

Gender Mainstreaming in Migration

Overview and challenges

*Author: **Ankica Tomic, PhD**
Bosnia and Herzegovina Representative
to MARRI Regional Centre*

*Editor: **Milica Trpevska**, IOM Project Assistant
seconded to MARRI Regional Centre*

Content Summary

This article explores the strong links between gender and migration issues, highlighting their intersection at different stages of the migration cycle. It provides an overview of the distinct gender-related risks and vulnerabilities faced by migrants at different points of their journey and integration. Drawing on the lack of interdisciplinary research, the article proposes a proactive approach to gender mainstreaming in migration with a view to assess and compare the experiences of the two genders in migration-related processes and procedures.

At first glance, gender and migration are viewed as two separate topics with no connection between them. However, these two topics are interlinked. In professional literature, different reports and research describe migration as gendered phenomenon at all stages of the migration cycle-¹ migration is therefore not gender neutral. Both migration scholars and practitioners need to reiterate this fact, with a view to recognise and explore the gender aspect in migration-related processes and procedures. However, theory and practice often disagree, provided that little attention has been paid to the gender aspects of migration in reality.

The gender concept is still associated with many prejudices and stereotypes. For example, many perceive it as a phenomenon which is exclusively focused on women and „women's issues“. However, that is not the case as gender applies to both men and women and is equally a male and female issue.

This is particularly important for understanding the essence of gender mainstreaming which aims to take in consideration the needs, priorities, expectations, experiences, knowledge, and skills of both men and women when undertaking any activities from the planning phase to evaluation and monitoring, so that both genders benefit equally. It is extremely important not only to be aware of this approach, but also to apply it in every context.

The context of migration is highly gendered. Women and men move for different reasons and they face different challenges, opportunities and have different and intersecting vulnerabilities.

Many of them are looking for new opportunities and a better life for themselves and their families. Others are forced to leave their home due to conflicts and natural disasters.

In analysing the causes and consequences of migration, whether voluntary or forced, the gender perspective plays a key role.

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/G1910791.pdf>

It is important to keep in mind that gender also affects the reasons for migrating, namely “who migrates and to where, how people migrate and the networks they use, opportunities and resources available at destinations”.²

To a large extent, risks, vulnerabilities and needs are also shaped by one’s gender, and often vary drastically for different groups. The roles, expectations, relationships and power dynamics associated with being a man, woman, boy or girl significantly affect all aspects of the migration process. Other factors, including age and disabilities, also affect vulnerability and needs.³

Men and women are exposed to different types of risk and vulnerability during the different stages of migration. Due to their status in society and their sex, women and girls are particularly subjected to discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Sexual violence⁴ is one of the most pervasive threats to women and girls using 'irregular' routes into and through Europe – especially those without support or travelling alone. Women and girls are exposed to different illegal and unethical practices such as female genital mutilation, forced early marriage in the countries of origin, rape and other forms of sexual violence.

Many organisations report that women and children, in particular, are being forced into 'survival sex' along migration routes. They are forced to provide sexual services with the aim to continue their journey in order to ensure ‘smooth’ passage for themselves and their family to the final destinations or to obtain necessary documentation or other assistance.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has identified refugees and migrants as the groups most vulnerable to trafficking, with women and girls within these groups most at risk and most likely to be taken for sexual exploitation.

Sexual harassment in transit camps and reception centres has been documented against female refugees and migrants – by other migrants and by public officials or staff in reception and detention centres. Women and girls alone or with children feel particularly threatened in transit areas and camps, because of the lack of segregated sleeping and sanitary facilities.⁵

Not much research is done on sexual and gender-based violence against men, i.e. little attention is paid to it, although it also occurs in all phases of the migration cycle. It is still a taboo topic and even men are not ready to talk about it, although they experience it in their country of origin as well as during the journey to Europe, or upon arrival.

Men and boys are suffering sexual violence and trauma during armed conflicts, such as rape, castration, and genital violence, including mutilation and electroshocks. Men and boys are also exposed to other forms of violence like forced labour, enslavement, kidnapping, human trafficking and smuggling, physical violence etc.

Sexual violence, including conflict-related sexual violence and sexual abuse within families, is a push factor for some refugee and migrant men and boys to leave their home countries. They experience sexual violence at borders and checkpoints, during random stops by armed groups, and while kidnapped and imprisoned.⁶

In conclusion, many migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers - women and girls, as well as men and boys - have been exposed to various forms of gender-based violence, in their country of origin as well as during their migration journey to Europe and upon arrival at the final destination.

Therefore, it is important to analyse migration from a gendered perspective in order to assess the experiences of women and girls compared to those of men and boys in displacement, reception,

² <https://www.iom.int/gender-and-migration>

³ Ibid

⁴ https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/global_campaign/en/chap6.pdf

⁵ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI\(2016\)579072](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI(2016)579072)

⁶ <https://s333660.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Libya-Italy-Report-03-2019.pdf>

asylum procedures and integration, to be sure that responses are in line with needs and meet human rights standards, identify protection gaps and determine what can be done to remedy them.

The first step is to raise the level of awareness and knowledge on the gender perspective of migration of all key actors. The next step is to link strategic, legal and operational documents that are relevant to both topics. So far, little attention has been paid to the gender aspects of migration and these two topics have been treated separately. It is necessary to link these topics together and mainstream gender in all stages of the migration cycle if we want to manage migration flows effectively and efficiently.



Migration Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI) is a single regional mechanism with core mandate to support the Western Balkans region in migration management. It is owned by six Participants: Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo which proudly govern the Initiative following the all-inclusiveness principle.*

The MARRI Regional Centre and Secretariat of the Initiative is based in Skopje, North Macedonia.

*Web: marri-rc.org.mk
Email: info@marri-rc.org.mk*

* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence