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FOR ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS

Women on the Move in Europe and Central Asia

A comparative analysis of mixed-migration dynamics, structural constraints and pathways to strengthen gender-responsive governance

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July 2026

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Foreword

Migration is one of the defining realities of our time, and in Europe and Central Asia it takes highly diverse and often overlapping forms. The region is simultaneously a place of origin, transit and destination. It is marked by labour mobility and remittance dependence, by protracted and new displacement, by restrictive migration regimes, and by the growing impacts of climate and environmental stress.

Women in Europe and Central Asia are on the move in large numbers and for many different reasons. They move in search of safety, livelihoods, education, family reunification and dignity. They also remain behind, holding together households and communities shaped by outmigration, crisis and economic insecurity. Their experiences are structured by persistent gender inequalities that influence who migrates, through which channels, under what conditions, and with what opportunities and risks. As this study shows, women are disproportionately represented in informal and precarious forms of work, including domestic and care work; they face significant barriers to decent employment, social protection and recognition of their skills; and they remain exposed to exploitation, violence and discrimination across multiple migration settings. At the same time, the migration of men often increases unpaid care responsibilities for women who stay behind, revealing how migration reshapes gender relations both across borders and within households.

For UN Women, migration intersects directly with our mandate on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. It raises fundamental questions of rights, economic justice, protection, participation and accountability. It also requires us to work across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and to engage with a wide range of actors, including governments, regional institutions, civil society, women-led organizations and other United Nations entities. This report is intended to support that engagement by offering robust, policy-relevant evidence that can inform dialogue, partnerships and advocacy across the region.

This report is intended to serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, practitioners, researchers and civil society actors working to advance more inclusive and rights-based migration governance in Europe and Central Asia. At a time when migration debates are increasingly polarized, UN Women remains committed to supporting efforts across the region to ensure that migration governance better reflects the realities, rights and contributions of women and girls in all their diversity.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

Armstat	Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia
ASTRA	Association for the Fight Against Trafficking in Women and Children
AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
BAM	Bosnia-Herzegovina Convertible Mark
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovinaw
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CEEPUS	Central European Exchange Program for University Studies
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease
CRP/K	Centre for Research and Policy Making Kosovo
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EAP	Environment Action Programme
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ECA	Europe and Central Asia
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
EU	European Union
EU-27	European Union (27 Member States)
Eurostat	Statistical Office of the European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Frontex	European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex)
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRETA	Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICMPD	International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
KRCT	Kosovo Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer

MARRI	Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative
MGI	Migration Governance Indicators
MIPOL	Migration Police of Ukraine
MYLA	Macedonian Young Lawyers Association
NAP	National Adaptation Plan
ND-GAIN	Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative Index
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PMM	Presidency of Migration Management
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
RRP	Refugee Response Plan
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SELEC	Southeast European Law Enforcement Center
SOGIESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
SuTP	Syrians under Temporary Protection
TIP	Trafficking in Persons
TURKSTAT	Turkish Statistical Institute
UN	United Nations
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDRR	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WB6	Western Balkans Six
WB-MIDEX 2.0	Western Balkans Migration Data Exchange Platform
WECF	Women Engage for a Common Future
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

The UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia commissioned this study to generate robust, policy-relevant evidence on the **gender dimensions of mixed migration** across the region. Implemented by Lattanzio KIBS with the substantive technical guidance of UN Women, the research analysed migration trends and women's experiences across diverse contexts, including labour mobility, forced displacement, gender-based violence, economic precarity, climate pressures and restrictive legal regimes. It also systematically assessed data and knowledge gaps that constrain gender-responsive migration governance.

The Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region occupies a pivotal position in global migration systems, simultaneously functioning as a region of origin, transit and destination. Migration dynamics are shaped by deep economic inequalities, conflict-related displacement (notably linked to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in February 2022 and Türkiye's large refugee population) and escalating climate risks, with climate-related internal displacement projected to affect millions by 2050. Within these dynamics, women constitute slightly more than half of migrants in the region yet remain disproportionately concentrated in informal and precarious sectors such as domestic and care work, with limited labour protections and heightened exposure to exploitation and violence. At the same time, male-dominated labour outmigration increases unpaid care responsibilities for women who remain behind.

While not a migration agency, UN Women addresses migration through its **triple mandate** on normative support, coordination and operational programming, focusing on migrant women's rights, economic empowerment, freedom from violence, and participation in peace and security processes. The study provides an evidence base to strengthen this mandate, inform partnerships with governments, UN entities and civil society, and support gender-responsive policy dialogue tailored to diverse ECA contexts.

Conceptual and analytical framework

The study is grounded in a **feminist, gender-sensitive approach to migration**, challenging earlier migration theories that treated mobility as gender-neutral and women primarily as dependants. Feminist scholarship demonstrates that gender is a social structure shaping who migrates, under what conditions, and with what risks and outcomes. Women's migration trajectories are influenced by gender-based violence, labour-market discrimination, unequal access to social protection, and household power relations shaped by patriarchal norms.

The analytical framework recognizes migration as a **gendered process across different stages of migration:** before departure, during transit and upon arrival. It also moves beyond a narrow focus on vulnerability by acknowledging migration's potential for gender-transformative change, while emphasizing that empowerment is neither automatic nor uniform. Outcomes depend on intersecting inequalities related to class, ethnicity, legal status, sectoral segregation and unpaid care responsibilities. Even where women gain income or mobility, gender hierarchies often persist, particularly when employment remains concentrated in feminized, insecure sectors.

The framework applies a **mixed-migration typology** aligned with international standards, covering emigration, immigration (irregular and regular), transit and mixed migration, international protection (asylum-seekers and refugees), trafficking in persons, internal displacement, environmental and climate-related migration, and return and readmission. While recognizing blurred boundaries between categories, the typology provides a structured lens for analysing complex mobility patterns, with gender treated as a cross-cutting analytical dimension throughout.

Methodology and limitations

The research adopted a **mixed-methods design**, combining desk research, quantitative data analysis and qualitative interviews to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation. Data were collected using a standardized analytical framework and indicators to enable comparability across countries and subregions. Intersectionality guided the analysis, with attention to gender, age, nationality, ethnicity, education, employment status and legal position, where data permitted.

Desk research reviewed policy documents, legislation and studies from governments, national statistical offices, international organizations and civil society. Quantitative data were drawn from national sources and complemented by international datasets, including those from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) and the Statistical Office of the European Union (Eurostat). Qualitative interviews with regional and national stakeholders, including civil society actors working directly with migrant women, provided contextual insight into gendered experiences and policy gaps. The analysis covered the Western Balkans, Türkiye, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the South Caucasus, with a primary temporal focus on the years 2022–2024.

Several **limitations** affected the depth and consistency of analysis. Migration monitoring remains inconsistent in many countries, with limited sex and intersectional disaggregation, constraining trend analysis and cross-country comparison. Definitions of migration categories vary across national systems, and data are fragmented across institutions. Certain forms of mobility, particularly environmental, circular and irregular migration, are under-documented. Access to open, disaggregated data is uneven, requiring supplementary requests and reliance on qualitative evidence.

These constraints underscore the urgent need for **more consistent, standardized and gender-sensitive migration data systems** across the ECA region, including harmonized definitions, regular monitoring and public availability of sex- and intersectionally disaggregated data to support effective, evidence-based policymaking.

Socioeconomic context and main migration trends in Europe and Central Asia

The ECA region occupies a strategic position between the European Union, the Middle East and wider Eurasia, where trade, energy and migration corridors intersect. Socioeconomic structures across the region continue to reflect the legacy of socialist systems and uneven transition trajectories, while recent shocks—including the war in Ukraine, geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus, unresolved post-conflict dynamics in parts of the Western Balkans, and major natural disasters—have reshaped demographic trends, labour markets, public finances and mobility patterns. Climate and environmental risks, including floods, drought, water stress and earthquakes, further strain infrastructure, rural livelihoods and urban resilience, reinforcing migration pressures.

Across subregions, many countries have reached upper-middle or high-income status and high levels of human development, yet **persistent inequalities, governance constraints and structural gender gaps** limit inclusive development. Demographic decline, driven by low fertility rates and population ageing, is widespread, while labour markets continue to underperform relative to the EU, particularly in terms of women's economic participation and leadership. Gender inequalities remain pronounced across employment, income, political representation and access to services, interacting with migration dynamics in gender-specific ways.

Subregional profiles differ but share common structural features. The Western Balkans combine high human development with sustained emigration, skills losses, demographic ageing and strong gender gaps in labour-market participation, shaped by a legacy of conflict and prolonged transition. Türkiye faces continued displacement pressures, inflation and disaster impacts alongside strong gender disparities in employment and education. Eastern Europe has been profoundly affected by the war in Ukraine, with displacement, population loss, energy shocks and reform processes linked to EU alignment reshaping mobility. Central Asia remains characterized by remittance dependence, rural livelihoods, climate stress and persistent gender gaps in employment and political participation. In the South Caucasus, divergent economic models, geopolitical tensions and demographic contrasts intersect with enduring gender inequalities and governance challenges.

Deeply embedded **gender norms** further structure migration outcomes. According to the 2023 Gender Social Norms Index, the vast majority of populations across the ECA region hold at least one gender bias, particularly regarding women's economic roles. These norms restrict women's access to paid work, income and economic autonomy, reinforcing labour-market segmentation and channelling women's migration into feminized and often precarious sectors such as domestic and care work, while framing women's mobility within family-based strategies rather than as an autonomous economic choice.

Against this backdrop, international migration from the ECA region has expanded rapidly. Data from UN DESA show that the number of people born in ECA countries living abroad has roughly doubled since 1990, reaching over 26 million by 2024. Women account for slightly more than half of this population, and their numbers have grown faster than men's in recent years, confirming a clear **feminization of migration**. Between 2020 and 2024 alone, the stock of ECA-born international migrants increased by more than one quarter, raising the region's share of the global migrant population.

ECA countries are also major hosts of migrants and displaced populations, with migrant stocks continuing to grow in absolute terms, though more slowly than global totals. Women constitute a growing share of migrants residing in the region, underscoring the need for gender-responsive reception, protection and integration systems, including access to decent work, skills recognition, healthcare and sexual and reproductive health services, protection from gender-based violence, and childcare and language support that enable labour-market participation.

While EU-linked policy frameworks and regional cooperation mechanisms have strengthened formal alignment in many countries, especially EU candidates, this has not consistently translated into improved lived outcomes for women on the move. Persistent gaps between policy design and gender-responsive implementation remain a defining challenge across the region.

Across Europe and Central Asia, women's migration is structurally embedded in gendered labour markets and care systems at both origin and destination. Women's mobility is therefore not residual. It reflects a combination of gender-specific push factors, including limited access to decent work, occupational segregation and wage gaps, weak availability of childcare and eldercare, and entrenched norms that constrain women's economic autonomy. These pressures intersect with strong demand in destination countries for feminized labour, particularly in health, long-term care, domestic work, hospitality and services. At the same time, women's migration trajectories are shaped by the degree to which they can move independently, secure legal status, and reconcile paid work with unpaid care responsibilities across borders.

Across migration types, outcomes for women are mixed. On the opportunity side, migration can expand access to income, formal employment and social protection, especially for women from contexts with low female labour-force participation and limited local labour-market opportunities. Remittances often strengthen household welfare and support children's education and basic needs, and they can increase women's bargaining power within families. Educational mobility is also an important pathway for women's empowerment, enabling higher qualifications and broader life-course options, particularly where domestic labour markets do not reward women's skills. For some women, migration also produces a 'capability effect', through exposure to more rights-based environments, wider networks and more gender-equal norms, contributing over time to shifts in aspirations and household models.

However, persistent gendered constraints shape women's migration across different stages of migration. Despite often having higher educational attainment than men, women migrants frequently experience deskilling, occupational downgrading and concentrated hiring in lower-paid sectors. Barriers include weak recognition of qualifications, language constraints, limited access to professional networks, and the continuing structuring role of unpaid care, which limits women's time, mobility and job choices even after migration. Women's employment rates may remain lower than men's in destination countries, and where work is informal, especially in domestic and care settings, women face heightened risks of exploitation, wage theft, harassment and violence, with limited access to labour inspection and effective remedies. Dependency-based legal statuses, common in family reunification pathways, can delay labour-market participation and increase vulnerability to economic exclusion and gender-based violence, particularly where women lack independent residence rights, income or accessible support services.

When it comes to **irregular and transit migration**, women tend to remain largely invisible in monitoring systems, resulting in systematic data gaps in said systems, yet qualitative evidence consistently indicates disproportionate exposure to coercion, exploitation and gender-based violence in informal accommodation, smuggling contexts and precarious work. In forced displacement and refugee contexts, women and children frequently constitute the majority of displaced populations, requiring a high level of care and strong dependence on functioning education, health and social services. Yet gender-sensitive protection procedures remain uneven, and disclosure of gender-based persecution is often constrained by limited privacy, a lack of female staff or interpreters, and weak trauma-informed approaches. Trafficking in human beings remains one of the most gender-skewed risks across the region, with women and girls constituting most identified victims in many contexts—and with persistent

gaps in early identification, survivor-centred protection and long-term reintegration. Return migration similarly presents a mixed picture: women returnees may bring skills, savings and exposure to more gender-equal norms, but reintegration systems are frequently fragmented and underfunded; and women, particularly single mothers and those with interrupted work histories, face acute barriers related to childcare, housing, healthcare and access to credit, often contributing to remigration.

Environmental stress and disasters are increasingly intensifying mobility drivers across the region. They have clear gender dimensions, as women often bear disproportionate recovery responsibilities through unpaid care and informal work. At the same time, women have limited access to compensation, land, credit and decision-making, even though they play important roles in community resilience that remain underrecognized in formal frameworks.

Across all migration types, **gender responsiveness of migration governance** remains uneven. Gender considerations tend to be strongest in anti-trafficking frameworks and weakest in emigration governance, labour agreements, return and reintegration systems, and environmental mobility planning. In reception and asylum contexts, gender-sensitive services frequently rely on UN agencies and civil society and are uneven across locations. Data gaps remain a critical constraint: sex-disaggregated and intersectional data are incomplete or inconsistent across emigration, immigration, irregular migration, asylum procedures, return, internal displacement and environmental mobility. Administrative systems often operate in silos with limited interoperability, and key variables—such as household composition, care responsibilities, education-to-work matching, legal status transitions, service access and exposure to violence—are rarely monitored in a way that enables robust gender analysis. As a result, women's migration trajectories, risks and contributions remain systematically under-measured, weakening evidence-based, gender-responsive policy design and accountability.

In addition to these common trends and patterns, several subregional features stand out. In the **Western Balkans**, women account for around half of emigrants, and educational mobility is strongly feminized, while women's overqualification and skills underutilization in destination countries are particularly pronounced; women are also more visible in family reunification and long-term settlement pathways than in labour-migration channels, which can delay labour-market integration and increase dependency risks. In **Türkiye**, overlapping roles as a country of emigration, immigration, transit and large-scale refuge create highly diverse pathways for women— including significant feminized labour immigration into domestic and care work with high informality and dependency on employers— alongside protracted displacement, where women and children form a large majority and face layered vulnerabilities linked to poverty, low work-permit access and care responsibilities. In **Eastern Europe**, sustained feminization of migrant stocks intersects with the post-2022 war-driven transformation of mobility patterns, producing large-scale displacement in which women often migrate as lead movers with children under temporary protection regimes, while labour-market integration remains constrained by childcare, language and recognition barriers. In **Central Asia**, women's labour migration remains constrained by social norms and is undercounted in administrative data, yet it has increased in some contexts since 2022 as an adaptive strategy where male migration was curtailed; women are concentrated in service, domestic and care work, often informal, while remittance dependence shapes prolonged journeys and household coping strategies. In the **South Caucasus**, near-parity gender shares in emigrant stocks mask channel-specific differences, including male-dominated temporary labour migration alongside women's greater visibility in longer-term settlement and in care and service-sector employment; the subregion also combines recent large-scale displacement and protracted internal displacement with emerging, though weakly measured, climate-related mobility pressures that interact with gendered inequalities in rural livelihoods and access to resources.

Despite formal commitments to equality, migration governance frameworks across the ECA region remain largely gender-blind in practice. Gender considerations are most visible in asylum and anti-trafficking responses but are rarely mainstreamed into labour migration schemes, border management, integration policies, or return and reintegration frameworks. As a result, women's specific risks, needs and contributions are insufficiently recognized and addressed.

Finally, persistent data gaps severely limit gender-responsive policymaking. Sex-disaggregated data are often confined to headline stocks and flows, with little intersectional information by age, family status, migration status, sector or vulnerability. These gaps are most acute for irregular, transit, environmental and return migration. Closing them is essential to making women's migration experiences fully visible and to designing evidence-based policies that reduce risks, recognize contributions and support gender-equal outcomes across the region.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

1.1 Conceptual approach and analytical framework

The conceptual and analytical framework for this research is grounded in a feminist, gender-sensitive approach to migration. Early migration theories often treated mobility as gender-neutral, depicting households as unified actors and women mainly as dependants of male migrants.[1] Feminist critiques questioned this bias[2] and demonstrated that gender is not an isolated variable but a social construct that shapes who migrates, why migration occurs, and the conditions under which it unfolds.[3] Women face specific constraints and risks, including gender based violence, labour-market discrimination, and exclusion from social protection.

Migration decisions are shaped by household power relations, where patriarchal norms, expectations and resource control influence women's choices.[4] Even when women migrate for paid care work and gain income, they often continue to carry gendered obligations within their families. This dynamic contributes to the formation of transnational care chains, which emerge when women from lower-income or migrant-sending countries provide care in wealthier households abroad while delegating their own caregiving responsibilities to other women in their home communities. These chains illustrate how global inequalities and gender norms jointly structure the organization of care and reinforce gendered divisions of labour.[5]

Feminist perspectives have also highlighted the importance of gendered social networks. Whereas earlier theories privileged male networks, newer research shows that women draw on their own kin and community relations that support migration, employment and settlement.[6]

A gender lens is necessary throughout the migration process—before departure, during transit and upon arrival—because gendered hierarchies and norms shape risks and outcomes at every stage.[7] At the same time, focusing solely on women's vulnerabilities creates another analytical limitation. Migration can facilitate gender transformative change, as women negotiate and resist norms in subtle ways,[8] yet empowerment is never automatic. It depends on intersecting inequalities related to class, ethnicity, legal status and family roles.[9] Women may assume new economic or social roles, but hierarchies can persist when opportunities remain concentrated in precarious, feminized sectors or when domestic care responsibilities remain unchanged.[10]

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines migration in general as "the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State".[11] Types of migration can be defined along many criteria. There is no single typology of migration as these diverse criteria can overlap and be mixed in many forms, creating a complex map of migration and migrants.

For the purpose of this research, the analytical framework is based on a typology of migration based on the hierarchy of criteria. It is focused on international migration with the addition of internal forced displacement and further distinguishes types of migration depending on the distinction between voluntary, forced and mixed migration, the primary motivation for migration, the direction of migration movements (inward or outward), and the legal status of migrants (regular or irregular).

The research distinguished the following main types of migration:[12]

1. **Emigration,** which, from the perspective of the country of departure, represents the act of "moving from one's country of nationality or usual residence to another country, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence", including:
    a. Economic migration – "the movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State motivated solely or primarily by economic opportunities", which in addition to labour migration as a main driver can also include economic activities such as investment.
    b. Educational migration – movements driven by the intention to study abroad.
    c. Family migration – movement driven by family reunification, family formation, or accompanying family members entering at the same time as the primary migrant.
    d. Circular, temporary, short-term, seasonal migration – recurrent, time-bound movements.

2. **Immigration,** which, from the perspective of country of arrival, represents "the act of moving into a country other than one's country of nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence", including:
    a. Regular immigration – "migration that occurs in compliance with the laws of the country of origin, transit and destination".
    b. Irregular immigration – "movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination".

3. **Transit and mixed migration** – Transit migration refers to the stopover of passage of varying length while travelling between two or more States, while mixed migration refers to complex population movements of people using the same routes and modes of transportation to travel but moving for different reasons. It is driven by multiple factors, and it is marked by the different needs and profiles of the persons involved.

4. **Migration under international protection frameworks,** which includes asylum-seekers,[13] refugees,[14] complementary or subsidiary protection,[15] and temporary protection.

5. **Trafficking in persons,** which refers to "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs".[16]

6. **Internal displacement** – movement of populations "who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized State border".[17]

7. **Environmental and climate migration** – movements caused by "sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their places of habitual residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move within or outside their country of origin or habitual residence".[18]

8. **Return and readmission**, which includes voluntary return, assisted voluntary return,[19] and forced return.[20]

This typology provided a structured lens for analysing migration in the ECA region, while recognizing the blurred boundaries between different types of movement and the importance of gender as a cross-cutting factor.

1.2 Research methodology

The research applied a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative data to ensure comprehensive coverage of migration dynamics across the ECA region. This enabled triangulation of diverse sources and strengthened the depth and credibility of the findings. Data were collected and analysed using a standardized framework and indicators to ensure comparability across countries and subregions. Intersectionality guided the analysis, with data disaggregated by sex, age, origin and destination, nationality, ethnicity, education, employment status, and other relevant variables where available.

The research covered the following subregions:

- **Western Balkans:** Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,* Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia
- **Türkiye** (treated as a separate subregion)
- **Eastern Europe:** Republic of Moldova, Ukraine
- **Central Asia:** Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan
- **South Caucasus:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia

Desk research: A review of reports, studies, legal and policy documents, and other materials provided contextual understanding of migration and its gender dimensions. Sources included national statistical offices, governments, international organizations, research institutes and civil society. Subregional experts prepared standardized country desk reviews that mapped national migration dynamics, highlighted factors shaping women's experiences and outlined existing policy responses.

Statistical data: Quantitative data on migration were collected using a standardized template aligned with the analytical framework. Primary sources were national statistics and government-collected data, supplemented by international datasets such as those from IOM, UNHCR, UN DESA and Eurostat. The temporal scope of the research primarily covered the period 2022–2024, ensuring that the analysis reflected the most recent migration dynamics in the ECA region. Where up-to-date information was not available, earlier data were also considered to provide continuity and a more comprehensive perspective. In Türkiye, UN DESA data span from 1990 to 2024, and additional sources date back to 2019. The data for the Western Balkans cover the period from 2021 to 2024, with some sources extending back to 2018. For Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, the data primarily cover 2022–2025, with occasional references to earlier material dating as far back as 2003. In Central Asia, the core dataset falls within 2022–2024 (and 2025 where available).

* References to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of UN Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

Data-collection time frame: Data for this study were collected and reviewed between August 2025 and February 2026 across all subregions. The main data consultation phase took place between September and December 2025, with additional sources reviewed through early 2026 to ensure updated coverage. A total of 13 key informant interviews were conducted between October and December 2025 to complement the data review. Interviews targeted regional and national stakeholders, particularly civil society organizations working directly with women in migration contexts and were selected to address identified data gaps. A full list of interviewees is provided in the Annex.

Analytical process: The analysis integrated quantitative trends with qualitative evidence to build a multidimensional picture of migration. Using the analytical framework, it mapped key patterns and examined structural, situational and gender-specific factors shaping mobility. Triangulation across desk research, statistical data, qualitative sources and interviews ensured robustness, while standardized indicators allowed comparability across countries and subregions. Each subregion was analysed by the respective subregional expert, who synthesized national findings into coherent subregional perspectives. In line with the study's objectives, a systematic assessment of data availability and quality was carried out for each subregion with a focus on gender-sensitive data.

Intersectionality: The study paid close attention to intersectionality, drawing on disaggregated data wherever possible. This included disaggregation by sex, age (with special attention to minors, particularly unaccompanied minors and those affected by trafficking), country of origin and destination, nationality and ethnicity, education level, employment status, marital and family status, and, where relevant, additional categories such as intracountry region or type of work permit. This approach aimed to capture the diverse experiences of different groups and highlight structural inequalities shaping migration outcomes.

1.3 Limitations

The research faced several methodological limitations that affected the scope and depth of the analysis.

As consistently indicated throughout the research, the lack of regular migration monitoring in many countries was a key challenge. In many cases, data are produced irregularly, cover only short periods or appear as one-time exercises.

Sex disaggregation was limited and **intersectional disaggregation even more scarce**, which reduced the ability to trace long-term trends or compare countries consistently. Even when breakdowns by sex existed, they were rarely sufficient to analyse women's specific drivers, experiences and outcomes. Intersectional information by age, nationality, ethnicity or socioeconomic status was even less available. Researchers mitigated these gaps by requesting additional data, drawing on qualitative studies and small sample analyses, and consulting experts, although some areas remained insufficiently documented. A further cross-cutting limitation concerned the absence of systematic data on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), as well as the near-exclusive reliance on binary sex disaggregation. Across countries and subregions covered by the report, administrative data systems and large-scale surveys rarely include variables that capture diverse gender identities or sexual orientations. Where such information exists, it is typically limited to small-scale studies specifically focused on LGBTIQ+ populations rather than integrated into mainstream migration statistics. As a result, the analysis was largely constrained to data disaggregated 'by sex' (female versus male), which obscures the specific migration drivers, protection risks and integration challenges faced by persons with diverse SOGIESC.

There was an absence of standardized definitions across countries. Categories such as internal displacement, voluntary and forced migration, and irregular migration were defined differently, creating inconsistencies in reporting. Data were also fragmented across national institutions, international organizations and civil society, each using different formats and levels of detail. To address this, the team applied a harmonization approach, used international definitions from UN DESA, IOM and UNHCR when possible, documented discrepancies, cross-validated sources, and relied on qualitative evidence to interpret differences.

Certain types of migration were under-documented. Environmental migration, circular migration and irregular migration often lacked reliable data, limiting the understanding of emerging trends and their gender dimensions. These gaps were partially addressed through additional literature, expert analyses and small-scale studies.

Access to open data was also restricted. National and international institutions often collected relevant information but did not publish it publicly, and differences in reporting periods made regional comparisons more difficult.

These limitations illustrate the need for more consistent, standardized, open and gender-sensitive migration data systems across the region, including harmonized definitions and regular publication of gender and intersectional data.

ECA REGION: SOCIOECONOMIC CONTEXT AND MAIN MIGRATION TRENDS

2.1 Socioeconomic context

Europe and Central Asia occupy a pivotal position between the European Union, the Middle East and wider Eurasia, where trade, energy and migration routes converge. Institutions, labour markets and social protection systems still reflect the legacy of socialist planning and the uneven pace of transition. Recent conflicts and security shocks, including the war in Ukraine and shifts in the South Caucasus, as well as unresolved post-conflict challenges in parts of the Western Balkans, have reshaped demographics, mobility and fiscal priorities. At the same time, climate and disaster risks such as earthquakes, floods, drought and water stress are testing infrastructure, rural livelihoods and urban resilience. Many economies have reached high or upper-middle income and substantial human development, yet persistent inequalities, governance constraints and structural gender gaps continue to weigh on inclusive growth.

What follows is a succinct summary of the socioeconomic context across all subregions.

The **Western Balkans** is a high-development,[1] upper-middle-income subregion[2] where inequality continues to diminish effective human development. Despite performing above the global average on sustainability-adjusted indicators,[3] the region faces environmental constraints and retains a substantial rural population that shapes labour markets, access to services and climate vulnerability. Demographic pressures are increasing due to very low fertility rates and rapid ageing,[4] while human capital levels lag EU benchmarks, especially among men.[5] Labour-market outcomes remain weaker than in the EU,[6] and governance challenges persist around democratization[7] and corruption.[8] At-risk-of-poverty rates are consistently higher across the region than average for the EU-27.[9] Gender gaps are pronounced across employment, participation and leadership. EU accession continues to anchor reforms, while the region's position on major transit routes and exposure to climate risks heighten socioeconomic pressures. The legacy of the 1990s conflicts and transition includes sustained emigration and significant losses of skilled labour.[10]

Türkiye is a very-high-human-development,[11] upper-middle-income country[12] where inequality and environmental pressures temper social progress. Urbanization continues alongside a still-sizeable rural population, and low fertility rates combined with rising longevity are gradually increasing dependency.[13] Human capital levels and labour-market outcomes fall below EU standards, with strong gender disparities in education and employment.[14] Türkiye's large economy operates in the context of continued displacement pressures, inflation and the significant impact of the February 2023 earthquakes. EU accession is stalled, though cooperation persists in selected sectors.

In **Eastern Europe**, the war in Ukraine has reshaped economic, demographic and security conditions. Moldova and Ukraine are advancing their EU alignment, linking reforms to the 2024 Enlargement Package. Both countries face energy and trade shocks, political uncertainty and climate exposure. Human development levels are high to very high;[15] however, inequality reduces effective outcomes, and sustainability-adjusted scores reflect environmental pressures. Demographically, the subregion combines sizeable rural populations, low fertility rates and population ageing—most acute in Ukraine.[16] Human capital is uneven, labour markets underperform relative to the EU, and gender gaps in employment persist.[17] Governance profiles classify both countries as flawed democracies[18] with significant corruption challenges.[19] Gender equality rankings vary, with Moldova performing comparatively well,[20] but structural gaps remain across economic and political dimensions.

The **Central Asia** subregion is shaped by commodity dependence, remittances and reconfigured trade routes linked to the war in Ukraine. Water scarcity, land degradation and climate hazards[21] pose major macro-development risks and may increase internal and cross-border mobility. Human development levels range from medium to very high[22] and income levels from lower-middle to upper-middle,[23] with inequality (especially in Tajikistan) reducing effective progress. Sustainability-adjusted human development[24] is consistently lower, reflecting environmental pressures. The region remains predominantly rural, especially in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Demographic structures vary,[25] from youthful populations to an older profile in Kazakhstan; life expectancy remains below EU levels and exhibits the gender–health paradox, with women living longer but in poorer health. Labour and governance outcomes diverge across countries, but female employment lags male employment everywhere. Gender gaps in economic participation and political empowerment are persistent.[26]

In the **South Caucasus**, recent geopolitical developments and population movements have reshaped socioeconomic risks and policy priorities. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia share post-Soviet transition legacies, exposure to regional shocks and rising climate risks, while differing in their relations with the European Union: Armenia and Azerbaijan engage mainly through sectoral alignment, and although Georgia was granted EU candidate status in December 2023, its accession process has been effectively frozen and suspended amid democratic backsliding and stalled talks until at least 2028.[27] Economic structures remain distinct. Armenia's economy is increasingly service-oriented, Georgia combines services, tourism and transport with growing regional integration, and Azerbaijan remains heavily reliant on hydrocarbons. Human development levels[28] are high across the subregion, with Georgia ranking highest, but inequality reduces effective achievements, and sustainability-adjusted indicators point to mounting environmental pressures. Rural populations remain significant, particularly in Azerbaijan and Georgia, shaping labour markets, service access and vulnerability to climate shocks. Demographic trends[29] reflect low fertility rates and population ageing, most pronounced in Armenia and Georgia, while Azerbaijan retains higher youth dependency. Life expectancy remains below EU averages, with persistent gender gaps. Human capital is relatively strong in Armenia and Georgia, especially in tertiary education, though Azerbaijan shows wider gender gaps. Despite this, labour-market outcomes lag behind the EU across all three countries, with persistent gender disparities in employment and job quality.[30] Gender inequalities in economic participation and political empowerment persist throughout the subregion.[31] Women's labour-force participation is constrained by occupational segregation, unpaid care responsibilities and limited care services, and women remain underrepresented in decision-making. All three countries are classified as flawed democracies,[32] with governance challenges and corruption perceptions[33] undermining institutional effectiveness.

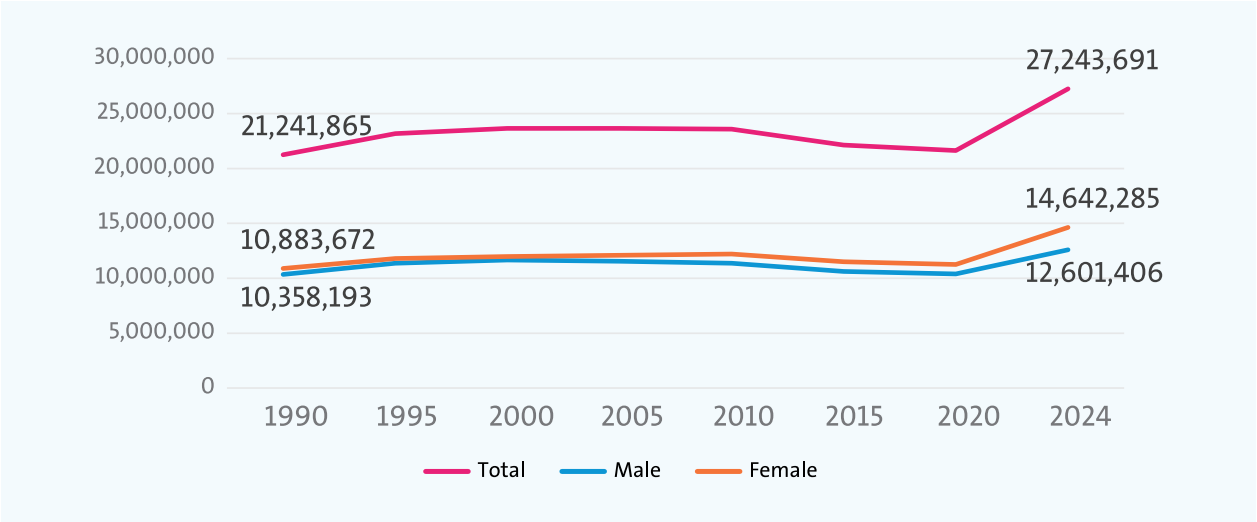
Across the region, these socioeconomic dynamics are shaped by persistent gender norms that influence women's and men's roles, their access to resources and their decision-making power, which in turn affect migration trajectories and outcomes. According to the 2023 Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI),[34] these norms are reflected in widespread gender biases, with a large majority of the population holding at least one such bias.[35] Among ECA countries with available data, the prevalence of at least one gender bias exceeds 90 per cent in Armenia (91.9 per cent), Georgia (94.4 per cent), Kazakhstan (93.2 per cent) and Türkiye (91.1 per cent) and reaches near universality in Azerbaijan (98.7 per cent), Kyrgyzstan (98 per cent), Tajikistan (99.9 per cent) and Uzbekistan

(98 per cent). Levels are lower, though still substantial, in Serbia (76.1 per cent) and Ukraine (84.2 per cent).[36] Within this landscape, economic biases are particularly consequential for migration, as they shape women's access to paid work, income and economic autonomy. Widespread beliefs that men should have priority in employment or would make better business leaders[37] reinforce labour-market segmentation and gender pay gaps, helping to channel women's migration into feminized and often precarious sectors and embedding women's mobility within family-based strategies rather than recognizing them as autonomous economic actors.

2.2 Main migration trends in the ECA region

International migration of populations born in the ECA countries[38] has expanded rapidly. According to UN DESA, the number of people born in one of the ECA countries in the international migrant stock has increased between 1990 and 2024 (Figure 2.1). The proportion of women has been relatively stable during the entire period, around 50 per cent, with a sharp increase after 2020 (partly due to the refugees from Ukraine being predominantly female).

FIGURE 2.1: **Number of international migrants born in ECA countries, by sex, 1990–2024**

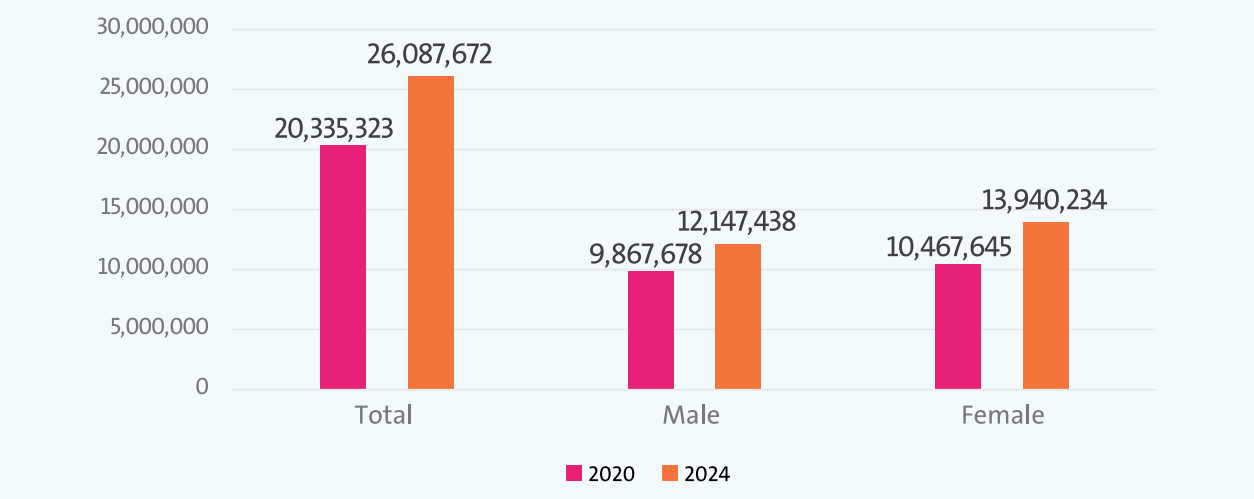


Source: UN DESA 2024a.
Data refer only to countries included in the research except for Kosovo.

Between 2020 and 2024, the stock of ECA-born international migrants[39] rose from 21.6 million to 27.2 million—an increase of 5.6 million (+25.9 per cent). Over the same period, the ECA region's share of the world's migrant stock grew from 7.4 per cent to 9 per cent (+1.6 pp), underscoring the region's rising weight in global mobility.

A clear feminization trend is evident (Figure 2.2).[40] Women account for more than half of ECA-origin international migrant stock, with their share increasing from 52 per cent (approximately 11.24 million) in 2020 to 53.7 per cent (approximately 14.6 million) in 2024—an absolute gain of about 3.4 million (+30.2 per cent), faster than the growth among men (+23.1 per cent). The growing feminization of migration places additional pressure on both origin and destination countries to integrate gender perspectives into migration management policies and measures and to provide tailored support to women in migration, taking into account their specific legal status, socioeconomic characteristics and the distinct challenges they face throughout the migration process.

FIGURE 2.2: **Number of international migrants born in ECA countries included in the research, by sex, 2020 and 2024**

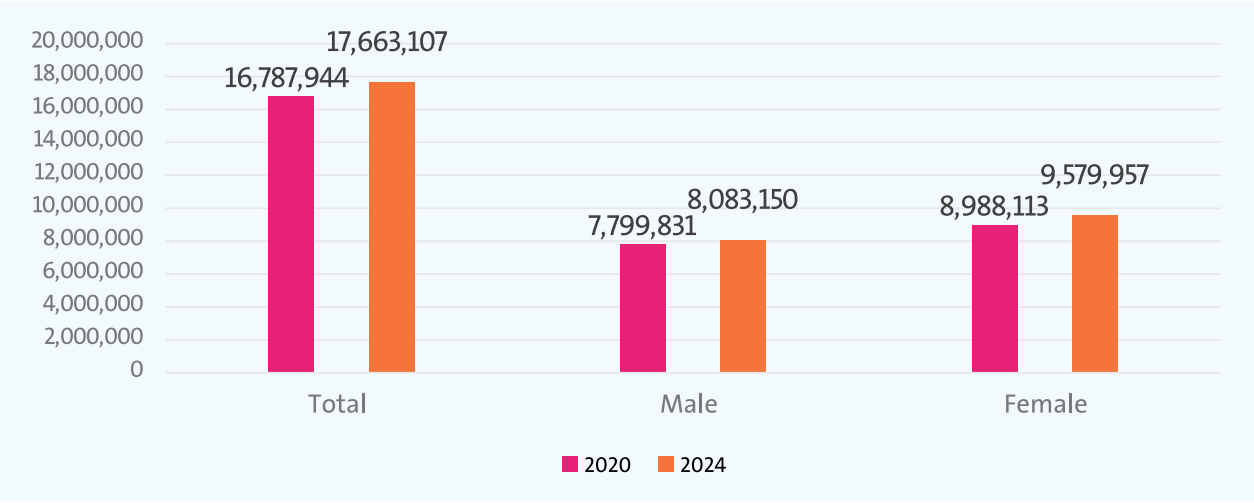


Source: UN DESA 2024a.
Note: Data refer only to countries included in the research except for Kosovo.

ECA countries also host a large and growing international migrant population:[41] between 2020 and 2024, stocks rose from 16.8 million to 17.7 million, an increase of roughly 875,000 (+5.2 per cent) (Figure 2.3). Over the same period, the ECA share of the global migrant stock edged down from 6.1 per cent to 5.8 per cent (–0.3 pp), indicating that while absolute numbers grew, they did so more slowly than worldwide totals.

Women's share among international migrants in the ECA region increased from 53.5 per cent to 54.2 per cent (+0.7 pp) between 2020 and 2024,[42] reinforcing the need for gender-responsive reception and integration, recognition of qualifications, access to decent work (including in care and services), tailored health and SRH services, protection from GBV and exploitation, and childcare and language support that enable labour-market participation.

FIGURE 2.3: **Number of international migrants hosted in the ECA countries covered by the research, by sex, 2020 and 2024**



Source: UN DESA 2024a.
Data refer only to countries included in the research except for Kosovo.

The analysis of the international migration data presented in this section indicates that these movements are increasingly gendered: women's participation in mobility is rising, while men and women experience different drivers, routes, risks and outcomes. A gender perspective is therefore essential to understand who moves, why and with what consequences, shaping evidence, policy and programming on protection, decent work, skills recognition, access to services and durable solutions across each subregion.

2.3 Policy initiatives at the regional and subregional levels

Regional migration governance in Europe and Central Asia operates through multiple policy dialogues and EU-linked mechanisms that support coordination on mixed flows, labour mobility, protection and return, though most are non-binding and unevenly implemented.

BOX 2.1: Migration policy and coordination mechanisms in the ECA countries

Regional initiatives

- **Prague Process**[43] – A broad intergovernmental dialogue promoting cooperation on migration, asylum and return, contributing to policy convergence and knowledge exchange, including over 50 countries. The Process promotes structured dialogue and practical cooperation on key areas of migration governance: migration and development, legal migration and integration, irregular migration and return, and international protection and asylum. Its activities include the preparation of Migration Profiles and country fact sheets, technical workshops and capacity-building projects that encourage evidence-based policymaking.[44]
- **Budapest Process**[45] – An interregional dialogue spanning Europe to the Silk Routes (including the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia). It provides a platform for policy coordination and operational cooperation, recently renewed via ministerial declarations and a "Call for Action".
- **Almaty Process**[46] – A Central Asia-focused forum on mixed movements and refugee protection offering practical guidance. It focuses on mixed movements, referral practices and cooperation among states.
- **MARRI (Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative)**[47] – A cooperation platform in the Western Balkans with a regional centre in Skopje that convenes networks on border police, readmission, anti-trafficking and asylum.
- **Eastern Partnership Panel on Migration and Mobility**[48] – Provides structured dialogue and technical support on asylum systems, visas and border management.
- **EU–Türkiye arrangements**[49] – Aims to regulate irregular crossings and support returns while financing refugee services.
- **Skopje Declaration and Action Plan (Western Balkans)**[50] – Strengthens regional coordination, return systems and EU alignment. The accompanying 2023–2025 Action Plan for Sustainable Migration Governance translated these commitments into 21 priority measures that aimed to improve border management, strengthen asylum systems, support migrant integration and build institutional capacities, with a strong emphasis on harmonizing national frameworks with EU institutions and agencies.[51]

EU normative and operational frameworks relevant to candidates and neighbours

- **Pact on Migration and Asylum**[52] – Sets new EU rules on screening, border procedures, solidarity and returns; observers highlight complexity and rights concerns. For candidates and neighbours, it shapes alignment targets, cooperation on returns and border management, and access to capacity-building.
- **EU Reception Conditions Directive**[53] – Establishes minimum standards for humane reception and mandates identification and support for applicants with special needs, including survivors of gender-based violence. The Directive obliges Member States to provide protection from assault and violence in reception facilities, with explicit attention to risks linked to sexual and gender-based violence under Articles 18 and 19. A strong gender-sensitive approach is reinforced through Article 25, which requires access to medical and psychological care, trauma counselling, and psychosocial and legal assistance for applicants who have experienced sexual or gender-based violence.
- **EU Crisis Regulation**[54] – Provides rules for managing large-scale arrivals with reinforced obligations to protect vulnerable applicants, including victims of GBV. As part of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum, it strengthens solidarity, responsibility-sharing and the protection of fundamental rights during emergencies. The Regulation identifies victims of gender-based violence, unaccompanied minors, persons with disabilities, older persons, pregnant women, single parents, and victims of trafficking as applicants with special reception needs who must receive tailored support. Articles 20 to 23 require Member States to provide special procedural guarantees for vulnerable persons, ensuring access to healthcare, psychosocial and trauma support, and reception conditions that protect physical and psychological well-being. The Regulation reinforces that victims of GBV are entitled to adapted reception conditions and gender-, age- and trauma-sensitive procedures throughout relocation and asylum processing.
- **EU Qualification Regulation**[55] – Sets uniform protection standards and requires gender- and age-sensitive assessments, recognizing gender-based and child-specific forms of persecution. The Regulation requires authorities to recognize that persecution can be gender specific or age specific. Under Article 10(3), assessments must consider sexual and gender-based violence, as well as child-specific forms of persecution. It identifies practices such as female genital mutilation, sexual or domestic violence, forced marriage, trafficking for sexual exploitation, and forced sterilization as possible forms of gender-based persecution. These provisions require Member States to conduct gender- and age-sensitive assessments and to grant protection accordingly.
- **Istanbul Convention**[56] – Legally obliges States to integrate gender considerations into asylum and return procedures and prohibits returning women to places where they face gender-based violence. It confirms that all women are entitled to protection from gender-based violence regardless of their migration status. Article 60 requires States Parties to recognize gender-based violence as a form of persecution under the 1951 Refugee Convention and to ensure gender-sensitive asylum procedures, reception conditions and support services for women seeking international protection. Article 61 reinforces the principle of non-refoulement by prohibiting the return of victims to countries where they risk death, torture, or inhuman or degrading treatment. This includes risks linked to domestic violence, forced marriage, trafficking and so-called 'honour crimes'.

Key institutions

- **European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)**[57] – Supports alignment with EU asylum standards through training, technical assistance and vulnerability-responsive tools, including gender-sensitive procedures.
- **Frontex**[58] – Engages partners through joint operations and technical support, though accountability and rights safeguards remain debated.

EU readmission agreements and visa dialogues

- Provide frameworks for return and legal mobility but face uneven implementation and ongoing reintegration challenges.

Across Europe and Central Asia, the EU-linked normative and operational frameworks outlined above apply most directly to EU candidate and potential candidate countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) and to Moldova and Ukraine; to Türkiye through dedicated EU–Türkiye arrangements; and more selectively to Eastern Partnership countries through approximation and technical-assistance mechanisms. In formal terms, candidate countries tend to display comparatively more developed legal and policy frameworks in areas relevant to women on the move, including asylum legislation, anti-trafficking measures, gender-equality strategies and minimum reception standards, reflecting alignment with European Union norms and acquis.

However, the analysis across subregions cautions against interpreting this alignment as evidence of systematically better outcomes for migrant and refugee women. While indirect indicators suggest more regulated migration flows, clearer procedures and, in some contexts, better availability of basic services, the gendered impacts of these frameworks are rarely monitored or evaluated in practice.

Across candidate, neighbouring and non-candidate countries alike, women on the move continue to face persistent barriers linked to legal status insecurity, labour-market segmentation into low-paid and informal sectors, unequal care responsibilities, and heightened exposure to gender-based violence and exploitation along migration routes and in destination contexts. Differences between country groups are therefore more visible at the level of formal compliance and institutional design than in lived experiences: alignment with EU frameworks has not consistently translated into improved protection, access to decent work or reduced gender-specific risks for women migrants and refugees. The gap between formal policy alignment and gender-responsive outcomes in practice emerges as a cross-cutting finding of the report and underscores the need for more systematic, women-centred assessment of migration governance beyond formal harmonization.

WOMEN IN MIGRATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

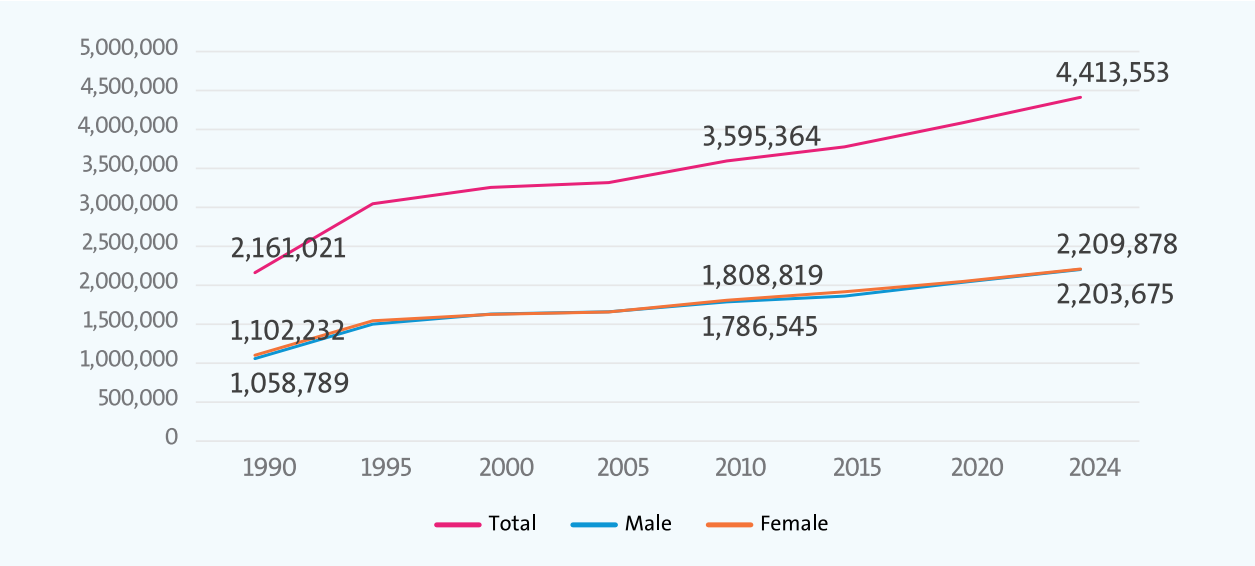
The Western Balkans is marked by a highly diverse landscape of migration flows, encompassing long-standing emigration, dynamic transit movements and growing immigration. Emigration continues to be driven by limited economic opportunities and high youth unemployment, with women facing added pressures tied to care responsibilities, gendered labour-market barriers and restricted pathways for economic advancement. The region also functions as a major transit corridor for mixed migration, where women and girls experience elevated protection risks, including gender-based violence and inadequate access to safe accommodation and services. At the same time, several Western Balkan countries are slowly becoming destinations for immigration, yet women's roles, opportunities and vulnerabilities within these emerging labour markets remain poorly understood, highlighting the need for more systematic and gender-responsive monitoring.

3.1 Women in emigration from the Western Balkans

Emigration from the six countries of the Western Balkans (WB6: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) has unfolded in distinct historical phases: beginning in the 1960s, former Yugoslav republics and provinces (all previously mentioned except Albania) supplied large numbers of 'guest workers' ("Gastarbeiter") to Austria and West Germany under formal agreements. This was a move facilitated by the Yugoslav State as a labour-relief[1] and foreign-currency[2] strategy.[3] With the conflicts related to the dissolution of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, wave after wave of emigration ensued, driven not just by labour mobility but by war, displacement and economic collapse.[4] In the 2000s and into the 2020s, similar emigration trends have continued as the Western Balkan countries pursue EU accession. Structural drivers such as persistent development gaps, wage differentials and demographic decline[5] have underpinned continued emigration.[6]

Since 1990, the number of international migrants born in the WB6 has steadily increased (Figure 3.1). Across this entire period, women have consistently accounted for around half of all migrants from the region, indicating that migration from the WB6 has long been a gender-balanced phenomenon in terms of women's proportion in the emigrant population.

