europe and the Middle East. Since the formal closure of the Western Balkans route and tightening of borders across the Middle East region, women have continued to leave home, travel to Europe, and apply for asylum in large numbers. However, the level of danger they face has increased due to tightening legislation and limited legal alternatives, leaving women and girls, like all those on the move, more likely to resort to smuggling and to face greater risks related to trafficking and exploitation.

Despite the assumption in most humanitarian programming that women and girls represent a particularly vulnerable group,⁷² the level of risk they face relative to men and boys varies at different moments of their migration, leaving them both more and less vulnerable to different threats. Upon arrival for example, females are less likely to be granted asylum than their male counterparts,⁷³ highlighting potential issues within the asylum system that affect women’s ability to tell their stories and prove their claims.⁷⁴ Clearly, vulnerabilities can vary as a result of different factors, not just the sex of an individual—both humanitarian programming and government policy-makers should be doing more to account for such nuances.

This review of literature has shown how structural inequalities, social and cultural factors, policy responses and humanitarian programming have created a set of characteristics and constraints particular to the migration of women and girls. These factors affect their journeys from beginning to end, and will continue to do so upon arrival. It has also highlighted several areas in which further research is needed in order to better understand the issues raised.

Suggested areas for future research:

- Move beyond the categories of “men, women, and children” to provide arrivals data disaggregated by sex and age, and avoid counting “women and children” as a single category. Girls and boys have different needs and are present in migration flows to differing degrees – this is particularly true in the case of unaccompanied minors who are often automatically assumed to be male.⁷⁵
- Address the lack of gender disaggregated data on motivations and triggers for movement, which currently limits our understanding of the relative importance of a range of factors to women and girls.
- Pay more attention to those left behind. The disproportionate presence of adult males arriving in Europe points to a high proportion of women and vulnerable family members remaining in areas of origin. The recent shift in gender balance shows that where men have left home, women are likely to follow, yet little is known about those left behind and their future intentions.

The Mixed Migration Platform (MMP) is a joint-NGO initiative providing quality mixed migration-related information for policy, programming and advocacy work, as well as critical information for people on the move. The platform was established by seven partners - ACAPS, Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Ground Truth Solutions, Internews, INTERSOS, REACH & Translators Without Borders (TWB) - and acts as an information hub on mixed migration in the region.

For more information visit: mixedmigrationplatform.org

⁷⁰ REACH (2016) Situation Overview: European Migration Crisis, May 2016.

⁷¹ See for example: Jones, N. “Scorching heat and poor conditions exacerbate suffering on Hungary-Serbia border”, IFRC website, 19 July 2016.

REACH (2016) European Migration Rapid Assessment: Belgrade and North Serbia, 28 April 2016.

⁷² See for example@ United Nations (2016) R3RP: Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2016–2017 in Response to the Syria Crisis, Iraq.

⁷³ In 2015, 51% of female asylum applicants were rejected by EU states, compared to 49% of male applicants. Eurostat (2016). First instance decisions on applications by citizenship, age and sex Annual aggregated data (rounded) [migr_asydcfsta].

⁷⁴ Bonewitt, A. (2016) Reception of female refugees and asylum seekers in the EU - Case study Germany. Brussels: EU Policy Department.

⁷⁵ 8,260 unaccompanied girls aged under 18 applied for asylum in 2015, accounting for a small but important minority (9%) of all applications by unaccompanied minors. Eurostat (2016) Asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied minors by citizenship, age and sex Annual data (rounded) [migr_asyunaa]