



# Justice for Forcibly Displaced Girls: Responses to Current Gaps and Challenges

## Working Paper

This Working Paper outlines the complex ways in which displacement affects girls' access to justice, and how these are often overlooked. It places special emphasis on the achievement of SDG16.2: 'put an end to abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence and torture against children', and SDG16.7: 'ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels,' located in the context of the 70<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women's priority theme of 'ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls.'

**Deliberate action to address the gaps and challenges faced by forcibly displaced girls is essential to achieve access to justice for all. By mid-2025, nearly [117.3 million](#) people had been forcibly displaced due to 'persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, or events that severely disrupt public order.' Children (under 18 years old) account for 40% of this population. However, the complex ways in which displacement affects girls' access to justice are often overlooked.**

## Introduction

This working paper contributes to the child-centred justice agenda of the [Global Working Group on Justice for Children](#) by focusing on forcibly displaced girls within the global justice gap. Special emphasis has been placed on [SDG16.2](#): 'put an end to abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence and torture against children', and [SDG16.7](#) to 'ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels'. At the same time, this paper also speaks directly to the discussions of the [70th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women \(CSW70\)](#). The priority theme of which is 'ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, including by promoting inclusive and equitable legal systems, eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices, and addressing structural barriers.' As global actors work towards ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, we have an opportunity to highlight the challenges experienced by forcibly displaced girls.

## Gaps and Challenges

**Separated and Unaccompanied Children:** Many children migrate alone, whether by choice or necessity. Separated\* and unaccompanied girls† who are without their primary caregiver are exposed to violence and challenges. Fear of deportation and mistrust of authorities cause many to remain hidden. Reliable global [estimates](#) are still lacking, making girls particularly invisible and depriving them of the necessary support.<sup>1</sup> [Barriers](#) to family reunification include procedural delays, legal hurdles, weak protective frameworks and difficulties in accessing support. **Responses:** Initiatives such as the [Save the Children North West Balkans Country Office's Balkans Migration and Displacement Hub](#) demonstrate how centring girls' voices in research and policy design can translate invisibility into informed, gender-responsive protection systems. Expanding empirical data collection, investing in cross-border information sharing, building trust through community outreach, and ensuring girls understand their rights can significantly improve early identification and access to guardianship, protection and family reunification pathways.

**Sexual and Gender-Based Violence:** Girls are more likely to experience [violence](#), neglect and abuse, including sexual abuse, trafficking and exploitation, than older women, men or boys. Consequently, girls on the move adopt various [self-protection strategies](#), including dressing as boys, taking contraception, or finding a male partner prior to or during travel, travelling in groups, engaging in survival sex (the exchange of sexual acts for necessities or protection) or sex work.<sup>2</sup> Effective responses prioritise integrated, mobile, and community-based services along migration routes and in camps, combining health care, psychosocial support, safe shelters, and legal assistance into a single, accessible entry point. **Responses:** Embedding early victim identification procedures and applying the non-punishment principle for trafficked children ensures girls are protected as children rather than criminalised.<sup>3</sup> Child-friendly justice mechanisms in civil and administrative proceedings tailored to the distinctive needs of girls are key to ensuring access to justice. The International Rescue Committee have demonstrated how, where the availability of quality services is limited, mobile sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) prevention and response services, as a model for the delivery of GBV services, are essential to develop a profile of comprehensive services.<sup>4</sup>

**Young Mothers and Early Marriage:** Poverty, insecurity, violence and family separation are linked to early and forced marriage and adolescent pregnancy.<sup>5,6</sup> Motherhood profoundly influences decisions to migrate, the costs associated with travelling, and creates additional anxieties around the provision of basic services such as food, shelter, health care and education.<sup>7</sup> Displacement, youth and poverty are frequently associated with malnutrition in

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\*[Separated](#) children are those who have been separated from both parents or their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but they may still be with other relatives.

† [Unaccompanied](#) children are those who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not under the care of an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.

‡ [Adolescence](#) is defined as 10-19 years old.

pregnant and lactating women and girls.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, forcibly displaced adolescent mothers may face [discrimination](#) from service providers and communities, creating barriers to seeking support.<sup>7,9</sup> Data and evidence gaps persist, particularly in measuring the experiences of young mothers in forced displacement and their children. **Responses:** [The Population Council](#) found that projects in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Liberia, Mexico, Tanzania, Kenya, and Zambia that combined asset transfers (transfer of cash, land, or goods to communities) with empowerment activities had a greater impact on school progression, delayed marriage, and safe sexual experiences than stand-alone transfers. Addressing early and forced marriage among displaced girls requires investing in programmes that provide social protection alongside challenging norms and beliefs that devalue and discriminate against girls and women.

**Documentation and Legal Status:** [Restrictive border policies](#) have increased detention and procedural barriers, even for children and pregnant or lactating asylum seekers. Even where policies allow irregular migrants to apply for permits, the application process is rarely adapted to the [specific needs and rights of children](#), such as their lack of documentation, knowledge of migration policies or fear of deportation. Without legal identity, [girls](#) are often unable to access education, healthcare or social protection, and may face heightened risks of statelessness and exploitation. **Responses:** [Best practices include](#) ensuring that birth registration and civil documentation are accessible regardless of migration status, accepting age claims unless strong evidence suggests otherwise, ending the detention of children, expanding community-based alternatives, preventing family separation and strengthening family reunification efforts. Increasing the availability of legal support is an effective way to improve access to documentation. In [Colombia](#), [the Legal Clinics project](#) has been established at 22 universities, training students and professors to provide free legal support to Venezuelans to register their children's births and access public services.

