



# WOMEN & GIRLS ON THE MOVE: A SNAPSHOT OF AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

## 1. BACKGROUND

Gender is a significant factor shaping every aspect of **human mobility** – from the decision to migrate, transiting across borders, to settling in the country of destination, or choosing to return home. Access to services, the labour market or other opportunities and benefits depend on migrants' gender too.

Incorporating gender-responsive data in international migration governance is critical to a human rights-based approach to migration, which is key to the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), and the [Global Compact for Migration](#). These two international frameworks call for more migration data to be disaggregated by sex and age, among others. Yet major gaps exist in international migration data,<sup>1</sup> particularly with respect to gender.<sup>2</sup> Timely, reliable and disaggregated migration data are needed to properly identify and address systematic gender inequalities and formulate gender responsive migration policies and actions that contribute to real change.

<sup>1</sup> Migration data, as per the IOM Migration Data Strategy, refers to all types of data that support the development of comprehensive, coherent and forward-looking migration policies and programming, as well as those that contribute to informed public discourse on migration.

<sup>2</sup> As per the IOM SOGIESC Glossary, gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for individuals based on the sex they were assigned at birth.

The [United Nations Secretary-General's Data Strategy 2020–2022](#) identifies the promotion of gender equality as a central objective, notes that a lack of sex- and gender-disaggregated data contributes to a “gender data gap”, and pledges to bridge the gender data gap in its programme by proposing to use data to measure gender gaps and the establishment of a gender-balanced data governance council. In alignment with this Strategy, the [IOM Migration Data Strategy 2020 | 2025](#) commits to gender equality as a fundamental principle and supports gender analysis.

This brief is devoted to International Women's Day and, hence, is primarily focused on the situation of women and girls on the move. It presents an overview of internationally available sex-disaggregated data – recognizing the importance of data that help understand the gendered dimensions of human mobility. In the future, gender analysis also requires consideration of the gendered experiences and the needs and characteristics of different groups of people. Analysis is needed to better understand the forms of gender-based discrimination that people on the move face.

## METHODOLOGY

### Gender vs sex disaggregated data<sup>3</sup>

Data are **sex-disaggregated** when they include differentiation of information by sex categories as typically listed on official identification, including male, female and other designations such as O, T or X, depending on the country. Data regarding whether an individual has intersex characteristics may also be collected through the use of a separate question.

**Gender-disaggregated** data refer to information about an individual's gender identity. Gathering accurate gender-disaggregated data requires respondents to self-identify their gender, which may or may not correspond with their sex assigned at birth or the gender attributed to them by society.

While disaggregating data by sex is crucial and should be the minimum, data are also needed about the gendered experiences of the different situations faced by women and men. Data and analysis are needed to understand how gender roles and responsibilities affect their situations (needs and interest) and the potential impacts of ongoing or upcoming policies and/or programmes. Taking this additional step will bring forth the realities of all genders including gender diverse people, the different challenges, needs and opportunities which will also contribute towards achieving gender equality more broadly.<sup>4</sup>

Data on gender identity – sometimes erroneously conflated with data on sex – is difficult to collect in contexts such as displacement and irregular migration. Even in the rare occasions where gender mainstreaming methodologies are included in data collection activities, data are not always disseminated due to the unique protection needs of people who do not identify with the sex assigned to them at birth. Therefore, policymakers often end up relying on migrant data disaggregated by sex.

For more information, visit the [Global Migration Data Portal's thematic page](#) on gender and migration.

<sup>3</sup> Data are “disaggregated” when they unpack large population groups to enable comparisons across categories or groups of people. For more information on data disaggregation in relation to migration, see: IOM, 2021b, [Leave No Migrant Behind: The 2030 Agenda and Data Disaggregation](#).

<sup>4</sup> It is also important to recognize that collecting, storing, sharing, analysing and using gender data may in some cases create risk to beneficiaries, and therefore must be done in line with protection considerations and the principle of do no harm. See the [IASC Operational Guidance on Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action](#) and forthcoming IOM guidance on collecting data for persons with diverse SOGIESC.

## 2. STATE OF EVIDENCE ON HUMAN MOBILITY AMONG WOMEN AND GIRLS

### Share of female international migrants remains stable globally but varies across regions

At mid-year 2020, female migrants comprised somewhat less than half (135 million or 48.1 per cent) of the global **international migrant stock** according to latest global estimates available (UNDESA, 2020). The percentage of female migrants has not changed dramatically since the first global estimate disaggregated by sex in 1960.