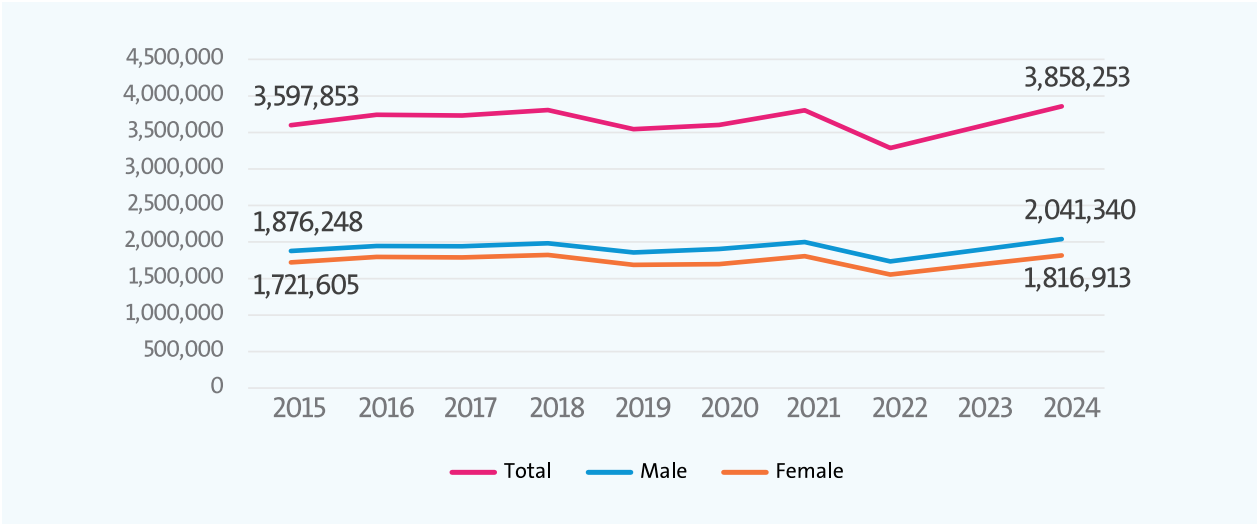
FIGURE 3.1: **International migrant stock by origin from the WB6, by sex, 1990–2024**



Source: UN DESA 2024a.

Europe is one of the key destination areas for emigration from the WB6, together with North America and Australia.[7] The total number of WB6 citizens residing in EU-27, European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and Schengen countries has grown in the past decade (Figure 3.2), and the share of women has remained close to 50 per cent,[8] confirming that women are not marginal participants but long-standing agents of migration dynamics.

FIGURE 3.2: **Number of WB6 citizens in EU-27, EFTA and Schengen countries, by sex, 2015–2024**



Source: Eurostat, n.d.-d.

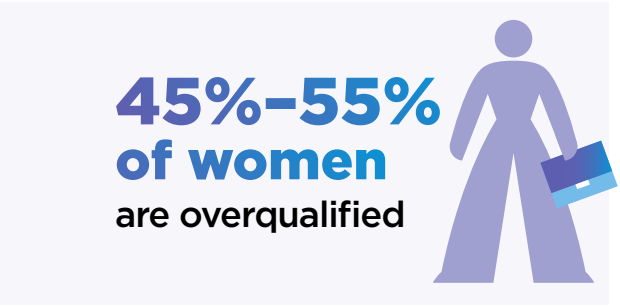
While destinations such as Austria, Germany and Italy remain central for the region, neighbouring EU Member States like Croatia and Slovenia have become increasingly important, offering proximity, cultural familiarity and high labour demand.-

Across age groups, women's migration reveals distinct life-course dynamics. Women are strongly represented among older migrants (53.0 per cent), reflecting earlier migration waves and longer female life expectancy. Their presence in the working-age population is nearly equal to that of men (46.9 per cent), and among children, girls make up almost half of young migrants (47.7 per cent), signalling continued family migration and reunification processes.[9]

Educational profiles among migrant women are diverse. Large shares of highly educated women from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia contribute to concerns about gendered brain drain, while women from Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro often reflect earlier migration waves characterized by lower or mid-level educational attainment. More recent cohorts of women from several WB6 economies tend to have higher levels of education, indicating changing motives and opportunities for female mobility.[10]

3.1.1 Labour migration

Labour migration from the WB6 is strongly shaped by gendered structural and economic conditions. Persistent gender gaps in activity and employment remain central push factors.[11] Women face higher risks of long-term unemployment, underemployment and informality than men, especially those with lower educational attainment



and those in the farming sector.[12] Women are frequently employed in the care sector (health, education, domestic and social care) in which demand in EU countries is growing, while domestic economies fail to generate sufficient formal and high-quality jobs in these fields. Regional labour markets are also characterized by significant wage gaps and poor working conditions. Migration becomes a strategy to access employment and social rights abroad. Indeed, migration often represents not only an economic strategy but also a way to support households through remittances[13] and to invest in children's education and family well-being. Limited access to childcare and eldercare, traditional gender norms, and reliance on remittances further restrict women's participation in domestic labour markets, making migration one of the few viable pathways to economic independence.[14]

Labour-market outcomes in destination countries also reveal gender-specific patterns. Among WB6 emigrants, men are more likely to have medium-level education, whereas women are more polarized, being concentrated either among the less educated or the highly educated.[15] The notable exception is Albania, where women and men are about equally likely to have completed medium-level education.[16] Despite improvements in women's education, gender gaps in employment outcomes remain significant. Men from all WB6 economies are consistently more likely to participate in the labour market in destination countries and to have higher employment rates than women.[17] Male migrants are concentrated in construction, manufacturing and agriculture (the latter particularly for Albanians), while women are mostly employed as cleaners, personal care workers, service staff, sales workers and health associate professionals.[18]

Another important dimension of inequality is overqualification, meaning employment in jobs that require lower skills than a person's level of education. Male migrants from the WB6 are generally more likely than female migrants to experience overqualification,[19] with migrants from Serbia being the only exception to this pattern. In 2015/16, close to or more than 50 per cent of highly skilled men from Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia were working in lower-skilled jobs. Women's overqualification rates were slightly lower but remained very high, reaching 45 per cent for women from North Macedonia, 50 per cent from Albania and 55 per cent from Kosovo. All of these rates significantly exceed the average for foreign-born populations in OECD countries, underscoring the magnitude and persistence of the issue.[20]

3.1.2 Educational migration

Educational opportunity abroad is an increasingly important driver of migration from the WB6, and women participate strongly in this trend. The number of tertiary-level students from the region in OECD countries rose by 150 per cent between 2013 and 2018 (from around 13,600 to 34,500),[21] reflecting the growing appeal of international study opportunities and the expanding role of education in mobility decisions. In 2023, there were 55,670 students from Western Balkans countries (excluding Kosovo) who were studying abroad, and the majority of them (58 per cent[22]) were women, who see international education as a pathway to qualifications, careers and autonomy that may be less accessible at home.

EU and regional mobility schemes have been central to expanding these opportunities for both women and men. Erasmus+ alone enabled more than 48,000 students, researchers and staff from the region to spend time abroad between 2015 and 2020.[23] Programmes such as CEEPUS, the European Regional Master's Programme and bilateral university agreements have also widened access, including for young women who may otherwise face financial or institutional barriers to international study.

3.1.3 Emigration as an opportunity and a challenge for women

Non-migrant adults in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

41% of men and 23% of women were employed.

For women in the Western Balkans, migration often offers an avenue for empowerment. Mobility provides access to employment opportunities that are not available domestically, particularly for women from economies with very low labour-force participation, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. For example, according to OECD statistics, 77 per cent of male emigrants and 63 per cent of female emigrants in OECD countries 15 years old and above were employed in 2015, which was significantly higher than the employment rates observed among the Bosnian non-migrant adult population in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the same year, where only 41 per cent of males and 23 per cent of females were employed.[24] In destination countries, women are more likely to obtain formal jobs with social protection, contrasting sharply with their frequent concentration in informal or unpaid family work at home.

Women also benefit from strong labour demand in expanding sectors of EU economies, including health, long-term care, domestic services and education. These opportunities span the skills spectrum: many women enter care and service roles, while others, especially those with tertiary education, find pathways into professional and highly skilled jobs. Given that women in the Western Balkans are increasingly overrepresented among university graduates, migration can allow them to capitalize on qualifications that are often undervalued in domestic labour markets.[25]

Migration also enhances women's financial autonomy. Their remittances play a central role in household welfare and children's education while strengthening women's bargaining power at home. Exposure to more gender-equal labour markets and social norms abroad can further expand their aspirations, autonomy and leadership trajectories.[26] Educational mobility reinforces these gains: women gain access to high-quality training and international networks, assets that are especially valuable in underresourced and gender-segmented domestic systems.[27]

Alongside these opportunities, women face a set of gendered challenges throughout the migration process. A persistent gender inequality is present: despite being, on average, better educated and more represented than men among the highly skilled, women migrants participate less in labour markets and experience weaker employment outcomes. Specifically, labour-force participation rates in destination countries typically range from around 60–70 per cent for women compared to about 75–85 per cent for men, and employment rates from roughly 55–68 per cent for women versus 70–80 per cent for men.[28] Persistent credential-recognition hurdles, weaker access to professional networks and limited pathways from education to skilled jobs are among the key challenges.[29]

Research on the integration of migrant women from the WB6 in destination countries remains limited, but available studies reveal a common pattern: migration can be both emancipatory and burdensome. For example, studies of Albanian women in Italy[30] show that employment and exposure to more egalitarian norms strengthen autonomy, yet enduring care responsibilities, time poverty and weak institutional support restrict full integration. Other research[31] highlights that women's access to employment is often mediated by traditional household roles, limited childcare options and cultural stereotypes that channel women into low-paid or informal sectors.

Studies of Albanian migrant women in Greece[32] show how patriarchal norms from both sending and receiving contexts can reinforce economic dependency and heighten vulnerability to intimate partner violence, particularly when residence permits depend on spouses. Research on Kosovar migrant women in Germany and Switzerland[33] suggests that migration can catalyse social emancipation, expanding public participation and economic autonomy, yet cultural expectations and family obligations continue to hinder empowerment, producing hybrid identities that blend traditional and modern values.

Historical and institutional contexts also matter. Bosnian refugees in Austria and Sweden achieved relatively strong long-term employment and educational outcomes, yet gender gaps persisted, with women's employment rates lagging around 20 percentage points behind men's.[34] This indicates that even in supportive policy environments, structural inequalities and cultural norms continue to shape women's integration.

Finally, studies of Western Balkan diasporas[35] show that women are active participants in transnational civic and economic networks. However, their contributions to entrepreneurship, knowledge transfer and community leadership remain underrecognized due to limited institutional engagement and the lack of sex-disaggregated data.

3.2 Immigration to the Western Balkans

Immigration to the Western Balkans has historically been limited in scale compared to emigration, but as evidenced in the following section, its significance has grown in recent years as the region gradually shifts from being primarily a place of origin to also serving as a destination and transit area.

3.2.1 Regular immigration

Gendered patterns are increasingly visible within the growing immigration flows to the Western Balkans. Although overall immigration remains moderate compared to the EU, all six countries have seen steady increases in foreigners receiving temporary or permanent residence. Where sex-disaggregated data exist, they show that men constitute the majority of labour and education-related migration, while women are more strongly represented in family reunification and longer-term settlement, reflecting gendered pathways into residence and integration.

Immigration is shaped by several drivers. Labour migration is now the principal entry channel, with foreign workers filling shortages in construction, IT, infrastructure and services—sectors where men are the majority.[36] Family reunification remains significant, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Serbia, where it is a key route for women's migration.[37] Education-related migration is expanding in Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia, while Montenegro has opened entry pathways for digital nomads.

Countries of origin follow a mixed pattern: mobility between the WB6 remains strong, but flows from China, India, the Russian Federation and Türkiye have grown, linked to investment, study and geopolitical shifts. With growing regional and extra-regional diversification of migrant origins, all WB6 countries report increasing numbers in resident permits with particularly sharp rises in Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia, with employment-related permits being the primary reason for residence in most of the countries, followed by family reunification as the second most common reason across the region.[38]

Although men make up the majority of employment and education-based immigration to the Western Balkans, women who migrate typically find important opportunities for stability, rights and empowerment. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, women form the majority of permanent residents, reflecting long-term settlement often linked to marriage and family formation. This status enables women to participate economically, build intergenerational assets and integrate into local communities.[39]

Women also benefit from emerging labour-market openings. In Montenegro and Serbia, growing service, trade and tourism sectors offer employment options, while highly educated women from countries such as Russia, Türkiye and Ukraine increasingly pursue professional or entrepreneurial roles in IT, health and education.[40] Digital-nomad schemes in Montenegro further expand opportunities for women with portable skills.[41]

Despite these opportunities, women face gendered constraints in entry channels and labour-market access. Those arriving primarily through family reunification or education pathways often require additional support to transition into employment. Sectoral concentration in services, care work and sales, combined with credential-recognition hurdles and language barriers, restricts upward mobility. Evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia shows that women's pathways through family or education status often require additional support in order to transition into work.[42]

Gender also shapes the integration needs linked to age and origin. Albania's rising inflows of non-European migrants in their prime family-formation years imply a growing demand for childcare and social services,[43] while Montenegro's feminized immigrant stock underscores the importance of recognition procedures, anti-discrimination safeguards and accessible childcare, so that immigrant women can move from mere residence status into active labour-market participation and economic inclusion.[44]

Host-society attitudes further influence women's integration. Public-opinion research in Serbia[45] shows openness to short-term stays but greater resistance to permanent settlement. Negative perceptions are shaped less by direct contact and more by media narratives, which often frame migrants as economic or cultural threats. Women experience this through gendered stereotypes that position them either as vulnerable dependants or as carriers of cultural difference, limiting recognition of their economic contribution. Where structured opportunities for interaction exist, attitudes improve, demonstrating the importance of community programmes, language learning and local engagement in strengthening women's inclusion.[46]

Studies on women immigrants to the region remain limited, but emerging research on displaced women from Ukraine[47] and migrant women from Russia in Serbia[48] show both opportunities and persistent structural barriers. Although legal frameworks grant access to services and the labour market, women frequently struggle with administrative procedures, precarious childcare arrangements and limited recognition of their qualifications. Highly educated women often experience 'brain waste', accepting temporary or remote work far below their skill level. Language difficulties and fragmented information impede women's ability to exercise their rights and to access regulated professions, while gender norms assign women the bulk of care responsibilities, reducing their time and capacity for integration.[49]

3.2.2 Irregular immigration

While regular immigration to the Western Balkans has grown, irregular migration remains a parallel and predominantly male phenomenon. Across all countries, detections, refusals of entry and readmission cases overwhelmingly involve men, in stark contrast to regular immigration channels where women are more present in family-based and long-term settlement pathways.[50] Importantly, sex-disaggregated data are not consistently available; and in several jurisdictions, no sex breakdown is reported at all, limiting the ability to analyse women's experiences within irregular migration.

Across the region, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia report[51] the highest exposure to irregular border crossings, refusals of entry and readmission procedures, primarily involving nationals of Afghanistan, Syria and other conflict-affected countries, as well as Türkiye. Irregular entries to Kosovo have fallen substantially, and irregular migration remains transit-oriented across the Western Balkans.[52]

A persistent lack of gender-sensitive data on irregular migration in the Western Balkans obscures women's trends, experiences and challenges. Most countries do not routinely disaggregate border, detection and enforcement statistics by sex, making women's mobility patterns largely invisible in official reporting. What can be observed[53]

suggests a stark gender divide: irregular movements are overwhelmingly male, especially along transit routes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. When women do appear in administrative records, it is most often due not to unauthorized border crossing but to administrative or legal insecurity, such as expired residence permits or difficulties in meeting documentation requirements.

For women, the core risks relate to legal status, protection and access to services. Many women enter legally through family reunification or family-related channels; however, their residence status is often dependent on a spouse or sponsor and subject to renewal. When administrative procedures are complex, costly or poorly signposted, women may lose legal status after entry (for example, due to expired permits, delays in renewal, changes in marital status or difficulties in meeting documentation requirements). At entry points, stricter documentation requirements or the need to demonstrate purpose and means can also disproportionately affect women, particularly those travelling with children or holding dependent documentation.[54]

Women in irregular situations face heightened economic risks. With limited options for regularization or recognition of skills, they are often confined to informal, low-wage sectors such as domestic work, cleaning, hospitality and personal care—in other words, jobs with weak labour protections and few complaint mechanisms. In such positions, some migrant women face acute risks when employment is irregular or tied to employers. Civil society organizations in Serbia have documented cases of severe exploitation in domestic and care work, where isolation, dependency on employers and weak oversight create conditions for abuse.[55] Such cases highlight systemic gaps in monitoring private-household employment and ensuring protection for women whose livelihood is linked to their informal employer.

3.3 Mixed transit migration through the Western Balkans

The Western Balkans has long been one of the principal transit corridors for mixed migration flows towards the European Union. Geographically positioned between major migration source regions in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and the EU's external borders, the region constitutes a key segment of what is often referred to as the Eastern Mediterranean–Western Balkans route. This route accounted for 37 per cent of all entries into the European Union in 2024.[56] Along the Western Balkans route specifically, authorities recorded more than 56,300 irregular arrivals, a figure that represents a sharp 66 per cent decrease compared to 2023 when 165,000 arrivals were recorded.[57] Despite the decline, the route remains one of the main entryways into Europe for people on the move. Based on the sample composition of surveys conducted by IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) in the region, the flows consisted mainly of young men, accounting for 93 per cent of all arrivals (over 52,000 individuals).[58] The average age of the migrants in transit was 27 years, with two thirds between 18 and 29 years old.[59] Some estimates indicate that around 5 per cent of migrant women surveyed in 2025 were not registered with the authorities, compared to 32 per cent of men.[60]

Only ~5%
of migrant women are unregistered

***32% of migrant men are unregistered**

Due to this small proportion of women, the picture on transit migration is strongly shaped by men's experiences. Drivers of migration, transit conditions and decision-making patterns largely reflect the motivations and journeys of young men, since the published findings are not sex-disaggregated beyond a few individual indicators.[61]

According to research from IOM, the primary origins of migrant women in 2024 were Nepal, Syria, Türkiye, Morocco, Afghanistan and unspecified countries.[62] However, the main reasons women reported choosing their destination, according to this research, include

appealing socioeconomic conditions and opportunities, recommendations from relatives and friends, and safety.[63] Data from the IOM Flow Monitoring survey in 2025 suggest that 45 per cent of women surveyed left their home country for economic reasons, followed by war and conflict (33 per cent) and personal and targeted violence (28 per cent). Limited access to services (19 per cent) was the fourth reason for women in 2025.[64] The same data show that 56 per cent of women transiting were travelling with children compared to 32 per cent of men in 2025, and 52 per cent of surveyed women and men were travelling with their spouses, suggesting the important role of family dynamics in women's migration decisions.[65] Still, without systematic sex-disaggregation and participatory, gender-sensitive data collection that centres women's experiences, it is not possible to assess how gender norms, caregiving responsibilities, exposure to gender-based violence or family obligations shape women's decisions differently from those of men.[66]

Most migrants enter the Western Balkans from Greece, accounting for about 92 per cent of entries into Albania and 98 per cent of entries into North Macedonia.[67] North Macedonia also served as an entry point from Greece, although flows there declined as more migrants opted to enter the region via Bulgaria. Serbia received arrivals from both Bulgaria and North Macedonia, as well as by air from Türkiye, India and Nepal.

Once inside the region, movement followed a consistent northward trajectory (Figure 3.3). Serbia acted as the central hub of regional movement, receiving inflows from multiple directions and serving as a staging point for onward attempts towards the European Union.[68] Compared with previous years, however, exit routes shifted considerably. After violent clashes among smuggling groups in northern Serbia in late 2023 and the introduction of restrictive, security-driven policies, transit flows were redirected westward into Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a result, the Bosnia and Herzegovina–Croatia pathway became the primary exit direction through much of 2024.[69] Across the entire route, Afghans, Syrians and Turks remained the most prominent national groups in transit.

FIGURE 3.3: **Transit migration routes through the Western Balkans**

Source: Adapted from IOM 2025s, pp. 12–13.

According to both IOM and civil society organizations working along the route,[70] Serbia's shift from a protection-oriented to a more security-driven approach led to intensified police actions, relocations from northern to southern reception centres, restrictions on movement, and the closure or downsizing of several facilities. CSOs report that this created a more repressive environment, reducing access to humanitarian assistance and rights-based support.[71]

These changes had particularly strong effects on women and their families. To avoid official centres and police surveillance, many began relying more heavily on smugglers or informal accommodation, making their movements far less visible. According to the same sources, although officially recorded entries to Serbia dropped nearly tenfold compared with 2022, this likely reflects increased invisibility rather than a real decline in transit, which in turn heightens protection risks that administrative data cannot capture. As a consequence, women became increasingly difficult to reach within this restrictive context, limiting the ability of actors to provide timely support.[72]

Modes of travel also mirror male routes: walking remains the primary mode for most migrants, although organized or semi-formal transport (e.g. buses, taxis, private cars) is common in Montenegro and North Macedonia. The use of facilitators is widespread, with 39 per cent of migrants reporting reliance on some form of paid facilitation, while communication via WhatsApp and Telegram supports navigation, route planning and coordination.[73] The 2025 IOM DTM Flow Monitoring survey data from the Western Balkans suggest that while WhatsApp is a primary information channel used by 82 per cent of surveyed women, Facebook is the second most used source of information (54 per cent of respondents), followed by Instagram (25 per cent of respondents).[74] Still, sex-disaggregated data regarding who women rely on for travel and how they travel remain limited.

Smuggling dynamics expose gender-specific risks that remain poorly captured in official statistics. While most smuggled migrants are men,[75] field evidence from civil society organizations[76] and humanitarian actors documents distinct vulnerabilities for women, including coercion into sexual exploitation when unable to pay facilitators, heightened exposure to gender-based violence in informal accommodation, and severe barriers to reporting abuse due to fear of retaliation or stigma. Women's occasional involvement in smuggling activities, such as driving vehicles or mediating communication, is underresearched and not reflected in official datasets.[77]

Across the Western Balkans, women on the move face acute unmet basic needs, heightened protection risks and limited access to gender-responsive support. Women from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and several African countries undertake long and dangerous journeys with little protection, information or access to services.[78] Deprivation in shelter, food, water and hygiene persists along the route, with Albania showing the starkest shelter shortages and Bosnia and Herzegovina facing sustained needs related to prolonged stays and repeated failed exits. Precarious accommodation disproportionately affects women and families. In Kosovo, for example, women were among those forced to sleep outdoors due to insufficient reception capacity, increasing their exposure to violence, illness and exploitation.

Findings from IOM's 2024 DTM survey show that 19 per cent of migrants reported experiencing at least one form of violence, exploitation or abuse, although GBV is not systematically measured.[79] Men more frequently reported physical violence linked to pushbacks and clashes with smugglers, while women more often reported coercion into unwanted work or activities. Due to stigma, fear of retaliation and limited trust in authorities, often compounded by the absence of women interpreters, the real prevalence of GBV is almost certainly underreported.

GBV remains one of the most pervasive risks, including sexual violence by smugglers, the police and other migrants, forced marriage, trafficking and sexual exploitation. Reporting is rare, and safe mechanisms are limited.[80] Reception conditions across the region are not adapted to women's needs. Centres often lack gender-segregated spaces, adequate hygiene facilities, reproductive health services and psychosocial support. Where interpreters and medical staff are male, women frequently avoid disclosing health or protection concerns. Linguistic and cultural barriers further limit access to justice and information about rights.[81]

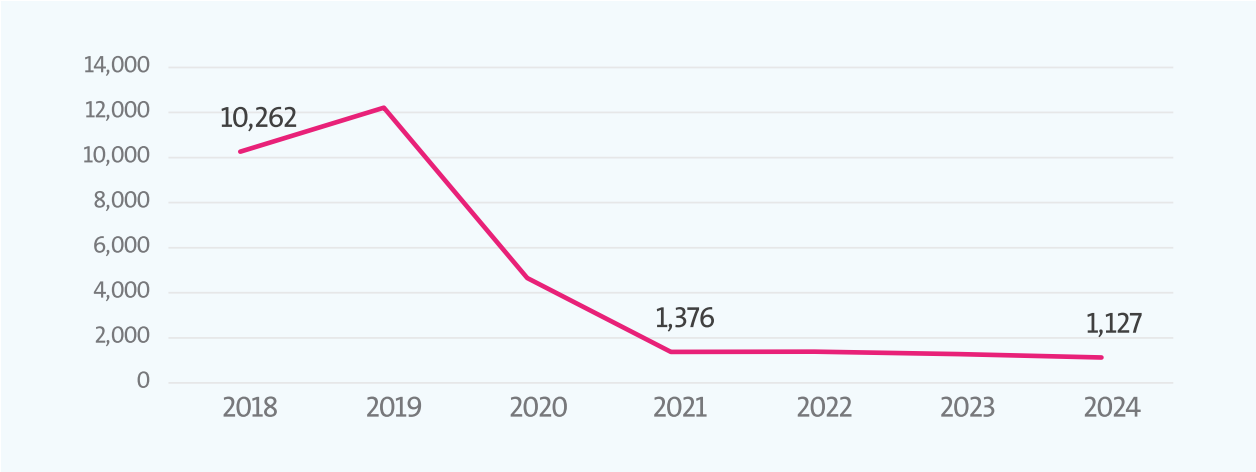
Civil society organizations highlight that shrinking funding and tighter government controls, particularly in Serbia, have reduced access to women-focused services. Activities such as psychosocial counselling, reproductive-health education, safe spaces and cultural mediation have largely been discontinued, leaving migrant women with minimal institutional support.[82]

Mental health needs remain severe and largely unmet.[83] Many women experience trauma linked to war, displacement, transit violence, sexual abuse, family separation and persistent insecurity. Yet few seek help due to stigma, a lack of interpreters and fear of disclosure-related consequences. Specialist mental healthcare is scarce, waiting times are long, and state-run services reach only a fraction of those in need. NGOs fill some gaps but are dependent on short-term donor funding.[84]

3.4 Women as asylum-seekers and refugees

Since 2018, asylum applications in the Western Balkans have fallen sharply, from more than 10,000 to about 1,100 in 2024 (Figure 3.4),[85] underscoring the region's role mainly as a transit corridor rather than a destination for international protection. Most claims were lodged in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, with Syrians, Russians and Turkish nationals forming the largest applicant groups. Although men remain the majority of applicants, women and girls make up roughly one fifth of cases, a pattern that limits visibility into their specific protection needs.

FIGURE 3.4: **Total number of asylum applications in WB6 countries, 2018–2024**



Source: UNHCR 2025m.

Women on the move through the Western Balkans for international protection leave their countries for reasons that are both similar to and distinct from those of men but shaped by gender-specific risks and responsibilities. According to UNHCR's regional protection monitoring,[86] women most commonly cite threats to their life and family and generalized violence and insecurity as primary drivers, reflecting the severe protection risks faced in contexts such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Syria. However, women mention family reunification far more often than men (6 per cent compared with 1 per cent), underscoring gendered migration strategies where men typically depart first and women follow once partial safety or economic stability is secured abroad.[87] Focus groups further

show that women's decisions to flee are strongly influenced by their children's safety, education, health needs, and risks of conscription for male children, revealing the centrality of caregiving roles in shaping mobility.[88] Beyond conflict and violence, limited access to employment, essential services and adequate healthcare, especially for children or family members with disabilities, also contributes to women's decisions to leave, although these factors vary by country of origin. A recent report published by UNHCR[89] confirms that women's migration is driven by a combination of protection threats, family-linked obligations and structural gender inequalities, producing movement patterns that differ from men's.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, the widespread use of 'intention to seek asylum' as a temporary legal status produces large gaps between declared intentions and formal applications, especially among people in transit. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than 21,000 intentions to apply for asylum were registered in 2024, yet only 234 individuals (just over 1 per cent) submitted a formal asylum application.[90] Most of the remaining cases were discontinued due to the applicant's absence, as people continued their journey towards the EU before receiving a first-instance decision. Among the 234 applicants, 72 were women (31 per cent). In 2024, only two applicants were granted a form of international protection.[91]

In Serbia, a similar but smaller-scale pattern emerged. In 2024, 847 intentions to seek asylum were recorded, including 714 men and 133 women (41 of whom were minors). Only 219 individuals (about 26 per cent) submitted a formal asylum request. As in Bosnia and Herzegovina, most procedures were later discontinued because applicants left the country before the process concluded. Only seven people received a positive decision in 2024: four were granted refugee status (two women and two men), and three received subsidiary protection (all men).[92]

Asylum systems offer limited capacity for gender-sensitive procedures.[93] For women, access to asylum is further constrained by cultural barriers, trauma and risks of gender-based violence, which reduce their ability to disclose persecution or seek support.[94] Gender-specific barriers persist across registration, reception and services. Women frequently encounter male-only front-line staff and interpreters; modesty norms and stigma limit disclosure around sexual and reproductive health, and sensitive protection needs can be filtered through male partners, undermining confidentiality. Service coverage is uneven across sites and often relies on short funding cycles, which constrains continuity for trauma-informed, women-centred support. UNICEF and UNHCR partners have expanded safe spaces and GBV protocols, but reach remains inconsistent, especially outside larger centres.[95]

Many migrant women suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, stemming from war, violence and displacement experiences. Their precarious social position and limited tailored support in Serbia further exacerbate these conditions. Programmes that include occupational and recreational activities for women in centres have shown positive effects on mental health, providing opportunities for accessing social networks and peer support.[96]

Gender-based violence is one of the most pressing issues. A pilot study conducted in Serbia by NGO Atina in 2017 showed alarming exposure rates: 64.8 per cent of women and girls reported experiencing physical violence, while 24 per cent experienced sexual violence—occurring in countries of origin, along migration routes and even within Serbia.[97] Women travelling with partners and children were at highest risk, facing violence from smugglers, police and partners themselves. Violence is underreported due to stigma, fear of retaliation, distrust in institutions and the fact that Serbia is perceived as a transit country. Underreporting of GBV is compounded by cultural norms, men interpreters, fear of institutional mistrust and dependency on partners. Even when reported, protection mechanisms are inconsistently applied.[98] While there are trained staff within the Ministry of Interior and safe houses available, gaps remain in coordination between the police, social services and health providers. Civil society organizations often possess greater expertise but have limited access to camps. A similar situation is noted for other countries in the region.[99]

Reception centres prioritize basic needs (food, shelter, hygiene), with limited attention given to gender-specific needs. The environment, where women are rarely separated from their partners, is not conducive to confidential communication or protection from violence. Improvements have been noted in recent years: UNHCR reports indicate the introduction of GBV protocols in reception and asylum centres, and NGOs have developed programmes tailored to women, though coverage remains limited.[100]

Furthermore, due to the fact that many women asylum-seekers do not proceed beyond the stage of expressing their intention to apply for asylum (as they head towards the EU), their access to formal protection mechanisms and associated services remains limited. Coverage is also inconsistent, with some services concentrated in reception centres near urban areas, leaving women in more remote or informal transit settings with limited support. Moreover, reliance on international funding means that many programmes remain vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities, raising concerns about the sustainability of protection services for women on the move.[101]

In June 2023, the European Union adopted a major reform to the Common European Asylum System,[102] centred on the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation and the Asylum Procedure Regulation. Together, these reforms tighten external border procedures, expand the concept of the 'safe third country' and accelerate asylum and return processes. These shifts have significant implications for neighbouring Western Balkan countries, especially Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, which function as key transit corridors. Across the Western Balkans, asylum-seekers rely on a combination of state institutions, UN agencies and civil society. For women, who face heightened risks of gender-based violence, exploitation and cultural barriers, these partnerships are essential yet uneven and highly dependent on international funding.

In **Albania,** the National Reception Centre in Tirana provides accommodation and basic services. UNHCR Albania[103] ensures legal counselling, interpretation and GBV referral pathways, while NGOs such as the Albanian Red Cross and CARITAS support women with health services, psychosocial assistance and social inclusion programmes.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina,** UNHCR and partners, including the Bosnia and Herzegovina Women's Initiative (BHWI),[104] deliver psychosocial support, healthcare and interpretation in centres such as Ušivak, Delijaš and Salakovac. The Danish Refugee Council (DRC)[105] provides safe accommodation for survivors of GBV and labour exploitation, alongside psychosocial assistance and awareness-raising activities. UNFPA and Snaga Žene[106] offer integrated medical, psychological, educational and legal support tailored to refugee women and girls. Vaša Prava Bosnia and Herzegovina[107] delivers free legal aid throughout the asylum process.

In **Kosovo,** the Asylum-Seekers Centres (in Magure, Vranidoll and Belvedere) are operated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with UNHCR ensuring protection services for women and girls. CRP/K[108] offers legal assistance, while KRCT[109] provides specialized psychosocial and medical care including support for survivors of torture and GBV.

In **Montenegro,** two Reception Centres for Asylum-Seekers (in Spuz and Bozaj) operate under the Ministry of Interior, with UNHCR[110] facilitating access to legal aid and integration support. NGOs such as Civic Alliance[111] and the Red Cross of Montenegro provide targeted services for women, including GBV referrals, psychosocial counselling and humanitarian assistance.

In **North Macedonia,** the Vizbegovo Reception Centre is supported by UNHCR[112] and NGOs such as MYLA[113] and Legis, which deliver legal counselling, humanitarian aid and awareness-raising for women and girls regarding their rights and available protection mechanisms.

In **Serbia,** the Commissariat for Refugees and Migration[114] coordinates reception, accommodation and basic services (in three reception centres and four asylum centres), often with support from UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF and NGOs. UNICEF and local partners[115] have established safe spaces for women and girls, while Atina[116] supports survivors of trafficking with safe housing, psychological assistance and livelihood programmes.

However, interviews with IOM and civil society field workers in Serbia reveal persistent gender-specific challenges. Cultural norms strongly influence women's interactions with institutions. Registration and services often involve male officers or male medical practitioners, which can create discomfort and hinder disclosure, particularly regarding reproductive and sexual health. Women may communicate through their husbands or male relatives, leading to miscommunication and concealment of violence or health needs. GBV survivors face additional obstacles: limited availability of women interpreters, insufficient privacy during interviews, and fragmented referral pathways.

3.5 Women victims of human trafficking

Trafficking in human beings remains a pervasive human rights violation across the Western Balkans, reflecting deep structural inequalities and vulnerabilities that particularly affect women and children. Most of the identified victims in the WB6 are nationals of their respective countries.[117] In Albania, nearly all victims were Albanian citizens trafficked either internally or abroad. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, the majority of victims were domestic, though cases of foreign victims trafficked internally were also reported. Exploitation most often occurs within national borders, but significant shares of domestic victims are also trafficked abroad, as seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.[118] This pattern highlights the dual role of Western Balkan countries as both places of origin and exploitation, with women and children being the groups most at risk.

Regional data show consistent gender and age patterns: women and girls constitute the majority of identified victims in all countries, while children represent a substantial share, often more than half of all victims (see Table 3.1).[119] In Albania, 74 per cent of identified victims were women and girls; in Kosovo, the share reached 93 per cent; and in Montenegro, it reached 81 per cent. Although far fewer men and boys are detected, Albania's data show that they still represent more than a quarter of cases, mainly linked to forced labour and begging. Children face particularly acute risks. Serbia reported a more even distribution, with 52 per cent minors and 48 per cent adults. These patterns confirm that child exploitation—including sexual exploitation, forced begging and in some cases coerced criminal activity—is pervasive across the region.[120]

Sexual exploitation is the dominant form of trafficking, disproportionately affecting women and girls.[121] It accounts for 80 per cent of cases in Kosovo and more than half in Albania and remains significant in Serbia as well. Labour exploitation appears in all countries but at lower levels. North Macedonia stands out for a high incidence of forced marriage, especially among girls.[122]

TABLE 3.1: **Victims of trafficking in human beings in the Western Balkans, 2022**

Country	Albania	BiH	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
NUMBER OF VICTIMS						
Presumed	109	38	8	0	13	55
Identified	3	0	22	16	9	62
Total	112	38	30	16	22	117
GENDER						
Male	31 (26%)	7 (18%)	2 (7%)	3 (19%)	1 (5%)	13 (11%)
Female	81 (74%)	31 (82%)	28 (93%)	13 (81%)	8 (36%)	49 (42%)
Unknown	-	-	-	-	13 (59%)	55 (47%)
AGE						
Minors	74 (66%)	29 (76%)	17 (57%)	12 (75%)	15 (68%)	61 (52%)
Adults	38 (33.9%)	9 (24%)	13 (43%)	4 (25%)	7 (32%)	56 (48%)
TYPE OF EXPLOITATION						
Sexual	60 (53.6%)	8 (21%)	24 (80%)	3 (19%)	1 (5%)	34 (29%)
Labour exploitation	5 (4.5%)	5 (13%)	4 (13%)	-	-	4 (3%)
Forced begging	37 (33%)	16 (42%)	1 (3%)	4 (25%)	-	8 (7%)
Forced criminality	9 (8%)	-	-	-	-	2 (2%)
Forced marriage	1 (0.9%)	2 (5%)	1 (3%)	8 (50%)	6 (27%)	6 (5%)
Trafficking with organs	-	-	-	-	1 (5%)	-
Other/mixed forms	-	7 (18%)	-	1 (6%)	1 (5%)	8 (7%)
Unknown	-	-	-	-	13 (58%)	55 (47%)
INTERNATIONAL VERSUS DOMESTIC						
Foreign victims internally exploited	3	6 (16%)	4 (13%)	4 (25%)	1 (5%)	6 (5%)
Domestic victims exploited internally	109	-	-	12 (75%)	6 (27%)	47 (40%)
Domestic victims exploited abroad	-	32 (84%)	26 (87%)	-	1 (5%)	9 (8%)
Unknown	-	-	-	-	14 (63%)	55 (47%)

Source: MARRI, n.d.

Trafficking in human beings in the Western Balkans is shaped by persistent socioeconomic inequalities, gender hierarchies and post-conflict fragility that expose women and girls to intersecting risks of exploitation. Across the WB6, poverty and economic dependency remain central drivers. Women are overrepresented in informal, low-paid and unprotected work, including cleaning and care services, where most female workers lack contracts, insurance or legal safeguards. Foreign women in these sectors face passport confiscation and mobility restrictions, amounting to trafficking for labour exploitation. Roma women and girls face compounded risks due to discrimination, lack of documentation and school dropout; they are disproportionately victimized in sexual exploitation, forced begging and early marriage, while Roma boys are often coerced into street work.[123]

Gender norms and violence further heighten vulnerability. Patriarchal constraints on women's mobility, income and autonomy, combined with high rates of domestic violence, create pathways into trafficking. Reports by the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA)[124] for Albania, Montenegro and Serbia note that many women enter exploitation after fleeing violence without adequate protection. Weak coordination between the police, social services and judicial institutions allows traffickers to operate with limited accountability.[125]

Migration dynamics also amplify risks. As more women migrate alone or as household breadwinners, deceptive recruitment and coercive labour practices increase their exposure to exploitation along the Balkan route and in destination countries. Even when migrating through regular channels, women often face discriminatory labour markets, irregular status and limited awareness of rights, particularly among Albanian and Serbian women working in domestic and care sectors abroad.[126]

Children face severe gendered risks. Forced begging remains widespread, often involving girls caring for younger siblings or infants.[127] Roma children are especially affected due to barriers to education and documentation. Reports document organized networks controlling child begging in Montenegro as well as hundreds of cases in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Early and forced marriage is another persistent form of trafficking. GRETA reports cases of Albanian girls trafficked for forced marriage abroad and subjected to subsequent sexual and labour exploitation.

Weak rule of law, corruption[128] and institutional fragmentation and coordination gaps[129] provide a permissive environment for traffickers. Despite legal alignment with the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, enforcement is uneven; and internal trafficking, especially involving women and girls in rural or Roma communities, often remains undetected or unprosecuted.[130]

Based on GRETA reports, it can be concluded that while both men and women experience exploitation across the region, women and girls face distinctive, layered challenges at every stage of the trafficking continuum: from recruitment and exploitation to identification, access to justice and reintegration. The combination of economic dependence, gender-based violence and institutional bias creates a cycle of vulnerability that is difficult to escape.

GRETA's evaluations show that identification remains the weakest link: many trafficked women are not recognized as victims at all. Those returning from forced marriages, sexual exploitation or labour abuse abroad are frequently registered only as 'returnees', which excludes them from specialized assistance. The lack of gender-sensitive screening disproportionately affects Roma women and migrant women, whose exploitation is often misclassified or overlooked due to stereotypes, language barriers and institutional bias.

Access to justice is equally limited. Victims struggle to obtain timely legal aid, residence permits or compensation, while prosecutors routinely dismiss cases for "lack of evidence".[131] This pattern reinforces impunity and discourages survivors from coming forward. Migrant and foreign women face additional obstacles because their residence permits are tied to employers, making them reluctant to report abuse. ASTRA's documentation of Asian women working in domestic and service sectors shows widespread passport confiscation, unpaid work and threats of deportation.[132]

Reintegration services for women are chronically underfunded and short-term. Shelters across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia rely on NGO funding and offer only temporary accommodation, with minimal support for long-term economic independence.[133] Women leaving exploitation often return to communities where stigma, gender-based violence and economic dependency persist. Mothers risk losing custody, while survivors face judgment and isolation that hinder reintegration.

Labour-market reintegration mirrors structural gender inequalities. Most women exit trafficking into the same precarious, feminized sectors where they were first exploited, particularly domestic work, cleaning and care.[134] These sectors have weak labour inspection systems and widespread informality, making women vulnerable to re-exploitation. Lack of contracts, limited knowledge of rights and the absence of complaint mechanisms keep survivors trapped in cycles of economic insecurity.

Health and psychosocial consequences are severe and long-lasting. Trafficked women frequently experience trauma, depression, PTSD and chronic health problems linked to prolonged violence, unsafe abortions or reproductive coercion. Across the Western Balkan countries, GRETA finds that women victims of trafficking generally have a formal right to health and psychosocial assistance, but actual access is uneven, fragmented and often short-term, with services frequently dependent on NGOs and external funding.[135] A common pattern is that emergency medical care is usually available, while long-term psychosocial support, trauma-informed counselling and specialized mental-health services remain limited, particularly outside capitals and for women who do not enter shelters or who are not formally identified. Specialized gender-responsive care, including support addressing sexual violence, reproductive health needs and complex trauma, is inconsistently available and rarely integrated into mainstream public health systems.[136] Key differences lie in service organization and sustainability. Albania and Serbia have comparatively more developed NGO-led psychosocial support structures linked to referral mechanisms, but GRETA[137] notes capacity constraints, uneven quality and discontinuity once external funding ends. Bosnia and Herzegovina shows strong reliance on safe houses for psychosocial care, with limited access for women outside shelter settings and weak integration with public mental-health services. Montenegro and North Macedonia provide basic healthcare and some psychosocial assistance, but GRETA[138] highlights shortages of specialized professionals, gaps in trauma-informed care and limited follow-up support, particularly for migrant women and women exiting shelters. Across all countries, GRETA underlines that women exposed to sexual exploitation and prolonged abuse face the greatest barriers to sustained recovery, as psychosocial assistance is rarely available for the duration needed for reintegration.[139]

Across the Western Balkans, GRETA[140] consistently finds that intersectional vulnerabilities are insufficiently recognized and addressed in anti-trafficking responses, leaving Roma women, women with disabilities, women in rural and remote areas, and migrant and asylum-seeking women at heightened risk of trafficking and revictimization. A common pattern is that poverty, social exclusion, gender-based violence, low education levels and discrimination intersect to reduce visibility, trust in institutions and access to protection, resulting in under-identification and limited access to assistance.[141]

3.6 Women in internal displacement

Internal displacement in the Western Balkans is deeply rooted in the violent conflicts of the 1990s following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo produced massive waves of internally displaced persons (IDPs), alongside refugees who fled abroad. While many have since achieved durable solutions through return, local integration or resettlement, large groups, particularly ethnic minorities and vulnerable populations, remain in protracted internal displacement.[142]

In addition to conflict-driven internal displacement, the region also experiences disaster-driven internal displacement caused by floods, earthquakes, wildfires and landslides,[143] which is discussed in further detail in section 3.8.

Publicly available data on IDPs in the Western Balkans remain scarce, outdated and uneven across the region. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo lack recent, sex-disaggregated publicly available information, while Serbia provides some basic data. This limits the understanding of how displacement affects women and girls, including in relation to livelihoods, care responsibilities, safety and access to services, even many years after displacement.

By the mid-1990s, millions were displaced across the region,[144] and although housing and reconstruction programmes (notably the Regional Housing Programme[145]) have supported many returns and local-integration efforts, tens of thousands still lack durable solutions. Women and girls remain disproportionately affected by long-term displacement, reflecting broader gender inequalities and structural barriers.[146]

Women make up

51% of IDPs

Female-headed households (17%) are the most vulnerable, facing higher poverty, lower employment and limited access to services.

The latest available survey data collected by IOM on displaced people from Kosovo in Serbia from 2018[147] show that 51 per cent of IDPs are women and that female-headed households (17 per cent of all IDP households) are consistently the most vulnerable, facing higher levels of poverty, lower rates of employment, insecure housing and limited access to services.

Gendered vulnerabilities are particularly acute among Roma IDPs, who face extreme levels of socioeconomic exclusion.[148] Unemployment among Roma IDPs reaches 74 per cent, with women disproportionately affected by low education, discriminatory labour markets and unpaid care responsibilities. Many Roma IDP households lack secure income, adequate housing and health coverage, while Roma girls experience disrupted schooling and early involvement in informal work. Elderly Roma women face isolation, poor health and lack of pension entitlements, illustrating the intergenerational transmission of poverty within displaced communities.[149]

Bosnia and Herzegovina reports approximately 96,000 remaining IDPs,[150] but no recent sex-disaggregated data are available, limiting insight into the specific challenges faced by displaced women, including access to livelihoods, social protection and safe housing.

In Kosovo, an estimated 16,000 IDPs remain,[151] primarily Serbs, Roma, Ashkali, Egyptians and Bosniaks. Many still live in collective centres or informal housing. Gendered labour-market disparities are pronounced: among working-age IDPs, labour-force participation is 55 per cent for men but only 31 per cent for women. Unemployment among displaced women reaches 47 per cent, compared to 38 per cent for men, while young displaced women (aged 15–24) face particularly high unemployment, reinforcing long-term dependency and social exclusion. Older IDPs, especially women, experience limited access to healthcare and social services, deepening their vulnerability.[152]

Across the region, insufficient sex-disaggregated data obscure the full picture of women's displacement, hindering effective planning, service provision and the design of durable, gender-responsive solutions.

Housing, land and property rights remain a central obstacle to durable solutions. While property restitution mechanisms exist, women's ability to claim and keep property is constrained by inheritance norms and family pressure—well documented in Kosovo, where women's property ownership has historically been low and enforcement weak.[153] These constraints reduce women's chances to return sustainably, access collateral for livelihoods or secure safe housing when living away from their place of origin.

GBV risk and underreporting cut across conflict and disaster internal displacement. UNHCR's global Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) analysis[154] notes persistent GBV risks and information gaps in displacement settings, trends mirrored in Western Balkan operations. In protracted settings, stigma and dependency discourage disclosure.

Lack of documentation, ambiguous legal identity and the risk of statelessness continue to hinder access to assistance, schooling and healthcare for displaced minority women, especially Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities—problems that compound over time and across generations. Livelihoods and care responsibilities weigh heavily on displaced women.[155] Limited childcare, transport and recognition of prior skills keep many out of formal work; in rural return areas and informal settlements, women shoulder unpaid care and recovery tasks while lacking access to credit, land titles or training, undermining self-reliance and integration.[156]

Service provision such as social welfare and health assistance remains uneven. For example, in Serbia only 37 per cent of IDP households in need exercised the right to various forms of social welfare assistance, and Roma IDPs are noted to have extremely high unemployment rates (around 80 per cent among Roma IDPs in need) and extremely low levels of formal employment.[157]

3.7 Women returnees

Return migration remains a significant phenomenon in the Western Balkans, closely tied to the region's role as a major source of emigration to the EU. In Serbia, return migration is primarily captured through readmission data; in 2024, 1,224 persons returned under readmission procedures, of whom approximately 65 per cent were men, indicating a predominance of male returnees, although more detailed and systematic sex-disaggregated data on returnees remain limited.[158] While comparable data on returnees are limited, available administrative data on individuals ordered to leave the European Union provide a useful proxy to understand the scale and composition of potential return flows. In 2024, a total of 29,580 citizens from Western Balkan countries were ordered to leave the European Union. The majority were men, while women represented 18.5 per cent of all orders, and children accounted for 8.3 per cent.[159]

Across the Western Balkans, women and children consistently appear among citizens ordered to leave EU Member States, though the scale and composition differ between countries (see Table 3.2). These figures refer to administrative orders to leave and do not necessarily correspond to completed or voluntary returns. Albania has the highest overall number of return orders, yet women and children make up a relatively small share, reflecting predominantly male migration patterns. Kosovo and Serbia show a more balanced profile, with women and children forming a larger proportion of those affected, indicating that family-based migration is more common among their nationals abroad. North Macedonia stands out with the highest relative share of women and children among all return orders, suggesting greater household mobility and therefore greater gendered and age-specific reintegration needs. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro record smaller caseloads but follow a similar trend, where a substantial minority of those ordered to return are women and children.

TABLE 3.2: **Citizens of Western Balkan countries ordered to leave the EU in 2024**

Country of citizenship	Total	Male	Female	Children (among the total)
Albania	15,140	13,315	1,815	565
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2,500	1,940	565	215
Kosovo	3,590	2,960	620	375
Montenegro	430	340	90	45
North Macedonia	2,520	1,695	825	610
Serbia	5,400	3,850	1,555	660
Total	**29,580**	**24,100**	**5,470**	**2,470**

Source: Eurostat, n.d.-e.

Women returnees often come back with higher educational attainment, language skills or work experience gained abroad, which may strengthen their employability compared to women who never migrated. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, survey data indicate that female returnees are more likely to be formally employed and better educated than the domestic female population, suggesting a potential to enhance local human capital if reintegration measures can capitalize on these assets.[160] Some women return with savings or business ideas, opening space for entrepreneurship, particularly in services, trade and agriculture. In Kosovo, for instance, voluntary returnees have invested in small businesses that contribute to household income and local development.[161]

Beyond economic contributions, women returnees may also bring exposure to more gender-equal norms experienced abroad, which can translate into stronger self-confidence, greater autonomy and higher aspirations for their children, particularly daughters. This potential for social change is significant in a region where patriarchal norms continue to constrain women's participation in the labour market.

At the same time, return presents major challenges. Roma women and single mothers are among the most vulnerable, facing low levels of education, weak access to healthcare, inadequate housing and limited childcare options. Many remain excluded from the labour market and rely on minimal social assistance, reinforcing cycles of poverty and re-emigration. Children are another highly vulnerable group.[162] Many struggle with interrupted education, non-recognition of foreign diplomas and language barriers, while Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian children are at high risk of dropout and social exclusion. Psychosocial stress and limited institutional support exacerbate these difficulties, particularly for unaccompanied minors and children without documentation.[163]

Many returnees report weak institutional engagement once back in Bosnia and Herzegovina,[164] despite the existence of a comprehensive readmission system. Local readmission teams and centres for social work provide some support, including accommodation, healthcare and legal aid, but their resources are limited and unevenly applied. International actors and NGOs, such as Vaša Prava and the Bosnia and Herzegovina Women's Initiative (BHWI), play an important role in bridging these gaps, providing legal, social and reintegration assistance. Many children of returnees face difficulties in adjusting to new environments, especially if they were born or educated abroad. While local schools and centres for social work generally accept children of returnees, challenges remain in ensuring continuity of education, health coverage and integration into peer groups. Unaccompanied children or those without proper documentation are particularly at risk and rely on social work centres for guardianship and support. Overall, reintegration support in Bosnia and Herzegovina is uneven and underfunded.[165] Economic reintegration remains the most pressing challenge,

with many returnees relying on informal employment or self-employment to survive. While the readmission system itself is well organized, broader reintegration policies for voluntary and vulnerable returnees are insufficient, leading many to consider re-emigration.[166]

3.8 Women in mobility driven by climate change and natural hazards

The Western Balkans is among Europe's most climate-vulnerable regions, facing a rise in both slow-onset and sudden-onset environmental hazards that increasingly drive mobility. Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, is ranked among the most disaster-prone countries in Europe, with more than 80 per cent of its municipalities at risk of floods or landslides.[167] Temperature data for the 1901–2018 period show a steady increase, with nearly all years since 2000 among the ten hottest on record, accompanied by more frequent droughts and erratic precipitation.

The most severe disaster in recent memory was the 2014 flooding triggered by Cyclone Tamara, which affected more than 2 million people across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, displaced 85,000 and caused losses equal to nearly 15 per cent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's GDP.[168] In Bosnia and Herzegovina alone, more than 40,000 people were displaced, with Roma households disproportionately impacted.[169] Subsequent heatwaves and droughts in 2017 and 2022 severely reduced agricultural yields and hydropower output, with Albania forced to import 80 per cent of its electricity during the 2017 drought due to low water levels.[170] Across the region, climate change acts as a multiplier of existing vulnerabilities—poverty, rural underdevelopment, weak infrastructure and governance deficits—leading to temporary and sometimes permanent displacement. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the 2012 drought reduced crop yields by about 70 per cent, causing agricultural losses of BAM 1.7 billion, while increasing wildfires and pollution continue to threaten livelihoods and health.[171]

Agriculture and hydropower, which account for roughly 11 per cent and 37 per cent of regional GDP respectively, are highly climate-sensitive sectors, meaning that each major drought or flood event can directly affect livelihoods and trigger adaptive or distress migration.[172]

Environmental degradation and climate shocks have differentiated effects on women and men. Across the Western Balkans, women, especially those in rural and low-income households, bear a disproportionate burden of climate-induced livelihood loss and disaster recovery.[173] An IOM analysis for Bosnia and Herzegovina[174] notes that women, youth, the elderly, persons with disabilities and ethnic minorities are among the groups most at risk of displacement and involuntary migration. During the 2014 floods, female-headed households were among those worst affected; women reported higher levels of emotional distress and slower recovery due to care responsibilities and limited access to reconstruction resources.[175]

Gender roles intersect with socioeconomic inequality: rural women depend heavily on agriculture and informal income, sectors most vulnerable to droughts and soil degradation. In post-disaster contexts such as the 2019 Albanian earthquake, recovery assessments found that women's unpaid labour increased significantly and that female-headed households faced higher risks of exclusion from compensation and land restitution mechanisms.[176] These gendered patterns reinforce existing inequalities and limit women's participation in decision-making about adaptation and relocation. At the same time, women play key roles as community organizers and resilience builders. IOM field data from Bosnia and Herzegovina after the 2024 floods highlight how women's groups led psychosocial support and community rebuilding efforts, yet their contributions remain undervalued in formal recovery frameworks.[177]

3.9 Gender-responsive migration management

Migration policies across the Western Balkans have expanded considerably in recent years, yet gender remains only weakly integrated into most areas of migration governance. While all states have developed legal and institutional frameworks aligned with EU standards, MGI assessments for Montenegro,[178] North Macedonia[179] and Serbia[180] show that gender analysis, sex-disaggregated data and measures tailored to women's migration trajectories are still largely absent.

Rights-based provisions ensure formal access to services for migrants, but implementation is uneven, and policies tend to prioritize security, administrative control and EU alignment rather than gender-responsive protection, labour-market integration or social inclusion. As a result, women's distinct needs, vulnerabilities and contributions often remain invisible within mainstream migration systems.

Data mapping conducted for the purpose of this report, overviews of migration policies in regard to respective types of migration, and IOM's reports on Migration Governance Indicators (MGI)[181] all demonstrate significant gender gaps in evidence and policies. Emigration governance is a clear example of this gap. Although women's mobility from the Western Balkans is rising, emigration policies, including bilateral labour agreements and temporary work schemes, remain gender-blind and fail to address women's concentration in lower-paid sectors, limited access to male-dominated mobility channels, or the enduring constraints of unpaid care work. Reintegration measures similarly overlook the gendered barriers faced by women returnees, who often re-enter fragmented labour markets and have limited access to childcare, land or credit. Educational emigration is encouraged through scholarships and mobility schemes, yet few mechanisms exist to support women's return, recognition of qualifications or entry into skilled employment.

Regular immigration frameworks also exhibit limited gender sensitivity. While residence and work permit systems are in place, they focus on administrative control and labour-market testing without addressing the feminization of migrant labour. Women increasingly enter the region through family, service and care-related migration, yet integration policies do not respond to their specific needs, such as childcare, protection from exploitation in private households, or pathways to formal employment. Skilled migration strategies tend to prioritize male-dominated sectors, overlooking labour shortages in care and services where migrant women work.

Irregular migration governance remains almost entirely security-driven, with border control, detection and readmission dominating state responses.[182] Gender-responsive profiling is rarely used outside anti-trafficking mechanisms. Women in irregular situations are especially invisible, particularly those working in domestic and care roles where oversight is minimal. Safe accommodation, GBV screening and access to legal aid remain limited across the region, and most states lack alternatives to detention for women and families.

Transit migration presents additional challenges as the Western Balkans increasingly function as an EU-facing buffer zone. Strengthened border controls and anti-smuggling operations, including under the 2024 EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, have made routes more fragmented and clandestine, increasing the protection risks for women and girls. Reception systems continue to rely heavily on humanitarian actors for GBV-sensitive services, and monitoring of pushbacks and border practices rarely disaggregates data by sex, making women's experiences largely invisible.[183]

In the refugee and asylum sphere, national legislation provides equal access to services, but gender-sensitive implementation depends heavily on UNHCR and NGO partners. These actors provide most specialized services for women, including psychosocial support, GBV referrals and safe spaces, while state systems lack sufficient female interpreters, privacy in interviews or consistent vulnerability assessments. Cultural norms, male-dominated front-line staff and fragmented referral pathways hinder women's ability to disclose violence or access protection.[184]

Anti-trafficking frameworks represent the strongest gender-responsive area of migration governance.[185] All Western Balkan states (aside from Kosovo, which is not monitored by GRETA) have adopted national referral mechanisms, legal guarantees for victim protection and multi-stakeholder coordination. Nonetheless, implementation gaps persist: identification of female victims is inconsistent, shelters are underfunded, labour exploitation remains under-detected, and long-term reintegration, including through education, employment and housing, is the weakest component across the region.

Internal displacement policies, shaped by the legacy of the 1990s conflicts, remain largely gender-neutral. Although programmes such as the Regional Housing Programme have improved access to durable solutions, the gender-specific needs of women IDPs, particularly single mothers, older women, Roma women and survivors of conflict-related violence, are insufficiently addressed in long-term social and economic support.

Return and reintegration policies show further limitations. Although institutional frameworks and readmission systems are in place, state-led reintegration measures are fragmented, short-term and rarely tailored to the specific circumstances of women and children. Women and girl returnees often face compounded vulnerabilities due to disrupted employment histories, care responsibilities and limited access to finance.[186] International organizations and NGOs, including women's groups, fill many of these gaps by providing psychosocial support, legal aid and small business packages, yet coverage is uneven and not sustainably financed.[187]

Environmental and climate-related mobility is emerging as a concern, yet migration governance frameworks mostly overlook it.[188] Disaster risk strategies acknowledge women as a vulnerable group but lack gender-responsive planning, budgeting or targeted protection measures. Albania's gender-responsive Post-Disaster Needs Assessment stands out as a regional exception, while most countries have yet to integrate gender analysis into climate-related displacement planning.[189] MGI reports highlight similar gaps in Montenegro and Serbia, where climate mobility is recognized but not operationalized within migration strategies.[190]

Overall, despite progress in legal alignment and institutional development, the Western Balkans have not yet achieved gender-responsive migration governance. Across all types of migration, women's needs, risks and contributions are insufficiently recognized, and gender remains peripheral to mainstream policy design, implementation and monitoring. Strengthening sex-disaggregated data, embedding gender analysis across migration procedures, and designing tailored support for migrant, refugee and returnee women are essential steps towards equitable and inclusive migration systems.

3.10 Data gaps

The assessment of data gaps presented here is based on a review of official statistical sources, administrative records and publicly available data from international organizations. A consistent finding across all Western Balkan countries is that sex-disaggregated, reliable and comparable migration data remain limited across every major type of migration, severely hindering the ability of governments, researchers and international partners to understand women's migration experiences or to design policies that address their specific needs. Existing data systems remain fragmented, with limited interoperability between administrative registers. As a result, women's trajectories, vulnerabilities, labour-market outcomes and protection needs remain largely invisible in official statistics.

Data mapping for the purpose of this analysis indicates that gender-sensitive data gaps are particularly acute in the area of emigration, where almost no Western Balkan country maintains a regular, comprehensive system for tracking outward mobility. Sex-disaggregated data generally remain highly limited, making it difficult to

understand the forms of mobility in which women participate, whether for work, education, marriage, care or longer-term settlement. Available sources, such as population censuses, deregistration systems and labour migration permits, capture only a fraction of actual emigrants and exclude unregistered, circular, irregular or seasonal mobility, where many women are present. Destination-country statistics, while more reliable, also offer only a partial picture and are rarely comparable across all relevant destinations, leaving women's emigration patterns particularly under-documented.

For regular immigration, while progress has been made, data remain largely inconsistent.[191] Stocks of foreign residents, work permits, first permits and renewals often rely on incompatible definitions, and their fragmentation makes it difficult to analyse gendered pathways, such as women's transitions from family reunification to employment or onward mobility. Interoperability across administrative systems—residence, employment, education, health and social insurance—is minimal, preventing robust analysis of integration outcomes that matter for women, including time to first employment, sector of entry, contract stability, earnings or skills recognition. Intersectional breakdowns by age, education, occupation or nationality are rarely available, and irregular publication or undocumented breaks in data series further undermine comparability.

Monitoring of irregular migration was also found to be largely gender-blind. The analysis of official data sources shows that countries use different definitions and counting rules, mixing person-based and event-based statistics, making regional comparison unreliable. Critical categories such as green-border detections, overstays, smuggling data or outcomes of regularization and return are inconsistently captured or not recorded at all. From a gender perspective, the limited use of systematic disaggregation by sex, age, nationality or vulnerability markers (pregnancy, disability, GBV risk, trafficking indicators) leaves women and girls almost entirely invisible in irregular-migration data, including those working in domestic, care or hospitality sectors where exploitation is hardest to detect. Data systems across border police, foreigners' services, labour inspectorates, asylum offices and assisted-return programmes operate in silos, without shared identifiers to track individual trajectories or assess whether gender-sensitive safeguards are applied.

Data on transit migration across the region reveal similar limitations. The most comprehensive information comes from IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix, but publication is uneven across countries and generally contains limited gender analysis. Annual Western Balkans reports produced by IOM Bosnia and Herzegovina capture movement modalities, needs and risks but lack comprehensive sex disaggregation. National authorities detect only a fraction of actual smuggling cases, and the absence of standardized reporting on the gender, age or nationality of smuggled persons leaves women, children and unaccompanied girls largely unaccounted for. Violence, exploitation and deaths occurring during smuggling operations are seldom reflected in official statistics, despite their regular appearance in field reports.

Regarding the analysis of official data within refugee protection and asylum systems, sex- and age-disaggregated data are not consistently collected across key stages of the procedure: intention to apply for asylum, registration, lodging, reception, case processing, outcomes and post-decision phases.[192] Critical intersectional factors, such as pregnancy, post-partum status, disability, unaccompanied or separated girls, single-female-headed households, caregiving responsibilities or SOGIESC characteristics, are rarely recorded. Gender-based violence remains under-measured, with screening inconsistent, incident data fragmented, and referral information insufficiently linked to asylum case files. Data on the use of essential services, such as legal aid, interpretation, sexual and reproductive health, education and language training, are seldom disaggregated, obscuring women's protection and integration outcomes.

In the area of trafficking in human beings, data gaps persist despite relatively advanced frameworks. Identification remains the weakest point: only a small proportion of trafficked persons are formally recognized,[193] and disaggregation by sex, age, nationality and form of exploitation is inconsistent. Official statistics tend to

overrepresent sexual exploitation while underreporting labour exploitation, forced begging, forced marriage and emerging forms online due to weak investigative procedures and reliance on victim testimony. The intersection between trafficking and smuggling is poorly documented, and women and girls experiencing coercion or exploitation within smuggling networks are rarely reclassified as trafficking victims.[194] Cross-border data sharing also remains limited.[195]

Despite growing attention to the importance of intersectional analysis, there is still room for improvement in official return-migration data. With the exception of Serbia, which publishes somewhat more detailed statistics, Western Balkan economies do not systematically report sex- and age-disaggregated return figures or distinguish between voluntary, forced and assisted returns. Reintegration outcomes are referenced in strategies but not monitored through reliable indicators, leaving the situation of women and children returnees particularly unclear. Many insights, especially for Roma women and girls, derive from qualitative studies rather than administrative records. These gaps impede the design of gender-responsive reintegration measures and contribute to cycles of marginalization and remigration.

For environmental migration, systematic data are virtually absent. No regional database exists to track displacement caused by floods, droughts, wildfires, landslides or pollution. Available statistics are event-specific, uneven across countries and mostly not disaggregated by sex or age. The link between environmental stressors and long-term mobility, especially from rural or polluted urban areas, is poorly captured, with many such movements recorded simply as economic migration. National climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies rarely include indicators related to mobility, and there is little evidence that climate policies are monitored for gender-differentiated impacts.

Taken together, these gaps constrain gender-responsive migration governance. Without systematic, comparable and intersectionally disaggregated data across all migration categories, policies cannot adequately reflect women's experiences, risks or contributions, and opportunities to support their economic empowerment and protection remain underutilized.

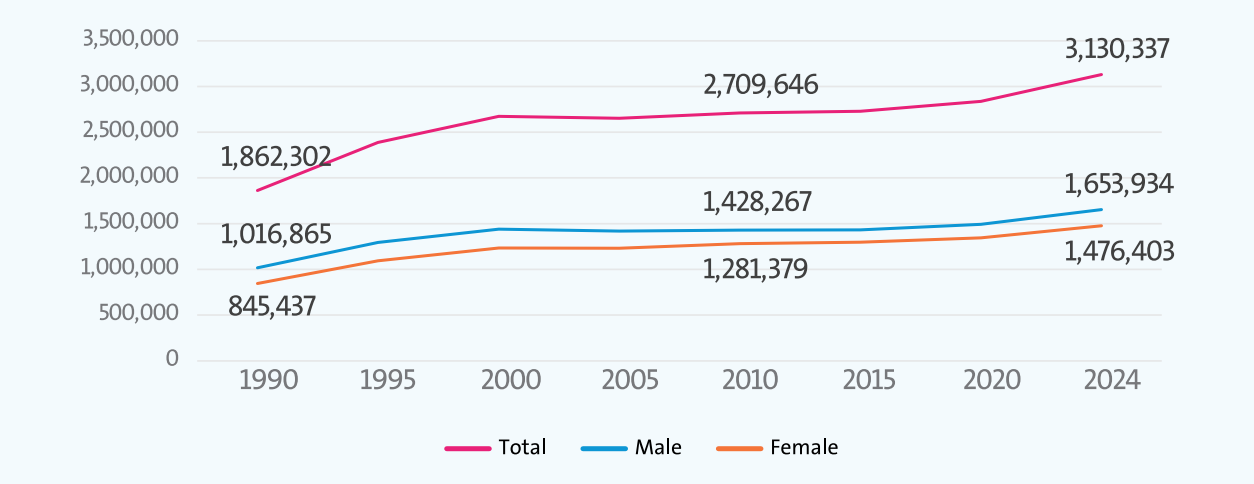
WOMEN IN MIGRATION IN TÜRKİYE

Türkiye's migration landscape is highly complex, shaped by its simultaneous role as a country of emigration, immigration, transit and destination for refugees. For women, mobility unfolds across multiple and overlapping trajectories—from labour and family emigration to Europe, to educational and politically motivated exits; and from immigration for care, marriage and work, to forced displacement, transit migration and return. Women's experiences of migration are deeply gendered, influenced by low female labour-force participation, traditional gender norms, societal pressures, care responsibilities and uneven access to rights and services.

4.1 Women in emigration from Türkiye

The number of emigrants from Türkiye almost doubled from 1990 to 2024, from 1.8 million to 3.1 million,[1] and the share of male and female emigrants has not significantly changed (Figure 4.1). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports the number of Turkish citizens living abroad as 7.5 million, 6 million of whom live in Western European countries,[2] with more than 3 million people of Turkish origin known to be living in Germany. Total emigration flows increased by more than 160 per cent between 2016 and 2022 (from 177,960 to 466,914),[3] and those specific to OECD countries increased by 61 per cent in 2022 (115,000 people). Around half of this population moved to Germany, 11 per cent to the Netherlands, and 6 per cent to the United States. The emigration of Turkish citizens to Germany doubled from 2021 to 2022, and Turkish citizens constituted the second largest group of asylum applicants in the country in 2023, amounting to a 156 per cent increase in 2022.[4]

FIGURE 4.1: **International migrant stock from Türkiye, by sex, 1990–2024**



Source: UN DESA 2024a.

The Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT) reports a sharp decline in the emigration flow by 40.6 per cent in 2024 compared to 2023, having dropped to 424,345 people in 2024, 44.3 per cent of whom are women.[5] Women emigrants are predominantly of working age, with the highest concentration in the 25–29 age group, followed by those aged 30–34. More broadly, women are primarily represented within the 25–64 age bracket, indicating that young and prime working-age women are the most likely to migrate. At the same time, children constitute a significant share of outward mobility: one in five female emigrants is under the age of 14, underscoring the continued importance of family-linked migration and the need for adequate childcare, education and child-protection services in destination countries.

4.1.1 Labour and family emigration

Turkish citizens' long-standing emigration to Western Europe reflects a clear gendered trajectory, shifting from male-dominated labour migration in the 1960s to predominantly female family reunification and family-forming migration, with women's outcomes shaped by intergenerational gains in education and employment alongside persistent constraints related to care responsibilities, labour-market segregation and patriarchal norms. The large emigrant population in Western European countries is due to the bilateral workforce agreements signed in the 1960s, primarily with Germany but also France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria and Sweden. Today, more than 60 years on, the fourth generation of Turkish emigrants live in European countries.[6] According to data from the German Federal Statistical Office, by 2023, approximately 1.4 million Turkish citizens, consisting of 816,000 men and 732,000 women, lived in the country, while another 1.6 million obtained German citizenship.[7]

In the initial stage of labour migration programmes, 1 million Turkish citizens emigrated to these countries, with women constituting only 15 per cent of this population, as the programmes mainly aimed at a male labour force. After the 'guest worker' programmes ended in 1974, the movement from Türkiye to Western Europe continued mainly in the form of family reunification and family-forming migration as unmarried migrant workers married a partner from their host country. This second wave of migration was predominantly female,[8] and women who emigrated in this framework primarily moved for family-related reasons, rather than their own employment motives. [9]Family-related migration is still the main migration motive for almost half of women emigrants today, as women mostly emigrate as a result of household decisions, usually because their husbands find a job abroad and they accompany them.[10]

The level of educational and vocational qualifications of first-generation women was low, leading to negative labour-market outcomes in terms of employment chances, occupational status and wages. The lack of language proficiency also limited their access to important networks and job search possibilities. Gender segregation in the labour market particularly affected lower-educated and lower-skilled women in terms of wage differentials and their overrepresentation in jobs that are in line with traditional gender roles. Accordingly, while first-generation men predominantly worked in the manufacturing and construction sectors, at least half of women were employed in the services and healthcare sectors.[11]

In terms of educational attainment, 54 per cent of first-generation Turkish women in Germany had low levels of qualification, compared to only 5 per cent of German women, highlighting a significant initial integration gap. However, this disparity narrowed substantially among the second generation: Turkish women born or raised in Germany were significantly more likely to attain intermediate-level degrees and vocational qualifications, in some cases outperforming their male counterparts. This shift reflects improved access to education and stronger labour-market integration over time, though it does not automatically eliminate gendered employment segmentation.[12] Similarly, while the male-breadwinner model was more common among first-generation Turkish emigrants, the dual-earner model has become more widespread since the second generation, confirming higher levels of employment among later generations of women.[13]

For the lower-educated and lower-skilled women, emigration brought more challenges than opportunities in terms of difficulties with finding decent employment in their host countries, their loss of autonomy and the unchanged traditional division of labour. Women in this category were either not allowed to work or faced challenges in the labour market, including discrimination, lack of recognition of their qualifications and language barriers.[14] Childcare responsibilities significantly affect the labour-market outcomes for these women, as they tend to have children earlier and have larger families than the women in their host community, and many are either unlikely to enter employment or more likely to exit the labour market after becoming mothers.[15]

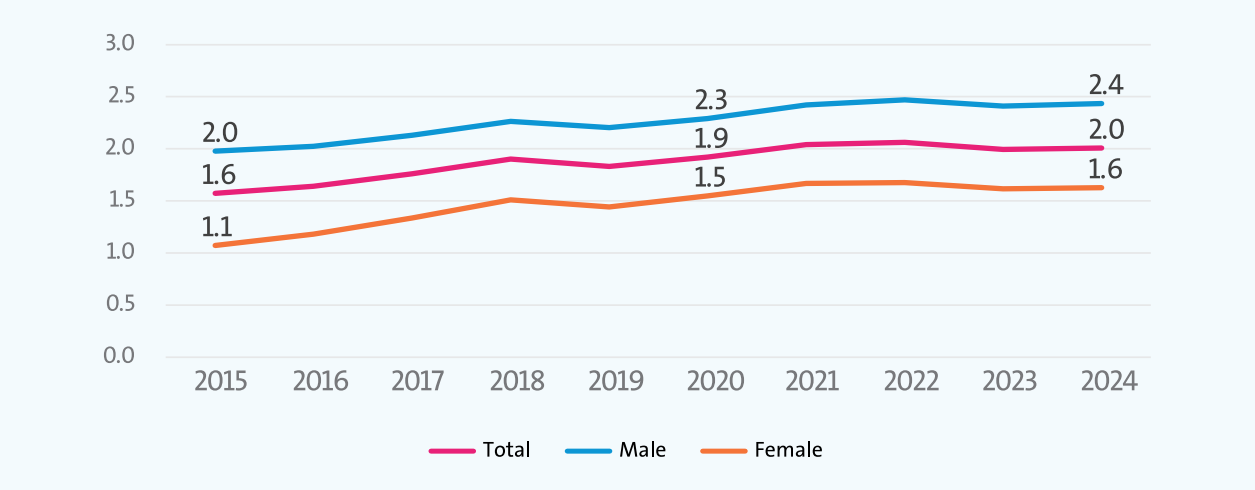
On the other hand, the low female employment rate in Türkiye, at 31.8 per cent as of September 2025,[16] implies that emigrant women in Western Europe have a greater likelihood of being employed than their non-emigrant counterparts, due to three main factors: (i) labour markets in destination countries offer better opportunities for women (i.e. more jobs, more childcare facilities, etc.); (ii) women face less patriarchal restrictions in destination countries, resulting in a greater likelihood of paid employment; and (iii) emigration to Western Europe creates more educational opportunities, particularly for those born in these countries.[17] A study comparing the employment trends of emigrants and their non-emigrant counterparts in Türkiye found that 21 per cent of women in the sending regions of Türkiye, versus 42 per cent of emigrant women, and 63 per cent of those born in the European destination countries are in paid employment, showing a significant difference between emigrant and non-emigrant women, as well as between generations. Among the three factors, education appears to be the most significant, since it explains more than 40 per cent of the employment gaps between emigrant and non-emigrant women, as well as between those who emigrated and those who were born in the host country and thus demonstrates how emigration benefits women's employment by increasing educational opportunities and levels of education. Particularly in the Western European destination countries, the longer duration of compulsory education—16 years, compared to 12 years in Türkiye today (increased from 8 years in 2012)—is a key factor accounting for the higher employment trends of the second, third and fourth generations.[18]

Today, the primary motivation for women's emigration, particularly among younger age groups, is the pursuit of better income opportunities. This is followed by aspirations related to education, as well as the search for environments offering greater non-discrimination, personal freedoms and expanded life choices. [19]Women's emigration decisions, however, remain strongly shaped by family dynamics. Marriage and spousal or partner employment continue to constitute key drivers of women's outward mobility, indicating that many women migrate as part of family strategies rather than primarily in pursuit of their own independent employment trajectories.[20] At the same time, emigration can expand women's economic opportunities, particularly in the context of Türkiye's persistently low female labour-force participation (around 32 per cent) and comparatively high youth unemployment (16.2 per cent overall and 23.7 per cent for young women as of June 2025).[21] The prominence of motivations such as non-discrimination and freedom also points to broader structural pressures within the domestic context. Patriarchal norms, entrenched gender roles and an increasingly conservative sociopolitical climate continue to shape expectations around women's behaviour, care responsibilities and public participation. In this environment, migration may represent not only an economic strategy but also a pathway to greater autonomy, expanded life choices and personal empowerment. However, such outcomes are not automatic and depend heavily on the conditions women encounter in destination countries, including access to decent work, rights protection and supportive integration systems.

An important aspect of labour emigration from Türkiye is the brain drain, which started in the 1960s, mainly due to the political instability triggered by the 1960 military coup.[22] Economic push factors (economic crises, insufficient jobs, unemployment, low wages, etc.), sociocultural push factors (inequalities in educational opportunities, bullying, safety concerns, etc.) and political push factors (political crises and instability, military coups, corruption, nepotism, etc.) have all been influential in this process. The main pull factors can be grouped as mainly economic (better career prospects, better living conditions and income opportunities, etc.) and political (political and religious freedom, security, meritocracy, etc.).[23] It should be noted that studies and data on high-skilled migration, particularly in recent years, are scarce, as well as lack a gender perspective.

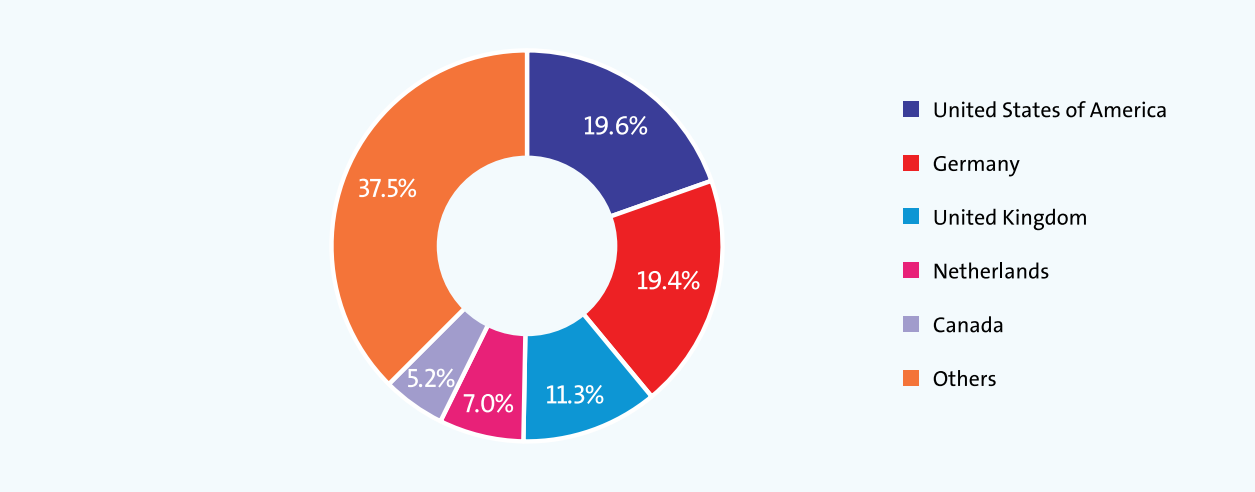
Official data[24] reveal that brain drain rates for higher education graduates increased from 1.6 per cent in 2015 to 2 per cent in 2023. This rate, as well as the gender distribution of emigrants, did not change from 2023 to 2024 (Figure 4.2).[25] The fields with the highest rate of brain drain in 2024 were ICT (6.7 per cent), engineering, manufacturing and construction (4.4 per cent) and natural sciences, mathematics and statistics (2.7 per cent). The United States was the country where the graduates emigrated to the most, followed by Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Canada (Figure 4.3).

FIGURE 4.2: **Brain drain rate of higher education graduates from Türkiye, by sex, 2015–2024**



Source: TURKSTAT 2024a.

FIGURE 4.3: **Distribution of higher education graduates from Türkiye, by country of emigration, 2024**



Source: TURKSTAT 2024a.
Note: Values in the figure may not add up to totals due to rounding.

Studies on highly skilled emigrants reveal that low wages and career concerns were the most important push factors in the early waves of brain drain in the 1960s and 1970s, which then expanded to include lack of freedom of expression, workplace dissatisfaction and political instability in the 2000s, and political instability and lack of academic freedom in the 2010s.[26] Accordingly, existing gender inequalities in the Turkish education system and labour market encourage highly skilled women to migrate, particularly if they pursue an education in engineering or natural and technical sciences, given the high demand for these fields in destination countries.

Türkiye has experienced a significant rise in the emigration of highly educated and skilled professionals, including doctors, engineers and academics in recent years.[27] The rising trend is mainly explained by the political and economic developments in the country triggered by the 2013 Gezi protests, the 2016 failed coup attempt and

the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in significant deterioration in the economy, skyrocketing inflation rates, the deterioration of human rights, restricted freedoms and increasing political pressures.[28] The protests in Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013 marked the beginning of a new emigration wave to Western Europe, which is depicted as heterogeneous, covering secular, liberal, highly educated sections of society, including members of the LGBTIQ+ community, religious-political factions and others opposing the government.[29]

The 25–29 age group constitutes the largest group in this wave, and various pull factors (employment/career prospects, higher income and living standards, social rights, etc.) and push factors (deteriorating economic situation, lack of a merit-based system, political environment, etc.) drive this outward movement, where the push factors are becoming more and more prominent. This age group also suggests that young people who complete their university education and who probably have a number of years of job experience are more predominant in the flows abroad.[30] For women, gender inequality is a structural factor affecting migration decisions, mostly due to labour-market barriers[31] and limited professional prospects.[32]

A substantial share of young people expresses a desire to live abroad permanently, with surveys indicating that between 60 and 70 per cent would prefer to settle in another country if given the opportunity. The most frequently cited destinations are Germany, the United Kingdom and France, followed by the United States, Canada and Scandinavian countries, reflecting both established migration networks and perceptions of stronger labour markets, education systems and social freedoms in these contexts.[33] The main motivations extend beyond expectations of better living standards. Many young people also cite perceptions that destination countries offer stronger protection of human rights, greater personal and political freedoms, and more predictable institutional environments. Feelings of insecurity and uncertainty about the future in Türkiye further reinforce aspirations to migrate, suggesting that mobility decisions are shaped not only by economic considerations but also by concerns related to rights, governance and the sociopolitical climate.[34] The prospect of securing a 'better future', particularly for their children, is a central factor shaping many women's decisions to move abroad. This aspiration is closely linked to the desire to 'feel safe and free', including through freedom from harassment and violence and the ability to move comfortably and confidently in public spaces. For many women, migration is therefore framed not only as an economic strategy but also as a pathway to safety, dignity and improved life chances for themselves and their families.[35]

In 2023, Türkiye appeared among the top three countries of origin for asylum-seekers in nine OECD countries (Austria, Czechia, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovakia and Switzerland), making it the 7th country of origin for all asylum applicants in the OECD—with approximately 125,000 to 129,000 applications, showing an increase of 76 per cent compared to 2022.[36] These figures point to the salience of political pressures along with economic deterioration.[37]

4.1.2 Educational emigration

While data on educational emigration from Türkiye are scarce, there is an acknowledgement that the numbers have been on the rise in recent decades. A study focusing on the emigration of Turkish citizens to Germany emphasizes that the previously unskilled emigration of the 1960s started to change by the 1990s to include an increasing number of Turkish students and skilled professionals, seeking educational opportunities and careers in fields such as engineering, medicine and academia. Student emigration has been notable in this context, accompanied by academics, researchers and technical experts in recent years.[38]

A study by Educational Testing Service (ETS) dated February 2025 and conducted with young people between the ages of 16 and 35 reveals that 93.6 per cent of young people would consider studying abroad, while their other main reasons for emigration include securing a better career (91 per cent), personal development (89 per cent),

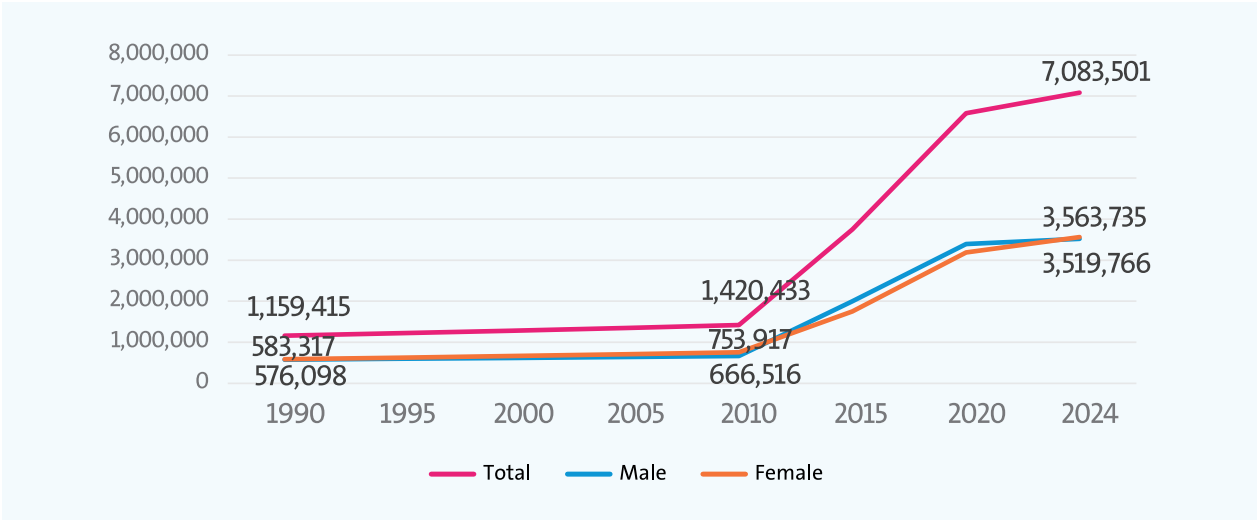
getting a better education (88 per cent) and improving their language skills (85 per cent).[39] On the other hand, despite this strong interest, the main obstacles are expressed as financial constraints (83 per cent) and language barriers (64 per cent). The quality of education is the most cited reason for selecting a destination (97 per cent), followed by post-graduate job opportunities (87 per cent) and the ability to work while studying (71 per cent). Top choices for international study include the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany and the United States.

According to UNESCO data, in 2023, there were 66,914 international students from Türkiye who studied abroad, 43.5 per cent of whom were female.[40] The increasing willingness of young people to continue their education abroad and the growing rates of brain drain are closely related to the socioeconomic instability in Türkiye.[41] In this sense, it would be correct to argue that brain drain provides opportunities for women to attain higher personal and career development possibilities, more paid employment prospects and freedom concerning their life choices. However, the current trend appears to work to the disadvantage of women, as most of the emigration in this category concerns STEM subjects, particularly engineering and technical fields, where women's participation is already low. This partly explains the relatively small presence of women in labour emigration, along with the patriarchal structure of society where especially young women confront challenges from their families and communities in terms of their lifestyle choices, including freedom to move abroad.

4.2 Women in immigration to Türkiye

Starting from the 1970s, the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the change of the political system in Iran, the conflicts and wars in the Middle East, and the collapse of communist systems in Eastern Europe and the USSR have rendered Türkiye an important destination for both regular and irregular immigration movements.[42] The immigrant population in Türkiye recorded a more than sixfold increase between 1990 and 2024, from approximately 1.2 million to 7 million. While the numbers of immigrants displayed a steady upward trend until 2010, a sharp twofold increase took place between 2010 and 2015, which continued to rise up until 2024,[43] mostly due to the influx of Syrian nationals from 2011 onward. The share of women and men in the immigrant population pursued an equal path throughout (Figure 4.4).

FIGURE 4.4: **International migrant stock to Türkiye, by sex, 1990–2024**



Source: UN DESA 2024a.

Since 2022, Türkiye has experienced a reversal in migration trends, characterized by both an increase in emigration and a decline in new immigration. Importantly, the rise in emigration includes not only Turkish nationals leaving the country but also a growing number of previously arrived migrants departing Türkiye, resulting in net outflows. This shift appears to be driven by a combination of factors. Economic conditions have deteriorated, as evidenced by the negative economic outlook, declining living standards and reduced employment opportunities. At the same time, migration policies have become more restrictive, with tighter admission procedures, increased visa requirements and greater difficulties in obtaining or renewing residence permits. Public attitudes towards migrants have also hardened, and immigration has become a prominent and polarized political issue, influencing both policy and the social climate. In parallel, changes in the international context—such as more favourable admission policies in other destination countries and the emergence of new employment and business opportunities abroad—have further contributed to outward migration and reduced inflows.[44]

4.2.1 Regular immigration

Official data demonstrate the number of foreign nationals moving to Türkiye in 2024 as 210,856.[45] The top five countries of origin for immigrants included Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, the Russian Federation and Iran. The largest proportion of immigrants are between the ages of 20 and 34, pointing to a relatively young population composition.[46] The overwhelming majority of women, at almost 60 per cent, are of working age (aged 25–64), while one in four immigrant women are in the 15–24 age group and are expected to be either in education or in the process of transitioning to the labour market (Table 4.1).

TABLE 4.1: Immigrant population in Türkiye, by sex and age group, 2024

Age group	Total country population	Total immigrant population	Male immigrant population	Female immigrant population	Share of the female immigrant population by age group
Total	**85,664,944**	**314,588**	**171,336**	**143,252**	**100%**
Aged 0–14	17,926,565	**34,894**	17,956	16,938	11.8%
Aged 15–24	12,763,159	**77,164**	41,874	35,290	24.6%
Aged 25–64	45,862,922	**188,403**	104,079	84,324	58.9%
Aged 65+	9,112,298	**14,127**	7,427	6,700	4.7%

Source: TURKSTAT 2024b.

As for the **immigration stock**, the size of the immigrant population was 1,480,547 in 2024, slightly more than half of whom consists of women.[47] The largest group consists of Iraqi nationals (12 per cent of total foreign nationals). While there is a gender balance across the majority of foreign nationals, women are overrepresented among immigrants from Central Asian and Eastern European countries, including Turkmenistan, the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Ukraine (Table 4.2). As discussed below, this overrepresentation can be explained by different trends and types of migration to Türkiye from these countries, including the marriage migration of Russian women, care migration from Central Asian countries, and the forced migration of Ukrainian women due to the war (while their husbands remain in the country to fight).

TABLE 4.2: **Immigrant population in Türkiye, by sex and the top 11 countries of citizenship, 2024**

Country of citizenship	Total immigrant population	Male immigrant population	Female immigrant population	Female immigrant population (share of the total)
Total	**1,480,547**	**715,689**	**764,858**	**51.7%**
Iraq	**177,988**	89,401	88,587	49.8%
Afghanistan	**139,251**	81,032	58,219	41.8%
Germany	**115,958**	57,843	58,115	50.1%
Turkmenistan	**113,762**	53,539	60,223	52.9%
Iran	**95,924**	44,324	51,600	53.8%
Russian Federation	**85,752**	37,560	48,192	56.2%
Azerbaijan	**80,133**	38,393	41,740	52.1%
Syria	**72,367**	35,982	36,385	50.3%
Uzbekistan	**59,132**	20,981	38,151	64.5%
Kazakhstan	**44,445**	18,416	26,029	58.6%
Ukraine	**35,446**	10,127	25,319	71.4%

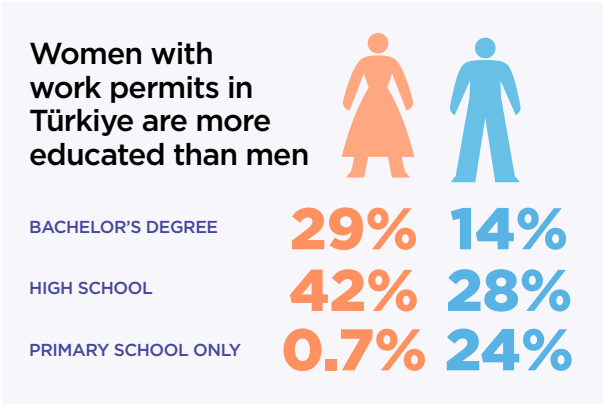
Source: TURKSTAT 2024b.

IOM reports that there are 4.1 million foreigners in Türkiye, 3 million of whom are seeking international protection (consisting of 2.8 million Syrians under Temporary Protection and 230,617 refugees and asylum-seekers).[48] In addition, there are 1,084,501 residence permit holders[49] in the country across various categories, including short-term, family, student, long-term and humanitarian residence permits, as well as residence permits for victims of human trafficking. Of these permits, 44 per cent are short-term residence permits, 18 per cent are issued for study purposes, 14 per cent for family reunification, and the remaining 24 per cent fall under other categories. In 2022, citizens of Russia (11 per cent), Iraq (9.8 per cent) and Turkmenistan (8.5 per cent) were the major nationalities among those provided with a residence permit. The number of Russians granted a residence permit significantly increased from 2021 to 2022 (by 127.1 per cent), and Ukrainians entered the top ten nationalities granted a residence permit. Both can be explained by the escalation of the war in 2022, leading Ukrainian nationals to flee for security reasons and Russian nationals to escape from obligatory military service and wait for the end of the war in a more secure place.[50]

In terms of educational immigration flows and stock in Türkiye, 260,000 foreign students were enrolled in higher education institutions in the 2021/22 academic year, accounting for 3.1 per cent of the 8.3 million enrolled Turkish citizens. Women students constituted 37.7 per cent of this group, which can be explained by the fact that most students come from Middle Eastern and North African countries,[51] with lower levels of higher education enrolment for girls. For instance, among Syrian students, 21,431 female students were enrolled in higher education in Turkish universities in the 2021/22 academic year, compared to 31,666 male students; the same was observed for Somalian students, with 3,389 females enrolled compared to 7,685 males.[52] Approximately 1 million foreign students are enrolled in primary, secondary and high schools, the majority of whom are Syrian nationals.

In terms of family residence permits, 12.7 per cent of them were granted to citizens of Azerbaijan, followed by those of Uzbekistan (8.9 per cent) and Russia (7.1 per cent). Note that these data are not disaggregated by sex or age.

In 2022, 212,682 work permits were issued to foreign nationals, up from 45,823 in 2013, 27.2 per cent of which were for women. Among the women granted a work permit in 2022, 42 per cent had completed high school and 29 per cent had bachelor's degrees. The respective rates for men were 28 per cent and 14 per cent, while 24 per cent of men were primary school graduates (note that this rate was 0.7 per cent for women), suggesting that women applying for work permits had a higher educational profile. The nationality with the highest rate of work permit issuance was Syria, but the proportion of Syrians who were holders of a work permit was only about 5 per cent of the total Syrian population in Türkiye, suggesting that most were involved in unregistered work.[53]



As for immigration from Eastern European and Central Asian counties, a complicated picture emerges involving closely interwoven regular and irregular dynamics. Women's immigration from these countries to Türkiye since the 1990s reveals that push and pull factors, focusing on the increasing poverty rates and the transition to a free-market economy, remain insufficient in explaining why women constituted the majority of immigrants in this wave.[54] Women were the most affected by deepening poverty and unemployment in these countries, since they were previously concentrated in agriculture, office work, light industry, social services and education sectors, which were heavily affected by the transition to a free-market economy. Türkiye was an important destination in this movement due to its geographical proximity and the relative ease of its visa procedures compared to European countries.[55]

The trend first started as short-term and repetitive circular migration flows between Türkiye and these countries and then started to diversify, as the number of women immigrants coming from different regions for different purposes gradually increased, along with their economic activities, mostly in the domestic work and entertainment sectors.[56] The economic sectors where immigrant women work in Türkiye are diverse but remain segregated along their country of origin. Those coming from Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan tend to cluster in domestic work; those from Bulgaria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Romania and Ukraine in the food sector; and those from Moldova, Romania, Russia and Ukraine in the entertainment sector.[57] This suggests a highly gender-segregated labour market for immigrant women, perpetuating the traditional gender division of labour. Although there is no supporting evidence that would indicate clearly why such diversification has occurred, it can be assumed, in line with network migration theories, that with time women from different countries of origin have developed informal networks acting as push factors and facilitating access to jobs in specific sectors.

The gender segregation in the labour market, mostly causing immigrant women to work in sectors that are perceived as 'suitable' for women, reinforces the traditional gender division of labour. Immigrant women concentrate in precarious, low-pay and low-skill positions in the labour market and suffer from multiple disadvantages coming from both their gender and immigrant status. On the other hand, the sectoral concentration of immigrant women from the same country of origin suggests that the social networks (family, relatives and other social relations) of these women are strong, which facilitates their adaptation and enables them to cope with challenges collectively.[58]

In short, women have been present across all types of immigration flows to Türkiye; they hold all forms of immigration statuses and work across different economic sectors as secure, permanent workers, as well as undocumented, precarious ones, including as domestic care workers, low-waged workers in small and medium-sized manufacturing workshop ateliers, sales assistants in department stores, seasonal workers in agriculture, or as sex workers. It is important to note that Türkiye appears as the country with the widest gap among OECD countries with respect to the employment rates of immigrant men and women (67.1 per cent and 27.4 per cent, respectively), reaching almost 40 percentage points.[59]

The fact that a key area of concentration for immigrant women is domestic work points to the gaps in the provision of affordable and quality care services in Türkiye, which obliges families who can afford it to look for alternative solutions. Immigrant women fill an important void in this respect, as they provide live-in help to the families, as opposed to Turkish citizens employed in care and domestic work. This has increased the demand for immigrant labour since the 1990s, and women primarily from Moldova (particularly those whose mother tongue is Turkish) but also from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan have started to move to Türkiye for this purpose.[60] It is argued that, while the exact numbers of these domestic workers are unknown—as the majority work for short durations and some are employed in unauthorized positions—they face significant challenges stemming from both the problems in existing regulations and the specific conditions of domestic work.[61]

The increase in immigrant domestic workers has also triggered the establishment of private intermediary agencies for the employment of immigrants, helping them (and their families and acquaintances) to find and change jobs in return for a commission.[62] However, the lack of awareness of rights among immigrant women, as well as their potential employers, renders these firms more predatory and both sides more open to exploitation,[63] leading most of these women to work informally and without a clear legal status.

4.2.2 Women in irregular migration to Türkiye

Irregular migration in Türkiye is a complex phenomenon bringing together circular migration, irregular labour migration and transit migration along with the 'unregistered', 'irregular' or 'undocumented' flow of refugees and asylum-seekers. The number of irregular immigrants peaked in 2019 with 454,662 persons and declined from then onward mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic; but it still showed a fluctuating trend, having reached around 160,000 by the end of 2025.[64] The numbers represent irregular migrants who have been identified by Turkish authorities, meaning that the actual extent of irregular migration is much larger, possibly reaching two to three times the official figures. Almost one third of irregular immigrants consists of Afghan nationals,[65] followed by Syrians, Uzbeks and nationals of Turkmenistan.[66] In 2025, irregular migrants entered Turkish territory from neighbouring countries such as Iran, Iraq and Syria and either transited or resided in Türkiye before attempting to cross the Aegean Sea.[67]

Circular migration[68] and irregular labour migration are generally included in the category of irregular migration and entail the same person entering and exiting the country numerous times. The majority of migrants in this category legally enter Türkiye but overstay the duration of their visa and fall into the status of undocumented migrant.[69] The main countries of origin include Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and Romania, while their numbers are significantly declining since the 2000s, from 100,000 to 50,000 annually.[70] An important reason for this decline is the increasingly volatile economic environment and intensifying unemployment, which has rendered the Turkish labour market less attractive for foreign workers. The general areas of activity of this population include domestic work (whose irregular dimensions were discussed above), entertainment, textiles, construction, tourism and sex work.[71] Looking at these fields, it can be argued that women constitute a significant proportion of irregular migrants, underlining their vulnerability to exploitation and precarious conditions.

The forced removal of irregular migrants raises important concerns. Increasing allegations of migrants and asylum-seekers are reported at the Turkish–Iranian border, particularly since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August 2021, which caused significant Afghan inflows crossing Iran to Türkiye. While there is a lack of publicly available, sex-disaggregated data, nearly 120,000 persons were blocked from entry in 2021, 75 per cent of whom were Afghan nationals. A growing concern in this respect is the fact that those who managed to cross the border go into hiding, refraining from submitting applications for international protection or reporting abuses due to their fear of being sent back to Afghanistan or Iran,[72] which has significant consequences in terms of their access to services and support.

Women working in the domestic care sector face multiple, interrelated challenges. Their working hours are often undefined and extend well beyond standard limits, while the private nature of household employment renders their labour largely invisible and weakly regulated. Many experience emotional exploitation, particularly where expectations of 'being part of the family' blur professional boundaries and normalize excessive demands. Their workload typically combines intensive care responsibilities with extensive household chores. At the same time, entrenched stereotypes contribute to discriminatory treatment, including perceptions of domestic workers as untrustworthy, practices such as passport confiscation or restrictions on freedom of movement, and limited access to complaint mechanisms. Legal frameworks frequently tie work and residence permits to a specific employer or to narrowly defined 'home services', restricting mobility across sectors and making it difficult to change jobs. This dependency heightens women's exposure to exploitation, harassment and various forms of violence.[73]

The specific characteristics of domestic work—performed in private households, often without effective monitoring or labour inspection—make immigrant women particularly vulnerable to exploitation and violence. This vulnerability is compounded by gaps in the legal and regulatory framework governing domestic employment. In practice, many women enter Türkiye on tourist visas, overstay their permitted duration and subsequently work informally, without access to social protection or basic economic security. Irregular status further increases their dependency on employers and intermediaries. In some cases, women enter into formal marriages with Turkish men as a strategy to regularize their stay, a practice that can itself expose them to additional forms of exploitation and abuse.[74] Regulations requiring migrant workers to remain outside the country for 90 days before re-entering create further insecurity. Few employer households are willing to hold positions open for such extended periods, and many domestic workers lack the financial means to travel repeatedly. As a result, women face a stark choice between becoming undocumented, losing their employment or returning to their countries of origin without viable income alternatives. These structural constraints, combined with the high commissions often charged by intermediary agencies to secure employment, create conditions that heighten the risk of labour exploitation and abuse.[75]

4.3 Mixed transit migration through Türkiye

Türkiye's geopolitical location in the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Asia corridors, which are key for mixed migration, along with the ongoing crises in the region make it a key transit hub (along with Iran and Greece) for thousands of refugees and migrants on their way to Western European countries.[76] The majority of irregular border passages to the EU and apprehensions take place on Türkiye's maritime borders, particularly on the northern shores of the Aegean Sea. Transit migration in Türkiye is closely interwoven with different forms of irregular migration, asylum seeking, refugee movements, shuttle migration, circular labour migration, overstays and the like.[77]

More recently, trends resulting from the global context, including shifting border policies, deportations and security crackdowns, have increasingly restricted the movement of people in these corridors. In the specific case of Türkiye, the explanation for the declining numbers, along with the deteriorating economic conditions, mainly focuses on the country's EU accession process, which entails efforts to turn irregular migration into regular migration, including by increasing the penalties for human smuggling and trafficking and by taking a stricter approach to border protection.[78]

The three main drivers of transit migration are violence and insecurity, economic hardships, and the lack of rights and freedoms. An overwhelming majority of Afghan and Syrian nationals travel via land routes from Iran to Türkiye, while they tend to cross the border between Türkiye and Greece via the sea, using a boat as their means of transportation. Many Afghan migrants stop at the Afghanistan–Iran or Iran–Türkiye border to arrange smuggling services. Upon arrival in Türkiye, they usually stop where their smugglers abandon them, mainly in the border cities of Ağrı and Van.[79] Syrian migrants, on the other hand, stop after crossing the border to Türkiye,

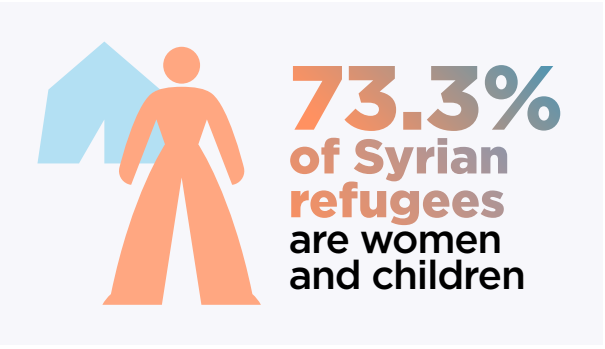
in the cities of Hatay, Gaziantep and Kilis, to reconnect with family and friends and to organize onward travel. Many arrange smuggling services in the central transit hubs such as Istanbul and İzmir.[80]

Border passage is often a long-term process, including multiple attempts, the use of alternative routes and modes of transport, and substantial payments to smugglers. The temporal aspect of transit migration is also crucial, as many who cross the Turkish border do not think of leaving at first but later decide to attempt or consider transit to Europe after some negative experiences in the job market, education and society at large.[81]

The constant interchange and blurring between categories of 'transit migrant', 'irregular migrant' and 'asylum-seeker' in the context of Türkiye has particular implications for women and girls due to the uncertainties entailed by these multiple trajectories. The difficulties of the journey, the cases of arrest and deportation, the fear of losing one's life at sea, and the lack of access to services and employment due to uncertain legal status imply particular challenges for women, namely the inability to secure livelihoods, the high risk of poverty, the lack of access to education and healthcare, psychosocial problems, and vulnerability to exploitation and violence.

4.4 Women as asylum-seekers and refugees

UNHCR data from mid-2024 show that there are 2.8 million Syrians under Temporary Protection (SuTP) and 230,250 refugees and asylum-seekers under International Protection in Türkiye, consisting primarily of Afghan (47 per cent), Iraqi (46 per cent) and Iranian (5 per cent) citizens.[82] Data from September 2025 reveal that the total number of registered Syrian refugees in Türkiye is 2,491,283, displaying a decrease of 410,195 people from the beginning of 2025,[83] leading SuTP to constitute 3.2 per cent of the total population. The female and male populations are almost the same in number, while almost half of the female population is under the age of 17, and the other half is of working age.[84]



Women and children constitute 73.3 per cent of the Syrian population in Türkiye,[85] which implies significant challenges for women in terms of childcare responsibilities, economic and social participation, livelihoods and integration in society. Despite the Temporary Protection status, which entitles Syrian nationals to access to the social protection system, including health, education, social services and employment, many Syrian women and girls face significant challenges in meeting their basic needs and participating in social and economic life. This is mainly due to the language barrier, as 70 per cent of Syrian women in Türkiye do not speak Turkish, meaning that they face difficulties in accessing their rights and services.[86]

As of 2019, less than 55,000 out of 3 million refugees were issued a work permit and/or a permit to establish a business, and about 20 per cent of Syrian refugee households had no working members, while more than two thirds could not rely on skilled or reliable work. Consequently, around 60 per cent of all Syrian households were classified as multidimensionally poor, which is expected to affect women and girls much more deeply.[87] Most Syrian women and girls find themselves in unregistered work or child labour, as well as early and forced marriages. As of 2019, only 23 per cent of girls between the ages of 15 and 17 attended school, mainly due to child marriage, family pressures, work, and household and care responsibilities. In addition, only 15 per cent of women worked in income-generating jobs, mostly in agriculture, textiles and service provision; and only 7 per cent had access to basic skills and vocational training.[88] The most popular areas of work for this population include hairdressing and needlework, which strongly reinforce the traditional gender division of labour and provide limited opportunities

for formal employment. Moreover, Syrian women greatly lack information about their rights and available support services, including legal support, while they are found to be at high risk of discrimination and exploitation. Indeed, 73 per cent do not know where to find assistance related to violence or harassment, while another 74 per cent do not know where to seek support for their children.[89]

The fall of the Assad regime in November 2024 is likely to have a major impact on the mobility dynamics in the region; conditions in Syria are not yet conducive for large-scale and sustainable returns due to ongoing insecurity, weak public services and limited opportunities for livelihoods.[90] A dynamic migration situation is expected in the region as a result of the recent developments, which may include pendulum movements in and out of Syria, temporary and permanent returns, and further displacement, rather than durable returns.[91] The context is likely to have significant implications for women, who would be more affected than men by these uncertainties, particularly considering their care and household responsibilities, the challenges they face in labour-market participation, their vulnerability to exploitation and violence, and their lack of awareness of their rights.

Another important forced movement has been that of the Ukrainian population since February 2022. While up-to-date data on the actual size of the Ukrainian population in Türkiye are unavailable, it is estimated that the number declined from 145,000 in March 2022 to 46,000 as of the end of 2023.[92] While the number of refugees and asylum-seekers from Ukraine was reported as 4,473 as of May 2024,[93] the number is known to be higher due to registration issues. Ukrainians are mostly living on short- or long-term residence permits and tourist visas, thus lacking access to the rights and services entitled to International Protection status. An overwhelming majority consists of single-mother families with children and sometimes with elderly relatives (i.e. women whose husbands stayed back in Ukraine to fight), entering Türkiye through already existing connections (i.e. through tourism-related visits, Turkish friends or acquaintances, and assets such as houses and businesses). They mostly come from high socioeconomic backgrounds and have high levels of education, employment experience and income back in Ukraine. However, very few of them are working in Türkiye, mostly due to the language barrier, a lack of documents and their care responsibilities.[94]

Despite significant steps to extend protection and grant legal rights to Syrians, there have been problems noted on the ground, mostly driven by the tensions with the host community, including school bans for children, bullying in schools and difficulties in obtaining work permits for adults.[95] The escalating social and political tensions between the host community and Syrian nationals, along with the pandemic of 2020 and the earthquakes of 2023, have worsened their already precarious situation in the labour market and have increased their vulnerability, all of which affect women refugees much more deeply. The ambiguity concerning their legal status, particularly the lack of a legal framework regulating the transition of refugees to immigrant status and then to citizenship, causes complexities for this population; for example, a Syrian national who arrived in Türkiye in 2011 as a refugee still has SuTP status 14 years later.[96]

Women have particularly limited opportunities to participate in the labour market, as well as to attend the various training and skilling programmes that have been widely provided in Türkiye in the past decade. Most women state that they cannot attend these courses because of childcare obligations and the lack information on existing opportunities.[97] Considering the significant proportion of children among the Syrian population, the lack of childcare support constitutes a key challenge to women's participation in society. The language barrier and Syrian women's secondary position within the family and the community mean that their access to employment, as well as information and knowledge of their rights, is quite limited. Problems are also noted regarding the large informal labour market in Türkiye, which, coupled with the fact that an overwhelming majority (i.e. 95 per cent) of Syrians work informally, implies significant challenges for child labour, labour trafficking and other types of abuse. Most high-risk sectors in this respect are agriculture, hospitality, textiles, construction, entertainment and leisure, which are—perhaps with the exception of construction—the traditional sectors of women's employment.[98]

In the 2020/21 academic year, 433,000 refugee children, particularly in the 15–18 age group, were out-of-school, and absenteeism and discontinuation were common among those enrolled in education, mostly due to high poverty levels and early marriages of both girls and boys. Access to education is a particular challenge for refugee children, mostly due to the related costs, conservative family structures, registration problems and, increasingly, peer bullying, which has become widespread in schools.[99]

There have been numerous programmes and projects implemented by international organizations, government agencies and civil society organizations targeting this population, particularly women and girls, in the past decade. However, most of the projects and programmes implemented by international organizations and civil society were closed by the end of 2025, due to the severe cuts in development aid. This certainly will have tremendous consequences for this population in Türkiye, who benefited from these programmes to increase their adaptation and employment prospects.[100]

Security, shelter, education, social support and economic stability are key factors in determining women's possibility of returning to Syria.[101] For single women, the main concern is security, economic conditions and a lack of social support due to the loss of kinship and neighbourhood connections they once had in their city of origin. For single mothers, their children's access to education and health is a major concern, along with the economic difficulties they would face upon returning to Syria. Divorced, widowed women and single mothers are concerned about raising their children alone in Syria under unsafe conditions. Other main concerns include possible interruptions to education in Syria and its low quality; children's lack of Arabic proficiency; potential problems with citizenship rights as they lack relevant documents; and security issues.[102] Access to rights and services is, therefore, the main factor shaping the return decisions of Syrian women, along with safety concerns. Many women thus find it safer to stay in Türkiye unless conditions improve in Syria, as they do not want to disrupt the order and support networks they have established in Türkiye.[103]

For Ukrainian women, whose legal status differs from Syrian women, there are challenges with offering them limited access to services, as the duration of their stay in Türkiye is much shorter. These Ukrainian women are almost exclusively single parents, with needs to access healthcare services, psychosocial support and care facilities, along with language support to access these services. The demographic characteristics of this population imply significant care responsibilities as they are mostly women accompanied by their children, which is an important impediment to their labour-force participation. As most tend to see their life in Türkiye as short-term and transitional due to the country's lower social and economic prospects and possibilities for work, they display a reluctance to integrate into the host society, to learn and exercise their rights, and to access basic services.[104]

4.5 Women victims of human trafficking

Among identified trafficking victims:

82% were women

29% were children

Between 2019 and 2023, 1,466 victims of trafficking were formally identified in Türkiye, representing a more than twofold increase over the 2014–2018 period (which saw a total of 776 victims);[105] 82 per cent (1,208) of the identified victims were women, and 29 per cent (422) were children, including 266 girls. However, the real extent of the phenomenon could be much broader due to the difficulties in the detection and identification of victims in the context of high numbers of refugees, the irregular transit of migrants, and prevailing social norms—particularly in certain parts of the country regarding child labour and child marriage.[106]

The main countries of origin for victims were Syria, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, followed by Türkiye itself. The types of trafficking mostly encountered include sexual exploitation (52 per cent), labour exploitation (30 per cent), forced marriage (9 per cent) and forced begging (6 per cent). The massive flow of refugees and asylum-seekers, as well as the large informal sector characterizing the Turkish economy, constitutes the main factors behind the increasing levels of human trafficking and exploitation. Türkiye is also increasingly used as a transit country for victims trafficked to the Middle East for the purpose of domestic and care work and/or sexual exploitation.[107]

Most of the women victims of human trafficking consist of people who want to work abroad for economic purposes but end up in a country where they are primarily forced to work in the sex industry with no income, but victims are also found in domestic labour or care services or are forced into marriages. Men are primarily trafficked for the purpose of labour exploitation, but their numbers remain lower.[108] The profile of victims of human trafficking has remarkably changed over the past decade, seeing an increasing share of Syrians.[109]

Refugees hosted by Türkiye may face heightened vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation, particularly among children. A significant practice concerning the trafficking of refugee children is child marriages involving the payment of a bride price, where families accept the marriage of their daughters in return for financial gains to cope with economic hardship. Child marriage is also mainly driven by the high poverty levels and challenging living conditions faced by most Syrian families.[110] It is reported that Syrian girls as young as 12 years old are being married to adults in unofficial religious ceremonies, especially in poor and rural regions, which makes them vulnerable to domestic servitude and sex trafficking. This trend—of Syrian refugee families marrying off their daughters as an economic coping mechanism—has been growing since the 2023 earthquakes due to the deteriorating economic conditions.[111] Moreover, Syrian and other refugees, including children, are vulnerable to forced labour, as they are increasingly seen in street begging and work in agriculture, restaurants, textile factories, shops and the like, working long hours for low wages and in hazardous working conditions.[112] The large informal sector creates a conducive environment for child labour and labour exploitation of children, particularly affecting Syrian children.[113]

Victims of human trafficking are mostly recruited through online platforms, and the trafficking acts are usually committed in places where it is difficult to detect it, including entertainment venues, beauty centres, private apartments and hotels. High-risk sectors include agriculture, construction, domestic care, hospitality and entertainment, the clothing industry and garbage collection.[114] It is reported that agricultural workers, particularly those working on hazelnut farms, are vulnerable to forced labour with low pay, long working hours, wage withholding and dangerous working conditions, along with workers in the textile industry, whose majority is made up of women and who face, in addition to these challenges, the risk of harassment. The February 2023 earthquakes gave rise to 3 million internally displaced persons, including refugees, children and LGBTIQ+ community members, who may face increased risks of trafficking.[115]

The identification of victims is an important challenge, and practices may vary across provinces due to differences in experience, resources and institutional arrangements, along with the lack of standardized criteria and procedures for identification. A coordinated multi-agency approach—involving specialized NGOs, social workers, labour inspectors, child protection specialists and healthcare staff—is needed.[116] The Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) operates specialized shelters for foreign female trafficking victims in Ankara and Kırıkkale, each with a respective capacity of 30 and 12 persons, where victims can stay up to three years, with a re-evaluation by the PMM every six months. Children can go to the nearby schools, and victims are offered vocational training courses and financial support, but the amount is not enough to live outside the shelter without working. The number of victims accommodated in the shelters remains low compared to the number of identified victims, either because many victims prefer to return to their home countries or do not want to stay in a shelter (mostly because they would have to be separated from their children older than 12 years of age for boys and 18 years of age for girls, who cannot stay with them in the shelter). On the other hand, if no security concerns exist, accommodation can also be offered in houses where women can stay with their children, regardless of their age.[117]

The Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS) also operates 112 shelters across 81 provinces for victims of violence, with a capacity of 2,805 people, which also accommodate trafficking victims. However, the shelters for victims of violence are not adequate for accommodating victims of human trafficking as their staff have no or very limited knowledge about human trafficking, and the shelters are not specialized and do not have capacity for such services. Thus, challenges exist for victims of trafficking, all of whom are women, in these shelters.

Access to healthcare services is a significant challenge for trafficking victims who are not international or temporary protection holders or applicants (as these legal statuses provide coverage under the general health insurance scheme). Healthcare services are provided for human trafficking victims who do not have the means to meet their healthcare expenses free of charge. Still, the language barrier and practical problems delay their access to services.[118]

The limited availability of translators and interpreters cause delays for foreign victims in accessing assistance, particularly in emergency situations. Challenges related to information-sharing and coordination across governmental units and international organizations, including the absence of a comprehensive digital case management system, may also affect protection efforts. In addition, gaps in formal identification procedures result in some cases remaining unidentified. Reports indicate challenges in proactively identifying victims within vulnerable refugee and migrant communities, and concerns have been raised regarding the return of some individuals without comprehensive screening for trafficking indicators. Victims may also be reluctant to participate in criminal justice proceedings due to perceived limitations in protection measures and access to legal assistance. Available data on the number of victims receiving legal support or participating in criminal proceedings remain limited.

4.6 Women returnees

TURKSTAT includes Turkish citizens, who need to be considered as returnees, in its international immigration data. Accordingly, 100,732 Turkish citizens returned in 2024, 38 per cent of whom were women. Studies on women returnees in Türkiye are limited and mostly outdated (conducted prior to 2015) and do not allow a comprehensive gender analysis on long-term outcomes.

Returnees from Germany to Türkiye significantly increased in the 1980s, reaching 70,000 people per year, decreasing to 35,000 by 2000 onward.[119] Return decisions are highly heterogeneous and vary according to the migrant generation. The typical pattern for the first generation is post-retirement return, mainly motivated by health problems and the cost of living, but also involves concerns about their children's future (i.e. ethnic discrimination and limited opportunities in German schools) and business investments, especially for the better-off and better-educated migrants. For the second and third generations, who are better educated, return decisions are primarily motivated by aspirations for social mobility, prospects of university education in Türkiye, and personal reasons (i.e. a desire for independence from their parents, a return 'to the homeland', etc.).[120] In terms of reintegration patterns, returnees generally follow an upward social mobility, settling in well-developed urban centres that offer better education and employment opportunities, rather than returning to their hometown.[121] The OECD reports that the return migration of the first generation was less successful in terms of reintegration, as they mostly lacked formal education and came from economically less well-developed regions, while third-generation migrants were able to become actively involved in the business sector and social life.[122]

Return migration has economic implications for women. Focusing on the income patterns of female returnees, a study found that migration experience affects the labour income of returnees positively, as women return with new skills that increase their chances of earning higher wages than before migration.[123] Returnees with

high levels of education find employment more easily than lower-educated returnees in Türkiye, and they earn more than overall wage earners with the same levels of education and skills, while female returnees earn less than their male counterparts.

Several studies on skilled migration find that women are less inclined to return to Türkiye than men, mostly due to greater freedom in lifestyle choices abroad, as well as economic instability in the country.[124] A study with high-skilled women living abroad (professionals and PhD students) finds that women are less likely than men to intend to return to Türkiye, mainly due to push factors such as gender inequalities in the labour market and education, along with a political, cultural and social atmosphere that is damaging gender equality. The political atmosphere in Türkiye is a key factor affecting the non-return decisions of women, along with the backlash regarding the role of women in society (e.g. increasing pressure on women, efforts to confine them to the private sphere, etc.).[125]

4.7 Women in mobility driven by climate change and natural hazards

Türkiye is vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate change due to its geographic location, also complicated by the fact that it is host to numerous and diverse migration dynamics. Climate change has particular implications for agriculture, mostly due to the increase in temperature, melting of glaciers and change in rain patterns that raise the frequency and intensity of droughts, heat waves and water shortages.[126] Farmers are considered to be the group most affected by climate change and environmental degradation, with particular risks for seasonal migrants, although no sex-disaggregated data are available. Internal migration among the rural population is likely to increase as the impacts of climate change become more severe and economic conditions worsen in Türkiye.

A further important point concerns the migratory moves triggered by the devastating earthquakes of 2023 in the Southeastern Anatolia region of Türkiye affecting 11 provinces (home to almost 16 per cent of the total population), which led to a death toll of more than 53,000 and the injury of nearly 110,000 people. Releasing a situation report immediately after the earthquake in March 2023, UNFPA reported the number of the affected population in Türkiye as 15.8 million, including 1.7 million refugees, 2.6 million youth in the 15–24 age group, and 4.1 million women of reproductive age; the report particularly underlined the importance of protection needs and GBV services for the women, girls and other vulnerable groups who faced increased risks in these respects. It was highlighted that women and girls exposed to GBV, older women living alone in rural areas, people with disabilities, migrants and refugees faced significant barriers to access basic services and support.[127]

The March 2023 earthquake affected 15.8 million people in Türkiye, including

1.7 million refugees
2.6 million youth
4.1 million women

It is estimated that more than 2 million people experienced shelter problems, while at least 5 million migrated from the area to different regions.[128] The internal displacement figures for Türkiye in the year 2024 was 538,000, still mostly related to the 2023 earthquakes, ranking the country as having the third largest population of internally displaced persons (IDPs). In 2024, 8,600 new displacements occurred, again attributed to the disaster.[129]

The 2023 earthquakes also triggered emigration flows, as some of the affected cities such as Hatay and Kahramanmaraş recorded more than a 100 per cent increase in their population moving abroad compared to the previous year. Such emigration was also enhanced by some countries (e.g. Canada) adopting facilitative policies towards those affected by the earthquakes,[130] including the provision of temporary and permanent residence and refugee resettlement possibilities, the extension of stays for those who were already in the country, and an open work permit policy.

The devastating impact of the earthquakes particularly affected vulnerable groups, and women have been the most affected. Women's vulnerability was deeper for some groups, particularly those with no access to education, no income and no work experience.[131] These women often had to work in unskilled and unprotected jobs including house cleaning and eldercare. Significantly more women were displaced from the earthquake region with their children or elderly family members, since men were more likely to either stay in or return to earthquake-affected areas for their jobs in order to provide for their family. This caused family separation and the creation of single-parent family structures in the relocation areas, with women remaining in the safer cities for crucial needs like the education of their children, childcare and eldercare, and health issues. It is also reported that financial and psychological difficulties often led to divorces.[132] Therefore, women's responsibilities increased, and their social support networks decreased in the new locations.

It is reported that the situation was even more challenging for the Syrian population residing in the area—particularly women, for whom the earthquakes doubled the existing challenges as they were forced to migrate again, often back to Syria, which exacerbated their vulnerability. A study conducted with Syrian women reveals that the earthquakes caused significant socioeconomic and psychological problems.[133]

In addition, the feelings of uncertainty created by the prolonged reconstruction process in the earthquake-affected regions have turned many temporary migration moves into permanent ones, implying difficulties in access to services, support and employment for women. Particularly for Syrian nationals who were concentrated in the region, the uncertainties significantly compounded their vulnerability and family responsibilities.[134]

Psychological health disorders such as high stress, anxiety and depression levels were also prevalent among women. The destruction of homes and memories, as well as the loss of loved ones, led to a significant decrease in overall life satisfaction. In addition, women faced challenges related to their gender roles and responsibilities, which amplified their psychological stress. These included an increase in care responsibilities, as they tried to protect their children and care for the elderly amid the disaster, as well as privacy and hygiene issues, especially if they lived in shared spaces like tents and containers.[135]

4.8 Gender-responsive migration management policies

Türkiye's migration policy framework is extensive and institutionally developed, yet gender responsiveness remains uneven and often limited to specific protection provisions rather than embedded across all areas of migration governance. While recent reforms have strengthened the legal and administrative architecture for managing immigration, asylum, international protection and diaspora engagement, the mainstreaming of gender equality into migration policy has not kept pace with the scale and diversity of mobility affecting women.

Migration policy in Türkiye in the most recent period mainly focuses on the Syrians under Temporary Protection (SuTP), recovery from the impact of the pandemic, and managing the consequences of the 2023 earthquakes.[136] Most of the existing legislative framework pertains to international forced migration. It is argued that the magnitude of the war and displacement in Syria has had key implications for national migration policy, drawing public attention to the protection needs of vulnerable groups including women,[137] while almost none of the legal instruments effectively mainstream gender into the existing migration policy framework and address the distinct needs of women fleeing political and economic turmoil.[138]

The legal status of immigrant women is a key challenge, as legal status defines the extent of the rights and services they are entitled to. Many immigrant women are undocumented, are spouses of Turkish citizens, hold residence permits, work permits, tourist visas or business visas, or are asylum-seekers or refugees under international or

temporary protection. These different statuses, or lack of status, are shaped by the state policy framework, which has changed since the 2000s in terms of regulations on work permits, citizenship and marriage. This has had significant implications for women immigrants, driving them into informal work and insecure and exploitative social and economic relations.[139] For many immigrant women, for instance, marriage to Turkish citizens is a significant pathway for overcoming restrictions on their stay and securing housing, permanent residency and benefits for their dependants. However, it can also make them dependent on their husbands and vulnerable to GBV, particularly in the first years of marriage, as getting a divorce before the obligatory marriage period of three years results in them losing their chance at Turkish citizenship.[140]

In the area of regular immigration, Law No. 4817 on the Work Permits of Foreigners of 2003 abolished the bans pertaining to domestic work, while the long application process and its likelihood to result negatively did not in practice change the immigrant women's informal position in the labour market.[141] A further legal regulation that aimed to prevent unregistered work concerned an amendment to Law No. 5683 on the Residence and Travel of Foreigners in Türkiye in 2011, establishing the condition that immigrants who stayed in Türkiye for 90 days must leave and spend another 90 days in another country in order to come back.[142] Circular No. 37, adopted in 2012, relaxed this requirement by allowing foreigners who had violated visa or residence procedures to obtain a renewable six-month residence permit upon payment of the relevant fines. The permit could be renewed up to four times, creating a temporary pathway to regularize stay and re-enter the country legally.[143]

The 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection and related regulations recognize groups with 'special needs', including pregnant women, single parents with minor children, and victims of physical, sexual or psychological violence. These groups are entitled to additional services and protection; however, there are gaps in implementation, as mechanisms for systematically identifying vulnerabilities are still evolving, and capacity constraints affect the availability of support and services. The law also contains provisions for victims of domestic violence; that is, in case of divorce, victims of violence are allowed to obtain a residence permit without the prior residency requirement of three years.[144] The law thus contains specific provisions for at least some groups of women, while it is criticized for its limited incorporation of a gender-sensitive approach throughout.[145]

A study conducted with refugee and asylum-seeking women finds that the complicated asylum system in Türkiye presents significant challenges for them, including limited information about application processes, the need to provide required documents, language barriers, and physical difficulties in reaching the registration centres. In addition, the limited gender-sensitive approach of official bodies dealing with the application process has been widely reported; these bodies have a constrained understanding of the specific needs of women after their traumatization by the long journey and their experiences of GBV. This limited gender-sensitive approach, combined with the absence of a holistic response to the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees, affects the overall experience of immigrant women as they navigate life in satellite cities and attempt to secure livelihoods.[146]

It is reported that limited access to sustainable socioeconomic support forces many immigrant women to work without permits, for low wages, in inadequate working conditions and with a lack of social security, working as domestic workers, atelier workers, waitresses, masseuses or sex workers. Such conditions increase precarity and exposure to exploitation, as well as the risk of detention or deportation due to irregular employment status, while also heightening vulnerability to workplace harassment, including sexual harassment.[147]

The Turkish Penal Code of 2005 provides the definition of human trafficking in its Article 80 and stipulates a penalty of 8 to 12 years' imprisonment and cash fines. An amendment to Article 80 in 2006 extended the definition of human trafficking to include forced prostitution in order to fully align the national law with the Palermo Convention and its protocol. The aforementioned Law on Foreigners and International Protection provides for a 30-day residence permit for actual and/or potential victims, including the possibility of renewing this permit every six months for up to three years (Article 48), and prohibits the deportation of victims benefiting from victim support

services (Article 55). A Regulation on the Prevention of Human Trafficking and Protection of Victims entered into force in March 2016, with the aim of determining the principles and procedures concerning the prevention and protection of victims (including Turkish citizens) and the support services to be offered to victims.[148] This can be considered as a significant step to establish standards across the country to overcome differences in practice that affect women victims of trafficking, although the extent of its implications have not been assessed.

Several regions of Türkiye are or potentially will be impacted by the climate-induced migration patterns, whereas the possible human mobility, migration or displacement effects are inadequately addressed by the existing policy framework on climate change and the environment,[149] let alone their implications for women. The National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan and the National Strategy and Action Plan for Improving the Work and Social Lives of Seasonal Migratory Workers provide an important policy framework; however, certain vulnerabilities of seasonal workers are not addressed, including their limited access to social security and compensation for crop failure or reduced harvests linked to climate change.[150] Gender considerations could also be more systematically integrated.

Many disaster and emergency-related interventions in Türkiye have focused on immediate survival and protection needs. While municipalities have largely concentrated on basic living services, such as food, clothing, sanitation and housing support, NGOs are proactive in providing specialized social services, including educational, psychological and legal support. However, coordination gaps among service providers and the need for more comprehensive policy frameworks suggest room for further strengthening, particularly with regard to social services and sustainable livelihood opportunities.[151] These issues have particular implications for women displaced by the earthquakes, who often face longer-term recovery and support needs. In addition, several NGOs and international organizations have noted ongoing challenges related to GBV prevention and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, even in 2025, two years after the earthquakes.[152]

4.9 Data gaps

The research conducted on Türkiye reveals that despite growing attention to intersectional analysis, data gaps hinder a comprehensive and gender-responsive understanding of migration dynamics in the country, implying difficulties in analysing the trends and challenges from a gender perspective. While sex-disaggregated data exist in the TURKSTAT database, primarily by age and nationality, information is limited or absent for key variables such as education, employment, reason for migration, sector of activity, and duration of stay. These limitations make it difficult to analyse the socioeconomic position of migrant women or to understand how their migration trajectories differ from those of men.

Administrative data collected by other official bodies—notably the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM)—remain largely inaccessible to the public and are often not disaggregated by sex or age. While immigration statistics are somewhat easier to obtain, up-to-date and disaggregated information on emigration is scarce, especially regarding types of mobility (educational, economic, family-related), underlying drivers, countries of destination and labour-market outcomes. Educational emigration is particularly under-documented, and the limited studies on brain drain rarely include a gender perspective. As a result, emigration data on women are insufficient across all dimensions, obscuring the gendered factors shaping their decisions, opportunities and vulnerabilities.

Limitations are particularly evident in the area of irregular migration, where available data remain limited and are not consistently disaggregated by sex, age, employment status or other demographic variables. Comprehensive, large-scale, sex-disaggregated data to monitor the scope and characteristics of irregular migration are still under development, including with regard to migrant women working informally in domestic work—a sector that

presents heightened risks of exploitation and is inherently difficult to monitor. Strengthening data availability and disaggregation would support a better understanding of gender-specific risks and the design of more targeted protection measures.

Similarly, comprehensive demographic and socioeconomic data on immigrant women and girls remain limited. Key variables such as education, income, marital status, household composition, residence type, geographic distribution and duration of stay are either not consistently available or only partially captured. Much of what is known comes from small-scale, qualitative or outdated studies, preventing the development of an accurate national picture of the challenges and opportunities faced by migrant women.

In the domain of trafficking in human beings, data gaps are also significant. Data collection is not fully standardized, and almost no official sex- or age-disaggregated statistics on types of exploitation are publicly available. Sex-disaggregated data on identified victims, repatriation, access to legal support and participation in criminal proceedings are not systematically published. Limited visibility of women and girls in official statistics makes it challenging to assess their specific risks and to design fully evidence-based prevention and protection policies.

Research on return migration is similarly limited. Studies focusing on reintegration outcomes and long-term impacts are scarce and often outdated, making gender-responsive analysis particularly challenging. Again, large-scale, sex-disaggregated national dataset gaps persist in this area, and the available research remains predominantly micro-level and qualitative.

Finally, environmental and climate-related mobility represents an emerging but under-documented area. There are no comprehensive national datasets capturing movements linked to climate change, environmental degradation or disaster-related displacement. Existing studies are few, narrow in scope and lacking gender analysis. Even in the aftermath of major disasters, such as the 2023 earthquakes, official sex-disaggregated data on internally displaced persons (IDPs) were not publicly available, leaving critical gaps in understanding how crises affect women and girls differently and in planning gender-responsive recovery measures.

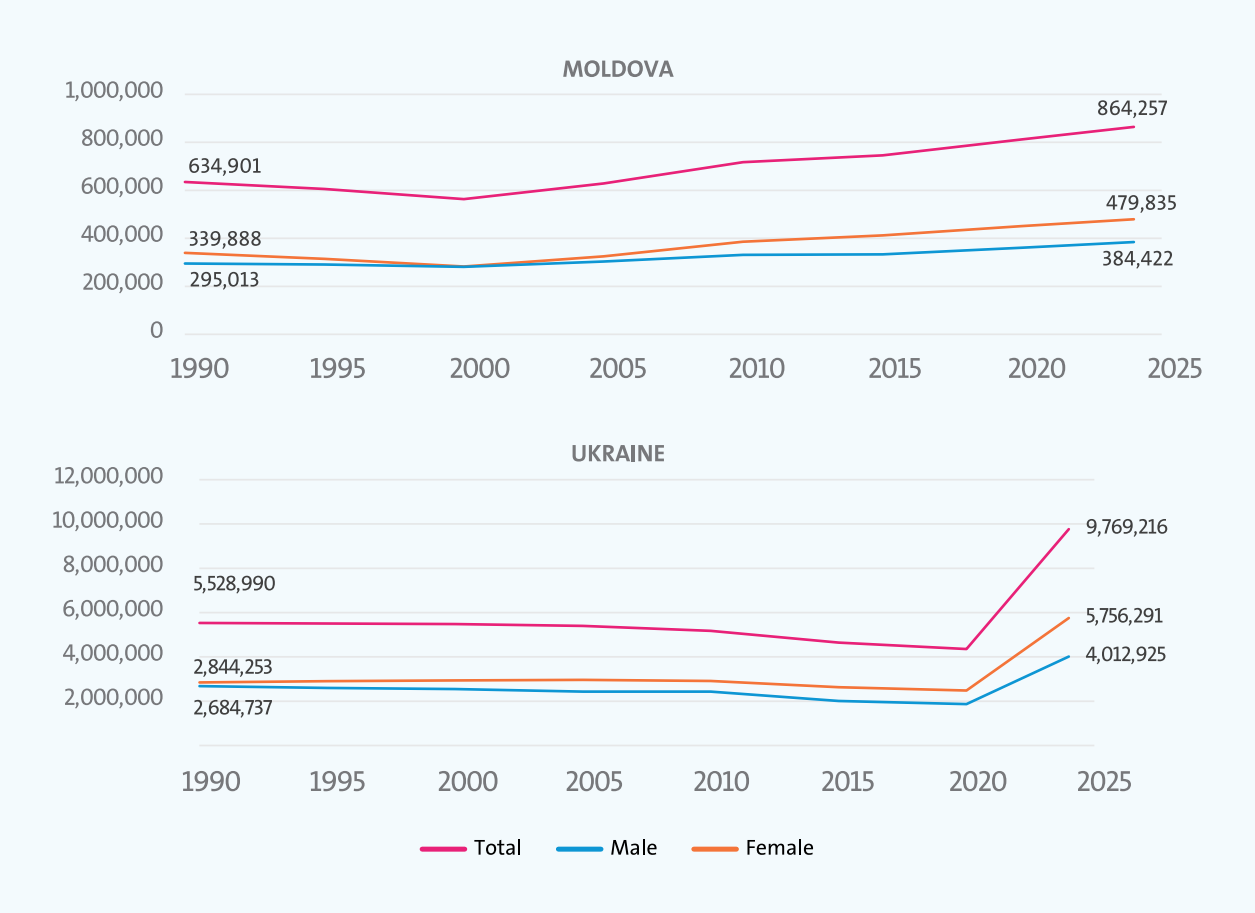
Taken together, these data gaps impede Türkiye's ability to design effective, gender-responsive migration, protection and integration policies. Without systematic, accessible and disaggregated data, women's migration experiences risk being insufficiently reflected, making evidence-based policymaking more challenging.

WOMEN IN MIGRATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

5.1 Women in emigration from Eastern Europe

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moldova and Ukraine experienced a large wave of emigration driven by poor economic conditions, insecurity and widespread poverty. Most migrants settled in the neighbouring Russian Federation due to social ties, language knowledge and better opportunities for employment. Besides Russia, Moldovans also emigrated to Italy,[1] and Ukrainians to Italy, Poland, Germany, Czechia and Spain.[2] Changes in the scale of emigration from 1990 to 2024, based on UN DESA data and its gender comparison, are shown in Figure 5.1.

FIGURE 5.1: **Emigration from Moldova and Ukraine, by sex, 1990–2024**



Source: UN DESA 2024c, Table 1.

The presented data demonstrate the growth of emigration for Moldova and Ukraine, as well as the growing feminization of emigration—the share of women among emigrants in 2024 was 55.5 per cent for Moldova and 58.9 per cent for Ukraine. In Moldova, national statistical data for 2023 recorded a higher number of male emigrants (72,124 versus 57,960 females).[3] These data demonstrate that while women constitute a significant portion of the Moldovan diaspora (stock), recent annual data (flow) demonstrate the opposite trend towards the masculinization of migration flows from this country, which may be due to the structure of demand in the labour markets of destination countries.

Table 5.1 demonstrates an annual increase in emigration from Moldova and Ukraine to the EU. The gender composition of migration flows shows feminized migration to the EU from Moldova and Ukraine (61 per cent and 56 per cent women, respectively). In the case of Ukraine, the feminization of migration has been particularly marked after the start of the full-scale invasion, with 39 per cent of women aged 18–60 displaced—either internally or abroad—though over half have since returned.[4] Among those who left the country, however, recent years have seen a partial reversal of this trend: in key destination countries like Germany, the share of women among Ukrainian migrants decreased from 65 per cent in 2022 to 60 per cent in 2024, and in Italy—from 78 to 76 per cent over the same period.

TABLE 5.1: Citizens of Moldova and Ukraine living in selected EU countries, 2022–2024

		Moldova			Ukraine		
		2022	2023	2024	2022	2023	2024
EU	Total	189,811	200,673	190,554	794,321	2,364,945	2,747,127
	Female	118,135	124,515	116,422	477,963	1,251,495	1,548,287
Germany	Total	36,550	35,196	36,934	138,203	863,335	974,322
	Female	22,104	21,372	22,534	90,055	547,087	589,008
Italy	Total	114,914	109,804	102,667	225,307	249,613	273,484
	Female	75,966	73,026	68,129	175,275	192,350	207,353
Czechia	Total	5,644	6,368	7,009	170,977	469,755	538,875
	Female	2,427	2,679	2,871	74,063	255,608	295,375
Spain	Total	16,905	16,914	16,315	109,837	193,238	74,806
	Female	9,108	9,145	8,799	63,219	210,012	126,861
Portugal	Total	4,321	4,559	4,610	23,827	65,074	69,754
	Female	2,226	2,311	2,315	12,806	40,503	43,137

Source: Eurostat 2025c.

Germany and Italy remain key destinations for citizens of both countries. Moldovan and Ukrainian migrants in both countries tend to have a high proportion of women, reflecting broader regional trends linked to conflict, labour migration patterns and care economies.

The war in Ukraine reshaped Ukrainian migration geography: by 2024, Germany became the top destination (replacing Italy), followed by Poland and Czechia. Eurostat's labour and family migration data[5] also show rising preference for Poland and Czechia among Moldovan migrants. Notably, Czechia's gender composition stands out, as Moldovan migrants are predominately male.

5.1.1 Labour migration

Economic instability, unemployment, low wages at home and the desire to secure their children's future have traditionally been drivers of labour emigration, including seasonal migration, for women from the region. Many of them support their families through remittances, which were particularly significant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Remittance dependency remains high but offers limited long-term security for women. Indeed, remittances remain a critical income source, even as their share of gross domestic product (GDP) declined between 2022 and 2024.[6] While remittances have been central to Moldova's economic model, their recent decline has added pressure in a context of persistent rural poverty, limited services and low labour participation. In this context, remittances continue to sustain household consumption but do not translate into stable or long-term economic security for women, particularly those engaged in low-paid and informal sectors abroad.[7]

For many years, women from the region sought employment opportunities in Greece, Italy and Türkiye, while men tended to go to CIS countries.[8] In recent years, migrant workers of both sexes have mainly gone to the EU labour market. Eurostat statistics on residence permits for work purposes for the citizens of Moldova and Ukraine[9] highlight how the EU's open migration policies drove Ukrainian labour migration before 2022 (for example, the number of labour migrants exceeded 900,000 in 2021). However, the onset of full-scale war in 2022 led to a sharp decrease to 714,000–743,000 migrants, mainly due to the closure of borders to men of military age and the return of others to defend the country. The subsequent resumption of growth in 2023 was largely fuelled due to the Temporary Protection Directive in the EU and Moldova, which facilitated their entry into labour markets. While the war has effectively halted labour migration for Ukrainian men of military age, for many Ukrainian women, migration has become both an escape from conflict and a survival strategy. They have increasingly entered labour markets, often in low-wage, informal sectors such as care work and hospitality. For instance, among working Ukrainian women in Poland, 33 per cent were employed in services or sales, 22 per cent as specialists, 14 per cent as unskilled workers, 8 per cent as clerical workers, and 5 per cent as managers.[10] Data show that while skilled work may offer pathways to status regularization and better integration, many women remain concentrated in precarious conditions.

The scale of labour migration from Moldova has not changed significantly in recent years. The feminized migration from Moldova to Southern European countries, particularly Italy, is driven by demand for domestic care work, cleaning and service industries. This demand has created a transnational care economy, where Moldovan women fill critical gaps in eldercare and childcare in host countries, often at the expense of their own families back home.[11] According to IOM survey data of Moldovan returnees in 2023, 32 per cent of women had reportedly migrated to Italy before returning, compared to only 8 per cent of men.[12] To facilitate their freedom of movement in the European Union, Moldovan women have obtained or regained Romanian citizenship, generally using their Romanian passport when registering in destination countries.[13] While there has been a slight decline in the number of Moldovan labour migrants in Italy, this county continues to depend heavily on female migrant labour to sustain its eldercare system. This dependency highlights the broader implications of 'global care chains':[14] Moldovan and Ukrainian women (with Italy being the first destination for Moldavans and the second for Ukrainians) migrate and leave their own families to offer care to other families from the EU in a more financially advantageous context, while other women in similar or worse situations care for their children at home. This clearly confirms that the long-term loss of both formal and informal care resources and of the family resources from the home countries created a 'care drain',[15] with psychological and emotional effects for the women involved.[16]

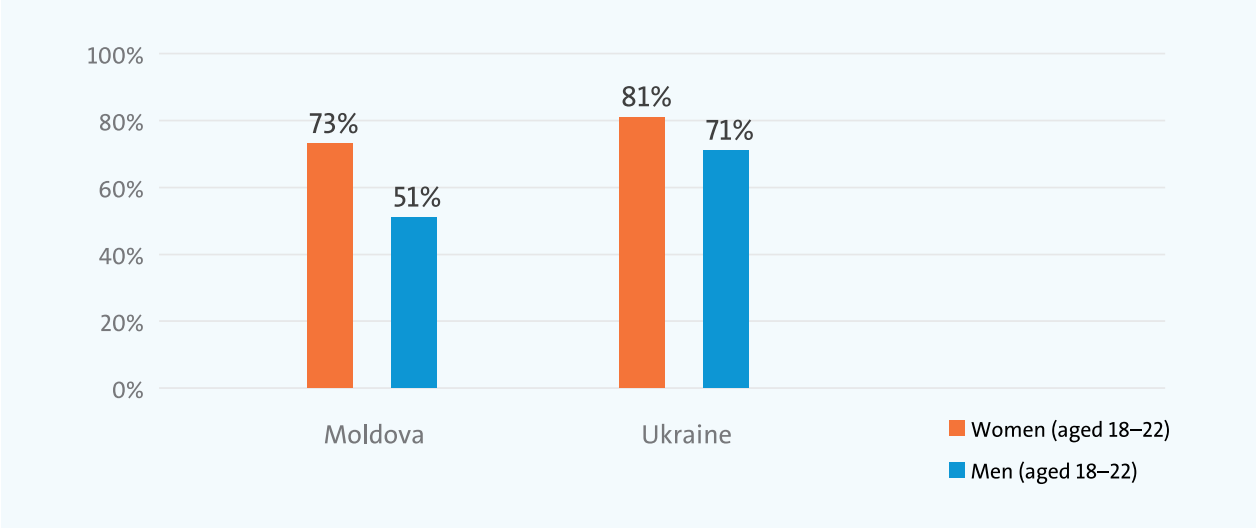
Eurostat data[17] also highlight the role of Poland, which has been the number-one destination for Ukrainians for many years, in recent years becoming a key destination for labour migrants from both Moldova and Ukraine. Since 2023, the number of Ukrainian labour migrants in Poland has been steadily increasing, partly due to the entry of Ukrainian refugees into the labour market and the change of their status.[18]

5.1.2 Educational migration

Educational migration from both Moldova and Ukraine is driven by a mix of 'push' and 'pull' factors. Internally, economic instability, limited career prospects, political uncertainty and the low prestige of local higher education institutions motivate young people to leave[19]—particularly women, who outnumber men in higher education in their countries (see Figure 5.2). Research by UN Women highlights how gender stereotypes in the Eastern Partnership countries, including Moldova and Ukraine, continue to shape educational and professional trajectories, with girls significantly underrepresented in STEM due to societal expectations and biases.[20] Economic factors further amplify this disparity. Women in the region face higher barriers to employment, including discrimination, lower wages and limited access to skilled labour markets. As a result, higher education becomes a strategic tool for economic independence. For many women, pursuing a university degree is not just an academic aspiration but a necessity to secure stable, well-paying jobs in a labour market that often marginalizes them. Externally, EU scholarships, geographical and cultural proximity to neighbouring EU countries, international recognition of diplomas, and prospects for a future career in Europe that open after studies[21] attract them to study abroad.

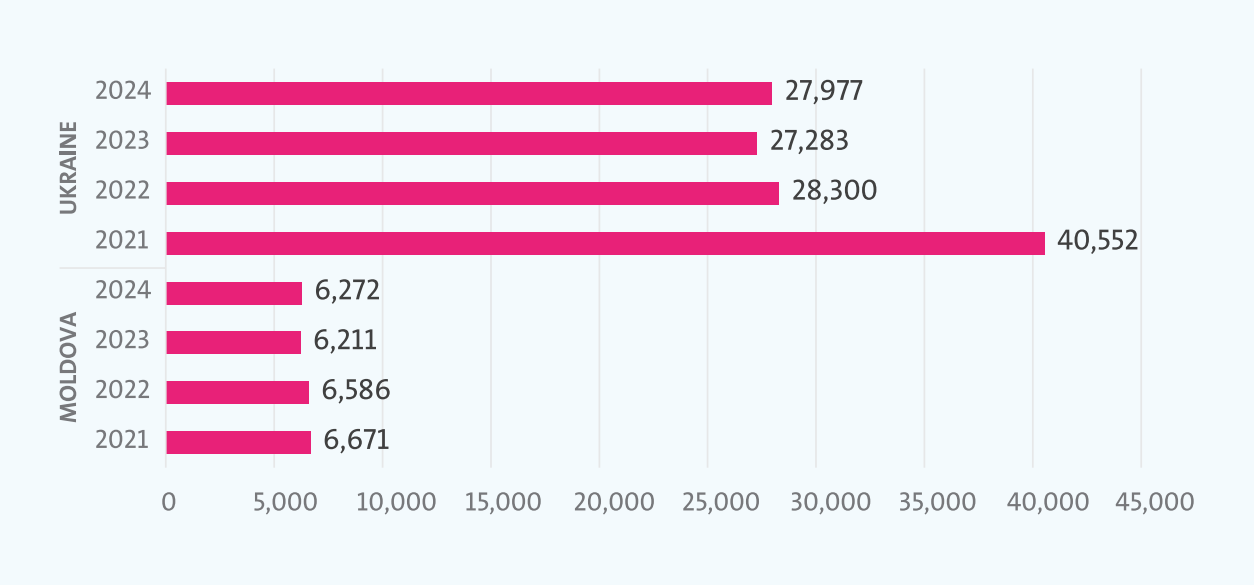
According to Eurostat, educational migration from Moldova to the EU in 2022–2024 remained moderate, while the volume of migration from Ukraine was 4–6 times higher (see Figure 5.3). It is noteworthy that more than 85 per cent of Moldovan students study in Romania.[22]

FIGURE 5.2: Gender disparities in higher education pursuit in Moldova and Ukraine, 2021–2022



Source: World Bank 2025c.

FIGURE 5.3: **Educational migration from Moldova and Ukraine to the EU, 2021–2024**



Source: Eurostat 2025a.

According to the State Statistics Service of Ukraine and the statistical services of host countries,[23] the volume of educational migration from Ukraine is much greater. Since 2014, educational migration from Ukraine has increasingly become a hidden way for permanent emigration—a 'social elevator' that allows entry into the EU labour market.[24] Before the war, 9 per cent of Ukrainian students studied abroad, with 58 per cent of them being women (their share reaching 70–75 per cent in Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Spain[25]). By 2023, this figure had risen to 11.4 per cent (around 115,000 Ukrainian students[26]), with 40 per cent studying in Poland.[27] The war in Ukraine disrupted education for many young women, making educational migration a key pathway to restoring their academic opportunities. Despite travel restrictions, men increasingly sought opportunities to study abroad to avoid conscription, leading to a rise in their share among student migrants from 40 to 46 per cent in 2023–2024.[28] Female students continue to prefer Western European countries,[29] seeking stability, better career prospects and stronger integration programmes.

European universities actively recruit Ukrainian students, offering scholarships, free accommodation, language courses and psychological support. Poland has significantly expanded educational opportunities for Ukrainians by waiving language requirements and simplifying admission processes,[30] reflecting its role as a key hub for Ukrainian refugees, where diaspora networks and cultural proximity facilitate integration. All these measures provide women with access to quality education, better career prospects, leadership opportunities and autonomy. However, women often combine education with care responsibilities (children, elderly relatives) and part-time work, which increases stress and limits academic achievement.[31] This double responsibility can hinder their ability to take full advantage of available educational and professional opportunities.

5.1.3 Family migration

Family migration from the region is quite significant and demonstrates clear gender patterns. Eurostat data[32] show that family migration from Ukraine is small compared to labour migration, with only a slight increase after 2022 (from 314,000 to 333,000). Moldova experienced a sharp rise in family migrants (from 63,000 to 94,000 in 2022), surpassing the scale of labour migration. Trends in the feminization of migration show that women increasingly becoming independent migrants—whether as students, workers or refugees. For example, Moldovan and Ukrainian women in Italy, initially arriving as temporary care workers, often become settled migrants, later bringing their families to join them.[33] The war in Ukraine and related restrictions preventing men aged 18–60 from leaving the country have led many women and children to relocate independently, creating forced single-parent families in the EU. These women often become primary agents in their families, navigating challenges such as integration, access to employment, and caregiving in their new countries,[34] while facing a dual responsibility—being both breadwinners and caregivers—often without adequate social support in host countries. Over time, their husbands and other family members often join them. In Germany, for instance, the share of Ukrainian women living with partners doubled within a year after the war began.[35] This shift challenges the traditional family model, where men were typically the first to migrate, followed by their families. Instead, women now often lead the migration process, bringing their families later. For them (particularly Ukrainian women who found themselves in the EU because of the war), family reunification is not just about improving material conditions but also about restoring psychological support, family unity and safety.

5.1.4 Emigration as an opportunity and challenge

Emigration from Moldova and Ukraine—whether labour, educational or family-based—provides women with access to global opportunities or serves as a survival strategy for their family.[36] However, women often end up in low-wage, informal sectors—such as eldercare, domestic work and seasonal agriculture—where they lack social protections, healthcare and pension rights. For example, in 2024, only 35 per cent of Ukrainian refugees in Moldova who declared having an occupation also had an official working contract.[37] This trend reflects gender inequalities, where women's migration is both a response to financial pressures and a symptom of systemic barriers to fair employment at home. The war in Ukraine has intensified these challenges: as of 2025, 20 per cent of women remaining in Ukraine wanted to leave but could not.[38]

The mass exodus of educated women[39] (74 per cent of refugees hold higher or incomplete higher education qualifications[40]), who predominate in sectors like education and healthcare, poses severe gendered demographic and economic challenges. The war in Ukraine has dramatically accelerated brain drain, with skilled professionals and students leaving in record numbers, and Moldova faces steady talent loss due to economic constraints. Highly skilled female migrants increasingly prioritize social protection, legal guarantees and career opportunities, as well as stability and certainty for the future, in their host countries, particularly in the EU.[41]

Family reunification, which often accompanies emigration—whether it is women joining male migrants or vice versa—presents new challenges. Women risk dependency, deskilling, limited career opportunities and the double responsibility of work and caregiving, while men who join female migrants (e.g. Ukrainians reuniting with partners in the EU) face societal expectations as 'primary breadwinners' but often struggle to secure matching employment. Children gain better education abroad but often face integration barriers like language issues and discrimination.[42]

The war has blurred the line between labour migration and forced displacement for Ukrainian women. Many of them are stretched thin between caregiving and work and lack proper support, while Ukraine continues to lose vital human capital.

5.2 Immigration to Eastern Europe

While Moldova and Ukraine have traditionally been net emigration countries, recent UN DESA data (see Table 5.2) reveal shifting immigration trends. Moldova experienced a 2.5-fold increase in its immigrant share—from 2.5 to 6.2 per cent between 2020 and 2024, primarily due to the influx of displaced persons from Ukraine. In Ukraine, despite ongoing conflict, the immigrant population grew from 11.2 to 13.4 per cent in the same period.[43]

TABLE 5.2: Immigration stock in Moldova and Ukraine – Total population and breakdown by selected country of origin and sex, 2024

	Moldova			Ukraine		
	Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male
Total*	188,207	110,195	78,012	5,064,173	2,886,151	2,178,022
Kazakhstan	2,459	1,421	1,038	228,982	125,750	103,232
Uzbekistan	358	184	174	226,478	113,866	112,612
Armenia	274	92	182	48,740	20,492	28,248
Azerbaijan	405	163	242	84,792	37,518	47,274
Georgia	299	127	172	66,350	30,299	36,051
Belarus	1,036	727	309	252,977	148,926	104,051
Romania	3,545	1,739	1,806	-	-	-
Russian Federation	20,439	12,854	7,585	3,375,095	1,987,068	1,388,027
Ukraine	143,623	84,788	58,835	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: UN DESA 2024c, Table 1; Migration Data Portal 2025a.
* The first 'Total' row shows the total immigrant population in Moldova/Ukraine. The subsequent rows list immigrants from selected countries only.

At the same time, according to national flow data, Moldova's immigration peaked in 2022 (177,875) before falling to 97,517 in 2023,[44] with the gender composition shifting from female-dominated in 2022 to male-dominated in 2023. For Ukraine, the annual reports of the State Migration Service indicated that the number of registered immigrants decreased slightly from 308,204 to 305,744 for the 2022–2024 period.[45] According to an IOM analysis of data from the Government of Ukraine, in 2025, Odeska, Dnipropetrovska and Kharkivska were the top locations of issued residence permits for women by oblast; however, it must be noted that due to the full-scale war, many women are now living in other areas of the country.[46]

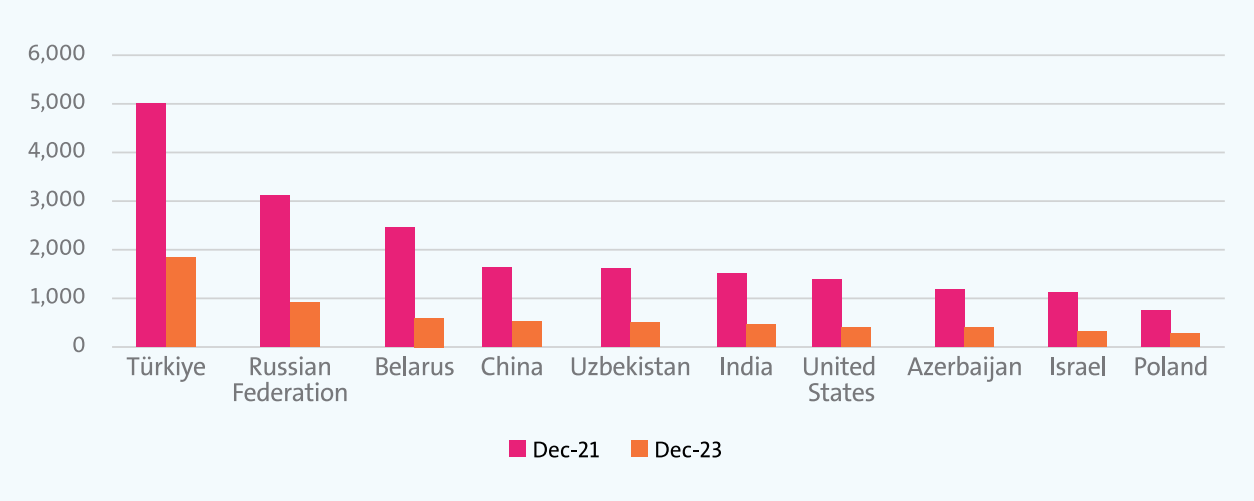
While national data on the gender composition of annual immigrant flows vary, UN DESA reports that women predominate in diaspora communities: 57 per cent in Ukraine and 58.5 per cent in Moldova (see Table 5.2). An even higher proportion of women is indicated by data from the 2024 Moldovan census (61 per cent women with an average age of 55.2 years among 106,718 persons born abroad).[47] According to the UN DESA, 76 per cent of immigrants in Moldova are Ukrainian, with 59 per cent women, reflecting Moldova's role as a refuge and transit hub. Many of these women are vulnerable refugees with limited social support compared to other countries, often

excluded from the labour market due to their age and the restrictive labour market. Due to persistent gender stereotypes, migrant women are often confined to informal, low-wage sectors, reinforcing economic precarity and limiting career advancement. Ukraine hosts 3.5 million Russian immigrants (66 per cent of the total immigrant population), of whom 51 per cent are women, alongside female-majority groups from Belarus, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In the context of war, these women face heightened vulnerability, a lack of support systems and discrimination—particularly Russian women, who encounter social and institutional barriers.

5.2.1 Regular immigration

National data indicate that labour migration is not the main driver for women heading to Eastern European countries. In Ukraine, as of 2023, there were only 9,987 workers with temporary residence permits of both sexes, a threefold drop from 2021.[48] Data from the State Migration Service of Ukraine (see Figure 5.4) show that among them are mainly citizens of Türkiye, Russia, Belarus, China and Uzbekistan, many of whom are involved in seasonal labour, trade, construction work, taxi driving and delivery services,[49] sectors traditionally male-dominated. According to Moldova's 2024 Population and Housing Census, among 14,125 foreign female citizens (compared to 12,010 male), only 2.7 per cent were labour migrants (versus 9.3 per cent of men). Meanwhile, 29.3 per cent of foreign women in Moldova were voluntary migrants, arriving for work, business, education or family.[50]

FIGURE 5.4: Total number of migrants (or stateless individuals) who had temporary residence permits for employment purposes in Ukraine in December 2021 and December 2023, by country of origin



Source: IOM 2024q.

These data confirm that the main drivers of women's regular immigration in the region are education and family reunification. In Ukraine, war has devastated what was once a thriving international student community. Before 2022, there were 81,346 foreign students in Ukraine.[51] However, in contrast to student emigration, women made up just one third of student immigrants. Women were prevented from studying in Ukraine by language barriers, difficulty with document recognition, lack of information about systems, financial constraints and cultural stereotypes.[52] Those who did study in Ukraine were often poorly integrated into local communities and saw education in Ukraine largely as a first step on the path to the European labour market.[53] Moldova's educational migration remains limited, with women constituting 7.3 per cent of female student immigrants (versus 6.4 per cent of men).[54]

Family reunification remains a key migration pathway for women. Moldova's 2024 census shows that 26.2 per cent of foreign women (versus 21.4 per cent of men) hold temporary residence permits for this purpose,[55] reinforcing gendered trends. While Ukrainian data are unavailable, a similar trend can be expected. For many years, Ukrainian universities—with affordable tuition and a shared language—have attracted students who often settled permanently, creating transnational family networks that sustain today's diaspora communities.

Finally, in Moldova, the war in Ukraine and the geopolitical developments in Russia have led to the emergence of a new category of immigrants—forced displaced remote workers, the number of which is still difficult to estimate. Some media sources have cited about 18,000 Russians who have taken refuge in Moldova since the beginning of the war[56] and an increase in the number of Russian applicants for Moldovan citizenship, especially among persons with Moldovan roots.[57] Although sex-disaggregated data are not available, female activists, professionals and refugees are a prominent part of these flows, often combining political asylum with remote work opportunities. They also include Ukrainian women who fled the country due to the war and continue to work remotely, as well as former Ukrainian refugees who have found work in other countries. Their dual status as both forced migrants and skilled professionals underscores the changing dynamics of migration in the region.

The region offers regular immigrants affordable education, employment and business opportunities, but these advantages are deeply gendered. Moldova is trying to attract migrants with its EU perspective, low cost of living and simplified entry, including via a 2025 Digital Nomad Visa[58] and temporary protection for Ukrainians. However, most immigrants are Ukrainian displaced migrants—women and children—who are putting a strain on social services. NGOs and multilateral organizations like IOM Moldova provide critical support, but integration challenges persist.

In Ukraine, war has nearly halted regular immigration, leaving only humanitarian workers and journalists, who face heightened security risks. While 73 per cent of Ukrainians acknowledge the need for post-war labour migration,[59] this process is deeply shaped by gendered expectations. Women often face pressure to fulfil traditional domestic roles (including caregiving for children and dependants) while simultaneously seeking economic stability, leading to issues like skill mismatches, limited female breadwinning and vulnerability to exploitation, contrasting with pre-war patterns of male labour migration and reinforcing societal norms.[60] Bureaucratic hurdles—such as six-month registration processes and unreasonable requirements for employers[61]—disproportionately affect women, particularly single mothers, as their access to jobs, childcare, workforce activation and protection measures becomes restricted. Women face challenges related to limited childcare services, made worse by the destruction of facilities, the relocation of staff and reduced opening hours; as of the end of 2022, only 53 per cent of preschool children were enrolled in kindergartens.[62]

5.2.2 Irregular immigration

Irregular migration in Moldova and Ukraine has surged, though data remain fragmented. Moldova, traditionally a country of origin, now sees growing transit flows—especially from conflict zones like Syria and Ukraine—with 2,495 irregular entries in 2022 (a fifteenfold increase from 2021).[63] Ukraine, once a transit hub, is now primarily a source of irregular migrants. According to Ukraine's State Migration Service, 3,058 foreign nationals (25 per cent women) were detained in 2024—a 40 per cent drop from 2022 (5,062, also 25 per cent women).[64] However, the scale of irregular emigration from Ukraine is far larger: in 2024 alone, 14,232 Ukrainian men were registered as irregularly crossing into the EU, accounting for over half of the 24,496 detected cases since 2022.[65] In 2024, 19,595 Ukrainian nationals were also refused entry into the EU at various borders.[66]

These data demonstrate how the war has fundamentally shifted irregular migration patterns. Ukrainian men of military age—barred from legal exit—face impossible choices between remaining despite protection concerns or using smuggling networks at significant cost (US$2,000–US$10,000[67]) and risk. This demand fuels criminal exploitation, while women and girls in transit face heightened risks of exploitation and trafficking. Economic hardship and gendered legal restrictions (e.g. movement restrictions for men due to conscription) drive these flows, but there is a lack of sex-disaggregated data, including on the dependency on smugglers and labour exploitation. The rise in organized smuggling networks exacerbates risks for all migrants, particularly women travelling clandestinely.

For irregular migrants, the risks are even more severe than for regular migrants. Liberal visa policies and porous borders—compounded by conflict zones like Abkhazia in Georgia, the Transnistria region of the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine's occupied regions—create 'grey zones' where trafficking thrives. Women and girls are often lured with false promises of employment or safety, only to be trapped in exploitative networks.[68] Smuggling networks frequently transport migrants in life-threatening conditions—such as refrigerated trucks or unseaworthy boats. In Moldova and Ukraine, smugglers have forced migrants to swim across rivers like the Tisa, Prut or Dniester, where fast currents and cold temperatures pose deadly risks.[69] While men aged 18–43 form the majority of irregular migration flows,[70] women confront distinct dangers: poverty, domestic violence and lack of opportunities push them into trafficking and precarious work, with no access to justice.

Across the region, women immigrants—whether regular or irregular—face systemic barriers: language gaps, costly residence permits and housing insecurity trap them in informal, exploitative jobs. The influx of female refugees further strains social services, leaving single mothers and female-headed households most vulnerable to homelessness and instability. The disconnect between legal frameworks and gender-sensitive protections undermines economic stability, social cohesion and gender equality.[71]

5.3 Mixed transit migration through Eastern Europe

The main drivers of transit migration include the geopolitical positioning of Moldova and Ukraine, the relatively lenient visa policies in Moldova, and the tighter EU border controls that force migrants towards riskier routes. Poverty, conflict, political instability and climate change in origin countries further fuel these movements. Since 2022, however, Moldova has become the primary transit corridor for migrants and refugees heading to the EU, as Ukraine's role shifted from a transit hub to a country experiencing mass population displacement due to the war.[72]

In 2022,

81% **of migrants in Moldova were women**

rising to

94% **by 2024**

Moldova, located between Romania and Ukraine, became a key transit route for Ukrainian refugees following the full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. Data from border services on crossing the border of Moldova and Ukraine indicate that two-way traffic is ongoing. For example, as of 7 June 2022, 489,283 departures and 87,621 returns were recorded,[73] while by November 2022, their numbers were 698,131 and 370,918, respectively.[74] This sustained bidirectional flow continues, reflecting circular migration patterns.[75] IOM DTM survey data (from three surveys conducted between April 2022 and November 2024 with adults aged 18 and above crossing back into Ukraine at major border points)[76] provide insights into the nature of these transit flows. Transit migration through Moldova since 2022 is overwhelmingly female-led, with women making up 81 per cent of migrants in 2022 and 91–94 per cent by 2024, reflecting Ukraine's conscription policies that restrict men

aged 18–60 from leaving. The average age of women in transit is 43–45 years, compared to 63 for men. Travel with children is common: in 2022, 76 per cent of transit migrants were accompanied by children, with 29 per cent travelling with infants (0–4 years) and 47 per cent with children aged 5–17 in 2024. By the end of 2024, the share of those travelling alone with children decreased to 13 per cent.[77] Travellers have different legal statuses: 71 per cent of women have temporary protection (compared to 50 per cent of men), while 22 per cent of women (versus 40 per cent of men) lack legal documentation. Family reunification remains the top travel reason (78 per cent of women, 73 per cent of men), while medical treatment (20 per cent of women) and document renewal (13 per cent for both women and men) have become more important over time. Additionally, 35 per cent of respondents reported crossing borders 3–5 times since 2022,[78] underscoring the circular and frequent nature of these movements. In 2024, there were an average of 1,982 border crossings per month by female Ukrainian nationals moving between Moldova and Ukraine.[79] According to IOM surveys conducted with Ukrainians crossing back to Ukraine from Moldova, around 37 per cent of women cite the proximity to Ukraine as the primary reason for relocating to Moldova, compared to only 17 per cent of men.[80] This pattern reveals how women's mobility is driven by caregiving responsibilities, legal challenges and the need to sustain family connections during the war.[81]

Main reason for travel (family reunification):

78% of women
73% of men

Although most transit is legal, 100 irregular migration cases (half involving Ukrainians) were recorded in 2022 in Moldova,[82] highlighting risks for women navigating documentation gaps and exploitative routes. While most Ukrainian women and many children cross borders legally under the EU's Temporary Protection Directive, some turn to irregular migration due to invalid passports or deportation fears. A 2023 UNODC survey found that only 3.6 per cent of women (compared to 9.7 per cent of men) reported paying for irregular crossings,[83] reflecting how women are more likely to be pushed into exploitative situations rather than attempting dangerous physical crossings like men.

Transit migration in Eastern Europe exposes women and girls to severe gender-specific risks. In Moldova, where state resources are stretched thin, women and girls frequently depend on underfunded local women's organizations for essential services, including shelter, medical care and legal assistance. These organizations, though critical, struggle with limited capacity and institutional support, leaving many women without adequate protection. The results of the 2022 IOM DTM survey show that demand for humanitarian assistance among transit migrants in Moldova increased from 24 per cent in April to 31 per cent in November 2022.[84] In 2024, the main needs of transit migrants from Ukraine in Moldova were financial support (43 per cent), medical care (21 per cent) and personal security (16 per cent). Men's reported needs are increasingly shifting towards medical care, while women continue to need financial support and security.[85] The operational challenges faced by border and migration agencies—compounded by martial law in Ukraine and resource constraints in neighbouring countries—further exacerbate these risks.

5.4 Women asylum-seekers and refugees

5.4.1 Nationals of Eastern European countries seeking asylum or refugee status abroad

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a massive refugee crisis, with 5.75 million Ukrainians—predominantly women and children—fleeing abroad by October 2025, primarily to neighbouring EU countries, including Moldova (135,080 persons)[86] due to geographical proximity, cultural links due to a sizeable pre-war diaspora community, language knowledge and perceived socioeconomic opportunities.[87] Most of them rely on the EU's Temporary Protection Directive, while others apply for asylum. Some Moldovan citizens are also seeking asylum due to political instability and economic hardship.[88] UNHCR data from 2022 to 2024 show a 25 per cent

increase among Ukrainian asylum-seekers (from 34,600 to 44,300) and a slight decrease in the relatively small number of applicants from Moldova (from 7,000 to 5,900). The data also demonstrate gender parity, even among Ukrainians, with Germany, Italy and France being the main destinations for all three nationalities.

UNHCR data about nationals with refugee or similar status[89] demonstrate a relatively small number of refugees from Moldova (4.8–6.2 per cent) with a tendency for gradual growth and a predominance of men. Among the more than 5 million Ukrainian refugees, women are the majority, although their proportion has gradually declined—from twice as many as men in 2022 to 1.5 times as many in 2024.[90] For Moldovans, the gap narrowed in 2024, as the number of recognized refugees even exceeded new asylum applications, likely due to the processing of backlogged cases. It is suggested that the low recognition rates for Moldovans stem from their classification as 'safe countries of origin' by most EU states,[91] leading to high rejection rates for claims often motivated by economic rather than persecution-based reasons.

The distribution of refugees across host countries reveals further gendered and national trends. Moldovan refugees are mostly in Germany (one third), with significant numbers also in the United States and France with a balanced gender ratio. Ukrainian refugees are hosted by Germany (20 per cent), Poland (16 per cent) and Czechia (6 per cent), with women making up the majority.[92] Additionally, 1.2 million Ukrainians in Russia (as of mid-2023) live in refugee-like conditions. Globally, Ukrainian refugees are 45 per cent women, 31 per cent minors and 24 per cent men.[93]

5.4.2 Refugees and asylum-seekers hosted within Eastern European countries, including third-country nationals

Both Moldova and Ukraine are not only places of origin but also destinations for refugees (see Table 5.3).

TABLE 5.3: Persons seeking asylum, refugees or persons of other international protection in Moldova and Ukraine, by sex, 2022–2024

		Moldova			Ukraine		
		Total	Female	Male	Total	Female	Male
Persons seeking asylum	2024	904	-	-	487	136	352
	2023	556	-	-	498	105	249
	2022	3,620	-	-	502	117	385
Refugees or other persons of international protection	2024	135,941	61,374	43,591	2,389	632	1,757
	2023	120,947	-	37,583	2,512	689	1,823
	2022	105,374	-	-	2,520	632	1,838
Ukrainians	2024	135,486	-	-	n/a	n/a	n/a
	2023	120,564	54,445	37,583	n/a	n/a	n/a
	2022	98,910	59,158	39,688	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: UNHCR 2025j.

Moldova, despite its small size, has received a disproportionate number of refugees—mostly women and children. Only 52 per cent of refugee women aged 18 and above are economically active (the lowest such rate in Europe), while nearly 25 per cent are over the age of 60, as older women remain while younger ones migrate for better opportunities. Care responsibilities and unequal labour participation persist, with men showing higher levels of economic activity.[94] Before 2022, Ukraine received around 1,500 asylum claims annually. Post-invasion, the numbers dropped to 597–1,036 annually, as martial law disrupted the asylum system. The number of refugees remaining in the country is approximately 2,300–2,500, and the number of asylum-seekers is five times less. Among both groups, men sharply outnumber women (at 73–74 per cent).[95]

The mass displacement from Ukraine—primarily of women and children—has created both opportunities and challenges for Ukraine and host countries. For Czechia, Germany and Poland, Ukrainian refugees offer a potential solution to labour shortages[96] and ageing populations, while Ukraine's diaspora in the EU strengthens its European integration and post-war recovery prospects.[97] Moldova faces significant challenges as a host country for Ukrainian refugees, particularly in meeting their needs for housing and social support. Addressing labour-market integration is not a priority, given the limited employment opportunities and the high risk of informal work.[98] Over time, the social inclusion challenges of Ukrainian refugees have generally reduced, most notably regarding access to housing, which was reported as a challenge by 21 per cent of Ukrainian women crossing back from Moldova in 2023, compared to 12 per cent of women who crossed back in 2024.[99] Still, other challenges like financial issues, while less reported, remain prominent, reported for example by 56 per cent of women who crossed back in 2023 compared to 42 per cent of women in 2024.[100]

Despite the fact that access to the labour market, social services, healthcare and education have improved over time, the unmet needs of Ukrainian refugee women relate to important areas such as learning the local language, obtaining high-skilled jobs, accessing comprehensive health services and finding adequate housing.[101] Care responsibilities, risks of exploitation, the breakdown of family units and uncertainties about the length of stay may deter their integration.[102] For Ukrainian women crossing back to Ukraine from Moldova, in one IOM survey both women and men reported financial issues as the main challenge faced in Moldova, followed by homesickness and distress.[103] Financial issues were more strongly reported by men (60 per cent compared to 42 per cent of women), while homesickness was more strongly reported by women (20 per cent compared to 30 per cent of men).[104] Some host countries face strained social services, labour markets and housing systems. Overcrowded reception centres, unsafe housing and limited healthcare increase GBV risks, particularly for single mothers and dependants. Ensuring effective access to language courses, recognition of qualifications, and education for children is critical but often hampered by limited resources. While Ukrainian women benefit from temporary protection, they still struggle to secure long-term rights; Moldovan women, subject to standard asylum procedures, face even greater barriers—lower host country language levels, higher prevalence of health problems, greater likelihood of social isolation and limited social networks.[105]

Ukraine's demographic challenges predate the 2014 conflict, with ageing populations, low birth rates and labour outmigration already straining the country's social and economic fabric.[106] Many Ukrainian women, especially IDPs, are vulnerable due to care responsibilities. The future of temporary protection regimes remains uncertain.[107]

5.5 Women victims of human trafficking

Moldova and Ukraine remain hotspots for human trafficking, with women and girls facing acute risks due to war, displacement and economic instability. Moldova's role as both a transit hub and a host country for Ukrainian refugees has amplified trafficking risks. However, available data presented in Table 5.4 indicate a decrease in the number of identified trafficking victims in 2024 compared to the previous years, with 935 victims recorded between 2020 and 2024, down from 1,496 in the prior four-year period. Notably, men accounted for 60 per cent of identified victims, while women and children represented 38 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively.[108]

TABLE 5.4: Identified victims of human trafficking in the Republic of Moldova, 2020–2024

Year	Total number of victims	Adults			Children		
		Total	Women	Men	Total	Girls	Boys
2020	139	116	29	87	23	20	3
2021	357	335	130	205	22	21	1
2022	151	107	32	75	44	43	1
2023	169	144	16	128	25	19	6
2024	119	89	21	68	30	26	4

Source: IOM 2025r; GRETA 2025c.

The sharp increase in male victims in 2023—as shown in Table 5.5—according to GRETA, can be linked to the influx of Ukrainian men attempting to flee conscription by crossing into Moldova irregularly. If these attempts fail, men often end up in forced labour, debt bondage or criminal exploitation, particularly in Moldova's informal economy or in neighbouring countries. GRETA also notes that the trafficking of women and girls remains a persistent but often underreported issue. The decline in identified female victims may indicate challenges in detection and reporting. Women and girls—especially those displaced by conflict or economic hardship—are vulnerable to sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and forced marriages; these forms of trafficking are less visible in official statistics due to stigma, fear of authorities and a lack of trust in institutions.[109] The high number of girl victims underscores ongoing risks, particularly for Roma children, children whose parents have migrated abroad, children in street situations and children in State-run residential institutions. Additionally, GRETA reports that while child labour, especially in agriculture, remains widespread, children are more frequently subjected to sexual exploitation. Online commercial sexual exploitation of children has increased.[110] Labour exploitation is the predominant form of human trafficking faced by adult Moldovan citizens in EU countries such as France, Germany and Italy, as well as in the Russian Federation.[111]

TABLE 5.5: Trafficking in persons (TIP) investigated cases and identified victims in Ukraine, globally and the EU (regarding Ukrainians)

	Years						Sex/age			Forms of trafficking			
TIP investigated cases and identified victims	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Years*	Women	Men	Children	Sex	Labour	Forced criminal	Other
Data from the United States Department of State													
TIP cases in Ukraine	-	-	222	70	142	2023	-	-	-	44	87	32	11
TIP victims in Ukraine	-	-	64	47	110	2023	-	-	-	-	-	-	8
Data from UNODC (based on Office of Prosecutor General of Ukraine, national data and GLOTIP Database)													
TIP cases in Ukraine	-	206	232	145	132	2020–2021	-	-	-	42%	38%	13%	7%
						2022–2023	-	-	-	29%	49%	21%	1%
TIP victims in Ukraine	-	152	163	66	84	2020–2023	43%	47%	20%	-	-	-	-
TIP victims globally	74	152	89	455	-	2022–2023	-	-	22	-	-	-	-
TIP victims in the EU	36	38	65	402	-	2022	206	192	-	-	-	-	-

Source: United States Department of State 2024e; UNODC 2025.
* Years in this column indicate the specific years for which disaggregated data (e.g. by sex, age or trafficking type) are available. Blank cells imply no data for that category in the reported period.

In Ukraine, there are notable fluctuations in the number of trafficking cases (see Table 5.5). Recent studies indicate that nearly half of the cases involve labour exploitation, about one third involve sexual exploitation, and the remainder involve forced criminal activities.[112] The gender distribution shows that women account for just under half of the victims, men for just over one third, and children for one fifth. This suggests that men, due to conscription or economic hardship, are increasingly targeted for forced labour or human smuggling, while women and children remain at risk of sexual exploitation and domestic servitude. The trafficking of children is especially alarming, underscoring systemic gaps in detection and response.[113] In the EU, the number of Ukrainian trafficking victims has surged, primarily for forced labour, linked to large-scale population displacement. Within Ukraine, internally displaced persons, homeless individuals, orphans and marginalized groups face risks of labour and sexual exploitation, as well as conflict-related abuse.

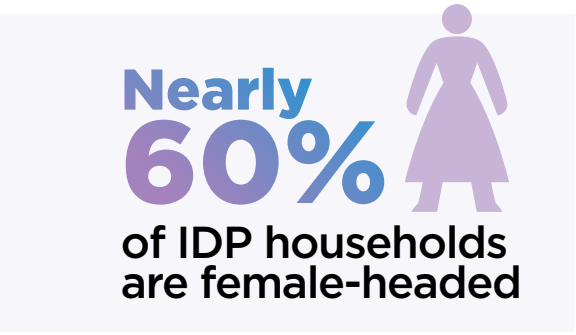
Trafficking trends in the region reveal distinct gendered patterns. Men are predominantly exploited in construction, manufacturing, agriculture and forced criminal activities. Women and girls face heightened risks in informal feminized sectors (domestic work, cleaning, caregiving) and in the hotel and restaurant industry, where isolation and the lack of legal protections increase vulnerability.[114] Online trafficking—the use of the Internet and digital technologies for recruiting, controlling and exploiting people through fake job offers, social media, messaging apps or online platforms—is growing rapidly. This trend disproportionately targets displaced populations,[115] who

are particularly vulnerable due to economic hardship, a lack of legal protections and limited awareness of digital risks. Women and girls face disproportionate threats from online sexual exploitation, sex trafficking and coerced transactional sex in exchange for housing.[116] This risk is heightened by the reliance on private accommodation—in Belgium, Italy and Poland, up to 90 per cent of Ukrainian refugees initially stayed with private hosts, creating vulnerabilities due to the lack of oversight, informal arrangements and potential for abuse.[117]

Civil society organizations report a rise in sexual and gender-based violence, with family separation increasing the vulnerability of girls to exploitation and trafficking. Border crossings and reception centres have become high-risk environments, where traffickers exploit refugees' desperation by offering fraudulent transport, accommodation or job opportunities, further entrenching cycles of abuse and coercion.[118] Economic inequality and the breakdown of social structures due to conflict are key drivers of trafficking. Many victims of trafficking remain unidentified due to a fear of stigmatization, a lack of awareness about their rights, traffickers' coercion (threats, debt bondage, confiscation of documents) and distrust of the authorities,[119] which discourages them from reporting their experiences or seeking help. In conflict zones and territories beyond effective government control (e.g. the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine and the Transnistria region of the Republic of Moldova), victims risk being treated as criminals rather than being protected, while limited government reach allows traffickers to act with impunity. Ukraine's war has worsened these gaps, leaving displaced women and children particularly vulnerable with few safe reporting channels—limited hotlines, overstretched NGO shelters and limited access to state services in conflict zones—while long-term reintegration support (e.g. therapy, job training) remains scarce.[120] Critical services like hotlines and safe housing are unreliable or absent, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas.[121] Without sustainable funding, survivors lack the resources to escape exploitation or rebuild their lives, leaving them trapped in cycles of vulnerability and abuse.

5.6 Women in internal displacement

Moldova and Ukraine are both affected by displacement dynamics linked to Russia's aggression, though with distinct trajectories. Ukraine is experiencing the largest displacement crisis in Europe since World War II, originating with Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and the escalation in eastern Ukraine, which initially displaced over 1.5 million people.[122] The 2022 full-scale invasion escalated this further, internally displacing 3,712,000 people, including 1,975,000 women, as of December 2025.[123] The first six months saw the peak—over 4 million displaced and 1.8 million returning, including returns from abroad.[124] By 2024, the IDP population stabilized.[125] Most IDPs come from front-line regions (over 86 per cent, with more than half coming from fully or partially occupied areas[126]), with 57 per cent of IDP households female-headed.[127] Among female IDPs, 30 per cent are over 60 years old, 27 per cent are 40–59 years old, 24 per cent are 18–39 years old, and 20 per cent are minors.[128]



Moldova's experience contrasts sharply. The brief 1992 Transnistrian conflict did not cause widespread internal displacement but rather led to a growing outflow of population from the region, through labour and educational migration. According to an IOM investigation, the driving factors for the Transnistria region's residents to emigrate include its internationally unrecognized status (limiting travel, work and legal rights), economic stagnation (low wages, reliance on outdated industries), political uncertainty (frozen conflict, Russian dependence) and a hostile environment (corruption, lack of opportunities)—pushing mostly young professionals and women to seek stability in the EU or Russia.[129] Among the Transnistria region's emigrants, women slightly outnumber men by 5–7 per cent, compared to Moldova's 20 per cent gender gap.[130]

For Ukrainian IDPs, military operations and direct threats remain the primary drivers of displacement, cited by 88 per cent of those who fled one time.[131] For those displaced multiple times, 41 per cent still point to worsening security, while 18 per cent highlight income loss and 16 per cent the lack of affordable housing.[132] In Ukraine, women constitute the majority of IDPs, often living outside collective centres and struggling with housing, employment and access to services. Ukrainian women sometimes return despite risks.[133]

Internal displacement in Moldova and Ukraine has deepened gendered hardships—with women facing military violence, economic collapse and caregiving responsibilities—while also sparking resilience and leadership. Women have driven transformative change, launching mutual aid networks, businesses and advocacy campaigns to demand gender-inclusive policies. Ukrainian women now lead humanitarian responses and reshape gender roles,[134] and Moldovan women's groups are mobilized for labour rights and social protections.[135]

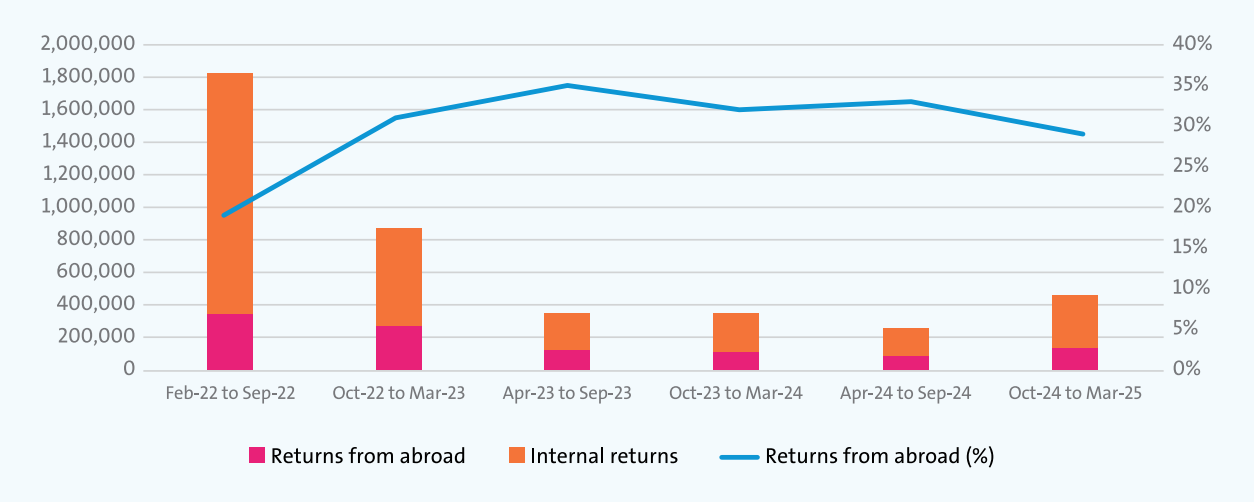
However, significant barriers remain, including limited access to economic resources, persistent gender-based violence risks and exclusion from decision-making. A 2020 study on the gender dimensions of displacement in Ukraine[136] highlighted housing access as a critical issue, now exacerbated by rising demand, destroyed infrastructure and low incomes—with 14 per cent of IDPs prioritizing housing (compared to 2 per cent of non-displaced populations)[137] and 54 per cent of IDPs living in rented accommodation (versus 6 per cent of the non-displaced), creating a disproportionate rental responsibility.[138] GBV surged by 36 per cent in 2024,[139] while unemployment, workplace discrimination and lost support networks have increased unpaid care responsibilities. Bureaucratic hurdles, such as mandatory registration for assistance, further restrict freedom of movement and access to social payments, particularly for vulnerable groups like women with disabilities, elderly women and Roma women. These challenges demand targeted interventions to address systemic inequalities and ensure inclusive recovery.

5.7 Women returnees

Return migration plays a vital role in Eastern Europe's recovery, but motivations and challenges differ by country and gender. Moldova's returns are economically cyclical, with mostly men returning temporarily to invest earnings. Women return more often due to family responsibilities or limited opportunities abroad, but they face reintegration challenges: traditional gender roles confine them to unpaid care work, undermining their long-term stability.[140] Women's returns are driven primarily by caregiving responsibilities (e.g. children, the elderly or other dependants) rather than economic opportunities, leaving them trapped in unpaid domestic roles and limiting their financial independence. According to 2023 IOM surveys of Moldovan returnees, for both men and women, the top reasons for returning were family reunification in Moldova, caring for others in Moldova (such as parents, spouses and sick relatives) and other unspecified reasons.[141] However, family factors were more strongly reported by women.

In Ukraine, return migration is directly tied to the war, with most returnees coming from internal displacement rather than abroad. Returns from abroad peaked in the first six months after the war started (343,586 people, 19 per cent of all returns) but later stabilized at around 100,000 every six months (29–32 per cent of total returns) (see Figure 5.5). As of December 2025, IOM estimates that there were 4,405,000 returnees living in Ukraine, including 372,000 who had returned to Ukraine from abroad but remained internally displaced.[142] As of August 2024, only 5 per cent of refugees from Ukraine in Europe were planning to return to Ukraine within 12 months.[143]

FIGURE 5.5: **Estimated number of individuals among returnees currently present in Ukraine, by type and date of return**



Source: IOM 2025q.

Women make up 68 per cent of returnees, particularly those aged 25–45, and are three times more likely than men to return from abroad (33 per cent versus 10 per cent),[144] primarily due to emotional ties, family reunification or caregiving responsibilities rather than improved security or economic conditions.[145] Women are significantly more likely than men to return from abroad primarily because of deep-rooted expectations around caregiving responsibilities, as societal expectations often place the responsibility of family reunification, childcare and eldercare on them. Many return to reunite with children or ageing parents, even if male partners remain abroad for work, or because they struggle to access childcare or integration support in host countries. Emotional ties to home and community also play a critical role, with women prioritizing family stability and personal connections over their own safety or economic security. Additionally, limited opportunities abroad—due to such issues as language barriers, discrimination or precarious legal status—push some to return, especially when financial resources run out.[146]

Only 44 per cent of international returnees live in households consisting solely of returnees (compared to 74 per cent of internally displaced returnees), with 11 per cent in single-parent households—predominantly women.[147] These returnees face severe gendered risks, including conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), restricted access to healthcare and economic barriers. Single mothers and elderly women (26 per cent of returnees in 2025, up from less than 20 per cent in 2022)[148] encounter childcare challenges, income instability and heightened GBV risks, while ongoing conflict further exacerbates their vulnerability. Returns remain volatile, with 54 per cent settling in non-front-line areas and 37 per cent returning to front-line regions.[149]

Return migration—whether economic, educational or forced—presents a critical opportunity for all countries to leverage returnees' skills, capital and global experience for economic diversification, innovation and social progress. Returnees launch small and medium-sized enterprises, creating jobs and stimulating local economies, as well as introduce new technologies and foster international partnerships.[150] Women play a pivotal role in this process, though their contributions are often undervalued. Their businesses, from retail to agribusiness, can introduce international standards and innovative practices. However, women entrepreneurs face unique obstacles, such as limited access to financing and systemic gender biases that hinder their growth.[151] Returners' contributions in education, healthcare and STEM can modernize local systems, while their global networks attract investment and strengthen cross-border collaboration.[152] Worldwide, every second social enterprise is led by a woman. Women drive social enterprises and community-based initiatives due to their strong local ties.[153] However, their impact is often constrained by traditional gender norms and insufficient institutional support.

Yet reintegration remains deeply gendered. Women face systemic barriers: limited access to financing, gender bias in entrepreneurship and weak institutional support. IOM data confirm that women struggle more than men to access employment, training and healthcare services, especially after experiencing abuse or exploitation during migration.[154] Economic instability is a major issue, as women often struggle to re-enter the labour market, particularly if they are over the age of 50 or lack formal recognition of their skills.[155] Economic instability hits harder: wage gaps, age discrimination and unrecognized skills block labour market re-entry. Female entrepreneurs also battle financial exclusion, as banks often deem them high-risk borrowers.[156]

The responsibility of unpaid care work disproportionately limits women returnees, as the lack of affordable childcare and eldercare—especially in conflict-affected regions—forces them into domestic roles over paid employment.[157] In Ukraine, security risks further threaten their reintegration: GBV, harassment and redisplacement are far more prevalent for women, with IOM data showing that women report higher levels of precarious living conditions than men. Social exclusion and stigma, particularly for single migrants or survivors of exploitation, deepen their vulnerability, while reintegration programmes often overlook gender-specific needs—such as trauma counselling, legal aid and skills recognition—perpetuating systemic discrimination.[158]

5.8 Women in mobility driven by climate change and natural hazards

Climate change is accelerating displacement in two key ways: slow-onset disasters (droughts, soil degradation) gradually destroy livelihoods, while sudden shocks (landslides, floods) trigger immediate and large-scale displacement.[159] Though official 'environmental migrant' data are scarce, labour migration trends and climate assessments confirm that environmental stressors are increasingly driving displacement.[160] Most movements remain internal or regional, not intercontinental. Moldova and Ukraine face both shared and distinct climate migration challenges:

- **Moldova,** Europe's most climate-vulnerable country, according to the ND-GAIN vulnerability assessment methodology,[161] sees droughts and floods threaten its agriculture-dependent economy, forcing male labour migration (two thirds of migrants are men under 45 years of age)[162] and leaving women to sustain farms and households in worsening conditions.

- **Ukraine** faces a dual crisis: climate change (currently +1.5°C, projected to be +3°C)[163] and war (which, for example, caused the 2023 Kakhovka Dam collapse, displacing 850,000).[164] Women, who constitute the majority of internal displacement, endure compounded risks: conflict, environmental hazards and caregiving responsibilities.

Environmental migration in the region is driven by economic vulnerability, livelihood loss, infrastructure destruction and conflict, each with distinct gendered consequences. Climate shocks reduce agricultural productivity, pushing men to migrate for seasonal work while women remain trapped in poverty, burdened by unpaid care responsibilities and limited economic opportunities. Droughts, floods and landslides destroy income sources, forcing relocation; women, lacking access to land or credit, either stay in degraded areas or migrate into low-paid, informal sectors where they face exploitation and abuse.[165] When disasters destroy housing and critical infrastructure, women and children—often the last to flee—end up in unsafe shelters with heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV) and restricted access to aid.[166] In conflict zones like Ukraine, war exacerbates environmental risks, leaving displaced women to navigate both conflict-related trauma and caregiving duties in ecologically hazardous conditions. While men typically seek labour opportunities abroad, women either stay behind to sustain households or relocate with dependants, encountering discrimination, limited employment options and increased vulnerability in destination areas. This dynamic reinforces structural inequalities, as environmental migration intersects with economic and conflict-driven displacement, deepening gender disparities in mobility, safety and resource access.[167]

Environmental migration, despite its forced nature, creates opportunities for migrants, their families and countries of origin. Remittances serve as a critical adaptation tool, enabling families—often led by women—to cover daily needs, restore livelihoods and invest in climate-resilient practices, thereby strengthening long-term resilience to environmental threats. Climate-smart agriculture initiatives introduce conservation techniques (e.g. no-till farming) to combat droughts and soil degradation. FAO and EBRD promote greenhouse and vertical farming across Moldova and Ukraine, helping farmers secure higher yields and access premium markets despite climate pressures.[168] Diaspora engagement also plays a vital role, as seen in Moldova's D4C project (IOM), where diaspora communities contribute knowledge, skills and funding to support climate adaptation, disaster risk reduction and green infrastructure,[169] fostering collaboration between migrants, governments and local authorities. International programmes like EU4Climate (EU and UNDP)[170] further assist these countries in aligning with the Paris Agreement and transitioning to low-emission, climate-resilient economies, ensuring that migration is integrated into national adaptation strategies with a gender-inclusive focus. The programme integrates gender-inclusive approaches—recognizing women's disproportionate climate vulnerabilities while promoting their leadership in green sectors (e.g. STEM, green jobs).[171]

However, significant challenges persist. The absence of legal recognition for 'ecological migrants' hampers data collection and policy development, leaving environmentally displaced people without the same social protections that are available to refugees. Policy fragmentation exacerbates the issue, as climate migration remains poorly integrated into national climate, environmental and economic plans, reducing their impact. Gendered vulnerabilities add another layer of complexity, with women—often left behind—shouldering disproportionate responsibilities, including economic hardship, caregiving responsibilities and heightened climate risks.[172] Finally, the overlap of crises, particularly in conflict-affected regions like Ukraine, destroys adaptive infrastructure, pushing displaced populations—primarily women—into ecologically hazardous and precarious conditions.[173]

5.9 Gender-responsive migration management policies

Current migration policies have advanced mobility and integration through the following: bilateral agreements (e.g. with Poland and Germany[174]) and visa-free regimes, facilitating legal employment and access to social services; temporary protection status for Ukrainians, ensuring their access to jobs, housing, education and social services; and diaspora engagement programmes (e.g. Ukraine's Science Diaspora Initiative[175]), EU-funded educational scholarships and integration support (language courses, childcare), such as the successful integration of 821,500 Ukrainian children in EU schools.[176]

However, critical gaps persist. Despite the EU Association Agreements signed in 2014,[177] committing to gender equality and equal opportunities in employment, education, training and decision-making, women remain concentrated in informal, low-wage sectors (e.g. care work, domestic labour) with weak social protections.[178] Family migration barriers (income, housing, documentation requirements) disproportionately affect women in informal work as well as single mothers. Children face integration challenges, including language barriers (delaying school enrolment) and disability-related exclusion (with 19 per cent less likely to be enrolled than their peers).[179] Finally, qualification recognition and vocational training policies fail to address women's needs. These policies reinforce gender stereotypes by channelling women into traditionally 'female' sectors like care work or education, while ignoring barriers such as unpaid domestic responsibilities, safety concerns and the lack of childcare support. Systemic biases further limit women's access to high-paying, male-dominated fields (STEM, skilled trades), perpetuating precarious employment and wage gaps.[180]

Immigration policies in Moldova, centred on visa liberalization and targeted permits, often overlook gender disparities. Moldova's Digital Nomad Visa targets high-income remote workers and excludes local and informal

employment, which may indirectly limit access for groups overrepresented in informal and care-based work, including many women. Meanwhile, governments increasingly view immigrants as a solution to demographic decline and labour shortages. Ukraine, for example, aims to attract 4.5–8.6 million workers through selective labour migration, streamlined employment procedures[181] and incentives for foreign students[182]—yet these measures remain gender-neutral. Though women make up most migrants, they face systemic barriers: precarious employment, legal vulnerabilities and exclusion from social protections. Unequal domestic responsibilities and weak childcare infrastructure further constrain women's economic participation and reproductive choices.[183]

Irregular migration policies—voluntary return, forced expulsion and entry bans—ignore gender-specific risks. In Ukraine, sex-disaggregated data are lacking, and programmes like voluntary return (six cases in 2024 and four in 2023)[184] fail to address women's needs (e.g. childcare, healthcare). Forced returns (2,657 in 2024)[185] and entry bans (3,800 in 2024)[186] overlook risks of re-trafficking or post-deportation violence. Regional cooperation (Europol, Eurojust, Interpol, SELEC, Frontex) prioritizes border control over survivor protection, while less attention is given to survivor protection and addressing gender-based violence in trafficking cases.[187] Weak governance, limited labour rights awareness and economic exclusion—key drivers of women's irregular migration—remain unaddressed.

Moldova and Ukraine have the legal frameworks for deportation, detention, asylum and readmission—backed by EU agreements and Frontex cooperation[188]—that are needed to manage mixed and transit migration. However, reception centres, detention facilities and border checkpoints often lack gender-responsive measures, such as female staff, private spaces for women and children, and GBV support. Despite commitments under the Istanbul Convention and CEDAW,[189] migration policies rarely fully align with these standards, leaving women and girls—especially those undocumented or in transit—vulnerable to exploitation, trafficking and abuse. This gap highlights systemic failures in addressing gender equality and human rights.

Policy responses to forced migration from Moldova and Ukraine rely on legal frameworks, bilateral agreements and humanitarian aid, but they lack gender-sensitive and long-term integration strategies. The bilateral EU agreements with Moldova promote labour migration but ignore root causes (economic instability, political repression), pushing migrants into ill-suited asylum systems.[190] The EU Temporary Protection Directive has been a highly effective tool in providing rapid, collective protection to millions of Ukrainians, but it also creates instability due to annual renewals and the lack of clear post-war pathways, leaving millions uncertain about return, integration or legal transitions.[191] Uneven EU responsibility-sharing places a disproportionate responsibility on front-line states like Poland and the Baltic countries, while neighbouring non-EU Moldova—already grappling with limited resources—faces severe strains on its social services due to high refugee influxes. Since 2022, Moldova has opened 136 Refugee Accommodation Centres (RACs), primarily supporting women, children, the elderly and Roma, including GBV survivors. As of May 2025, only 25 RACs remain, housing 1,300 refugees—with more closures expected.[192] This shift leaves Ukrainian refugee women facing housing insecurity, service gaps (healthcare, childcare, legal aid), limited livelihood opportunities and heightened risks of exploitation and poverty. While these measures offered immediate support, pathways to sustainable integration are lacking. Ukraine's collapsed asylum system under martial law leaves refugees from Afghanistan, Syria and other countries in limbo, often forcing dangerous secondary displacement. Finally, while Ukraine has a well-developed legal framework for gender equality and GBV prevention and response, implementation challenges persist. Reports from CEDAW (2022)[193] and the Beijing+30 Review (2024)[194] highlight gaps in access to sexual and reproductive healthcare and childcare as well as weak enforcement of GBV protections. The core issues stem not from a lack of laws but from insufficient funding, coordination and monitoring mechanisms, which limit their effectiveness. The continuation of war and the protracted nature of displacement weaken people's ability to cope, increasing their deferred vulnerability.[195]

The resilience of State mechanisms, the adaptability of anti-trafficking programmes within Ukraine and across Europe, and a variety of awareness-raising initiatives aimed at both Ukrainian refugees and front-line staff have been central to preventive actions.[196] Anti-trafficking and protection measures in the region are implemented

through national action plans (e.g. Moldova's 2024–2028 strategy)[197] and supported by specialized law enforcement units—such as Ukraine's MIPOL transnational team. Support systems—including shelters, hotlines and mobile legal aid—provide temporary housing, medical and psychological aid; however, Ukrainian refugee women face heightened GBV and exploitation risks, particularly in private housing and informal job markets.[198] While temporary protection measures mitigate some threats, underfunded long-term reintegration (vocational training, mental healthcare) remains underfunded, increasing revictimization.[199] Early identification and gender-responsive integration—such as safe housing, legal aid and labour rights awareness—remain critical but unevenly implemented. Policy responses to internal displacement and return in Moldova and Ukraine are rooted in national laws, but their impact on women remains inconsistent. Ukraine's 2014 IDP Law and 2022 Resolution No. 332 initially provided housing assistance, social payments and employment support for IDPs. However, the December 2023 amendments introduced stricter eligibility criteria based on income thresholds, employment status and household composition. According to DTM IOM, 39 per cent of IDPs (1.4 million people) were excluded from social assistance. Women were particularly affected due to their overrepresentation in informal employment, care responsibilities that prevent them from registering as unemployed, and the lack of documentation required to prove eligibility.[200] Moldova lacks an IDP-specific law, relying on general social policies that fail to address displaced women's needs, leaving them economically marginalized and without legal safeguards.[201] A shared challenge across both countries is the fragmentation of aid, leading to uneven resource distribution. Local NGOs, IOM, UNHCR and UNDP provide humanitarian and psychosocial support. UNFPA is actively providing protection and response services for GBV survivors and women and girls at risk (in Ukraine: targeted assistance, service delivery points, youth resilience, and mental health programmes; in Moldova: support to Ukrainian refugee women with financial health insurance and mobile clinics, as well as a comprehensive review of gender-based violence response services).[202] UN Women is also involved in addressing gender-based violence and women's disempowerment across the region (via multi-country programmes to reform legislation, strengthen gender-responsive governance and support to women's rights organizations).[203] Despite these collective efforts, however, critical gaps remain. Insufficient funding, insufficient inter-agency coordination and limited long-term reintegration programmes continue to hinder equitable protection and support for vulnerable women in the region.[204]

Global migration policies increasingly focus on return and reintegration through qualification recognition, economic incentives and housing reconstruction. For Ukrainian refugees and IDPs, this includes temporary housing and financial aid; however, these efforts often overlook gender-specific needs and challenges. Ukraine's newly established Ministry of Unity aims to accelerate returns, but experts emphasize that mass reintegration depends on three critical conditions: work, housing and security[205]—all of which disproportionately affect women. For women returnees, gender-responsive social integration—including psychological support, child education reintegration (particularly for children with foreign educational experience)[206] and safe housing—remains underdeveloped. Housing programmes fail to address women's needs (e.g. proximity to schools, access to healthcare and legal protections) or incorporate gender-responsive design in accordance with the principles of a gender-responsive and inclusive recovery for Ukraine.[207]

Moldova addresses environmental migration through EU-funded programmes (EU4Climate, EAP GREEN), which integrate gender-responsive planning into their National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) to ensure that climate adaptation efforts meet the needs of women and vulnerable groups.[208] Diaspora engagement, such as Moldova's Diaspora for Climate Action (D4C) project,[209] further strengthens climate policy by leveraging diaspora knowledge and resources. Ukraine's migration law recognizes displacement from natural and man-made disasters and links it to its Women, Peace and Security Action Plan (on UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2000)), emphasizing gendered impacts.[210] Despite some successes, fundamental gaps existed, including weak integration of migration into climate strategies; underused diaspora potential due to limited local understanding, poor communication and bureaucratic barriers;[211] uneven gender integration in NAPs; and limited social protection for environmentally displaced individuals. Despite progress, migration policies in Moldova and Ukraine suffer from systemic gender blindness, fragmented implementation and persistent protection gaps.

5.10 Data gaps

The research and data reviewed for this study identify limitations in the availability, consistency and sex disaggregation of migration data across Eastern Europe, despite growing attention to the importance of intersectional analysis in the region.

The analysis of available emigration data across Moldova and Ukraine reveals limited integration of intersectional analyses. Moldova's data are typically delayed, and Ukraine's reporting halted after 2021 due to the full-scale invasion. National administrative sources capture only a partial picture, excluding irregular, seasonal or cyclical migration—patterns where women are often overrepresented but remain statistically invisible. As a result, recent trends rely heavily on external estimates (UN DESA, Eurostat, Frontex), which, though valuable, provide fragmentary insights. A critical gap is the growing but limited amount of sex-disaggregated data on labour, educational and family migration, constraining the ability to track why and how women migrate, their occupational profiles, or the consequences of their mobility for households left behind. Research on the feminization of migration, the effects on family care arrangements and the challenges for women migrating independently remains scarce.

Research revealed that data on immigration from Moldova and Ukraine are also constrained by fragmented collection practices, inconsistent definitions and limited standardization, compared with EU systems. While Moldova provides partial sex-disaggregated data on migration purposes, Ukraine's wartime disruption has reduced availability to individual-level records without aggregated sex breakdowns. Emerging trends—such as the arrival of remote workers in Moldova—are largely unmeasured. Critical gaps remain regarding women's employment sectors, dependency status and family composition, as well as the socioeconomic conditions shaping their integration.

Information on irregular migration was found to be highly limited in its sex disaggregation. Ukraine was found to provide limited sex-specific figures, though even these do not include data on detection measures, outcomes or institutional responses. Moldova offers even less visibility. Data on women working irregularly—particularly in domestic, care or informal service sectors—are almost entirely absent. These limitations are compounded by inconsistent definitions of irregular migration, the lack of standardized reporting and substantial under-detection of actual flows.

Gaps in transit migration data further impede the understanding of regional mobility from women's perspective. While UNODC, IOM and Frontex generate important insights into routes and flows, publication is inconsistent across countries; and despite growing attention to sex disaggregation, their integration remains constrained. Without sex-disaggregated data on profiles, risks or vulnerabilities, the experiences of women and girls in transit remain underexplored, and policy responses cannot adequately address protection needs.

Within the refugee and asylum sphere, UNHCR provides global statistics, but sex and age breakdowns for Moldova and Ukraine are inconsistent over time and across host countries. While aggregate numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers may be available, sex-disaggregated statistics are often incomplete or missing, hindering the assessment of gender-specific trends or risks. Sociological studies and NGO reports partially fill the gap, but systematic, comparable data remain lacking.

Data on trafficking in human beings are substantial but fragmented. GRETA, the U.S. Department of State, UNODC and IOM's DTM provide important insights, yet available data across Moldova and Ukraine are inconsistent in scope, definitions and level of detail. Moldova maintains the most robust datasets, whereas wartime disruption has amplified data limitations in Ukraine. Sex-disaggregated statistics often report numbers of women, men, girls and boys but fail to distinguish how different groups experience specific forms of exploitation. The intersection

of gender with disability, nationality or displacement status is rarely examined. The low number of identified cases raises concerns about underreporting, gaps in detection and barriers that prevent victims from coming forward or being identified.

While Ukraine maintains some IDP statistics through UNHCR and IOM, voluntary displacement driven by economic or environmental pressures is largely untracked, especially in Moldova. Moldova does not systematically collect IDP data at all, despite long-term displacement from the Transnistrian conflict and ongoing economic-driven mobility. Secondary displacement caused by repeated relocations due to the conflict in Ukraine remains severely underreported, obscuring the cumulative impacts on women and girls.

Data on return migration remain sparse and uneven across the region. Existing studies, primarily from Ukraine using IOM's DTM, offer valuable but incomplete insights. Moldova lacks systematic statistical records on return migration, let alone sex-disaggregated reporting. The available evidence is highly project-specific, with no comprehensive datasets tracking reintegration outcomes, barriers or gender-specific needs. As a result, policymakers cannot reliably assess whether women and girls face particular obstacles upon return or whether reintegration support systems are effective.

Finally, despite the growing recognition of environmental migration, Moldova and Ukraine do not maintain sex-disaggregated data on climate-induced mobility. Indirect evidence from displacement records and climate assessments shows strong links between environmental degradation and migration—such as male-dominated seasonal migration from affected rural areas—but official statistics do not classify migration as environmentally driven. Gendered impacts remain unmeasured, even though women face heightened risks from land degradation, water scarcity and loss of rural livelihoods. In Ukraine, war-related environmental disasters such as dam collapses are also not categorized as ecological displacement, further obscuring the issue.

Taken together, these data gaps reveal a structural lack of gender-responsive migration statistics across Eastern Europe. Without regular, standardized and sex-disaggregated data, women's migration experiences remain insufficiently documented, limiting the development of effective and equitable migration, protection and reintegration policies in Moldova and Ukraine.

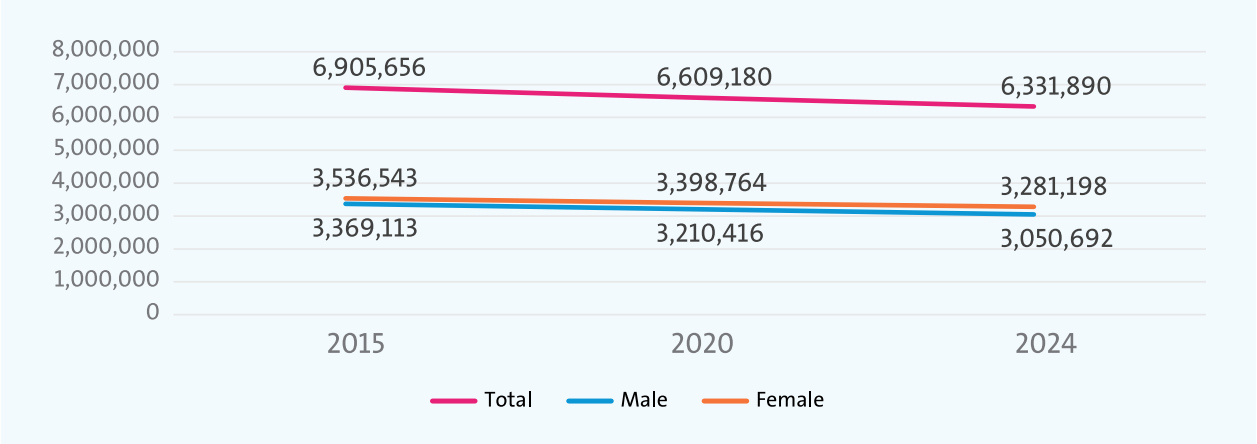
WOMEN IN MIGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

6.1 Women in emigration from Central Asia

Women's emigration from Central Asia is often undercounted due to limited sex disaggregation and the weakness of data across emigration, immigration and transit, including inconsistent collection practices, limited public availability and weak comparability of statistics across emigration, immigration and transit channels. Much of the findings from this analysis are based on different secondary sources and estimates. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have the largest number of nationals abroad, according to UN estimates in 2020, whereas Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have fewer migrants in absolute terms but a higher share relative to their populations. Turkmenistan has smaller diaspora communities by comparison.

According to the available data on emigration, female migrants constituted a majority (52 per cent) of the total international migrant population within Central Asian countries (Figure 6.1). However, the proportion of female emigrants can vary by country and destination. As of 2022, only 24.1 per cent of labour migrants from Uzbekistan were women.[1] Studies confirm that external labour migration in Tajikistan is male-dominated. This reflects persistent gender norms that discourage independent female migration. For example, according to data from IOM's Baseline Mobility Assessment, in 2025, 12,923 women from Tajikistan emigrated to the Russian Federation, compared to 64,712 men.[2]

FIGURE 6.1: **Migrant stock in Central Asia, by sex, 2015–2024**



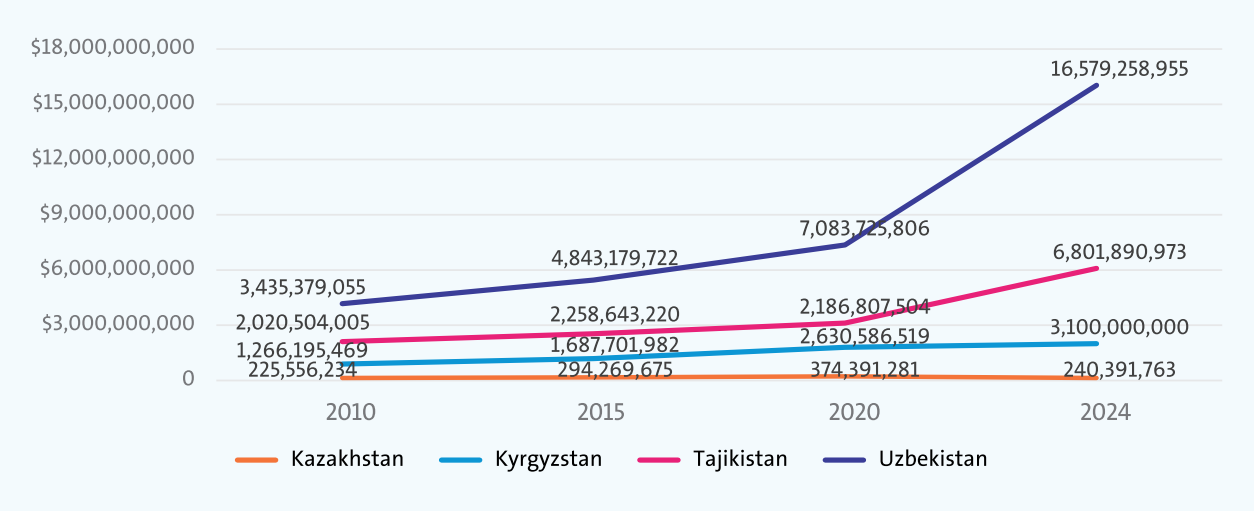
Source: UN DESA 2024c.

By contrast, Kyrgyzstan stands out with a more balanced gender profile among migrants, with approximately 40 per cent of female labour migrants in Russia. This higher female share is possibly linked to relatively more permissive social norms and the tendency for Kyrgyz women to migrate together with or join family members abroad. According to the UN DESA 2024 International Migrant Stock estimates and the available national records, Russia remains the primary destination for migrants from all five Central Asian countries.[3] At the same time, movement trends across the region differ by country. According to IOM data from 2024, in Kyrgyzstan, apart from Russia, Kazakhstan and Türkiye were the primary destination of emigrants, and between 2022 and June 2025, 71 per cent of emigrants were male, compared to 29 per cent female.[4] Similar data for Kazakhstan suggest that for women in 2024, after Russia and unreported destinations, Germany was the primary destination for female emigrants.[5] Finally, in Tajikistan, similar data for women in 2024 show that after Russia, the primary destination for emigrants was the United States, followed by Kazakhstan.[6] This emphasizes the strong intraregional migration trend while also highlighting the growing shifts to countries outside of the region for women emigrants.

Women often migrate to escape poverty, the lack of jobs at home, conflict or even climate disasters. Migrating abroad or to cities becomes an economic necessity rather than just a gendered preference. Global labour demand also pulls women into certain sectors: there is "a demand for women migrant workers in specific service sectors, such as domestic and care work", reflecting a global gendered division of labour.[7] Economic pressures and opportunities (or the lack thereof), alongside family needs, conflict and even women's own aspirations for a better life, all combine with gender norms to shape women's migration. It is an interplay of structural barriers (limited local jobs, lower wages, legal restrictions, etc.) and social norms that explains why so many Central Asian women seek work abroad.

Remittances are critical for parts of Central Asia, especially for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (Figure 6.2). The share of remittances originating from Russia is predominant.[8] That support helps families avoid poverty and cope when prices rise. In Uzbekistan, growing remittances in recent years have boosted household spending, helped people start small businesses and brought in much needed foreign currency.[9] Female migrants often send remittances that sustain their families and, in some cases, allow them to invest in housing, education or businesses back home. There is evidence that women, despite earning less on average, tend to remit a similar portion of their income as men and direct it towards family well-being.[10]

FIGURE 6.2: Personal remittances, received (current US$), by Central Asian country, 2010–2024



Source: World Bank 2024d.

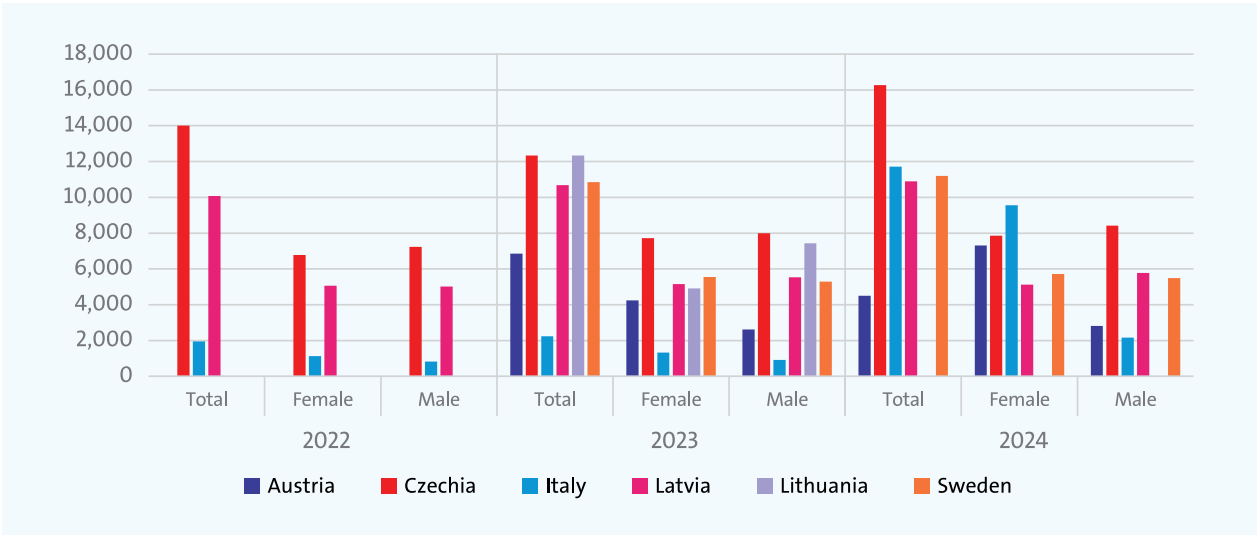
6.1.1 Labour migration

Most women who go abroad seek employment, typically in lower-paid and informal sectors. For instance, female migrants from the region often find jobs as caretakers, childcare workers, cleaners, market vendors, or factory and farm workers in destination countries. For example, according to research from IOM on women in such migration in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, among those surveyed from Tajikistan, nearly 50 per cent of women were employed in the community, social and personal services, 21 per cent in manufacturing, and 13 per cent in wholesale resale trade.[11] Meanwhile 30 per cent of women respondents from Kyrgyzstan were engaged in service activities, 24 per cent in the hotel and restaurant sector, and 19 per cent in resale and trade.

Participation in such work is often the result of either a lack of vocational qualifications (if a woman has only completed upper secondary education) or the lack of recognition of higher educational credentials, which creates a skills mismatch for women. Many of these jobs are seasonal or circular, which means that women travel abroad during harvest or service industry peaks and return home in the off-season.[12] Women's disadvantaged position in home labour markets does not by itself trigger migration, since most women also enter lower paid and feminized jobs abroad.[13] What changes is absolute earnings, currency value, availability of work and level of demand. A cleaner or caregiver in Russia, Türkiye or the EU can earn twice as much for similar work than in their home country, especially with overtime or live-in arrangements, and remittances stretch further in origin economies.[14] In this sense, women are not moving to higher status occupations but to similar roles with better pay in absolute terms, more regular work and quicker remittance potential.[15] For women, additional 'push' factors include high rates of rural poverty, the presence of friends, geographical proximity and similar language and culture[16] and, in some cases, social inequalities.[17] Women from patriarchal rural communities might migrate to gain autonomy or escape restrictive norms.[18] Evolving social attitudes in parts of Central Asia (notably Kyrgyzstan) have made it more acceptable for women to work abroad or travel independently, enabling a slow increase in female migration.[19] Another driver is the role of migrant networks: as more women establish themselves abroad, they help other women migrate by providing information, contacts or assistance with childcare jobs, among other support.[20]

One striking trend has been observed since the onset of the war in Ukraine in 2022: Central Asian women increased their labour migration to Russia after the war began, stepping in to fill jobs as some men hesitated or returned home due to mobilization fears.[21] A World Bank analysis found that many men from the region cut short or deferred migration to avoid the risk of conscription in Russia, while women (who are not subject to military call-ups) migrated in greater numbers to compensate for lost male earnings.[22] These female migrants often came from the same households and communities as the men who stayed behind, indicating an adaptive strategy where women assume the breadwinner role abroad when male migration is constrained by conflict.[23] Recent data from Kyrgyzstan illustrate this adaptive strategy. After 2022, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and related issues made many Kyrgyz men reluctant or unable to work in Russia due to fears of military mobilization and rising anti-migrant sentiment. In response, female migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia increased to fill the gap. The EU is another destination for Central Asian nationals seeking for employment (Figure 6.3).[24]

FIGURE 6.3: **People born in Central Asia living in the EU countries, by sex, 2022–2024**



Source: Eurostat, n.d.-c.

6.1.2 Educational migration

Educational migration remains limited in scale relative to labour flows. The gendered pattern of emigration for educational purposes mirrors the predominance of women in tertiary education. For example, in Kazakhstan, women constitute around 54–64 per cent of those who received support through the scholarship programme "Bolashak".[25] In Tajikistan, male students outnumber their female counterparts among those studying abroad, particularly at the undergraduate level, reflecting gender disparities in access to international education opportunities and patriarchal stereotypes towards unmarried young women.[26] Families often prioritize sons for overseas study, while daughters face mobility constraints linked to concerns about safety and reputation, expectations of early marriage, and the belief that independent living abroad is inappropriate before marriage.[27]

6.1.3 Family migration

Family-related migration is another important pattern: a significant number of women move abroad for marriage or family reunification. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, it is common for wives to remain at home while husbands work abroad,[28] but some women do follow spouses to Kazakhstan, Russia or further, especially as migration becomes a family survival strategy. Young women also sometimes migrate to marry abroad; for example, there have been cases of Central Asian women marrying and moving to Türkiye or South Korea, though exact numbers are unclear.[29]

6.1.4 Emigration as an opportunity and challenge

For the women who migrate, the experience can be both empowering and fraught with risks. On the positive side, migration can provide women with improved income and greater decision-making power. Female migrants often send remittances that sustain their families and, in some cases, allow them to invest in housing, education or businesses back home.[30] There is evidence that in general, women, despite earning less on average, tend to remit a similar portion of their income as men and direct it towards family well-being.[31] Migration can also broaden women's horizons, exposing them to new languages, skills and ideas, and in some instances improve their social status upon return; for example, a woman who has worked abroad may gain more say in household decisions due to her contribution to family income. Some women migrants form support networks or community organizations abroad, which can be an opportunity for leadership and solidarity; for example, Kyrgyz women in Moscow have informal groups for mutual aid.[32]

Women face a range of challenges and vulnerabilities throughout the migration process:

- Women in migration are at high risk of exploitation, including human trafficking.[33] Even in regular jobs, female migrants often experience unsafe or unfair labour conditions, such as long hours, below-minimum wages and harassment.[34] As domestic workers or caregivers, many work in unregulated settings with little legal and social protection. Language barriers and insecure legal status (e.g. when overstaying a visa) make it hard to seek help.
- When women migrate, they often leave children or elderly relatives in the care of others, placing extra caregiving responsibilities on grandparents or older daughters. When men migrate, which remains more common in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, wives face heavier domestic and agricultural workloads. In both situations, long separation can strain marriages and affect children's well-being.[35] Studies from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan show that children left in the care of relatives face higher risks of neglect and poorer school performance.[36]

- Despite some progress, many women in Central Asia still face cultural barriers to mobility. In more conservative areas, families may forbid daughters or wives from migrating independently due to safety concerns or gender norms that a woman's place is in the home.[37] Some Central Asian governments have even considered or enacted regulations that disproportionately affect women's travel, such as earlier proposals in Tajikistan requiring women under a certain age to get permission from male family members for work abroad.[38] These practices reflect protective intentions but end up limiting women's economic opportunities. Legally, while all citizens (men and women) have the right to migrate, bureaucratic hurdles like complex passport procedures or expensive exit requirements can impact women more if they have fewer resources and less education to navigate them.[39]

6.2 Immigration to Central Asia

Central Asia is increasingly becoming a destination for migrants, including women. Patterns of immigration vary by country. However, data on immigration are sparse and often not published, as evidenced by the difficulty in obtaining consistent breakdowns by sex in official statistics. It is important to note that none of the Central Asian countries actively support large-scale immigration. The only significant immigration that the Central Asian governments actively encourage is the return of their own ethnic diaspora. The states make special provisions for people of their national ethnicity abroad to 'come home' but otherwise do not encourage mass immigration of foreigners. Immigration tends to be viewed through a national security or labour-market lens rather than used as a demographic strategy.[40]

In 2020, Kazakhstan hosted

3.7 million

international immigrants,

50.4% of whom were women

Immigration into Central Asia is mostly regional and shaped by post-Soviet ties, proximity and ethnic-return programmes.[41] Overall, most immigrants to Central Asia come from nearby countries or other former Soviet republics, and many movements are circular or short-term.[42] Kazakhstan is the primary destination for immigrants in Central Asia, drawing people from neighbouring countries and beyond.[43] As of 2020, Kazakhstan hosted approximately 3.7 million international immigrants, of whom about 50.4 per cent were female.[44] This high number reflects largely the legacy of the Soviet era, as many 'immigrants' are ethnic Russians, Ukrainians or other nationalities who settled in Kazakhstan decades ago along with their female family members. Kazakhstan's immigrant stock includes a substantial population of long-term residents and their descendants, among which women are well-represented (often as spouses or second-generation migrants). These communities are relatively integrated (speaking Russian or Kazakh) and often hold citizenship or permanent residency.

Elsewhere in Central Asia, the absolute numbers of immigrants are much smaller. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan each host on the order of tens of thousands of foreign citizens; for example, Tajikistan has nearly 10,000 refugees and asylum-seekers (mostly from Afghanistan) as of 2023,[45] as well as a modest number of foreign workers (including some Chinese, Turkish and South Asian nationals).[46] UNHCR data show that the majority of refugees in Tajikistan are men and ethnic Tajiks fleeing conflict, but precise sex and age breakdowns for the overall refugee population are not available.[47] Kyrgyzstan's immigrant population includes expatriates (development and business professionals), some ethnic Kyrgyz returnees and regional migrants. Women account for about 60 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's immigrant stock and just over half in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan;[48] however, recent inflow subgroups (expatriate professionals, short-term workers) lack reliable sex-disaggregated data, so their composition may differ. Uzbekistan in 2024 recorded only 2,229 immigrants with residence permits.[49]

In Kyrgyzstan, as of 2025, Uzbekistan was the primary nationality of migrant workers, followed by Chinese and Pakistani nationals.[50] In Kazakhstan, meanwhile, the primary nationality of women labour migrants as of IOM round 7 Baseline Mobility Assessment data was Uzbek, followed to a much lesser extent by Russian and Tajik nationals.[51] The overall number of labour migrants in Tajikistan is much lower than other countries in the region, but as of IOM round 6 Baseline Mobility Assessment data, most women labour migrants were Chinese nationals, followed by Russian and Pakistani nationals.[52]

6.2.1 Regular immigration

Two important categories of regular immigrants deserve mention: ethnic repatriates and foreign students. Kazakhstan and (to a lesser extent) Kyrgyzstan have programmes to resettle ethnic kin from abroad; more information is provided in section 6.7. Meanwhile, foreign students are a growing presence in some Central Asian countries. Kyrgyzstan, for example, became a hub for South Asian students (especially in medical programmes); thousands of young students from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh study at universities in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also host international students[53] (including women from within the CIS, South Asia or Africa) in their educational institutions. These student migrants usually have legal status (student visas), and their experience differs from labour migrants; however, they can face integration issues and sometimes harassment as foreign women. For example, anecdotal reports have highlighted instances of South Asian female students in Central Asia encountering social biases.[54]

6.2.2 Irregular immigration

While the research did not find public data on irregular migrant numbers that could be used to inform the analysis, indirect indicators (such as deportation figures) suggest significant flows.[55] Irregular migration into Central Asia occurs in several forms: undocumented labour migration, transit migration by asylum-seekers, and human trafficking.[56] The most prevalent is undocumented labour migration, particularly into Kazakhstan and Russia (via Kazakhstan) from neighbouring states.[57] Among these irregular workers, men predominate in manual labour jobs, but women are also present, especially in domestic work, bazaars or farm harvesting. These women often enter legally (visa-free for a short term) but later fall into irregular status, by overstaying their authorized period of residence and staying in informal employment. Because of their irregular status, they are vulnerable to exploitation by employers and have little recourse if abused.[58] Gender patterns differ: men predominate in visible irregular labour in construction and large farms and are overrepresented in raids and deportations, while women are present in domestic work, small retail, hospitality and seasonal harvesting, face higher risks of exploitation in private settings, and are undercounted because many enter legally but then overstay and avoid contact with authorities.[59]

Several factors explain why people, including women, immigrate to Central Asian countries:

- Relatively stronger economies and higher wages are the single biggest pull.[60] Women from neighbouring countries move to Kazakhstan for jobs in childcare, cleaning or service industries. Similarly, Russia's war-driven economic changes led many Russians to relocate to Kazakhstan, and their arrival helped fill existing labour and skills gaps and also created new business activity in IT and services. Kyrgyzstan's economy is smaller, but its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) makes it attractive for some Russian professionals (including women in IT or education) seeking a more liberal social climate or lower cost of living than in Russia.[61]

- The war in Ukraine triggered a wave of immigration from Russia into Central Asia in 2022–2023.[62] This included a substantial number of women, often coming as part of family units. Among these 'new diaspora' were many young professionals and family groups, such as wives accompanying husbands, female entrepreneurs and single women in tech. Although precise breakdowns by sex are initially unclear, survey data provide some insight: the composition varies by host country.[63] Kyrgyzstan's new Russian diaspora is about 62 per cent male, reflecting the predominance of draft-age men who fled mobilization. In contrast, Kazakhstan's Russian newcomers are majority female (approximately 58 per cent).[64] This difference likely stems from migration motivations; Kazakhstan received many family units and professional women relocating businesses, whereas Kyrgyzstan saw more single men transiently escaping the mobilization. These gender dynamics matter for integration: female migrants may have different support needs—for example, childcare, access to decent work and livelihoods, recognition of qualifications, language support, and protection from harassment and exploitation—while the surge of young Russian men raises security and labour-market questions. Although many may treat Central Asia as a temporary refuge or transit to elsewhere, a significant number have stayed, effectively becoming immigrants. Furthermore, international sanctions on Russia have prompted some multinational companies to relocate their offices to Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan.[65] This matters in terms of the gendered impact because these relocations can change labour demand in services and ICT, support remote work and entrepreneurship opportunities, and increase competition and cost-of-living pressures that affect women differently.

The legacy of Soviet era interconnections eases some mobility in the region. In Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian language has an official role in public life, thus reducing language barriers for many migrants from Russian-speaking backgrounds. Migration profiles also note that knowledge of Russian and cultural familiarity linked to a shared history function as important pull factors.[66] In border regions (like Karakalpakstan (of Uzbekistan) and Kazakhstan), family networks and historical ties facilitate short-distance, cross-border moves.[67]

For some women, immigrating to Kazakhstan can increase earning potential compared to opportunities at home, particularly in services, trade, and domestic or care work.[68] At the same time, many women migrant workers in these sectors can face difficult working conditions, and employment is often informal or not fully protected by written contracts or effective labour enforcement. As a result, any economic gains can coexist with elevated risks of exploitation, depending on legal status, documentation and access to remedies.[69] Some highly skilled women who relocated from Russia to Kazakhstan have turned migration into an economic opportunity by opening small businesses (such as cafes), launching start-ups or working as freelancers, thereby strengthening their professional independence.[70] Others find greater personal freedom: Kyrgyzstan, for example, has attracted Russian women professionals seeking a more liberal social environment and lower living costs than in Russia, illustrating how moving to Central Asia can offer women both safety and a chance to thrive professionally.[71]

Female migrants who are irregular or undocumented face acute risks of exploitation, particularly in informal domestic, care and service work, where fear of detection limits women's access to complaints mechanisms and remedies.[72]

Women seeking asylum or transit through Central Asia confront additional perils. Central Asian countries have not established strong asylum systems, leaving many female refugees in legal limbo. These women face language barriers, no right to work and constant fear of expulsion. In late 2024, Tajikistan began forcibly deporting Afghan refugees, including women and children, back to Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, provoking an outcry from human rights organizations.[73]

6.3 Mixed transit migration through Central Asia

This review found that reliable quantitative data on transit migration in Central Asia, an area which sits at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, are limited due to the irregular and sometimes clandestine nature of these movements. The available indicators are often proxy measures—for example, the number of foreign citizens recorded as irregularly crossing borders or the number of 'transit migrants' assisted by IOM in the region). Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan each intercept a few hundred irregular migrants annually at borders or within their territory.[74] Women are present among those intercepted or requesting assistance, often travelling as part of mixed family groups (for example, with spouses and children), rather than alone.

One common route is from South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan) through Central Asia to Russia and sometimes onward to Europe.[75] Taking advantage of relatively easier entry into countries like Kyrgyzstan (which historically had visa-free access for some South Asian nationals), migrants from South Asia have flown into Bishkek or Almaty and then attempted overland journeys into Russia or Eastern Europe. Among them are women, often travelling with family groups.[76] The exact scale is unknown, but Central Asian authorities have occasionally broken up smuggling rings moving South Asian migrants (both male and female) through the region.[77] Another flow is Afghan refugees and migrants who escape the Taliban regime and head for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, including women—female university students and women's rights activists who fled Afghanistan.[78] Central Asia has not generally been a final destination for these women, given the limited asylum prospects, so many treat it as a temporary transit region while seeking resettlement elsewhere. Kazakhstan temporarily hosted over a hundred Afghan women students to continue their education, before many were relocated to universities in Europe or the United States. However, such structured education pathways are the exception compared to most transit experiences, in which displaced Afghans in Central Asia face limited legal pathways, low asylum recognition and few options for durable solutions.[79] Turkmenistan's border is practically closed; Uzbekistan initially admitted some Afghans but then stopped; Tajikistan sporadically allows crossings but, as noted, has deported many due to security concerns.[80]

An often-overlooked type of transit migration is that of Central Asian migrant workers themselves, especially during crises. For example, during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns, thousands of Central Asian migrants (including women) became stranded en route from Russia back to their countries of origin;[81] Kyrgyz and Uzbek migrants camped at the Kazakh border when it was closed. Women in these groups, including those with children, endured difficult conditions in transit zones.[82] From a transit perspective, Central Asian countries became waypoints for Russians and others fleeing conflict or sanctions. Many simply passed through Almaty or Bishkek airports to catch onward flights.[83] Women were part of this exodus, either as family members or among the rare single women escaping conscription-related chaos (female journalists, activists).[84] The Ukraine conflict also displaced some Ukrainians to Central Asia, though numbers were modest; several thousand Ukrainians reportedly went to Kazakhstan,[85] often because they had family or work there.

Even within the uncertainties of transit migration through Central Asia, women can derive some empowering outcomes. The very act of mobility allows women to escape immediate dangers and seek better futures beyond their home countries. In rare cases, transit countries have provided stepping stones to opportunity, such as in the case of Afghan women university students in Kazakhstan. Such instances show that transit journeys, while arduous, can expose women to new environments and support networks, helping them build resilience, learn new languages and gain wider perspectives.[86]

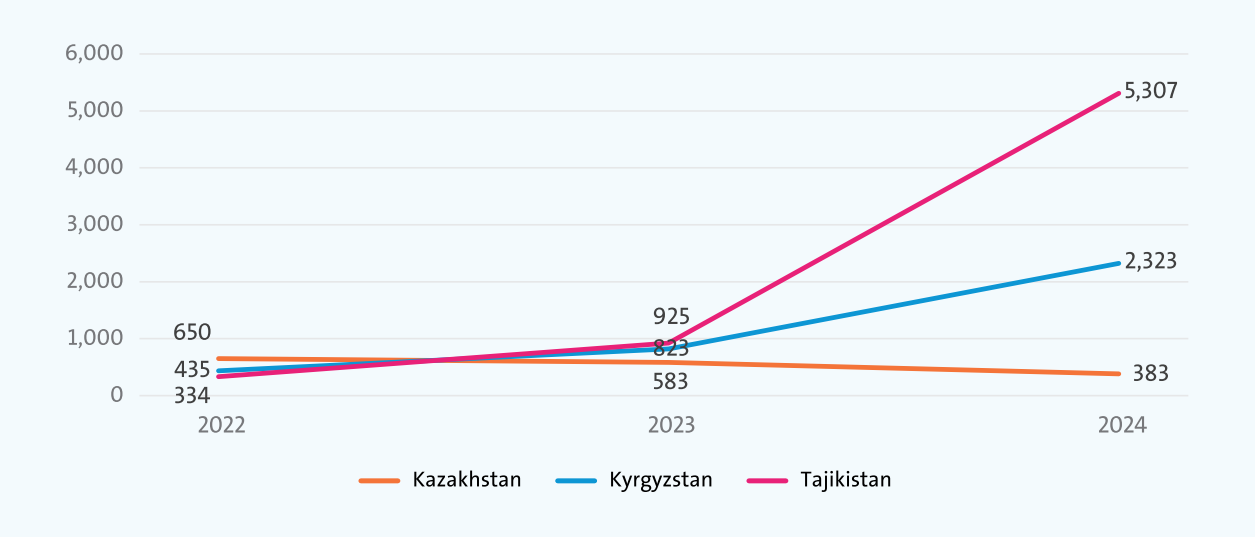
Central Asian countries face the challenge of distinguishing between transit refugees, asylum-seekers and irregular economic migrants[87] while also maintaining border control in a way that aligns with international obligations, including access to asylum procedures and the principle of non-refoulement under the 1951 Refugee Convention (Article 33). For women in transit, the challenges are acute: they need protection against gender-based violence, access to basic health services and often accommodations for children.[88] However, existing facilities are few.

Dedicated transit reception facilities for migrants in Central Asia appear limited in practice. When migrants become stranded, support is often ad hoc and largely provided through humanitarian actors, including IOM-supported assistance for vulnerable and stranded migrants.[89] A young woman from South Asia trying to reach Europe by migrating through Central Asia irregularly, for example, has little to no practical access to official support; she risks abuse by smugglers or even rogue officials. This is an illustrative scenario consistent with documented protection risks in irregular transit contexts. Language barriers exacerbate isolation, as few transit migrants speak local languages. Legal protection is also scant: Central Asia's laws against irregular border crossing can lead to detention and deportation, with little consideration of humanitarian factors. Reports of Tajikistan deporting Afghan women and children demonstrate the difficulties that transit migrants face in claiming asylum or even temporary refuge.[90]

6.4 Women asylum-seekers and refugees

Central Asian countries host relatively small populations of refugees and asylum-seekers (Figure 6.4). These numbers are modest, reflecting strict asylum policies and the geographic fact that Central Asia is somewhat removed from major conflict zones. The majority of refugees in Central Asia are from neighbouring conflict areas and the CIS, particularly from Afghanistan, Ukraine and Tajikistan.[91] Publicly available figures from governments and UNHCR do not usually break down the small refugee counts by sex.

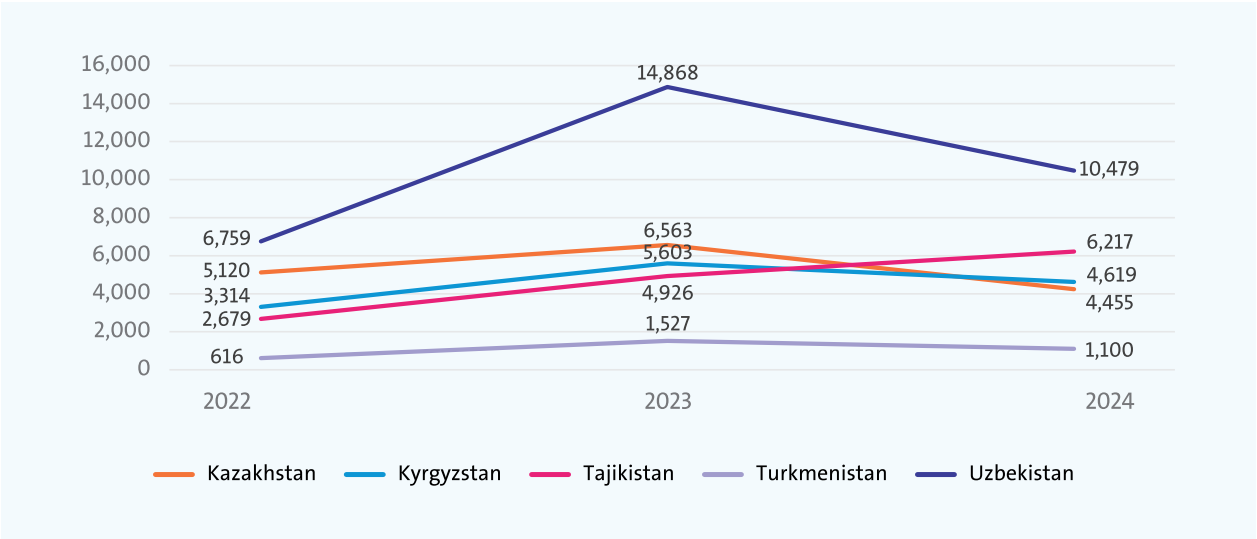
FIGURE 6.4: **Asylum applications in Central Asia, by country, 2022–2024**



Source: UNHCR 2025g.

In addition to hosting refugees, Central Asia is also a source region for asylum-seekers abroad (Figure 6.5). Uzbekistan is the country of origin for the greatest number of asylum-seekers from the Central Asian subregion, followed by Kazakhstan. All countries except for Tajikistan demonstrated a similar pattern in the number of asylum-seekers since 2022, with a spike in 2023 and a decrease in 2024. In the case of Tajikistan, there is a steady growth. The increases in Kyrgyzstan and especially Tajikistan likely reflect a combination of post-2022 mobility shifts linked to the war in Ukraine and changing economic incentives, alongside stricter migration enforcement affecting Central Asian migrants, particularly after Russia's intensified crackdown in 2024.

FIGURE 6.5: **Asylum applications from Central Asia, by country, 2022–2024**



Source: UNHCR 2025g.

The primary driver of the recent refugee influx has been the crisis in Afghanistan. The Taliban's return to power in August 2021 led to waves of Afghans seeking refuge in Central Asia. Tajikistan, which shares a long border with Afghanistan, was "deeply affected by instability in its neighbour", seeing a sharp increase in Afghan refugee arrivals since 2021.[92] The war in Ukraine indirectly impacted Central Asia's displacement trends. Although Central Asia did not receive a large influx of Ukrainian refugees, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan saw thousands of Russian citizens (men and women) arrive to avoid conscription or restrictions on civil liberties and political expression. Within Central Asia, some women have fled their home countries due to human rights abuses or gender-based violence, seeking asylum abroad. These outflows, while smaller in scale than the Afghan influx, indicate that gender discrimination and political repression are drivers for Central Asian women's asylum claims.[93]

For women who become asylum-seekers or refugees in Central Asia, migration is ultimately a path to safety that allows them to escape conflict or persecution and rebuild their lives in a stable environment. Although refugee numbers in the region are modest, there have been success stories: Kyrgyzstan, for example, naturalized thousands of Tajik refugees (many of them women and girls) in 2004 after that country's civil war, granting them secure legal status and a chance to integrate fully into society.[94] In Tajikistan, most Afghan refugees are concentrated in one community (Vahdat),[95] and many households are female-headed after women evacuated without their husbands. In such settings, women often bond together to support one another, creating solidarity and a sense of normalcy in exile. Over time, women refugees who gain legal status may pursue education, start small businesses or take on community roles.[96]

Women asylum-seekers and refugees in Central Asia face multifaceted challenges that compound their vulnerability. In some countries, women lack a formal legal status.[97] For example, in Uzbekistan (which is not party to the Refugee Convention), Afghan women have no official refugee recognition and thus "do not have access to socioeconomic rights or protection from refoulement".[98] Even where asylum laws exist (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), lengthy procedures mean that women wait years with uncertain status. Undocumented female asylum-seekers risk detention or fines if found without papers.[99]

Women asylum-seekers and refugees often struggle to access healthcare (especially reproductive health services), education and employment. Legal barriers (work permit restrictions) and language differences impede integration.[100] In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, refugees technically can work and use basic health and education services, but in practice many women face bureaucratic hurdles and discrimination.[101] Female asylum-seekers who are not yet recognized refugees receive minimal assistance.[102] Refugee women often become de facto heads of household (especially widows or single mothers from Afghanistan). Unable to work legally in some cases, they resort to the informal economy, where they risk exploitation. Without financial stability, they are vulnerable to gender-based violence and trafficking.[103]

6.5 Women victims of human trafficking

Human trafficking persists throughout Central Asia, and women constitute a substantial portion of identified victims. Reliable statistics are hard to obtain due to underreporting, but available data indicate that women and girls form the majority of trafficking victims in many cases, reflecting the global trend where females accounted for 61 per cent of detected victims in 2022.[104]

As the region's largest economy, Kazakhstan is both a destination and source for trafficking. Official victim identification in Kazakhstan remains low (according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs): in 2023, the Government identified 21 trafficking victims (15 females and 6 males). However, NGO data and cases detected by the police, border services and migration units suggest that the true numbers are far higher. In the first half of 2025 alone, Kazakh authorities recorded 134 trafficking-related crimes and since 2002 have assisted 1,891 victims (cumulatively) in partnership with IOM. Of those assisted over two decades, about 47.9 per cent were women (907 women versus 981 men), indicating significant male labour trafficking as well. It is important to note that these figures are not directly comparable. 'Officially identified victims' reflects people formally recognized as victims within government procedures in a given year, while 'assisted victims' can include people supported through referrals and service providers over a long period, and the gender distribution can differ because assistance caseloads may capture more labour trafficking of men, while official identification may overrepresent sex trafficking cases involving women. Women in Kazakhstan are primarily trafficked for sexual exploitation (which comprised around 37 per cent of identified cases) but also for labour (farm work, domestic servitude) given that labour trafficking is prevalent.[105] Kazakhstan also serves as a destination for women trafficked from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and beyond. Kyrgyzstan is a known source of trafficked persons, especially women trafficked abroad to the Middle East or Russia for sex or domestic work; it is also a transit country.[106] Official action has been limited: the Kyrgyz Government identified no victims in 2022 and only three in 2023, reflecting very weak official identification. Instead, civil society identified 111 victims during the latest reporting year, with approximately 74 per cent of them women.[107] The high number of women in forced labour cases is remarkable; many adult Kyrgyz women have been trafficked for labour exploitation, such as sewing workshops or agricultural labour in foreign countries.[108]

Over two decades,
47.9%
of assisted victims of trafficking were women

Tajikistan, with a large migrant worker population, is primarily a source country for human trafficking. Many Tajik women have been trafficked to Persian Gulf states or Russia or within Central Asia for sexual exploitation or as cheap brides or domestic servants.[109] The U.S. Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report suggests that Tajikistan's victim identification is low; for example, in 2022, Tajik officials identified only three victims (down from 19

the year prior), according to the 2023 TIP narrative.[110] NGOs and international organizations in Tajikistan likely identify more. Historically, Uzbekistan was known for State-sponsored forced labour (e.g. the cotton harvest mobilization), which involved millions, including many women, though this has drastically reduced since 2019 due to reforms.[111] From 2018 to 2023, Uzbekistan consistently had the highest number of its citizens identified as trafficking victims abroad among Central Asian states. IOM data (2004–2020) show 944 Uzbek victims assisted, the most from any single Central Asian country.[112] Many are women trafficked to Kazakhstan, Russia, the Middle East or South Korea for sexual exploitation or domestic servitude. The Uzbek Government has stepped up its efforts post-2020: in 2022, it reported identifying 241 victims,[113] though details on gender were not given in the summary. Turkmenistan remains one of the most opaque countries in the region on anti-trafficking efforts and is consistently assessed among the lowest performers, with no cases officially recognized by the Government. It is known as a source country: in 2024, Turkmen women were trafficked abroad to Türkiye and possibly the United Arab Emirates for sex work, and Turkmen men and women for labour in Türkiye or other countries.[114] Turkmenistan also has internal issues like forced labour in the cotton sector, which the United States designated as a "government policy or pattern of trafficking".[115]

Economic hardships such as unemployment and low wages drive hundreds of thousands of women to seek jobs abroad each year, especially from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.[116] This creates a large pool of potential victims for labour traffickers. The increase in labour migration flows post-2022 (due to inflation and food price shocks) serves as a driver of trafficking: traffickers exploit women's need for income, using fraudulent recruitment (fake job offers as childcare workers, waitresses, etc.) to traffic them.[117] A recent trend is the growing use of online platforms to recruit and traffic women.[118] Since 2022, traffickers in Central Asia have increasingly turned to social media, Telegram channels and online job ads to lure women with promises of high-paying jobs abroad or even false marriage offers.[119] The U.S. TIP Report 2024 highlights how traffickers exploit "technological advancements to conduct their crimes", which makes it harder to detect and prevent trafficking.

Trafficked women experience extreme violence and abuse.[120] Those in sexual exploitation suffer repeated rape, physical abuse and psychological trauma.[121] Forced labour victims often work long hours in harsh conditions, with beatings or deprivation as coercion. These abuses result in serious health issues, such as injuries, sexually transmitted infections (including HIV), unwanted pregnancies, PTSD and depression.[122] Yet access to healthcare is limited during exploitation and even after rescue, with many women struggling to receive adequate medical and psychological care. Trauma recovery services are scarce in the region, especially for specialized needs like trauma-informed counselling for sexual violence survivors.[123]

A huge challenge for female survivors is social stigma. In conservative communities of Central Asia, a woman known to have been subjected to sexual exploitation or even just to have lived abroad independently can face blame and rejection. Traffickers exploit this by telling victims that no one will accept them back.[124] Upon return, many women hide their experiences; those who do not may face family shame, divorce or ostracism. Stigma is especially harsh for victims of sexual exploitation as they may be seen as 'dishonoured'.[125]

Although all Central Asian countries criminalize trafficking, in practice women victims often do not receive the protection and justice they deserve.[126] Identification is weak; as noted, many governments identify few or no victims, meaning that women remain in exploitation or are treated as illegal migrants or criminals instead of victims. For example, in Kyrgyzstan some unidentified victims were "inappropriately penalized for unlawful acts committed as a direct result of being trafficked".[127] This refers to cases like women forced into prostitution being arrested for prostitution, rather than helped. After escaping trafficking, women face economic hardships that pose a major challenge. Many victims return with debts (often traffickers impose 'debts' for transport, or victims' families incurred loans), and they have lost years of earning potential. Some have been expelled from destination countries with nothing but the clothes on their backs.[128]

6.6 Women in internal displacement

Central Asia generally has low levels of internal displacement compared to conflict zones elsewhere, but certain increases occurred in 2022. The largest event was the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border clashes of September 2022, which caused mass displacement in border communities. In Kyrgyzstan's Batken province alone, according to various sources, 130,000–142,000 people were temporarily displaced by the four-day conflict.[129] Although exact sex-disaggregated data are not available, according to IFRC estimates, 35 per cent of the displaced were women and 65 per cent children.[130] While the majority returned home after the ceasefire, around 4,000 Kyrgyz civilians remained displaced months later (primarily those whose homes were destroyed). On the Tajikistan side of the border, displacement figures were smaller; thousands evacuated during the shelling, but most returned quickly, with no official numbers published. Aside from the conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, internal displacement in 2022–2023 was modest. For example, Kazakhstan saw localized evacuations from natural disasters, such as wildfires in summer 2023 and floods in 2024, displacing more than 13,000 residents temporarily.[131] Tajikistan and Uzbekistan periodically face floods or mudslides that force dozens or hundreds of families to relocate temporarily, but no event since 2022 has approached the scale of the Batken conflict displacement.[132]

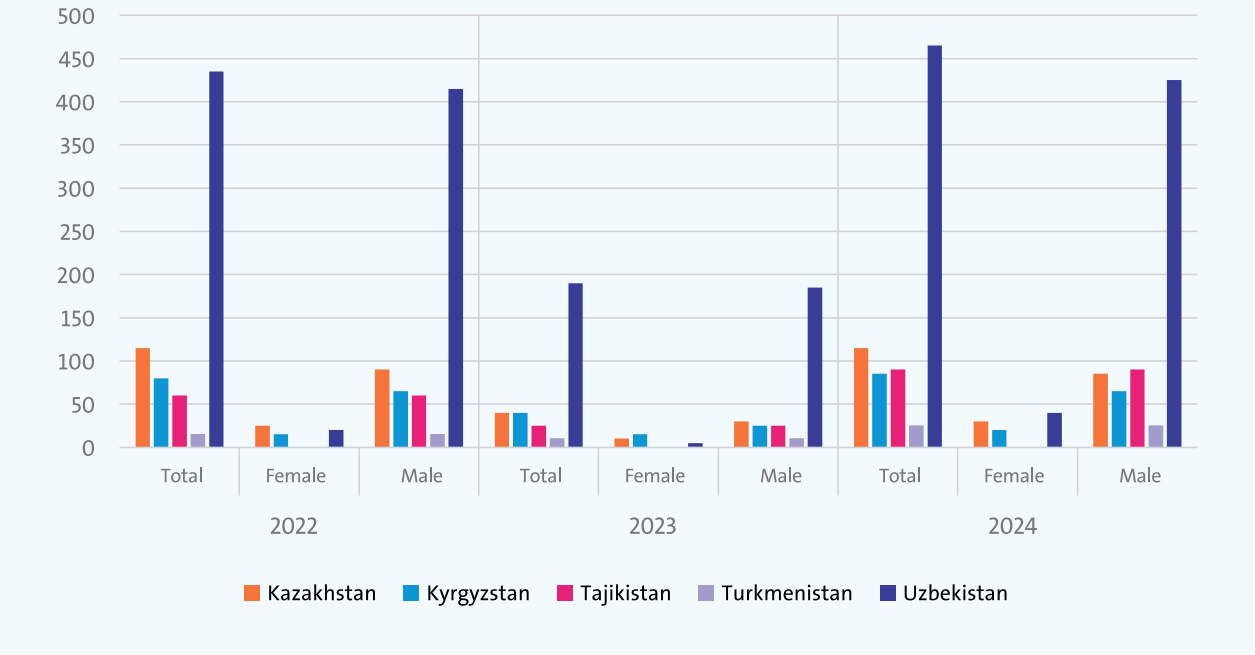
Gender dynamics in displacement events have been significant, even in short-term crises. Women and children evacuate first, while many men stay behind to protect property or assist in response. For example, during the Batken clashes, Kyrgyz authorities organized the early evacuation of women and children from border villages as soon as fighting escalated.[133] Women thus shoulder the main responsibility for managing family life in evacuation centres, caring for children and the elderly in unfamiliar settings, often with minimal comfort.[134] Even brief displacement can expose women and girls to greater risks of gender-based violence and exploitation amid the chaos.[135] Such radical change in the daily lives of households impacts women's psychological well-being. For example, women in Tajik border communities describe a persistent sense of insecurity after the September 2022 clashes, which has curtailed everyday mobility and strained relations with neighbouring Kyrgyz communities.[136] In addition, women carried a double load. Women participants and local leaders recognize that women have become more publicly active, yet their leadership is still undervalued and channelled into 'everyday' support rather than decision-making spaces.[137]

Internally displaced persons often lack proper local registration (due to the *propiska* residency system[138] still in use). Women who move to a city without a residence permit face difficulties accessing healthcare, enrolling children in schools or even finding legal employment. This hits women particularly hard if they are pregnant or have young children. For displaced women (those from conflict zones in Batken), the destruction of their homes means that they must live in temporary shelters such as schools, government facilities and mosques or with relatives. There are no specific reported cases from Batken of GBV in the shelters, as data collection on GBV in a short-term displacement can be difficult.[139]

6.7 Women returnees

Since 2022, Central Asian states have accelerated the repatriation of women and children from conflict zones, especially from camps in Syria and prisons in Iraq.[140] Although conflict-zone repatriations have dominated headlines, Central Asia has also seen women migrant workers returning home since 2022 (Figure 6.6). Economic uncertainty from the COVID-19 aftermath and Russia's war in Ukraine spurred many labour migrants, both men and women, to go back to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.[141] Uzbekistan experienced some of the largest return flows in the region, reflecting its large population of labour migrants working abroad.

FIGURE 6.6: **Assisted forced return from the EU, by country and sex, 2022–2024**



Source: Eurostat, n.d.-c.

Women migrant workers

Women returnees were more likely than men to have worked abroad in sectors such as retail, services, agriculture and care work, while male migrants predominated in construction; these sectoral differences affect reintegration, as skills acquired by women are often less easily transferable to local labour markets, increasing risks of underemployment or informal work upon return. For example, IOM DTM surveys in Kyrgyzstan found that female returnees had often worked in sectors like retail, services or agriculture (in contrast to male migrants, who predominated in construction).[142] These sectoral differences mean that women and men come home with distinct skill sets and challenges. The jobs women held abroad (e.g. salesclerk, care worker, farm worker, etc.) might not readily translate into gainful employment in their home village or town. A woman who spent years as a shop assistant in Moscow may return to a rural area where formal retail jobs are scarce, pushing her either to be underemployed or to start a small business. Meanwhile, a man with construction experience might more easily pick up local construction or handyman work. In this way, women's foreign work experience can be undervalued at home or mismatched to local market needs, potentially leading to higher unemployment or a shift to informal work among returnee women. Another factor is the skill level of returnees.[143] Many returning migrants bring with them education, work experience and skills acquired abroad. However, reintegration outcomes depend strongly on whether qualifications are recognized and whether the local labour market can absorb returnees into appropriate jobs. Evidence from Uzbekistan shows that returned migrants face significant labour-market reintegration constraints, including unemployment, uncertified skills and underutilization of acquired skills. These constraints can result in employment below one's qualification level and downward mobility for some returnees.[144] Women returnees may face additional barriers due to sectoral segregation and care responsibilities, but available data are limited; therefore, this should be treated as an analytical consideration rather than a quantified finding in Central Asia.

Women returnees who return home from abroad often bring back valuable skills, experiences and a determination to improve their lives and communities.[145] These women often gain confidence and broader perspectives; some have started small businesses or community initiatives upon return, leveraging their knowledge and experience to improve local livelihoods. However, skills gained abroad do not automatically translate into decent employment after return. Many face job mismatch, limited recognition of experience, lack of networks and care responsibilities, which can lead to underemployment even when human capital is high.[146] Governments are also encouraging positive outcomes: Uzbekistan's reintegration plan, for example, helps returnee women find employment or launch income-generating projects.[147] They might also face family reintegration issues, however: a number of these women left their children in the care of relatives while away, and upon return they must rebuild strained relationships. In some cases, their children experienced neglect or social stigma during their absence, which adds to the emotional burden.[148]

Women returnees from conflict zones

In Central Asia, the most documented 'conflict zone return' pathway concerns women and children repatriated by governments from Iraq and Syria through State-organized return operations, including families linked to territories formerly controlled by ISIL and, in some cases, detention camp environments.[149] These returns involve distinct legal and security pathways, including varying "legal and criminal processing" and subsequent monitoring by authorities for security purposes.[150] Reintegration is also shaped by community dynamics. After years of official demonization narratives, reintegration programming has often not sufficiently addressed the resulting social stigmatization in receiving communities, which bear much of the reintegration responsibility. Many repatriated families have faced practical barriers on return, including missing documentation and significant medical, mental health and psychosocial needs linked to prior experiences.[151]

Many returnee women from conflict zones repatriated from Iraq and Syria linked to ISIL-controlled areas and detention settings have limited education or job skills, having spent their early adulthood in isolation. Many travelled in their late teens or early adulthood and spent formative years in isolation, outside of any formal schooling or work environment. As a result, they return with few marketable skills and must start from scratch in building a livelihood. Providing livelihoods is a major challenge. Even so, they can still find a niche. For example, a reintegration centre called "Right" in Kazakhstan reported several cases of women starting small businesses, mainly in the beauty and wellness sector.[152] While Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan offer such support as professional training, small business grants and housing assistance to returnees, not all women can easily capitalize on these without prior work experience. Female returnees must also often care for numerous children (as some had multiple children while abroad), making it hard to work or study. Ensuring access to schooling for their children, who may only speak Arabic or have no formal education, is another hurdle noted by reintegration programmes.[153]

Community norms and cohesion dynamics strongly shape reintegration outcomes for returnee women. Many face stigma and fear in their neighbourhoods, which limits access to informal support networks and job opportunities. Prevailing gender expectations often push women to resume full-time caregiving immediately, reducing time for counselling, language classes, skills training or paid work.[154] Inside families, there can be tensions over child-rearing, religion and women's autonomy, and some women experience controlling behaviours or intimate partner violence after return. Service providers and community leaders often lack clear guidance, leading to uneven decisions and mistrust, while sensational media narratives can heighten community anxiety.[155]

Ethnic returnees

Another category of women returnees are ethnic repatriates. Several Central Asian states have launched programmes to encourage the return of their ethnic diasporas. Kazakhstan has been a pioneer with its Kandas programme (formerly known as Oralman). Since independence, over 1.14 million ethnic Kazakhs have 'returned' to Kazakhstan under this policy.[156] These returnees come mainly from neighbouring countries with historic Kazakh populations; for example, in 2024, nearly 85 per cent of new Kandas arrivals came from China and Uzbekistan. In 2021, the Kyrgyz Government accelerated the resettlement of Pamir Kyrgyz, a small nomadic community in Afghanistan, into Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan is simultaneously piloting incentives for returning labour migrants, regardless of ethnicity.[157] A new "Mekenim 1+1" scheme launched in 2025 co-invests in businesses opened by returnees: for every sum a returnee invests, the State provides a matching concessional loan.[158] This review did not find evidence of other Central Asian countries' ethnic return programmes.

Ethnic repatriates return under state repatriation programmes to a country that is their ancestral homeland but can still feel foreign in many ways. Female returnees in this category encounter a mix of practical and social challenges. Adaptation to local life is another issue: some repatriated women come from rural or economically underdeveloped backgrounds, so they struggle with unemployment or underemployment in the new environment. In fact, at one point roughly one third of working-age ethnic immigrants in Kazakhstan were not engaged in formal work, partly due to difficulties accessing vocational education and childcare for their children.[159] Language barriers often play a role as well; although many oralmans[160] speak Kazakh or Kyrgyz, they might not know Russian (the lingua franca for jobs and services) or vice versa, which limits their opportunities. Socially, these women can face subtle discrimination and an 'outsider' label even among their ethnic kin. Research on oralmans notes that locals sometimes view them with a divisive 'us versus them' mentality, leading to prejudice and integration problems.[161]

6.8 Women in mobility driven by climate change and other hazards

Central Asia is one of the world's most climate-vulnerable regions, where environmental factors are increasingly influencing migration patterns.[162] The Aral Sea environmental catastrophe led to decades of outmigration from western Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; some of those migrants (mostly entire families) moved abroad—to Russia or elsewhere.[163] Women from the Aral region, for instance, have resettled in Kazakhstan's cities or in Russia alongside their families after their livelihoods (fishing, agriculture) collapsed.[164] Another example is related to periodic water and energy crises in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (linked to glacial melt and poor resource management), which have spurred labour migration surges in certain years. In September 2022, about 137,000 people were evacuated in Kyrgyzstan amid a recurring border clash with Tajikistan linked to water distribution issues.[165]

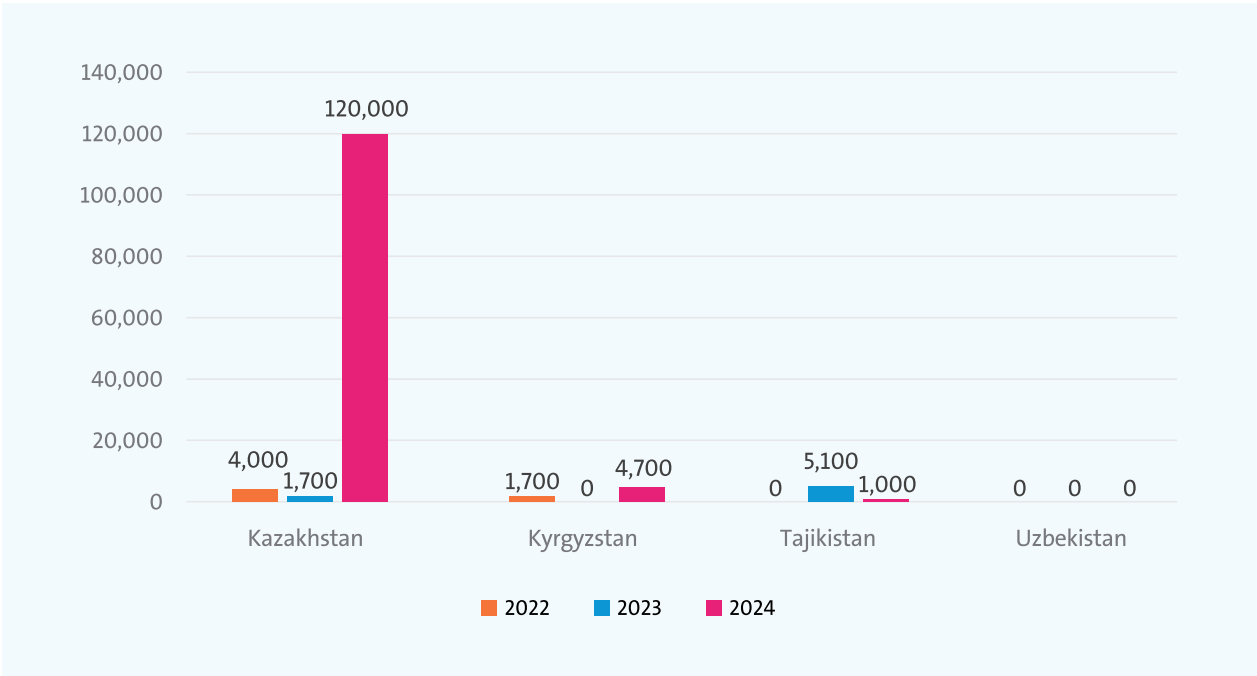
Worsening climatic conditions, such as droughts, desertification, floods, mudslides and landslides, are displacing communities (Figure 6.7). Experts warn that if current trends continue, parts of Central Asia could become uninhabitable in the coming decades.[166] By 2050, Central Asia could see up to 2.4 million people displaced by natural hazards, worsening water scarcity and disruptions to agriculture.[167]

By 2050, Central Asia could see up to

2.4 million people

displaced by natural hazards

FIGURE 6.7: **Internal displacements by disasters in Central Asia, 2022–2024**



Source: IDMC, Global Reports on Internal Displacement, 2023–2025.

Gradual environmental degradation is undermining agriculture and rural livelihoods. In Uzbekistan, about 25 per cent of the workforce is in agriculture, the sector hardest hit by climate change. Desertification affects over 10,000 hectares of land in Uzbekistan each year, leading to soil fertility loss. A study in drought-prone regions (Karakalpakstan and Jizzakh) found that many women are now prepared to leave their ancestral homes due to lack of water and land degradation; some villages already have abandoned houses.[168] Climate impacts are intertwined with economic migration. In Kyrgyzstan, communities like Naryn and Jalal-Abad, dependent on livestock and farming, saw significant outflows when extreme weather destroyed crops and fodder.[169] Thus, climate stressors amplify existing economic drivers;[170] for example, men losing agricultural jobs may migrate to cities or abroad, which in turn creates new social pressures at home.[171]

Gender-specific challenges

Migration patterns in Central Asia often involve men migrating for work while women remain in rural communities.[172] Women left behind must maintain farms, manage households and care for children and the elderly single-handedly when male family members migrate. In regions like the Ferghana Valley or southern Tajikistan, water shortages and land degradation have pushed men to seek jobs elsewhere, leaving women to shoulder agricultural work with fewer resources.[173] This increases women's workload and economic insecurity. With limited access to credit, land rights or mechanized tools, female-headed households struggle to adapt to climate impacts on agriculture, deepening poverty.[174] Many women in Central Asia rely on natural resources for their livelihoods (small-scale farming, livestock, crafts). In Uzbekistan's Aral Sea area, for example, the collapse of fisheries and farming left women with limited income sources, as they had fewer options to migrate for work compared to men. Even when women do migrate, they may end up in informal or less secure employment due to lower education or missing skills, making them vulnerable to exploitation.[175]

6.9 Gender-responsive migration management policies

All five countries in Central Asia have policies related to labour migration, but gender considerations are largely absent. Their migration management has traditionally focused on regulating the outflow of workers and maximizing remittances, with little specific attention to the needs of women migrants. For example, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have government agencies (or Migration Services) that facilitate contracts for work abroad (mostly in Russia or Kazakhstan), but these programmes primarily target male-dominated industries like construction.[176] Support services such as pre-departure orientation or legal aid exist in some form (often with IOM or NGO support), yet they are not tailored for women; for example, there is seldom information on women's rights at work, such as how to respond to sexual harassment or where to seek help as a domestic worker.[177] This review found that bilateral labour agreements (between Russia and Uzbekistan, or Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) make it easier for nationals to obtain work permits, but they do not include provisions for protecting female migrants or ensuring equal access to opportunities.

Similarly, several countries (with international support) have opened Migrant Resource Centres to provide people with information on legal job opportunities overseas, the risks of irregular migration, and reintegration support for returnees. These are positive steps towards safer migration. For example, ICMPD supported Migrant Resource Centres in Tajikistan (Dushanbe) and Kyrgyzstan (Osh), and in 2025, the EU and ICMPD supported the launch of a Migrant Resource Centre in Uzbekistan.[178] However, outreach often overlooks women: survey evidence suggests that women rely heavily on personal networks for information about migration and jobs abroad, which can reinforce migration via informal channels rather than formal ones.[179]

Compared to the system in place in long-standing destination regions, Central Asian states have relatively underdeveloped frameworks for managing immigration, and gender-specific provisions are minimal. Based on a desk review of national legal and policy frameworks and international reference materials, key features of immigration governance include the following:

- All five countries apply different rules by category: EAEU citizens, other CIS citizens and non-CIS nationals. Freedom of movement for work for EAEU citizens is an EU model. Third-country nationals are generally subject to quota-based work permits and sponsorship requirements. Kazakhstan has a more developed system, with work visa quotas for foreign workers (usually allocated to skilled roles in industries) and a simplified regime for EAEU citizens (Russians, Belarusians, Armenians, Kyrgyz) who can reside and work freely. For non-EAEU migrants, however, restrictions are significant. Kazakhstan allows visa-free entry for up to 30 days for many, but longer stays require sponsorship. These rules do not discriminate by gender, but in practice some women immigrate through family-linked channels (for example, as dependants of migrant workers or through marriage). In such cases, a woman's legal status may be derived from her spouse, which can create vulnerabilities and administrative hurdles when the relationship ends (divorce or separation) or in the event of widowhood, particularly if documentation is incomplete or if transitioning to an independent residence permit is procedurally complex.
- Naturalization laws in these countries are generally strict (requiring long-term residency, language proficiency, etc.), but for stateless persons, fast-track procedures exist.[180] Marriage to a citizen can expedite residency or citizenship in some cases, which has benefited many migrant women, but it can also trap them in abusive relationships if their legal status depends on their spouse. It does not automatically confer nationality and can create dependency risks if a woman's legal status is tied to her spouse, particularly in situations of domestic abuse, divorce, separation or widowhood. In Central Asia, nationality is generally granted by descent rather than by place of birth. Children born in the territory to foreign citizen parents usually do not automatically acquire citizenship at birth. Most countries include limited safeguards to prevent statelessness (for example, granting nationality to a child who would otherwise be stateless).

This can create legal risks for migrant mothers if the child's father is unknown or does not acknowledge the child, or if the mother cannot effectively transmit her nationality, so early birth registration and confirmation of the child's nationality are critical.[181] Statelessness has been an issue,[182] especially for women in cross-border marriages after the Soviet break-up, when many lost USSR citizenship without acquiring a new one.[183] UNHCR analysis notes that risks have been particularly acute for some women affected by cross-border marriage and mobility, combined with gaps in civil registration and difficulties confirming or transferring nationality after state succession. In practice, women who moved to a spouse's country could face problems if their identity documents were not updated, if proof of former USSR citizenship or residence was missing, or if administrative procedures required additional steps that were difficult to complete without legal support. These dynamics can leave women, and sometimes their children, without recognized nationality until documentation and nationality determination procedures are completed.[184]

So far, policy responses to transit migration in Central Asia have been reactive. For example, Kazakhstan established a humanitarian transit corridor for Afghan women and coordinated international evacuation arrangements.[185] Security concerns often prevail (tightening borders after influxes). That said, there have been diplomatic and policy moves: Kazakhstan's president affirmed a compassionate stance towards Russians fleeing mobilization, indicating they would be accepted and kept safe.[186] Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan coordinated with the international community in the 2021 Afghan evacuation efforts, showing willingness to act as transit hubs for emergency movements.[187]

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention (and 1967 Protocol), committing to basic refugee rights. Uzbekistan has not acceded to these treaties, remaining the largest gap in the region. Each country's adherence to these norms, however, differs. Turkmenistan's treaty commitment has not translated into practical asylum admissions.[188] Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have legal frameworks for asylum. Kazakhstan adopted a Refugee Law in 2009 and fully handles refugee status determination since 2010. However, recognition rates have been low.[189] In 2023, Kazakhstan pledged reforms, including "border referral procedures to ensure unhindered access to asylum"[190] and equal access for refugees to healthcare, jobs, education and social assistance. Tajikistan updated its laws by adopting a National Refugee Response Strategy in 2023 aimed at improving integration and protection.[191] However, as noted, Tajik authorities have simultaneously taken a tough stance on undocumented Afghan migrants. Kyrgyzstan has had a Refugee Law since 2002 and an established asylum agency. Yet TIP reports note procedural weaknesses, namely the inability to promptly identify vulnerable female asylum-seekers at borders.[192] Turkmenistan has a 2017 Law on Migration and a 2012 asylum procedure on paper but essentially no active asylum system; it naturalized many Afghans in the past, then stopped new recognitions.[193] Even where laws exist, recognition rates are very low: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, have recognized only a few hundred refugees (mainly from Afghanistan and Syria) over the past decade, and these include women and girls. In practice, female refugees and asylum-seekers in Central Asia rely heavily on international agencies and NGOs for support,[194] as government integration assistance is minimal.

In terms of the national frameworks, all five states participate in the Almaty Process, a regional dialogue on refugee protection and migration. It is largely consultative, with non-binding action plans. UNHCR and IOM support governments with capacity-building.[195] However, implementation of best practices like gender-sensitive asylum interviews, female interpreters and safe shelters for women refugees is inconsistent and depends on international organizations and resources.[196] Because the overall refugee numbers in these countries are relatively low,[197] there are few large-scale facilities. Instead, support for women tends to be case-by-case or through general services. For example, in Uzbekistan, UNFPA has established 21 hospital-based 'safe rooms' that provide emergency healthcare for GBV survivors, alongside broader GBV programming[198] including mobile health fairs with SRH, psychosocial and legal services for women and girls. These are national services, not refugee-specific, but displaced women can access them through referrals.[199] In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the availability of GBV services and shelters largely depends on local crisis centres and international organizations, and national capacity is constrained.[200]

Central Asian countries have taken steps to combat trafficking, but significant gaps remain in implementation, especially regarding women's protection. All five countries have criminalized human trafficking in their criminal codes (with penalties generally in line with international standards of severity).[201] Several have specific anti-trafficking laws or national action plans. Kazakhstan has been more proactive: it has had an anti-trafficking law since 2005, updated regularly, and in 2024 passed a new comprehensive Law on Combating Human Trafficking.[202] This law, supported by IOM through expert and technical assistance, outlines victim protection and mandates public awareness. Kyrgyzstan updated its trafficking law in 2022 under the Council on Migration and Combating Human Trafficking,[203] originally established at the parliamentary level to coordinate inter-agency efforts, and significantly enhanced its oversight by creating the institute of the National Anti-Trafficking Rapporteur to monitor and report on the country's anti-trafficking progress.[204] The Council on Migration and Combating Human Trafficking includes representatives from civil society organizations focused on protecting the rights of women and children, such as the Alliance of Women of Kyrgyzstan and the Forum of Women's NGOs of Kyrgyzstan, which collaborate with the Council's Secretariat to strengthen victim identification and support mechanisms. Uzbekistan approved a 2020–2025 National Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programme and has a law against human trafficking (2008), focusing on prevention and victim assistance, with an increased budget in recent years.[205] Tajikistan has a Law on Combating Trafficking (2014) and a national working group; however, implementation is weak due to limited funding.[206] TIP reporting confirms the commission and notes collaboration with civil society for awareness-raising, but it does not fully map representation (women's groups, academia). Turkmenistan adopted a Law on Combating Trafficking in Persons in 2016 and the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol (known as the Palermo Protocol) in 2005, but its implementation remains limited. Most countries have official, free-of-charge assistance like hotlines and police units for trafficking, but their effectiveness varies.[207]

Despite laws, conviction rates for perpetrators are extremely low. For example, Kyrgyzstan "did not secure any convictions for a third consecutive year" by 2023.[208] Tajikistan and Turkmenistan similarly report few to no convictions annually. Kazakhstan does prosecute some traffickers (Kazakh courts convicted 16 traffickers in 2022 per TIP data, though many were for labour trafficking), but often cases are reclassified to lesser crimes or plea-bargained.[209]

Central Asian governments are increasingly aware of displacement issues, but policy responses are evolving and sometimes fragmented. On internal displacement, countries historically lacked dedicated frameworks since large internal displacement events were rare.[210] After the 2022 border conflict, the Kyrgyzstan Government, with support from UN agencies, provided emergency relief—for example, deploying the Rapid Emergency Assessment and Coordination Team (REACT) with IOM to supply shelter and winter necessities.[211] However, a longer-term policy for IDPs (e.g. compensation for destroyed housing, or an official IDP status) is still developing.[212] Tajikistan, for its part, largely handled the 2022 displacement as a short-term emergency, and longer-term support to affected families (some of whom lost property in cross-border shelling) remains an area for policy improvement.[213]

All Central Asian governments (except Turkmenistan) have developed policy frameworks to manage the return and rehabilitation of women and children from conflict zones from Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. For example, Uzbekistan approved an Action Plan (2022–2025) on the social integration and rehabilitation of returnees from armed conflict zones. Kazakhstan and Tajikistan similarly integrated returnees' reintegration into their national counter-terrorism or extremism prevention strategies, often under the umbrella of their Women, Peace and Security national action plans.[214] Many include provisions for psychosocial support, ensuring that gender-sensitive support services are available to work with returnee women who may not be comfortable opening up to male officials.[215] They also emphasize livelihood support for women.[216] Uzbekistan's plan, for instance, calls for helping returnee women find employment or start income-generating activities, recognizing that economic independence is key to preventing re-radicalization.[217] Kazakhstan's approach has been to slot returnee women into existing women's empowerment programmes.[218] Policies recognize that returnee women are usually caregivers of multiple children, so reintegration efforts accommodate childcare.[219] Stigma reduction is less explicitly written into action

plans on the reintegration of women returnees from conflict-affected zones, but officials know that it is a problem. One way that policies address it is by involving local community and religious leaders in the reintegration process to build acceptance. For example, in Kazakhstan, theologians not only educate returnees but also later vouch for them in the community as "having changed".[220] Uzbekistan's mahalla (neighbourhood) committees have been tasked with looking out for returnee families, both monitoring them and helping include them in community events.[221] Tajikistan mostly relies on family networks; for example, a returnee woman is usually released to the custody of her extended family, who then reintegrates her quietly.[222] Initially, repatriation of ISIL families was handled as a security or humanitarian special case. As the years pass, however, those returnees are gradually transitioning into ordinary citizens who need jobs, schooling and healthcare like everyone else. Kazakhstan made an explicit link by allowing returnee women to qualify for mainstream welfare benefits if they meet the criteria. This mainstreaming is important for sustainability because connecting women to public services ensures long-term support.[223]

Policy responses to environmental migration in Central Asia are still nascent, and gender-responsive frameworks are largely lacking. Both at the international and national levels, significant gaps persist in protecting and empowering women on the move due to environmental factors. Existing global mechanisms for climate-related migration are limited and have not fully mainstreamed gender equality.[224] UN Women observes that current international frameworks to manage climate-related migration are fragmentary and do not systematically include gender perspectives.[225] As a result, women migrating due to climate stress often fall through policy cracks, without the safeguards afforded to political refugees or labour migrants.

Tajikistan is an exception in the region; it formally recognized 'environmental migrants' in the early 2000s and established a programme to relocate families from high-risk zones.[226] Multiple ministries (Migration Service, Emergency Situations, Geology, etc.) coordinate in identifying dangerous areas and resettling communities to safer locations, with government support for housing, infrastructure and loans to help them rebuild. However, even in Tajikistan, implementation is challenging,[227] and many people are reluctant to uproot from ancestral homes. Kyrgyzstan has incorporated internal displacement in its laws and offers some disaster relief, but it lacks a specific legal status or programme for climate migrants. Other Central Asian countries have no official recognition of environmental migrants. In Kazakhstan, for example, there is no legal status akin to 'environmental migrant', meaning that people who relocate due to environmental reasons do not receive the kind of assistance or benefits that some other migrant groups do.[228] Uzbekistan does not yet track environmental migration statistics, and the issue has low policy visibility. Women moving from an ecologically damaged region to a city, for instance, may not qualify for any resettlement help or social housing, making their integration difficult.

Environmental migration in Central Asia is also a transboundary issue, linked to water management and climate adaptation policies. While the five Central Asian republics cooperate on water sharing to some extent (through frameworks like the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination), there is no regional strategy addressing climate displacement. Policies tend to focus on infrastructure (dams, irrigation) rather than mobility.

6.10 Data gaps

This review found that across Central Asia, understanding the gender dimensions of migration remains constrained by patchy, inconsistent and outdated data. Although all five countries generate some administrative or survey-based migration statistics, these sources are rarely standardized, disaggregated or publicly available in ways that enable meaningful gender analysis. As a result, women's migration pathways—whether as labour migrants, family migrants, students, refugees, trafficking survivors, returnees or environmentally displaced persons—remain only partially visible in official records.[229]

While conducting this research, data on emigration were found to be particularly limited due to under-registration of departures, reliance on administrative systems that capture only selected migrant categories (often formal), and uneven coverage and sex-disaggregation in household surveys. Sex-disaggregated figures are incomplete across both sending and receiving countries, and many datasets collapse women into generic categories such as 'family dependants', obscuring independent labour or study migration. Seasonal and circular mobility, including short-term agricultural and service-sector work, is rarely recorded, meaning that repeated or temporary movements often disappear from annual statistics. This review found that administrative systems do not systematically track migrants' status transitions, participation in informal employment or engagement in irregular routes. This leads to structural undercounting of women concentrated in low-wage labour sectors, such as domestic work, where there are few formal contracts or registration requirements. This contributes to undercounting of migrants in low-wage and informal sectors overall; however, because women are disproportionately concentrated in domestic and care work and some service jobs, the resulting bias is particularly significant for gender analysis. As a result, the lack of sex-disaggregated and comparable data limits the ability to identify gendered trends, assess women's migration responses to economic shocks, and design targeted policies to prevent emerging vulnerabilities. Critical gaps remain in mapping women's destinations, sectors of employment, remittance patterns and risks of exploitation.

Evidence on immigration into Central Asian states is similarly fragmented. Sex disaggregation is rare, and there is little comparable information on occupation, contract type, wages, remittances, language proficiency, access to services or legal outcomes. Integration indicators are not monitored, leaving the barriers encountered by immigrant women largely anecdotal. These include restricted legal status, dependency on a spouse's visa, exposure to statelessness risks for mothers and children, limited recognition of qualifications, language gaps, and poor access to childcare, healthcare and legal aid. Women with insecure status—such as undocumented migrants or spouses on dependent visas—often do not appear as individually registered persons, highly constraining the capacity for gendered analyses.

There are likewise data gaps in mixed and transit migration. Authorities and international agencies often rely on proxy indicators or project-based reporting rather than systematic monitoring, and key terms such as 'transit', 'irregular migrant', 'asylum-seeker' and 'refugee' are applied inconsistently across countries. Sex- and age-disaggregated data are scarce for interceptions, detentions, deportations, voluntary returns and assisted return cases. Profiles of those on the move rarely include nationality, disability, family composition or markers of vulnerability. There is also little information on routes, modes of travel or duration in transit by sex and age, and virtually no longitudinal data were found to track mobility over time, limiting analysis of how conflict dynamics, policy changes and seasonal labour demand influence migration patterns. Administrative border data lack transparency on refusals of entry, grounds for detention, asylum intentions, recognition rates, decision times and non-refoulement safeguards, making the protection needs of women and girls impossible to assess comprehensively.

Despite growing efforts, reliable sex-disaggregated data on refugees and asylum-seekers in Central Asia remain limited. Most national governments publish minimal information, and much of what is known comes from UNHCR or partner agencies, which do not consistently provide sex- or age-specific breakdowns for each country. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan publish almost no public data on asylum-seekers; even in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, official figures may exclude persons who do not have official refugee or asylum-seeker status. Although UNHCR tracks global demographics, its Refugee Data Finder does not easily provide sex disaggregation for Central Asian host countries. Stateless populations in the region are not consistently captured or sex-disaggregated in migration and protection datasets, which limits visibility into gender-specific vulnerabilities among stateless women.

Data on human trafficking is likewise inconsistent across the region. Many cases are never officially identified, and law enforcement agencies sometimes misclassify trafficking as prostitution or immigration violations, causing incidents to disappear from trafficking statistics.[230] Official figures therefore vastly understate the true scale of exploitation and human trafficking, which independent estimates suggest is far higher. Sex-disaggregated data

are particularly lacking: without information on how women, men, girls and boys experience different forms of exploitation, it is difficult to design targeted prevention or protection strategies. The intersections of gender with disability, nationality, displacement or socioeconomic status remain overlooked.

Information on internal displacement is ad hoc and often unreliable. For example, during the 2022 conflict in Kyrgyzstan, early displacement figures were rough estimates, with little subsequent public reporting on how many people remained displaced or what their living conditions were like. Although women and children constitute a large share of displaced populations, there are no detailed breakdowns of female-headed households or gender-specific needs. Data on Central Asian women and children who remain in conflict-zone camps in Syria are difficult to obtain, due to both the shifting security conditions and limited humanitarian access.[231]

Data on return migration are also fragmented. While all Central Asian countries track some aspects of returnees—especially those repatriated from Iraq and Syria—publicly available datasets lack the sex breakdowns necessary to evaluate reintegration outcomes. Governments do not systematically report how many returnee women find employment, experience secondary displacement or have access to social protection. Sex-disaggregated data on the children of returnees are also scarce, despite the central role of children in reintegration strategies. DTM return-flow reports largely focus on labour migrants returning from economic migration; other categories such as deportations, forced returns or students returning after study abroad are poorly captured. Migrant women who are deported or banned from re-entry often appear indistinguishable from voluntary returnees in available data.

Finally, there is no comprehensive statistical information on environmental migration in Central Asia. Despite growing evidence that climate change—through droughts, water scarcity, land degradation and extreme weather—shapes migration decisions, national datasets do not record climate-induced displacement. Existing knowledge relies on case studies or small-scale surveys that provide only anecdotal insights into how environmental pressures affect women differently from men. There is no systematic tracking of what happens to women before, during or after environmental migration. Disaster displacement statistics provide annual figures but rarely include sex disaggregation or follow-up on long-term outcomes, making women's vulnerabilities in climate-related mobility largely invisible.

Taken together, these gaps reveal a structural deficit in gender-responsive migration data across Central Asia. Without systematic, comparable and sex-disaggregated data, the gendered realities of migration remain hidden, limiting the capacity of governments and international partners to design effective policies that protect women's rights, reduce risks, and support their economic and social contributions throughout the migration process.

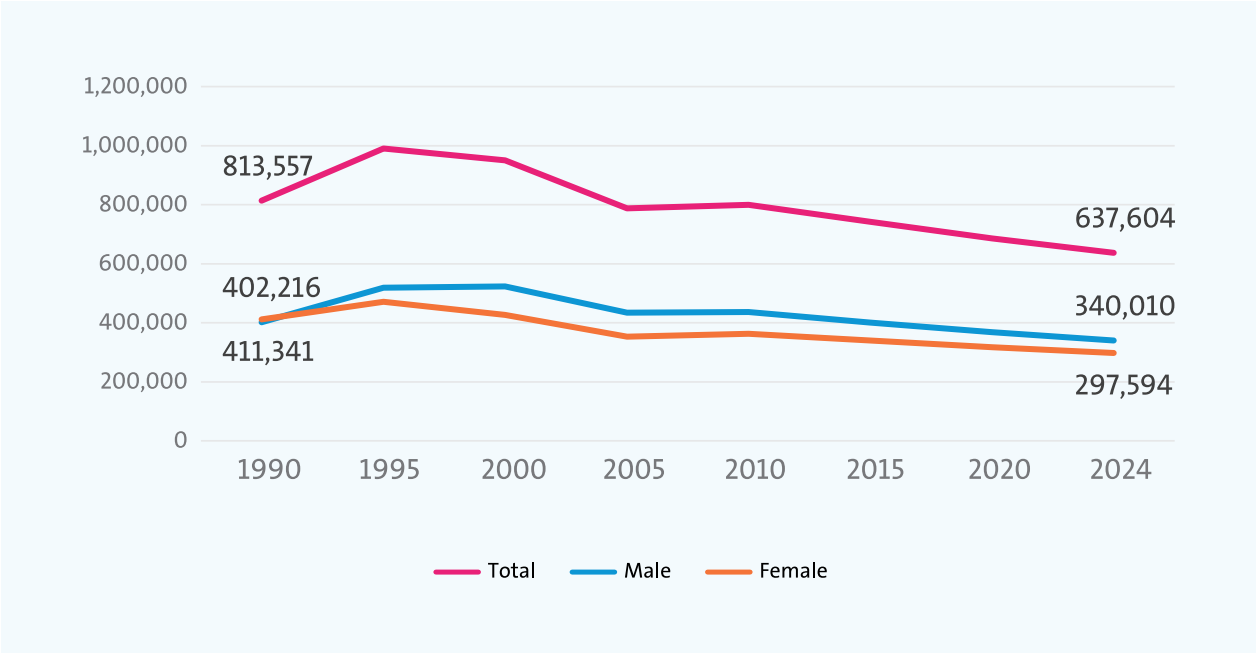
WOMEN IN MIGRATION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Migration in the South Caucasus is long-standing and complex, shaped by historical legacies,[1] conflict, economic disparities and rising environmental pressures. Since the early 1990s, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have experienced major outflows alongside varied patterns of immigration, displacement and transit mobility. Initial post-Soviet movements were large-scale and forced, driven by economic collapse and military hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, while later decades saw migration become a structural feature of livelihoods and labour markets. All three countries also serve as transit hubs along evolving Asia–Europe routes, prompting strengthened border management. Environmental stressors, including drought, land degradation and water scarcity, increasingly influence internal and livelihood-related mobility, particularly in rural areas, and are expected to intensify with growing climate risks.

7.1 Women in emigration from the South Caucasus

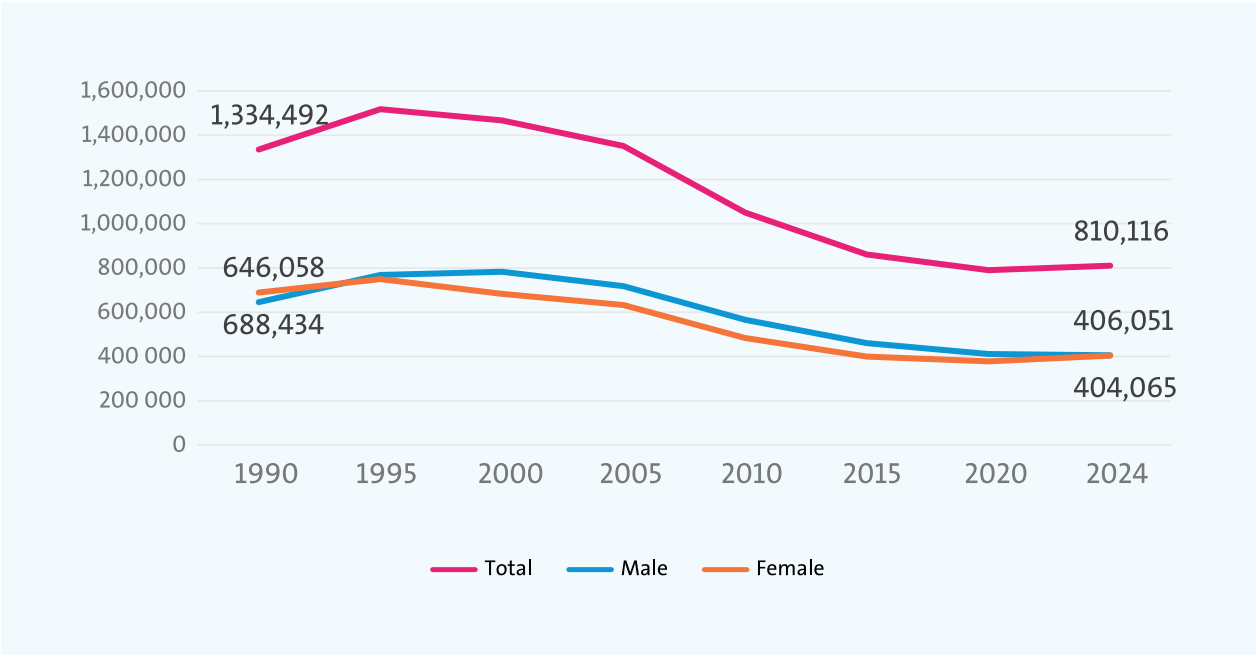
Across Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, the size of the international migrant stock has declined over time, although the timing, magnitude and gender dynamics of this decline differ across countries (Figures 7.1–7.3). In Armenia, emigration remains a structural, demographic and economic feature. The country experienced massive population losses in the early 1990s, when more than half a million people left during the peak of crisis and conflict. According to UN DESA data,[2] the international migrant stock of Armenian citizens abroad has slightly decreased in recent years (Figure 7.1). The proportion of women among Armenian emigrants has remained almost stable since 2015, moving from 45.9 per cent to 46.7 per cent. At the same time, Azerbaijan has experienced a relatively modest decline in emigrant stock after gradual growth in the 1990s, with the share of women rising from 46.4 per cent in 2015 to 49.9 per cent in 2024 (Figure 7.2). Georgia has experienced the sharpest and most sustained decline among the three countries: from its peak in the early 1990s, the emigrant stock more than halved by 2024, with women accounting for 54.3 per cent of the migrant stock (Figure 7.3).

FIGURE 7.1: **Number of international migrants from Armenia in global international migrant stock, by sex, 1990–2024**



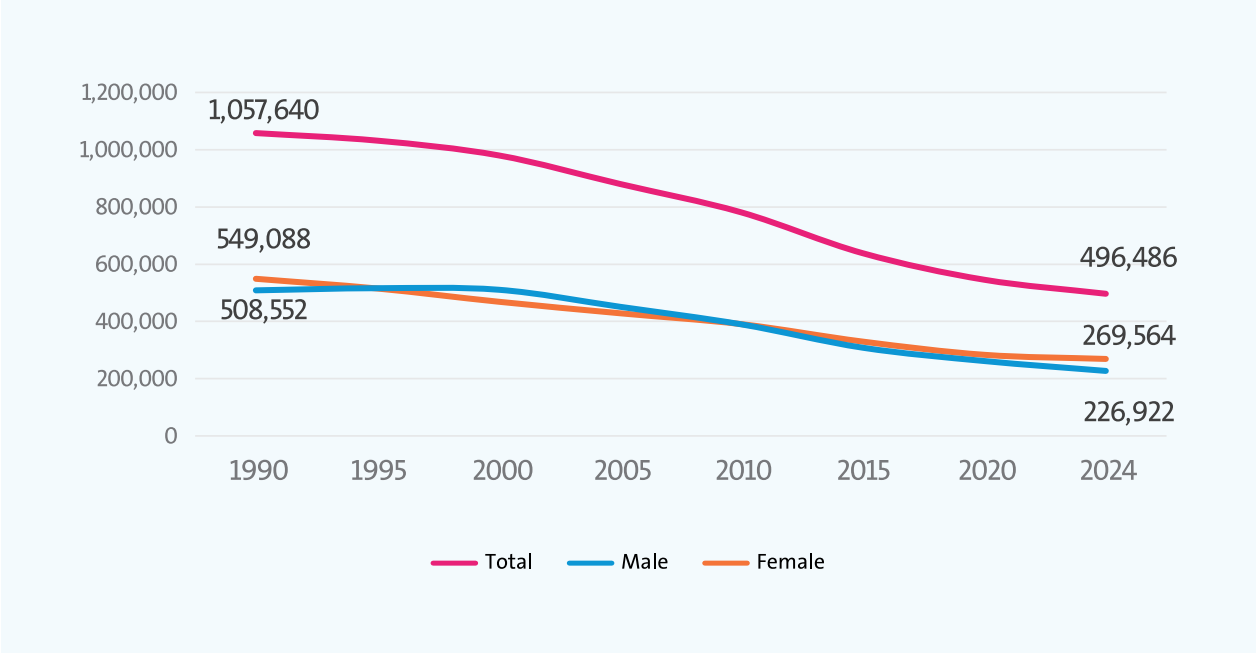
Source: UN DESA 2024a.

FIGURE 7.2: **Number of international migrants from Azerbaijan in global international migrant stock, by sex, 1990–2024**



Source: UN DESA 2024a.

FIGURE 7.3: **Number of international migrants from Georgia in global international migrant stock, by sex, 1990–2024**



Source: UN DESA 2024a.

Armenia's outflows are strongly linked to economic push factors: limited domestic job creation, wage gaps with destination countries, and the persistence of informal employment. Labour migration is largely circular and seasonal, directed towards construction, transport and trade in Russia and other neighbouring countries.[3]

The main driver of Azerbaijani emigration has shifted from conflict-related displacement to labour and educational mobility.[4] Emigration remains primarily regional: the largest communities reside in the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Türkiye, with a growing number in European Union countries, notably Poland, Germany and Lithuania, where first-time residence permits issued to Azerbaijani nationals rose by 32 per cent between 2019 and 2022.[5] Labour migration continues to target Russia and Türkiye, where migrants, mostly men, work in construction, manufacturing and services.[6]

Although women remain the majority within Georgia's migrant stock, recent annual flow data[7] show a predominantly male emigration pattern (72,782 men versus 48,643 women in 2024). This indicates a shift towards the masculinization of current migration flows, likely driven by changes in labour demand in destination countries favouring male-dominated sectors, while the existing diaspora structure continues to reflect earlier feminized migration.

7.1.1 Labour migration

The profile of Armenian emigrants reflects pronounced gender segmentation. According to national data,[8] about 86 per cent of recent emigrants between 2021 and 2023 were men, underscoring the dominance of male temporary labour migration in construction, transport and other traditionally male-dominated sectors. Men account for the majority of short-term or circular migrants engaged in seasonal work, particularly in the Russian Federation. Employment is largely concentrated in construction (62.3 per cent), transport (12.6 per cent), trade (8.8 per cent) and processing industries (4.2 per cent), reflecting the dominance of male emigration.[9]

However, the broader emigrant stock presents a more balanced picture: UN DESA estimates show that women make up nearly half of all Armenian emigrants abroad.[10] This divergence suggests that men and women migrate through different channels and time horizons. While men predominate in temporary labour mobility, women are more likely to migrate through longer-term or non-labour pathways, including family reunification, marriage, education, caregiving and professional employment.[11] This may suggest that women's migration is often linked to the search for social stability or skill utilization rather than immediate income generation.

The gender profile of emigrants from Azerbaijan shows that women made up a majority (around 62 per cent) of those who emigrated for permanent residence between 2013 and 2020.[12] The available evidence[13] suggests that women migrate for diverse reasons, including family reunification, marriage, education and service or care-related employment. However, detailed disaggregated data by age, education and professional background remain scarce. Reasons for emigration are different between countries of destination. For example, emigration to the Russian Federation is more employment-related, less permanent (fewer citizenships) and dominated by younger men, while emigration to Türkiye is more family-related, more permanent and with a higher share of women (52 per cent[14]).

Since 2021, Georgia has experienced a rapid expansion of labour migration, particularly towards Germany, Greece, Spain and Poland. While Georgian labour emigration overall remains male-dominated, employment has become the main reason for entry into the European Union for Georgian women as well, accounting for 56 per cent of female entries in 2022.[15] Many women migrants hold secondary education or professional training, including in fields such as manual therapy, pharmacy, paramedical services and viticulture, yet they often face

limited opportunities to translate these qualifications into commensurate employment abroad. Poland has emerged as the dominant destination, with Georgian labour migration increasing by approximately 2.5 times between 2021 and 2024, surpassing other EU destinations since 2022.[16] This growth reflects expanding labour demand but also reinforces gendered migration patterns shaped by household obligations. Although the share of remittances in GDP declined from 15.4 per cent in 2022 to 11.8 per cent in 2024,[17] remittances remain a vital income source for many Georgian households. Women migrants typically remit the majority of their earnings to cover daily household needs, limiting their ability to save or invest in long-term economic security. This dependence both sustains household welfare and contributes to prolonged periods of women's emigration, underscoring the gendered trade-offs embedded in Georgia's contemporary labour migration model. In the South Caucasus, migration intersects with gendered labour markets and care systems. Women's emigration presents a distinct set of opportunities and challenges shaped by the nature of labour and family-related mobility. Labour migration can offer income generation, greater autonomy and opportunities for skills acquisition. However, in the absence of comprehensive official data disaggregated by sector and formality, available evidence, primarily drawn from media reports and qualitative accounts, indicates that women migrants remain disproportionately concentrated in undervalued and informal forms of employment, particularly in domestic, service and care work,[18] where labour protections are weak and upward mobility limited. In Armenia, the heavy male outflow creates 'left-behind' female households and deepens care responsibilities. Armenian women, though a minority among recent emigrants, often enter sectors such as care and domestic work, which are characterized by informality, lower pay and weaker social protection.[19] In Azerbaijan, growing female mobility brings empowerment potential but also new forms of precarity. Female migrants often carry a double responsibility of contributing to family income while maintaining responsibilities for children or elderly relatives in their home country, which increases their stress and limits integration prospects abroad.[20]

Although direct, systematic data on care arrangements left behind by migrant women are not available, a combination of indirect indicators points to the possible emergence of transnational 'care chains'.[21] These indicators include the high share of women in specific migration streams; evidence that remittances are predominantly used to cover children's education, daily household needs and eldercare; and documented reliance on extended family networks, particularly female relatives, in households of origin. Taken together, these patterns are consistent with situations in which migrant women's provision of childcare, eldercare or domestic work abroad depends on other women (relatives, neighbours or informal paid carers) assuming caregiving responsibilities at home. Such cross-border redistribution of care highlights the gendered costs of migration: while destination countries benefit from women's care labour, families and communities of origin absorb emerging care deficits and emotional strains, especially for mothers who sustain caregiving roles from a distance. Furthermore, women in emigration face heightened risks of deskilling, dependence on sponsors or spouses, and exposure to discrimination. Armenian women emigrants tend to have higher educational attainment than men, yet they often work below their qualification level abroad, pointing to a mismatch between skills and employment opportunities.[22] Barriers to recognition of qualifications, particularly in the EU,[23] often constrain their opportunities for stable employment. Weakly gender-sensitive integration frameworks in host countries mean that women migrants are also more likely to experience isolation and reduced access to protection mechanisms.[24]

7.1.2 Educational migration

Studying abroad can be a channel for professional advancement and increased autonomy. Armenian students pursue higher education mainly in Russia, Europe and the United States, driven by aspirations for quality education and professional mobility.[25] According to UNESCO, in 2023, there were 2,908 male and 1,944 (40 per cent) female students from Armenia who studied abroad.

In Azerbaijan, educational migration has gained increasing importance in policies: under the State Programme for the Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad (2022–2026), hundreds of students each year receive scholarships to study in priority disciplines such as medicine, engineering and natural sciences in Türkiye, the United Kingdom and Germany.[26] The total number of Azerbaijani students abroad, including those who are self-funded, was estimated at more than 50,000 in 2023, with 27 per cent of them female students.[27] This focus on skills formation abroad reflects the Government's strategy to enhance human capital while maintaining relatively low levels of economic emigration.

Educational emigration represents a smaller but increasingly important component of outward mobility from Georgia. According to UNESCO data, there were 9,159 Georgian international students enrolled abroad in 2023, with women accounting for a slight majority (50.2 per cent).[28] This near parity reflects relatively balanced gender access to international education opportunities, in contrast to the more male-dominated profile of labour migration. Georgian students are primarily concentrated in European destination countries, with Germany hosting more than one third of all Georgian international students, followed by France and Spain.[29] These destination patterns point to the growing importance of EU-based higher education pathways, facilitated by mobility schemes, the recognition of qualifications and the perceived labour-market returns of international education.

While educational emigration offers significant potential for skills acquisition and upward mobility, its longer-term implications depend on post-graduation trajectories, including return, onward migration or transition into foreign labour markets. In the absence of systematic data on return rates and labour-market outcomes, the gendered effects of educational migration, particularly its role in mitigating or reinforcing broader patterns of labour-market segmentation, remain an important area for further research.

7.2 Women in immigration to the South Caucasus

South Caucasus countries were traditionally sources of outmigration, but they have increasingly become host to diverse groups of immigrants in the past decade. The scale differs considerably between the three countries. According to UN DESA estimates, Armenia saw the number of international migrants rise from 207,139 in 2020 to 274,645 in 2024 (an annual change rate of 7.1 per cent), raising the immigrant population share from 7.2 per cent to 9.2 per cent of the total population. Women make up the majority of this group, accounting for 58.1 per cent in 2020 and 57.0 per cent in 2024. In Azerbaijan, the stock of international migrants increased more modestly, from 198,894 in 2020 to 218,460 in 2024 (an annual change rate of 2.3 per cent). Their share of the total population remained relatively stable, decreasing slightly from 2.3 per cent to 2.0 per cent. In this case too, women comprise more than half of the immigrant population, with a share of 53 per cent in 2020 and 52.1 per cent in 2024.[30] These numbers include people arriving for work, family reunification, education and other purposes, as well as those who have settled long-term.[31] In Georgia, international migration trends differ markedly from those observed in Armenia and Azerbaijan, reflecting a long-term contraction of the immigrant population alongside recent stabilization. According to UN DESA estimates,[32] the stock of international migrants declined sharply from 304,470 in 1990 to 81,582 in 2024. Between 2020 and 2024, however, the total immigrant stock increased slightly from 79,368 to 81,582, corresponding to an average annual change rate of approximately 0.7 per cent. Over the longer term, the number of male migrants decreased from 133,285 in 1990 to 35,852 in 2024, while the number of female migrants fell from 171,185 to 45,730 over the same period. Despite the substantial decline in absolute numbers, women have consistently constituted the majority of the immigrant population, accounting for around 56 per cent both historically and in 2024. By 2024, international migrants represented 2.1 per cent of Georgia's total population.[33]

7.2.1 Regular immigration

In Armenia and Azerbaijan, regular immigrants include foreign-born individuals who have obtained residency or citizenship, international labour migrants with work permits, family members reunifying under proper visas, students on education visas, and others who comply with migration regulations.

Armenia has experienced a noticeable rise in immigration in recent years due to a combination of economic opportunities and regional geopolitical events. The dominant countries of origin include the Russian Federation, Georgia, Iran and other CIS members. These flows reflect both labour mobility and family reunification, as well as the presence of students and professionals. Most immigrants are concentrated in the capital city of Yerevan and other urban areas.[34] The majority of foreign-born residents in Armenia are women over 25 years old, born in CIS countries, with secondary or tertiary education.[35] In terms of activity, the profile of immigrants in Armenia is diverse. A portion enters for employment, with many absorbed in trade, services, education and health sectors.[36] The MGI profile indicates that immigrants have access to employment on an equal basis with Armenian citizens under the country's legal framework, and many are engaged in formal economic activity.[37] Recent reports show that Armenia has also become a destination for labour migrants from Asia, particularly India, where thousands of workers have arrived in recent years to fill jobs in construction, agriculture, services and delivery work. Many Indian workers enter under Armenia's liberal visa-free regime and then engage in informal or irregular employment.[38] By 2023, an estimated 20,000–30,000 Indian nationals were residing (at least temporarily) in Armenia, a striking development for a country that had very few South Asian migrants a decade earlier.[39] In addition to Indians, Armenia hosts migrant workers and small entrepreneurs from Iran, the Middle East and elsewhere; 1.1 per cent of migrant workers are entrepreneurs, which is a higher proportion than among the native population, and 25.7 per cent are self-employed.[40] These workers take advantage of the relatively open entry policies (i.e. citizens of Iran, Russia and many CIS countries do not need visas to enter[41]) and a business-friendly environment. Unfortunately, sex-disaggregated data are not available.

Another driver of immigration to Armenia is education and skill opportunities. The country's universities (particularly medical schools) attract international students, including a sizeable number from India, Iran and neighbouring states. Moreover, Armenia's IT sector and start-up scene have gained attention regionally, leading to a modest influx of foreign professionals and entrepreneurs in recent years.[42] A notable example of skilled migration is the relocation of Russian and Belarusian tech workers and companies to Armenia after 2022, when the war in Ukraine and political climate in Russia prompted many professionals to seek opportunities abroad. Armenia became a convenient haven due to cultural ties and ease of entry. This influx is reflected in Armenia's positive net migration balance since 2022,[43] reversing decades of population decline. Family reunification is another key component of regular immigration: Armenian citizens and permanent residents often sponsor foreign spouses or relatives for residency. Notably, Armenia's laws facilitate the immigration of ethnic Armenian diaspora—a 'special residence status' and expedited citizenship are available to those of Armenian descent,[44] which has encouraged the long-term settlement of Armenian Syrians (who fled the Syrian conflict in the 2010s) and others. These diaspora returnees frequently come with families, intending to settle permanently.