**Education and Information:** Seeking food, protection, shelter, education, and healthcare can be challenging for many children and young people who arrive in a new place with [no prior knowledge](#) of the health and social care, legal or educational systems. Many are forced to mature quickly and independently respond to complex [challenges](#) while also adjusting to new legal, cultural and linguistic challenges. There is a need to ensure that girls have access to and use of the essential services. More than half of the world's [14.8 million](#) school-aged refugee children currently have their rights to formal education violated. The number of forcibly displaced children is unknown but likely greater, with many instead engaged in informal, low-paid work. **Responses:** Innovative models, such as the All-Ukraine Online School developed by Ukraine's Ministry of Education, illustrate how digital and hybrid learning platforms can mitigate disruption and protect girls' right to education even during displacement.<sup>10</sup> Once settled, provisions for in-person education will improve girls' integration into host communities.

**International Financing:** Investment in education, health care, and family and community-strengthening programmes is pivotal in securing justice for children. Currently, humanitarian responses are often short-term, ad hoc interventions that fail to provide sustainable, reliable care to girls.<sup>11</sup> Increasingly, governments are withdrawing international aid agreements. Undoubtedly, irregular girls will be most affected. **Responses:** To implement the commitments outlined in the [Global Compact on Refugees](#), financing needs to improve responsibility-sharing to generate more predictable funding streams that integrate humanitarian and international development agendas. The [International Development Association's \(IDA\) Window for Host Communities and Refugees](#) supports government-led solutions that foster self-reliance and resilience by providing financial support to governments with longer-term development plans to integrate refugees and host communities. Now, more than ever, it is essential to continue to develop innovative and sustainable approaches to delivering essential services to girls.

**Centring Girls in Responses:** Too often, children are viewed solely as migrants and not children. Responses to displacement are often genderless and ageless, and thus fail to address the realities of girls or reproduce images of girls as passive victims of violence and suffering.<sup>12-14</sup> Girls are often not seen as individuals, each with unique experiences of migration shaped by gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, religion and nationality, whether it be from Sudan, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Palestine, Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Syria, Türkiye, Myanmar, India, Venezuela, or Haiti.<sup>13, 15</sup> **Responses:** Child-centred justice requires building partnerships with children, empowering and supporting them, to prevent challenges to justice from materialising, and to take appropriate action where challenges arise.<sup>16, 17</sup> Essential data to build, improve and generate a robust evidence base must be disaggregated by age, gender, and other key characteristics, and include qualitative testimony to capture girls' experiences in forced displacement. Only then can we truly understand their complexity and implement policies and practices that centre their needs and rights. [The Women's Refugee Commission](#) is among other organisations that platform the stories of adolescent girls in Sudan, highlighting the heterogeneity of

experiences and calling for greater inclusion and collaboration with Sudanese women. This includes prioritising the principle of the best interests of the child and the right to participate in decision-making processes, in addition to prevention against all forms of interpersonal and structural violence.

## Conclusion

As the international community approaches CSW70 and continues implementation of the SDG 16 agenda, forcibly displaced girls must be recognised as central to justice reform. Ensuring accountability for girls in displacement contexts is essential not only to meeting SDG 16.2 but also to advancing the gender equality commitments reviewed by the Commission on the Status of Women. In addition to the recommendations in the [Evidence & Data: Child-Centred Methodologies and Gamechangers to Achieve Justice for Children Report](#),<sup>18</sup> responses must also:

- Invest in **prevention services** include providing legal empowerment initiatives and systems that enable girls to know their rights and access public services. For girls on the move and in places of first reception, it is important to provide comprehensive sexuality education, highlight key support networks, establish safe spaces and provide nutrient-rich food, especially for pregnant and lactating women and girls.
- Encourage **systemic inclusion efforts**, including progressive policies regarding regularisation of irregular migrant girls and birth status to their children, remove barriers to accessing essential basic services and avoid criminalisation of victims or survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.
- **Provide multi-sectoral, solution-oriented services** such as sociolegal defence (aka integrated service hubs) to provide access to specially trained health and social care practitioners, psychologists and lawyers in one place. Delivering integrated, mobile, and community-based services along migration routes, in camps, settlements, and host communities will improve access for forcibly displaced girls on the move and outside of school.
- Establish **child-centred justice services** for girls to ensure access to free, independent, accessible legal aid to attain documentation, reunite families, and report instances of violence, including trafficking and child marriage, without fear of deportation.
- Ensure there are **trained child-friendly professionals** working at all levels who are skilled to communicate with forcibly displaced girls, sensitive to religious and cultural norms and practices faced by girls and understand their rights and needs. This will prevent (re)traumatisation and discrimination, which are often barriers to accessing services.
- Implementing robust **procedural safeguards**, such as ensuring safe, confidential and gender-responsive reporting mechanisms, supported by trained practitioners and multisectoral cooperation, so girls can seek redress without fear of (re)traumatisation, discrimination or deportation.
- Establish **collaborative alliances** combining health care, psychosocial support, safe accommodation and legal assistance through accessible, gender-transformative child-friendly entry points. In addition, cross-border information-sharing systems that enable girls realise their right to legal identity and reunite families. Internationally, we must establish longer-term sustainable funding initiatives that support the integration of forcibly displaced girls into sustainable development plans.

With these actions, we will work towards closing the justice gap for children by confronting the compounded discrimination faced by girls in displacement.

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