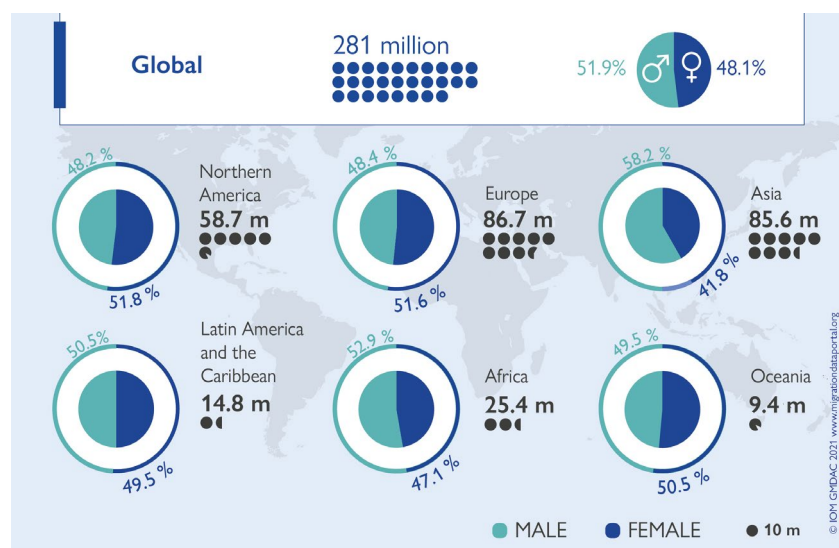
The distribution of male and female migrants has slight variations per region as shown in Figure 1.<sup>5</sup> The comparatively higher share of female migrants in North America and Europe, as well as in some countries in Asia over the last decades is explained, among other reasons, by the demand of service sector workers and family reunification policies.<sup>6</sup>

### Large country variations in female mobility dynamics

The evolution of female emigration and immigration varies strongly between countries as shown in Figure 2.

The first map shows the proportion of female emigrants averaged across the time period 1990–2020 for countries with available data. Singapore and Seychelles had the highest shares of females among emigrants while Qatar and Mauritania had the lowest shares of females among emigrants.

**Figure 1:** Total international migrant stock by region and sex, mid-year 2020



Source: UN DESA, International Migrant Stock, 2020

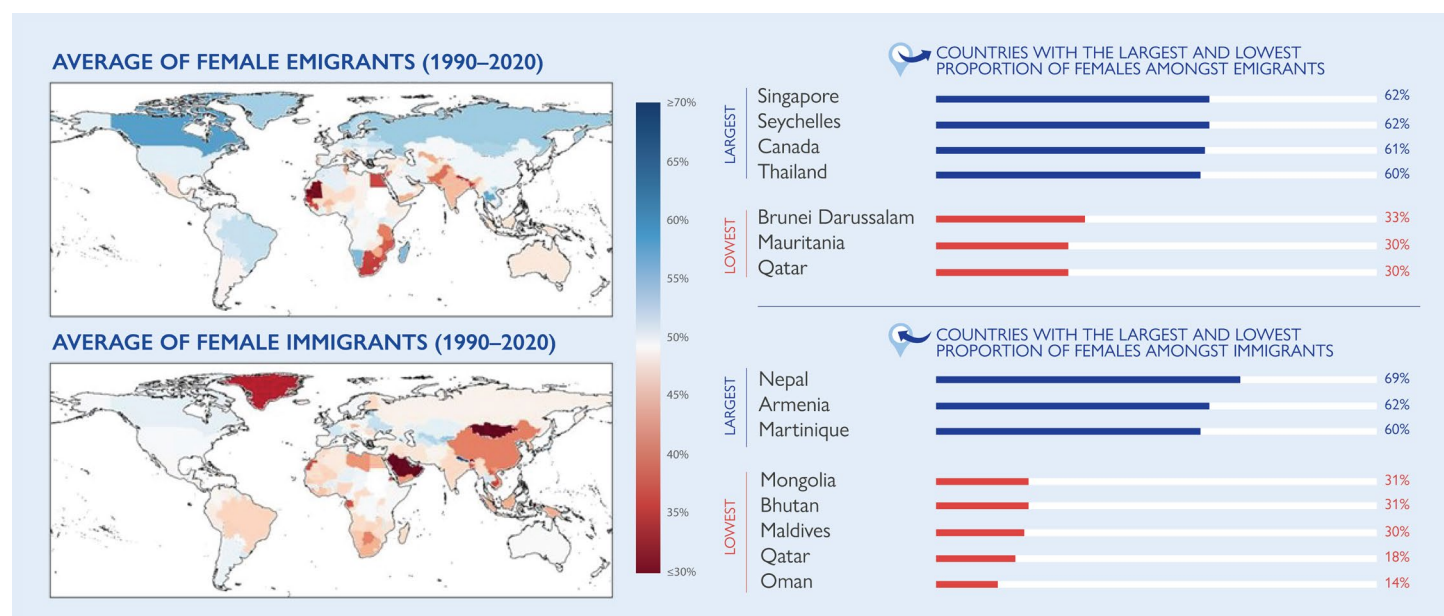
The second map shows countries' share of female immigrants for the same time period 1990–2020, with Nepal and Armenia as countries with the largest proportion of females amongst immigrants, and Oman and Qatar with the smallest proportion.

In 2021, women and girls accounted for 50 per cent of the internally displaced population (IDP) (53.2 million) and 48 per cent of people displaced across borders (21.3 million) (UNHCR, 2021). However, there are significant national differences in the sex distribution of displaced populations.

<sup>5</sup> See *Gender and migration*. Migration Data Portal.

<sup>6</sup> Source: Abel, G.J., Cohen, J.E. Bilateral international migration flow estimates updated and refined by sex. *Sci Data* 9, 173 (2022).

**Figure 2:** Countries with the largest and lowest proportion of females amongst emigrants and immigrants (1990–2020 average)



Source: Abel, G.J., Cohen, J.E. Bilateral international migration flow estimates updated and refined by sex. *Sci Data* 9, 173 (2022)

Note: The boundaries and names shown, and the designation used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations or the International Organization for Migration and its Member States.

## THEMATIC BRIEF

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### Migrant women are less likely to participate in the labour force than migrant men but are more economically active than native women

In 2019, women constituted 41.5 per cent of international migrant workers (ILO, 2021). Several factors could explain such under-representation of women migrant workers, including gender roles that influence the opportunities of accessing labour markets and migrating internationally, as well as the overall lower representation of women among international migrants.

When this data is disaggregated by the World Bank countries' income level,<sup>7</sup> migrant women's labour force participation is higher than non-migrant women in three out of the four country income groups. The highest participation gap was found in high income countries (12 percentage points between migrant women and non-migrant women) and lower-middle income countries (10 percentage points). In all four income groups, the labour force participation rate of migrant men was higher than non-migrant men in 2019. The lower labour force participation of migrant women in low-income countries could be attributed to the high share of informal employment (not fully captured in ILO estimates) in these countries.

### Untapped female migrants' potential within the digital revolution and financial inclusion

The UN Women's Gender Snapshot 2022 report points out that women's continued exclusion from the digital world has resulted in a loss of a trillion US dollars in the gross domestic product of low- and middle-income countries only in the last decade. Migrant women specifically face a number of obstacles in accessing financial services and products including mobility constraints, distance and safety impediments, lack of financial literacy and limited access to technology.<sup>8</sup>

The [World Bank's migration and remittances data](#), which include data sets on global migration stocks and remittances, does not disaggregate by sex, and there is very little evidence on comparative data of international remittances sent by migrant females and males. Nevertheless, evidence suggests that women tend to remit a larger portion of their earnings than men, as women typically earn less and pay more in transfer fees (UN Women, 2020).<sup>9</sup> Additional data are needed to quantify diaspora contributions to development beyond remittances (e.g., investments, trade, tourism and philanthropy)<sup>10</sup> and to address the potential differential impacts of climate change. In many contexts, impacts of climate change on migrants vary by genders; however, more data are needed to better understand these differences across large scales.

### Low share of women in mixed migration to Europe

[Displacement Tracking Matrix \(DTM\) in Europe](#) compiles mixed migration flow data from national authorities of countries at the southern and south-eastern external borders of the European Union: arrivals by sea and by land to Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain.<sup>11</sup> Also, it monitors transits by land in the Western Balkan (WB) region towards central and northern Europe.

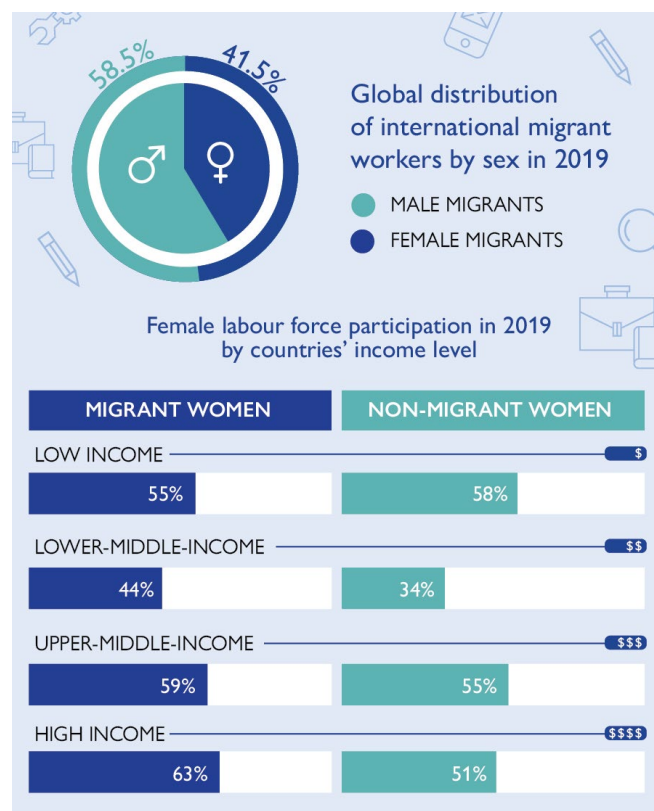
In 2022, IOM's DTM conducted Flow Monitoring Surveys (FMS)<sup>12</sup> with adult migrants and refugees travelling towards Europe through the Western Mediterranean and Western African Atlantic to Spain (893 individuals) and through the WB in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (1,341 individuals).

Among migrants arriving by sea to Spain and surveyed in 2022, almost one fourth (24%) were female (official data on sex ratio of arrivals by sea to Spain is not available).

Women were more present among the migrants from francophone sub-Saharan countries in the sample – Côte d'Ivoire (68%), Burkina Faso (50%), Comoros (38%), Guinea (32%), Cameroon (30%) – but were also considerable among migrants from the top two countries for registered arrivals by national authorities – Morocco (12% of respondents) and Algeria (14% of respondents).

Economic reasons and reasons connected to experiencing personal violence were the two main reasons to move mentioned by female respondents in Spain. About 65 per cent of women surveyed were travelling alone. Especially among these women, avoiding arranged marriages, family conflicts and situations of violence and abuse from the partner or the family of origin were mentioned among the reasons to move.

**Figure 3:** Global distribution of international migrant workers by sex and female labour participation in 2019



Source: ILO, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> High, upper-middle, lower-middle and low income countries.

<sup>8</sup> Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: [The gender snapshot 2022](#). (2022). UN Women.

<sup>9</sup> UN Women, [Migrant Women & Remittances: Exploring the Data from Selected Countries](#), 2020.

<sup>10</sup> IOM, [Guidance on Measuring the Economic Impact of Your Diaspora Beyond Remittances](#), 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Sex and age disaggregated data are available only for Italy and Malta. National authorities often provide sex-disaggregated data on adults only, not for children.

<sup>12</sup> For full methodology see the [DTM Methodological Framework](#).



## THEMATIC BRIEF

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### Main findings of DTM Europe FMS in 2022:

- » Women are the minority of arrivals and transits in all countries monitored (less than 10 per cent in all countries for which official data for 2022 are available)
- » Main nationalities for women registered at arrival to Italy and Malta along the Central Mediterranean route are Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Afghanistan, Tunisia and Syrian Arab Republic.
- » Main nationalities for women registered while transiting through the Western Balkan region are Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan, Türkiye and Islamic Republic of Iran.
- » While most women from South-East Asia travel more frequently with their families (men and children), women from sub-Saharan countries travel more frequently alone.

Among migrants travelling by land through the WB and surveyed by DTM in 2022, about 5 per cent were female (similar to the share of women in official data on transits). Among main nationalities in the sample, the share of women is higher among those from the Islamic Republic of Iran (13%), Burundi (8%), Afghanistan (5%) and India (5%). Only about 14 per cent were travelling alone, while the majority were travelling with other family members (partners and children).

Click [here](#) for an overview of DTM Sex- and Age- Disaggregated Flow Monitoring Data in three sub-regions in Africa.

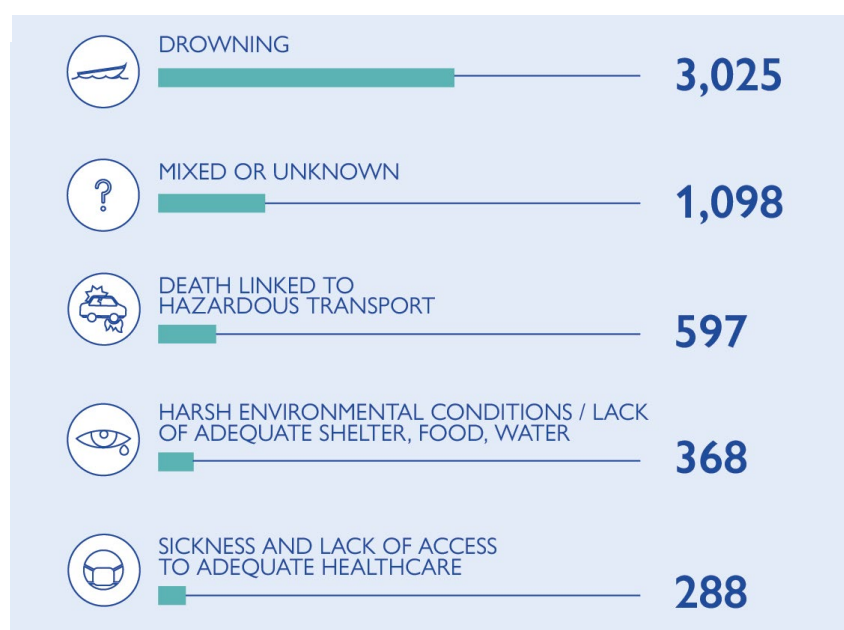
### Share of identified women among those perishing during migration

Women experience greater difficulty in accessing safe regular migration pathways when facing unequal access to pertaining rights and resources, increasing their likelihood of taking more perilous irregular migration routes and methods. The risks faced on irregular migration routes, including deaths and disappearances, are often gendered and yet undocumented. The limited availability of disaggregated data, including by sex, further perpetuates the invisibility facing all people on the move.

Among the nearly 53,000 people who lost their lives during migration worldwide between January 2014 and December 2022, information on sex is available for only 1 out of 3 deaths (IOM's Missing Migrants Project, 2023). Of the 18,851 migrant deaths where data on sex are available, 30.2 per cent were women. However, it is important to note that this data represents identified female adults only and excludes minors who are often not disaggregated by sex in official sources.

Nearly half of recorded women's deaths occurred during crossing the Mediterranean Sea (2,564) where women constituted 41 per cent of the total identified and the majority on the Western Mediterranean Route (61%). Many women were pregnant or cared for their children on board, limiting their chances of survival. The same applies for the Western Africa-Atlantic Route to the Canary Islands which has witnessed a high share of women among those identified (43%), surpassing the majority in the deadly year of 2021 (51%). At least 1,468 women died during migration in Africa since 2014, the majority on the extreme Sahara Desert Crossing (634).

**Figure 4:** Causes of death among migrant women, 2014–2022



Source: IOM's Missing Migrants Project, 2023.



### 3. CONCLUSION

Despite the important socioeconomic role of female migrants in societies, they continue to be among the more vulnerable groups. Just as more sex-disaggregated and gender-disaggregated data on women and girls are needed to ensure targeted policymaking, men, boys and other gender groups also have other needs that have to be addressed in policies.

Gender responsiveness constitutes an integral part of migration governance to promote, protect and fulfill the human rights of all migrants. Adopting a gender analytical framework for the entire data life cycle allows for capturing and understanding the demographic dimensions of migration and displacement. This is key to designing effective policies and programmes that enhance the social and economic benefits of human mobility.

IOM's [Gender and Migration Data: A guide for evidence-based, gender-responsive migration governance](#) provides concrete guidance to policymakers, national statistical offices (NSOs) and practitioners on how to promote gender-responsiveness when collecting, producing, using, analyzing and disseminating migration data for policy and action.



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