Azerbaijan's regular immigration profile is somewhat different in scale and character, reflecting its economic model and stricter migration governance. During the 2000s, fuelled by an oil boom and major infrastructure projects, Azerbaijan transitioned from an origin country to a destination country for migrant workers, as numerous foreign workers were recruited for the expanding oil industry and construction sector.[45] Citizens of Georgia, the Russian Federation and Türkiye together account for most residence permit holders. Azerbaijan also issues significant numbers of temporary residence permits for students, with Georgia and Türkiye alone accounting for more than half of foreign pupils and students in recent years. In addition, foreign workers are present under labour quotas, with most concentrated in construction, mining, manufacturing and education.[46] For women in particular, education has been the main sector for which work permits have been issued between 2023 and 2025, followed by accommodation and food services.[47]

The gender composition of immigrants in Azerbaijan shows some variation by residence status. Among temporarily residing foreign nationals (39,766 individuals), men accounted for 61 per cent and women 39 per cent, reflecting a male-dominated pattern typical of short-term labour migration. In contrast, among permanent residents (11,730 individuals), women made up the majority at 57 per cent, while men constituted 43 per cent. This suggests that female immigrants are more likely to be involved in long-term migration channels, such as family reunification or marriage-based settlement, whereas men predominate in more transient, employment-driven migration streams.[48]

Women immigrants in both Armenia and Azerbaijan face specific challenges and opportunities. In Armenia, many female immigrants are concentrated in services, education and healthcare, sectors that are generally more regulated and stable than construction or heavy industry, but they may encounter barriers in recognition of qualifications and integration into the labour market.[49] The 2023 Migration Governance Indicators (MGI) assessment for Armenia notes that while immigrants have equal rights to employment under the law, there is no comprehensive system to monitor their integration, nor specific mechanisms to support recognition of foreign qualifications.[50]

In Georgia, nearly half of all immigrants are citizens of Russia (47 per cent), followed by Romania (18 per cent), Armenia (16 per cent) and Ukraine (15 per cent). Women constitute the majority in most immigrant communities, with the notable exception of Romanian, Armenian and Kazakh diasporas, which remain male-dominated. Labour migration to Georgia has expanded rapidly in recent years. According to data from the European Migration Network,[51] labour migrants in 2022 originated primarily from China, Russia, Türkiye and Belarus. Administrative data show that the number of work permits issued increased almost fourfold between 2020 and 2024 (from 3,287 to 10,645).[52] Despite this growth, women's participation in labour-related residence permits remains comparatively lower: as of 31 December 2024, women accounted for 46 per cent of all foreigners holding valid residence permits, a share that remained broadly stable over the preceding five years.[53] This suggests that, while women's participation in labour migration is increasing, they continue to be more strongly represented in non-labour migration pathways.

Educational migration represents one such pathway in which Georgia has emerged as a regional leader. In 2024, nearly half of all residence permits were issued for study purposes.[54] The majority (63 per cent) of study-related residence permits were granted to citizens of India, who have consistently ranked as the largest group of international students in Georgia. Notably, Georgia has achieved gender parity among foreign students: between 2020 and 2023, women slightly outnumbered men, with a minor reversal observed in 2024.[55] This pattern reflects Georgia's success in attracting female students, particularly in medicine and selected STEM fields, and signals progress towards gender equality in access to education.

Family reunification permits nearly doubled from 1,827 in 2022 to 3,514 in 2024, with women accounting for

66%

of beneficiaries

Family reunification remains another key migration channel for women. Temporary residence permits issued for family reasons rose sharply from 1,827 in 2022 to 3,514 in 2024, with women accounting for 66 per cent of beneficiaries.[56] This pathway continues to reinforce women's overrepresentation in non-labour forms of migration, even as labour mobility expands.

Finally, recent geopolitical developments, notably the war in Ukraine and political repression in Russia, have contributed to the emergence of a new category of immigrants in Georgia: politically displaced remote workers from Russia and Belarus. Arriving in successive 'zero' (2014–2021), 'first' (spring 2022) and 'second' (autumn 2022) waves, these migrants often combine forced displacement with strategic relocation

to safer and more open environments.[57] Georgia's visa-free entry regime, simplified business registration and low tax environment have made it particularly attractive to this group. However, persistent gender norms, supported by 71 per cent of the population, who agree that women should prioritize family over paid work,[58] continue to shape unequal outcomes. Migrant women are more likely to be channelled into informal, low-paid care and service sectors, while men predominate in business and technology-related activities, which rely heavily on informal professional networks that women have limited access to. The double responsibility of paid and unpaid work,[59] combined with insufficient childcare infrastructure, further constrains women's labour-market choices. From 2025 onward, stricter migration regulations[60] risk exacerbating these inequalities, particularly for women in informal employment, increasing their vulnerability to precarious work and exploitation.

Across the South Caucasus region, female migrant workers tend to be employed in services and education rather than in sectors covered by quotas such as construction and energy. Although country-specific data are missing, global reports note that due to often informal employment in these sectors, women migrants may face vulnerabilities linked to precarious jobs, limited access to social protection and exposure to discrimination in the workplace.[61]

7.2.2 Irregular immigration

Irregular immigration into South Caucasus countries remains a complex and evolving dimension of the broader migration landscape in the region. The most comprehensive research in Armenia on the issue was carried out by IOM in collaboration with the Migration Service and the Statistical Committee of Armenia (Armstat) in 2015.[62] This baseline study estimated that several hundred cases of irregular residence were identified annually by the authorities, but the real numbers were considerably higher given the lack of systematic monitoring. The majority of irregular migrants were people who had entered the country legally and lost their status through overstays of visas or residence permits, while entry without inspection was relatively rare. The study found that irregular migrants were predominantly of working age, with men largely employed in construction, trade and agriculture, and women disproportionately concentrated in domestic and caregiving work. These jobs were overwhelmingly informal and lacked contracts or social security, leaving women at heightened risk of exploitation, harassment and gender-based violence.

The 2023 MGI profile of the Republic of Armenia, which is based on the Integrated Living Conditions Survey (ILCS), does not classify migrants by legal status. According to other sources, Armenian authorities registered a sharp rise in irregular migration during 2023. By the end of that year, a total of 15,379 foreign nationals were found to be residing in Armenia without legal status, a remarkable increase from about 6,000 in 2022.[63] Much of the recent increase in detected irregular migrants has been attributed to new arrivals from South Asia (especially India) and subsequent visa overstays.

In Azerbaijan, the State Migration Service provides more systematic data on irregularity. Between 2013 and 2021, nearly 192,000 violations of migration legislation were recorded. Most cases (65 per cent) ended in voluntary departure, 23 per cent in administrative expulsions and entry bans, and 12 per cent in legalizations through regularization procedures.[64] In November 2021, there were 3,642 identified irregular migrants, of whom 35.5 per cent were women, 5.3 per cent children and 10.7 per cent older persons (over the age of 65). Detention centres hosted more than 6,000 foreigners between 2013 and 2021, though most were placed there voluntarily pending return rather than by forcible apprehension. The proportion of female detainees averaged 12.9 per cent during the observation period.[65] Many irregular migrants originate from Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and neighbouring states. Gendered patterns of vulnerability are also visible: while men predominate in irregular employment in construction and energy, women are more frequently found in domestic work and are heavily represented among victims of trafficking.[66]

Irregular migration has increased sharply in Georgia in recent years. Official data indicate that recorded cases rose from 2,044 in 2020 to 7,375 in 2022, reaching 10,185 in 2024.[67] These flows have primarily involved citizens of China and Russia, reflecting Georgia's role as both a destination and transit country within evolving regional migration routes. The absence of sex-disaggregated data on irregular migration in Georgia significantly limits the ability to assess gender-specific risks and impacts.

Available evidence for Armenia indicates that women in irregular migration face a distinct set of vulnerabilities that combine the risks associated with insecure status with those produced by gendered labour-market segmentation, discrimination and exposure to violence. Many irregular migrants who are female were employed in domestic and caregiving work, sectors largely unregulated and informal. They often had limited knowledge of their rights and faced linguistic and cultural barriers that prevented them from accessing justice or social services.[68] More recent data confirm that women migrants in Armenia continue to show low labour-market participation (23.6 per cent in 2023, compared to 43.5 per cent of men) and remain concentrated in agriculture, education and caregiving services, all of which are prone to informality. However, this refers to all immigrants, as data on the employment status of irregular immigrants are not available.[69] In Azerbaijan, women migrants from neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia are especially vulnerable, often working in informal arrangements or under coercive conditions.[70]

Fear of deportation and the absence of gender-sensitive integration mechanisms contribute to the invisibility of irregular migrant women. In both Armenia and Azerbaijan, these women often depend on informal networks for support and are unlikely to report abuse or seek formal assistance. In Armenia, legal provisions against domestic violence exist, but irregular status and dependence on sponsors or employers make it difficult for affected women to access protection or justice.[71]

7.3 Mixed transit migration through the South Caucasus

Located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the South Caucasus has historically served as a strategic corridor for both commercial and human mobility. The region's geopolitical position between the Middle East, Central Asia and Eastern Europe has made it a bridge for movement along key north–south and east–west migration routes. Armenia and Azerbaijan have played shifting roles within this landscape: Azerbaijan's geographic position makes it a key transit country from a migration perspective. As a central node of the Middle Corridor, it links Iran and the Caspian Sea with the South Caucasus, Russia and Türkiye, facilitating cross-border mobility alongside trade and logistics.[72] UNODC analyses further identify Azerbaijan as part of established mixed-migration routes connecting Iran with onward destinations in Russia, Türkiye and Europe, with transit patterns shaped by border controls, security conditions and regional instability.[73] Although Armenia is not a major transit migration route,[74] it holds importance due to its bridging position between Europe and Asia. The EU identifies Armenia as a strategically located bridge between the Black Sea, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, with growing relevance as a potential transit country for migration.[75]

In recent years, Azerbaijan has emerged as a key transit corridor for irregular migrants and asylum-seekers from countries such as Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, with onward movement either westward towards Türkiye and Europe or northward into the Russian Federation.[76] Evidence points to the use of fraudulent documents and organized smuggling networks operating through official checkpoints. Moreover, between 2020 and 2023, tighter EU external borders and restrictions at the Iran–Türkiye frontier redirected some flows northward, further elevating the strategic importance of the Caucasus as a transit zone.[77]

Georgia has become the primary transit corridor for migrants and refugees heading to the EU, as Ukraine's role shifted from a transit hub to a country experiencing mass population displacement due to the war.[78] Georgia serves mainly as a transit point for migrants and refugees, predominantly men from Asia, Africa and Central Asia. Initially, the main contingent comprised citizens of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Now the share of citizens of African countries (Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan), as well as citizens of Central Asian countries (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), has increased significantly.[79] Additionally, Georgia has emerged as a key transit hub for Russian citizens fleeing their country due to fears of economic sanctions, forced military conscription among young men, and political repression for expressing anti-war views.[80] While the Georgian Government has actively sought to attract Russian professionals to its labour market, most of these migrants stay only temporarily. For example, out of the 1.1 million Russians who entered Armenia and Georgia between April and October 2022, only 140,000 remained in the two countries by the end of the year,[81] indicating a predominantly short-term presence.

Women's specific challenges appear at three points: recruitment, en route control and destination inclusion. First, recruitment into smuggling arrangements in the three countries frequently occurs through informal agencies or intermediaries advertising 'work-and-relocate' packages. Armenia's documented cases from 2022 to 2023 involve forged employment contracts and false statements used to secure visas or onward movement, a modus operandi that places women (especially those seeking care or service jobs) at risk of deception, debt and later coercion.[82] Second, at borders and checkpoints, women who rely on forged documents face a double bind: fear of prosecution and the immediate risk of violence or sexual exploitation if they disengage from smugglers.[83] Third, at destination, the boundary between smuggling and trafficking can blur in practice when deception, debt and control lead to exploitation.[84]

Smuggling networks are active in all three countries. There is evidence of regional collaboration between smuggling groups operating in Azerbaijan, Iran and Türkiye, facilitating movement for migrants seeking entry into the EU. These networks often exploit legal loopholes, prolonged residence applications or document fraud to sustain irregular mobility. Armenian actors have also been involved in organizing irregular emigration for nationals, although their involvement in facilitating third-country transit is less pronounced.[85] According to IOM,[86] Georgia is not currently a major hub or transit country for migrant smuggling. However, available evidence indicates the presence of organized smuggling activities targeting both irregular entry into and exit from the country. These activities primarily involve attempts to cross Georgia's 'green borders', particularly along the border with Türkiye, as well as the use of fraudulent travel and identity documents at international airports. While most detected cases concern foreign nationals using Georgia as part of onward migration towards Europe or neighbouring countries, the report highlights gaps in the investigation and prioritization of smuggling as a criminal offence, as well as weak integration of smuggling risks into broader strategies on organized crime. The report also notes the absence of systematic sex-disaggregated data, limiting the ability to assess gender-specific vulnerabilities, including potential links between smuggling and trafficking in human beings.[87]

Although sex-disaggregated evidence on migrant smuggling in the South Caucasus is scarce, UNODC's global analysis consistently shows that women who depend on smugglers are more exposed to deception, sexual violence and debt-related coercion during transit and at destination.[88] In Armenia, smuggling routes passing through the Iran–Armenia border expose migrants to long, treacherous crossings.[89] While country-specific data on women in transit or smuggled across Armenian borders are missing, it can be assumed that, as along other routes, women are at risk of sexual violence or exploitation by intermediaries.[90] Migrant women without legal status are less likely to access shelters, legal aid or reproductive health services. Armenia's rugged terrain and the use of informal crossing points from Iran also exacerbate physical risks for women and children on the move.[91]

7.4 Women as asylum-seekers and refugees

While the refugee situations in Armenia and Azerbaijan are strongly shaped by the long-standing military hostilities between the two countries, Georgia hosts a comparatively small number of migrants seeking international protection. In Armenia, the refugee population is large and consists predominantly of ethnic Armenians displaced from Azerbaijan as a result of the conflict. By contrast, Azerbaijan hosts a relatively limited number of refugees and has focused its protection response primarily on its substantial internally displaced population. To ensure analytical clarity, this section distinguishes between refugee situations directly linked to the military hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan and other forms of international protection, including asylum-seekers and refugees originating from unrelated countries and causes.

Karabakh refugees

International protection in Armenia has been dominated by the rapid and large-scale arrivals following the September 2023 hostilities in and around Karabakh. Between 24 September and 4 October 2023, 100,632 people entered Armenia, including about 30,000 children; 52 per cent were women and girls, 31 per cent were children, and 18 per cent were older persons. The largest concentrations initially settled in Yerevan (38 per cent), Syunik (16 per cent), Kotayk (8 per cent) and Ararat (7 per cent), often where family and services were accessible. New arrivals were described as physically and psychologically exhausted and in immediate need of food, warm clothing, medicines and counselling.[92]

By end-March 2024, Armenia had received 115,257 arrivals, with women and children making up about

67% of arrivals

By end-March 2024, cumulative arrivals since the escalation reached 115,257, equivalent to more than 4 per cent of Armenia's population; roughly two thirds were women and children.[93] In October 2023, the Government adopted Decree No. 1864-N granting temporary protection that provides the right to reside, work and access social welfare, healthcare and education. By the end of March 2024, over 78,000 people had been issued refugee cards under this temporary protection regime, while more than 1,400 had applied for naturalization.[94] As of mid-2024, UNHCR reported 148,024 refugees and 813 asylum-seekers in Armenia, plus 402 stateless persons.[95]

In Armenia, the majority of arrivals as a result of military hostilities were women and girls, many of whom reached the country in a physically and emotionally depleted state and required immediate humanitarian support.[96] Most initially settled in areas where services and family networks were more accessible. Gender-based violence emerged as a significant risk throughout displacement and during settlement.[97] Assessments conducted under the Refugee Response Plan highlight vulnerabilities linked to social isolation, limited social networks, restricted access to employment shaped by gender norms and caregiving roles, and inadequate or overcrowded housing and WASH facilities.[98] Adolescent girls face additional barriers to school enrolment and instances of discrimination.[99] Displacement has significantly intensified women's unpaid care responsibilities, with many women assuming sole responsibility for children, older persons and family members with disabilities while simultaneously coping with trauma, loss and uncertainty,[100] a high risk of poverty due to the loss of livelihoods, and limited access to stable income opportunities, especially outside major urban centres. Limited access to income has, in some cases, pushed women into precarious or informal work arrangements, increasing their exposure to exploitation.[101]

GBV remains a serious concern among Armenian refugee women and girls, with heightened risks resulting from displacement, loss of social protection and economic insecurity.[102] Fear of gender-based violence, including intimate partner violence, has increased in displacement settings, especially where women and girls live in

overcrowded, temporary shelters. Access to support services such as psychosocial care, legal counselling or safe shelters is limited outside Yerevan, and awareness of available services remains uneven.[103] Additionally, many women lost their usual livelihoods and face economic hardship, leaving single mothers and widows at high risk of poverty without targeted assistance.[104]

The crisis also disrupted access to prenatal care, safe childbirth facilities and essential medicines.[105] Women and girls also faced challenges related to disruption of sexual and reproductive health services.[106]

Affordable housing was a major worry: reports indicate that most displaced households listed safe, long-term housing as a top concern, given rising rents and limited availability.[107] Female-headed households, in particular, struggled to secure housing and pay rent, which left them vulnerable to exploitation.[108] During the 2022–2023 blockade of the Lachin Corridor during tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan, for instance, women were frequently seen waiting in long bread lines or travelling long distances to obtain food for their children, under threat of shelling[109] and traumatic stress, which can be exacerbated by their caretaking responsibilities and experiences of violence.[110]

Access to protection and services has been progressively mainstreamed into national systems. The Refugee Response Plan (RRP) was the main coordinated effort to provide adequate support across protection, education, health, basic needs and resilience.[111] The early months of the response delivered legal counselling and representation, GBV risk mitigation and case management, women-and-girls' safe spaces, child-friendly spaces, referral pathways in all regions, and cash assistance to meet basic needs.[112] The response increasingly linked humanitarian assistance to long-term inclusion. In 2024, the Government began implementing a housing support programme for refugees opting for Armenian citizenship, initially prioritizing large families, relatives of fallen soldiers who were household heads, and families including persons with disabilities.[113] UNHCR assisted with access to this programme through information and counselling.[114] Women's protection and participation have been a central pillar of the refugee response. A Gender Task Force (GTF) was established in October 2023 for the period of the RRP, co-chaired by UN Women and the Women's Resource Center to strengthen gender accountability across the refugee response.[115]

Refugees and asylum-seekers from other contexts

In addition to 140,881 refugees as a result of the military hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia hosted (mid-2024) 4,911 Syrian and 1,181 Iraqi refugees.[116] UNHCR has a memorandum of understanding with the Women's Resource Center to provide services for survivors of violence, including sexual violence. In 2024, 28 community support projects reached nearly 19,166 refugees and 134,273 host community members, focusing on infrastructure improvements, women and youth services, and economic inclusion.[117] UNHCR also promotes refugee inclusion in education and employment and supports refugee-led organizations and municipalities under the "Cities with Refugees" initiative. A dedicated hotline operated by KASA Swiss Humanitarian Foundation ensures direct access to information and assistance.

Arising from relatively modest absolute numbers[118] but a distinct post-2022 shift in origins (i.e. the arrival of Ukrainian refugees), Azerbaijan's asylum space today is characterized by a small refugee and asylum-seeker caseload, very low recognition rates in the national procedure, and a legal framework that does not provide subsidiary or humanitarian protection. As of mid-2024, UNHCR reported 8,087 refugees and 224 asylum-seekers in the country; stateless people numbered 513 and internally displaced people 657,749, underscoring how refugee and asylum needs coexist with a large population affected by protracted internal displacement.[119] The top refugee origins in mid-2024 were Ukraine, Afghanistan and the Russian Federation, while the largest groups of asylum-seekers were from Ukraine, Pakistan and Jordan.[120]

Azerbaijan runs a government-led asylum system: the State Migration Service is the first-instance decision maker, and appeals go to Baku Administrative Court and may proceed to the Court of Appeal and Supreme Court. The law does not foresee subsidiary protection or humanitarian status, and UNHCR ended its own refugee status determination in Azerbaijan on 1 July 2020, issuing protection letters to those registered before that date to guard against refoulement.[121] The national legal framework codifies non-penalization for irregular entry by people seeking asylum and the non-refoulement obligation. In practice, asylum-seekers and recognized refugees have the right to work without a work permit and can access public education and State-coordinated healthcare, including mental health and specialized services.[122]

The profile of applicants and status holders reveals marked gender and age skews at the application stage but a more balanced picture among those recognized. Between 2013 and 2021, about 85 per cent of principal applicants were men, and 67.2 per cent were aged 18–35.[123] Women appeared more often among Afghan applicants and were frequently counted as family members in cases led by a male principal applicant, which affects how sex- and age-disaggregated data are captured. Among those granted refugee status over the period, women accounted for 54 per cent, and half were aged 18–35.[124]

Access to services has improved but remains uneven. Refugees have begun enrolling in the national health insurance system, while UNHCR provided targeted support through cash assistance, education subsidies, employment facilitation and skills training, alongside legal aid and efforts to resolve statelessness.[125] These initiatives aim to strengthen inclusion and community resilience, particularly for youth and women. However, the overall scale of assistance is limited, and the closure of UNHCR's operation in Azerbaijan in August 2025 raises concerns about the continuity of services and referral systems for refugees and asylum-seekers during and after the transition.[126]

In Azerbaijan, national law contains no subsidiary or humanitarian protection, leaving few alternatives where the stringent refugee definition is not met; appeals exist, but recognition has historically been very low. Azerbaijan's main challenge is systemic: a restrictive recognition environment with no complementary statuses, coupled with a male-led application pattern that can sideline women's individual claims, meaning that women's protection often hinges on targeted assistance rather than durable legal pathways.[127]

Georgia hosts a modest but gender-skewed population of refugees and asylum-seekers: in 2022–2023, 62 per cent of adult refugees were women, while 25 per cent were minors. Asylum-seekers, however, are mostly men (13–15 per cent children), with citizens from Ukraine, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan predominating. This gender disparity likely stems from protection dynamics: Ukrainian, Syrian and Afghan women and children often qualify as refugees due to conflict-related vulnerability, while men—especially those migrating alone for economic reasons—face higher rejection rates and longer processing times, keeping them in the asylum-seeker category.

7.5 Women victims of human trafficking

Human trafficking in the South Caucasus remains shaped by limited but improving victim identification, a strong legislative anchor in the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, and persistent gendered patterns in exploitation.

In Armenia, the 2024 Trafficking in Persons report records a notable rise in victims formally identified in 2023, from 6 in 2022 to 25. Of these, 18 were exploited in forced labour and 7 in sexual exploitation. The group included 10 women, 9 men, 3 girls and 3 boys, and all were Armenian nationals, suggesting that most cases detected involve internal trafficking or exploitation of citizens rather than foreign nationals.[128]

GRETA's third evaluation of Armenia explains why identification remains modest and skewed: law enforcement has largely relied on victim self-identification. Specialized units have very few female investigators, and access to justice and compensation is uneven, which discourages reporting and follow-through. It also documents that more than 30 per cent of victims identified in 2017–2021 were children, with girls more often trafficked for sexual exploitation and boys for forced labour, and that female victims reported being interviewed only by male officers, undermining trust.[129]

Azerbaijan presents a contrasting pattern: victim identification is higher in absolute terms and overwhelmingly female and sexual-exploitation-related. In 2023, the Government officially identified 91 victims, 89 of whom were exploited in sex trafficking and 2 in labour trafficking; 90 were women and 1 was a man, confirming the persistent gender skew in detected cases.[130] GRETA's 2023 report on Azerbaijan welcomes stronger resourcing of the assistance centre and more sentences, but it urges better proactive identification, especially among irregular migrants and asylum-seekers, and the removal of any de facto conditionality linking assistance to cooperation with law enforcement. It also highlights limited access to compensation, the need to reintroduce robust labour inspections to detect forced labour, and the predominance of Azerbaijani women trafficked for sexual exploitation, including abroad.

In both countries, trafficking is deeply intertwined with poverty, inequality and limited awareness. Moreover, both countries face persistent gender-specific challenges related to human trafficking, shaped by socioeconomic vulnerabilities and gaps in protection systems.

Human trafficking remains a persistent concern in Georgia, with women disproportionately affected among identified victims. According to national data reported to GRETA,[131] 17 victims of trafficking were formally identified in 2023, of whom 12 were women. GRETA's assessment highlights that trafficking in Georgia primarily affects women and girls subjected to sexual exploitation, as well as women and men exploited in forced labour, including in domestic work, agriculture and service sectors. The report notes that while Georgia has strengthened its legislative and institutional framework to combat trafficking, challenges remain in proactive victim identification, particularly among migrant populations and persons in informal or precarious employment. Limited awareness of trafficking indicators, fear of authorities, and dependence on employers or intermediaries continue to hinder detection, with women facing heightened risks due to gender norms, care responsibilities and concentration in undervalued sectors. GRETA further underlines the need to strengthen victim-centred approaches, including access to specialized support services, long-term reintegration assistance and gender-sensitive protection measures.[132]

7.6 Women in internal displacement

The protracted military hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan have caused repeated waves of forced displacement on both sides. By November 2021, 173,101 internally displaced family units (totalling 651,458 individuals) were officially registered, originating from 13 districts across the Karabakh, East Zangezur and Gazakh-Tovuz regions.[133] Azerbaijan has developed a specific legal and institutional framework to address this situation, notably through the 1999 Law on the Status of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons and the 1999 Law on Social Protection of Internally Displaced Persons, implemented by the State Committee for Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. Demographically, IDPs display relatively balanced gender ratios overall, although gender differences appear across age groups: males constitute a slight majority among younger populations, while women represent around two thirds of the elderly population.[134] Children under the age of 18 account for more than a quarter of the displaced population, highlighting the long-term, intergenerational nature of displacement. Many IDPs initially lived in temporary shelters such as dormitories and public buildings, but since 2001, the Government has constructed more than 120 modern settlements to improve housing conditions.

Nevertheless, displacement has had distinct gendered implications, as women, particularly older women and female-headed households, often face increased caregiving responsibilities, economic vulnerability and limited access to employment opportunities in displacement settings. Government policies remain strongly oriented towards voluntary, safe and dignified return, though progress is constrained by extensive landmine contamination and the destruction of infrastructure, making reconstruction and demining essential prerequisites for sustainable return.[135]

Internal displacement in Georgia, rooted in the conflicts of the 1990s and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, affects around 300,000 IDPs (53 per cent women).[136] IDPs face persistent housing challenges, with issues including inadequate living structures, sewage problems and unsuitable climates. Returns are rare, as unresolved conflicts and environmental disasters (e.g. floods) perpetuate displacement, deepening women's vulnerability in accessing housing, jobs and services. The intersectional vulnerability of displaced women creates a feminization of poverty, increased risks of domestic violence and other systemic problems.[137]

7.7 Women returnees

Return migration to the South Caucasus has become more visible in recent years, though the dynamics and profiles differ among countries. In Armenia, the 2021–2023 Integrated Living Conditions Survey (ILCS)[138] counted approximately 58,800 return migrants out of 237,700 people involved in recent migration flows. Men accounted for 77.6 per cent of returnees, and 70 per cent returned from the Russian Federation. Family reasons, the end of employment abroad, and employment in Armenia dominate stated drivers. The vast majority (80.9 per cent) of returnees resettled in urban areas. Construction was the main sector of returnee employment, reflecting the male-skewed profile.[139]

Azerbaijan's return landscape is shaped by readmission from Europe and assisted voluntary return and reintegration. Between 2014 and 2021, 1,946 Azerbaijani nationals were effectively readmitted, with average readmission rates of 43.2 per cent and female returnees averaging 39.9 per cent of those readmitted.[140] Most cases originated in Germany and Sweden. Azerbaijan's 2014–2021 expansion of readmission agreements institutionalized the channel for enforced returns. More recently, EU data collated by the Prague Process indicate that return rates of irregular Azerbaijani migrants from the EU rose from 39.5 per cent in 2022 to 53.8 per cent in 2023.[141]

Women had lower employment rates than men:

26% vs 41%

Women returnees to Armenia face a distinct set of disadvantages that start with age and settlement patterns and cascade through livelihoods, services and well-being. In the latest Reintegration Sustainability Survey,[142] women returned at the average age of 49.2 years versus 44.4 years for men, and 40 per cent of women were over the age of 58 at return, compared with 22 per cent of men, a profile associated with lower reintegration scores for older and recently returned migrants and for those who were forcibly returned. Women also resettled outside their community of origin more often than men, a pattern linked to poorer outcomes across dimensions.[143] Economically, women's position is weaker: only 26 per cent were working at survey time, versus 41 per cent of men. Psychosocially, women participated less in social activities, reported more signs of distress and expressed a higher need for psychological support. Gendered return drivers compound these pressures: women more frequently cited family reasons and negative asylum or residence decisions as reasons for returning, while health was a leading motive and was reported more often by women than men (58 per cent versus 45 per cent).[144]

In Azerbaijan, women form a substantial minority of enforced returns, but their post-return outcomes are scarcely captured. Between 2014 and 2021, 1,946 people were effectively readmitted with an average readmission rate of 43.2 per cent, and women accounted for an average 39.9 per cent of those readmitted. Most readmissions originated from Germany and Sweden. Reintegration support exists—87 vulnerable returnees were assisted under the RESTART project, and voluntary-return pilots operate alongside readmission—but public reporting provides little sex-disaggregated evidence on women's employment, health coverage, childcare or housing after return, making gender-specific gaps hard to quantify and address.[145]

In Georgia, conflict-related IDPs (from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia) remain blocked by political barriers, while economic migrants—often from the EU, Russia or Türkiye—return for family reunification or entrepreneurial opportunities.[146] Women's returns, however, are less tied to economic success: research by WECF Georgia shows that they prioritize caregiving (elderly/children) or achieving migration goals (e.g. debt repayment, property purchase) over financial self-sufficiency.[147]

7.8 Women in mobility driven by climate change and natural hazards

Environmental migration in the South Caucasus is shaped by a mix of rapid-onset disasters and slow-onset environmental change, with gendered impacts that policy frameworks are only beginning to grapple with.

Armenia and Azerbaijan are increasingly vulnerable to climate change, with environmental degradation and extreme weather events shaping migration dynamics in both countries. In Armenia, projections show that average annual temperatures could rise by up to 4.7°C by 2100, while precipitation is expected to decline by 8.3 per cent, intensifying droughts, soil erosion and water scarcity, particularly affecting rural, mountainous areas where pastoralism and agriculture are prevalent.[148] In Azerbaijan, climate change is linked to rising temperatures, frequent floods, desertification and soil salinization, especially in the Kura-Aras basin and rural zones.[149] These risks exacerbate pre-existing vulnerabilities, especially in agriculture-dependent communities, where land degradation threatens food security and livelihoods.[150]

Environmental migration in Armenia is a key emerging challenge. According to IOM estimates, anywhere between 24,400 and 35,600 people are likely to become climate migrants by 2050.[151] Environmental migration in Armenia has gendered consequences that compound existing inequalities and care roles for women, especially in rural areas and among female-headed households. Women living in climate-exposed regions face greater livelihood disruption when droughts, floods and extreme temperatures damage crops, pasture and local services; rural female farmers are particularly vulnerable due to limited access to land, inputs and social protection, which deepens poverty and can trigger distress migration or prevent timely return.[152] Women constitute a large share of the agricultural workforce yet face heightened exposure to the effects of climate change, such as reduced yields, water insecurity and loss of income. Gender-specific challenges include limited access to climate-resilient agricultural inputs, extension services and land ownership, which constrain women's adaptive capacity.[153] Although Armenia's agricultural development strategy mentions inclusivity and gender equity, it lacks tailored support for women's resilience in the face of climate-induced shocks. Moreover, women are less likely to have the resources or mobility[154] to migrate voluntarily as a form of adaptation, making them more vulnerable to forced displacement or dependence on male relatives.

In Azerbaijan, only 20% of landowners and just 9% of registered individual farmers are women, stressing their vulnerability to climate change

Rural women in Azerbaijan are also particularly vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation and climate change, which intensify pre-existing structural inequalities. Although women constitute a significant portion of the rural population, they face limited access to land, irrigation infrastructure, agricultural inputs and extension services.[155] Only 20 per cent of landowners and just 9 per cent of registered individual farmers are women,[156] restricting their ability to respond effectively to environmental shocks such as droughts, soil degradation and water scarcity. These environmental stressors, coupled with financial dependence on male family members and gendered caregiving responsibilities, significantly constrain women's mobility as an adaptive strategy. Unlike men, who may migrate seasonally or seek alternative livelihoods, rural women often remain in environmentally stressed areas with declining agricultural productivity.[157] Climate change thus not only threatens their economic security but also reinforces patterns of immobility, marginalization and dependence. Without targeted climate adaptation and mobility support tailored to women's needs, environmental change may deepen gender disparities in rural Azerbaijan.

Environmental pressures increasingly shape internal displacement and migration decisions in Georgia, particularly in mountainous and rural regions exposed to climate-induced hazards such as landslides, floods and droughts. Extreme events, most notably the 2023 Shovi landslide and floods, which displaced more than 39,000 people,[158] illustrate the growing role of environmental shocks as drivers of both temporary displacement and longer-term mobility. In affected areas, environmental degradation and the loss of livelihoods contribute to gender-differentiated migration responses: men are more likely to engage in seasonal or circular labour migration abroad, particularly in agriculture and construction, while women more often seek service-sector employment, informal work or migration through family reunification channels.

Climate stressors also interact with pre-existing structural inequalities in rural Georgia, where women face higher unpaid care responsibilities, more limited access to land, finance and agricultural inputs, and lower income security.[159] In response, climate-smart agriculture initiatives supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the European Union[160] promote conservation techniques such as no-till farming, improved soil management and drought-resilient practices to reduce environmental vulnerability and livelihood loss. These programmes explicitly integrate gender-responsive measures by engaging women farmers through labour-saving technologies, gender-sensitive training and digital tools, with the aim of reducing women's workload, increasing productivity and income, and strengthening women's decision-making roles within households and communities. While such interventions cannot fully prevent environmentally driven mobility, they contribute to greater local resilience and may reduce the need for distress-driven or precarious migration, particularly among women in climate-vulnerable regions.

Displacement and evacuation create specific health and protection needs. Armenian evacuation rules prioritize pregnant women and women with young children,[161] acknowledging mobility constraints and the need for rapid access to safe shelter, obstetric care and childcare essentials; follow-on regulations require the gender-sensitive provision of food, clothing and hygiene items (e.g. menstrual hygiene), but territorial and capacity gaps can leave needs unmet during protracted stays. Access to essential services during and after environmentally driven moves is uneven, with women and girls disproportionately affected where infrastructure is weak and where migrants in insecure situations are excluded from healthcare and social entitlements, increasing exposure to communicable diseases and psychosocial stress. These barriers are sharper outside Yerevan and in remote or border communities.[162]

Care responsibilities, information gaps, and language or documentation issues can limit women's participation in recovery and local decision-making, affecting their ability to access compensation, housing support or livelihood programmes. Armenia's National Adaptation Plan instructs sectors to apply gender-responsive approaches precisely because women face added barriers to information, resources and opportunities; when not addressed, adaptation and disaster risk reduction measures risk entrenching gender inequalities along environmental migration pathways.[163]

7.9 Gender-responsive migration management policies

South Caucasus countries have incorporated elements of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) into national strategies, and they participate in regional dialogues on migration governance. Yet institutional capacities to address the intersection of gender and migration remain limited. The absence of gender-sensitive monitoring and the lack of formal pathways for recognizing qualifications or legalizing informal labour reduce the efficacy of policy frameworks for women migrants.

Armenia

Armenia's policy approach to emigration combines labour-mobility facilitation within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), diaspora engagement and repatriation measures, and gradual strengthening of data, coordination and reintegration systems. As an EAEU member, Armenian nationals enjoy simplified access to employment in other EAEU states, especially the Russian Federation, which reduces administrative barriers for circular labour migration and helps formalize movements that might otherwise be irregular.[164] Institutionally, migration governance has been consolidated under the Migration and Citizenship Service of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Armstat produces annual migration and labour profiles, while IOM assessments highlight progress in administrative data systems and coordination, alongside persistent gaps in interoperability across agencies.

Given that most Armenian emigration is circular labour mobility towards Russia, national policy focuses on safety and protection rather than restriction. Armenia has worked with IOM to strengthen regulation of private recruitment intermediaries, expand legal employment pathways and improve reintegration assistance for returnees.[165] Diaspora engagement is a cornerstone of emigration management. The Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs runs programmes such as "iGorts", which places diaspora professionals in state institutions, and "Neruzh", which supports start-ups led by young Armenians abroad. The Repatriation and Integration Centre provides counselling, legal advice and relocation assistance for returnees.[166] These initiatives aim to transform long-term emigration into a source of skills transfer, investment and innovation.

In the education sphere, although most study abroad is privately organized, the Government promotes the recognition of foreign qualifications and reintegration of graduates.[167] Armenia's approach thus emphasizes facilitation of regular mobility, enhancement of protection mechanisms, and mobilization of its extensive diaspora for national development, while continuing to improve data management and institutional coordination.[168]

Armenia has introduced key migration and asylum legislation, including the 2021 Law on Foreigners and the 2022 Law on Refugees and Asylum, and has developed procedures for entry control and asylum processing. The Migration and Citizenship Service and the Inter-Agency Commission on Migration coordinate migration governance. While Armenia participates in regional dialogues and has bilateral return arrangements, transit migration remains a secondary policy concern, and data systems are not tailored to capture its nuances. Mechanisms to identify and protect vulnerable migrants, particularly women involved in irregular transit or smuggling, are not systematized. There is no formal national protocol to ensure that intercepted women (whether or not they are identified as trafficking victims) are referred to gender-sensitive shelters, legal counselling or psychosocial care. This gap limits the ability of authorities and service providers to respond to gender-based risks linked to transit migration, especially in remote regions. Strengthening gender-sensitive screening, referral systems and data collection would enhance Armenia's capacity to uphold protection standards in the context of growing mixed migration pressures.

Policy responses to regular immigration demonstrate both progress and ongoing gaps, particularly with regard to gender-sensitive approaches and institutional coordination. The 2023 MGI profile reveals a relatively advanced legal framework supporting immigrant integration and gender equality.[169] Migrants have equal legal access to government-funded healthcare, education and employment opportunities. The Law on Medical Aid and Service to

the Population (1996) and the Law on Social Assistance (2014) ensure that resident foreign nationals and stateless persons can access social services, while the Labour Code and the Law on Foreigners guarantee the right to work on equal footing with Armenian citizens, including access to private sector employment without employment permits for most residence categories. Armenia also supports access to vocational and higher education through national and bilateral channels, including fully funded tuition for students from diaspora backgrounds and select foreign partners. However, provisions do not currently include gender-specific outreach or targeted support for migrant women entering the labour force.

The National Migration Governance Framework and its Action Plan (2021) outline a strategic approach to managing migration, explicitly incorporating gender-sensitive language that aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 8.8 to protect labour rights and promote safe working environments for women migrants. Yet the implementation of gender-responsive migration governance remains uneven. For example, while migrants have equal rights under the law, there is no dedicated programme supporting the recognition of foreign qualifications or addressing specific barriers faced by women in accessing stable, formal employment. Additionally, Armenia lacks a labour-market demand assessment mechanism to align immigration policy with sectoral needs, especially in areas like care, education and health where women migrants are often concentrated.

Armenia, facing large-scale displacement for the first time in 2020 and 2023, responded by establishing an emergency assistance framework for over 100,000 ethnic Armenian refugees. The Government granted them temporary protection status, ensuring access to legal residency, employment and public services.[170] Coordination was led by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and supported by a multi-agency Refugee Coordination Forum established with UNHCR. Immediate support included cash, shelter and food assistance, while longer-term integration measures have centred on monthly housing stipends (known as the "40+10" programme).[171] In May 2024, a housing scheme offering subsidized mortgages or grants was launched for displaced persons opting for Armenian citizenship.[172] Social protection and employment matching have been scaled up, and specific efforts have targeted women and girls through GBV response services, psychosocial care and community-based support structures.[173]

Armenia's framework addressing the trafficking of human beings, complemented by specialized shelters and a national referral mechanism, still shows gaps in gender-sensitive interviewing, timely adjudication and effective compensation; victims' reintegration is constrained by limited economic opportunities outside urban areas.[174]

Armenia recognizes the growing relevance of climate change and environmental degradation, but policy responses addressing their links to human mobility remain in the early stages. While the 2021–2030 Strategy on Disaster Risk Reduction and the National Adaptation Plan acknowledge climate-related risks, they do not yet integrate migration as a potential adaptation or displacement outcome. The National Adaptation Plan (NAP)[175] identifies highly exposed sectors—natural ecosystems, water, agriculture, energy, health, human settlements and tourism—and seeks to mainstream adaptation across them, creating entry points to avert, minimize and address displacement risks. The NAP explicitly promotes gender-responsive approaches on the grounds that women and men face different barriers to adaptation, including unequal access to information, resources and opportunities.[176] A 2023 IOM policy analysis notes that current frameworks lack operational coordination between climate, migration and gender policies, and there is no formal recognition of migration as a climate adaptation strategy.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan manages emigration within a comprehensive migration governance system overseen by the State Migration Service. Educational migration is a key policy instrument. The State Programme for the Education of Azerbaijani Youth Abroad (2022–2026) funds study at foreign universities in priority disciplines such as medicine, engineering and natural sciences, with the aim of returning graduates to fill strategic skills gaps. This programme is jointly implemented by the Ministry of Science and Education and financed through the State Oil Fund.[177]

Azerbaijan's labour-emigration policy emphasizes the regulation of recruitment intermediaries, the monitoring of outflows, and cooperation with neighbouring labour markets.[178] The Government also tracks increasing migration towards the European Union. While emigration management remains largely focused on regular pathways and educational mobility, IOM and national reports underline the need for improved sex-disaggregated data and targeted reintegration support.[179] The overarching approach combines regulation, data development and investment in human capital abroad to align emigration with long-term national priorities.

The 2013 Migration Code regulates the entry, stay and removal of foreign nationals, while the State Migration Service oversees implementation, including the identification of irregular migrants. Although Azerbaijan maintains the Unified Migration Information System, disaggregated public data on migrants in transit, especially by sex or by protection needs, are limited.[180] Azerbaijan participates in regional processes such as the Almaty and Budapest Processes and maintains bilateral agreements on migration management. However, its systems for screening and referring women intercepted in smuggling or trafficking contexts to protection services remain limited in scope and transparency. While victims of trafficking can access shelters and some assistance, irregular migrant women without formal victim status may lack effective referral pathways to legal aid, psychosocial support or safe accommodation.[181]

Azerbaijan's policy environment supports immigrant integration in legal terms but lacks comprehensive gender-responsive mechanisms. According to IOM's 2023 report,[182] migrants with regular status have access to social services, education, healthcare and housing. Azerbaijan has adopted a series of legislative reforms to improve migration management and has endorsed several international human rights and labour standards. However, its migration system prioritizes regulation and enforcement over integration, and gender dimensions of immigration remain underdeveloped.

The Labour Code of Azerbaijan prohibits gender discrimination and promotes equal pay, but migrant-specific gender provisions are lacking. The MGI notes that while some data on migration are sex-disaggregated, these are not regularly used to assess the specific needs of female migrants or to develop targeted policy responses. There are no dedicated programmes to address the obstacles faced by women in regularizing their status, accessing formal employment or receiving protection from exploitation. Migrant women's vulnerabilities are compounded by dependence on male family members for residence status in cases of family migration, as well as by limited access to skills recognition and language training.

The framework addressing human trafficking in Azerbaijan combines criminal provisions with an assistance centre and inter-agency coordination, but GRETA points to weak proactive screening of foreign and internally trafficked victims, barriers to legal aid and compensation, and insufficient labour inspectorate reach—issues that are particularly consequential for women whose exploitation often occurs in hidden, service-sector or domestic settings.[183]

Environmental migration is not explicitly addressed in core migration or climate policy instruments. Although the country has experienced recurrent floods, droughts and soil salinization affecting rural populations, the policy focus remains on disaster risk management and environmental protection rather than mobility outcomes. Institutional coordination between migration, environmental and rural development bodies is limited, and gender considerations are particularly absent. There are currently no policies aimed at supporting internal or planned relocation for populations at risk of environmental displacement.

Georgia

In Georgia, progress towards gender-responsive migration management has been incremental and uneven. The MGI assessment for Georgia indicates that gender equality is formally recognized within national policy frameworks relevant to migration, including labour migration, trafficking and asylum, yet gender considerations are not consistently mainstreamed across migration governance instruments or operational procedures.[184] While sex-disaggregated data are collected in some administrative domains, their use for policy design, monitoring and evaluation remains limited, constraining evidence-based responses to women's and men's differentiated migration pathways and risks.

The assessment highlights that women migrants are more visible in non-labour migration channels, such as education and family reunification, while labour migration governance continues to prioritize sectors and pathways dominated by men.[185] Targeted measures to support women's labour mobility, such as skills recognition, protection in informal sectors and access to information prior to departure, remain underdeveloped. Immigration policies in Georgia, centred on visa liberalization and targeted permits, often overlook gender disparities. Georgia's 2025 labour migration reforms (e.g. stricter work permits, IT visa[186]) risk marginalizing women, who predominate in informal sectors like care work. While Georgia's State Language Programme and inclusive vocational education aim to aid integration,[187] none address women's specific needs, such as childcare or sexual and reproductive health services. At the same time, Georgia has demonstrated stronger gender responsiveness in areas related to counter-trafficking and protection, where victim-centred approaches, inter-agency coordination and cooperation with civil society organizations are more institutionalized, reflecting international obligations and donor engagement. Georgia addresses environmental migration through EU-funded programmes (EU4Climate, EAP GREEN), which integrate gender-responsive planning into their National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) to ensure climate adaptation efforts meet the needs of women and vulnerable groups.[188]

Institutional capacity constraints persist. The MGI report notes limited specialized training on gender and migration for front-line officials, as well as gaps in coordination between migration authorities and gender equality institutions. As a result, gender-specific risks, such as women's exposure to exploitation in informal work, barriers to access services outside major urban centres, and the interaction between migration status and unpaid care responsibilities, are not systematically addressed. Overall, the findings suggest that while Georgia has established key building blocks for gender-responsive migration management, translating formal commitments into coherent, cross-sectoral and operationalized gender mainstreaming remains an ongoing challenge.

7.10 Data gaps

The analysis of data availability reveals persisting gaps in gender-sensitive migration data. Across Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, migration data systems remain insufficiently equipped to capture gendered and intersectional dimensions of mobility. While Georgia benefits from comparatively stronger national statistical capacity—particularly through Geostat's regular emigration reporting—administrative data in all three countries capture only a partial picture of migration. Unreported departures and irregular, seasonal and circular migration remain largely invisible, despite being patterns in which women are often overrepresented. As a result, recent trend analysis relies heavily on destination-country sources (e.g. UN DESA, Eurostat, Frontex), which provide fragmented insights and limited information on migrants' motivations, employment conditions and household impacts.

One notable gap is the lack of systematic sex-disaggregated data by migration type, particularly for labour, educational and family migration. Across the three countries, available statistics rarely capture women's occupational profiles, employment sectors, dependency status, family composition or care responsibilities,

constraining analysis of why and how women migrate and how their mobility reshapes care arrangements and livelihoods in countries of origin. A 2023 UNECE assessment of Armenia highlights the absence of unique identifiers linking administrative databases and the limited exchange of information between Armstat, the Migration and Citizenship Service, and other institutions.[189] As a result, available statistics cannot adequately distinguish between temporary and long-term emigration, or between labour, educational and family-related mobility. Research on the feminization of migration, independent female migration and the consequences for children and older persons left behind remains limited.

Data on immigration are similarly constrained. Armenia and Georgia provide partial sex-disaggregated information on residence permits, while Azerbaijan's data focus primarily on legal status and permit categories, offering little insight into labour-market outcomes or integration conditions for immigrant women. Emerging trends—such as the arrival of remote workers in Georgia—remain largely unmeasured across all three contexts.

Information on irregular and transit migration is particularly weak, with a lack of consistent, sex-disaggregated data on migrants in irregular situations or in transit, including those intercepted at borders or assisted through return mechanisms. This obscures women's exposure to exploitation, trafficking and gender-based violence and limits the ability to design gender-responsive protection responses. The lack of such coverage in regular IOM DTM reporting in Armenia and Azerbaijan further restricts systematic monitoring of mixed and transit flows.

Within the asylum and displacement domains, aggregate figures are available, but sex- and age-disaggregated data are inconsistent. This limits the assessment of gender-specific protection risks, despite women and children constituting a large share of displaced populations, particularly in Armenia and Azerbaijan. National displacement registries rarely publish disaggregated data by sex, age, disability or other vulnerability markers, constraining targeted policy and humanitarian responses.

Data on trafficking in human beings remain fragmented across all three countries and largely reflect detected cases rather than prevalence. Georgia produces some of the least comprehensive trafficking statistics in the subregion, while Armenia and Azerbaijan face challenges related to proactive identification and reporting. Although victim data are often sex-disaggregated, they rarely distinguish between forms of exploitation or capture intersectional factors such as migration status, disability or age, raising concerns about underreporting—especially among migrant women.

Finally, environmental and climate-related migration is not systematically tracked in any of the three countries. While indirect evidence links environmental hazards—particularly in Georgia—to displacement and mobility, migration statistics do not classify movements by environmental drivers, and no sex-disaggregated data exist on climate-induced mobility. As a result, the gendered impacts of environmental change on migration decisions, livelihoods and care responsibilities remain largely unmeasured.

CONCLUSIONS

Across migration types and subregions, the report identifies a **consistent configuration of gendered push and pull factors** shaping women's decisions to migrate, remain abroad or return. On the push side, women's mobility is strongly driven by structural constraints in countries of origin, including limited access to decent and secure employment, persistent wage gaps, occupational segregation and the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work. These constraints are reinforced by entrenched gender norms that restrict women's economic autonomy and decision-making and are further intensified by economic insecurity, conflict, displacement and, increasingly, environmental stress, all of which tend to increase women's care burdens and livelihood risks. In conflict- and crisis-affected settings—most notably Türkiye, Ukraine and parts of the South Caucasus—forced displacement and protection-related drivers are particularly prominent, further shaping women's mobility patterns and constraints.

On the pull side, women's migration is shaped by demand in destination countries for feminized labour, particularly in care, domestic work, health and services, alongside access to education, family reunification opportunities, perceptions of safety and the availability of basic services. Across contexts, the interaction between these push and pull factors is mediated by women's legal status, access to independent residence and work rights, and the provision of childcare and social protection, which together condition women's ability to translate migration into sustainable economic and social gains. Decisions to return are similarly gendered: while some women return with enhanced skills, savings and aspirations, many do so primarily due to caregiving responsibilities, emotional ties, barriers to integration or the exhaustion of legal and economic options abroad, often in contexts where reintegration systems remain fragmented and insufficiently responsive to women's needs.

Structural gender inequalities shape women's positions and outcomes across all stages of migration, with particularly consistent evidence in labour migration. Across subregions, women are overrepresented in **low-paid, informal and precarious sectors**, including domestic and care work, hospitality, agriculture and parts of the service economy, where labour protections and collective representation are weak. Evidence from the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Türkiye shows that women often migrate with equal or higher levels of education than men yet experience higher rates of overqualification and barriers to skills recognition. Patriarchal norms and gender expectations, documented most clearly in Central Asia, the South Caucasus and parts of Eastern Europe, continue to constrain women's autonomy in migration decision-making, destination choice and return, while simultaneously assigning them primary responsibility for both paid and unpaid care across borders.

GBV emerges as a cross-cutting risk, though its forms and visibility vary by migration category and context. The evidence is most documented for asylum-seekers, refugees and internally displaced women, particularly

in transit contexts and reception facilities in Eastern Europe, Türkiye and the Western Balkans. While women in irregular situations or informal labour arrangements face significant risks of GBV, such cases remain largely underreported and insufficiently captured in available data. Women and girls on the move face increased risks of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation, intimate partner violence and, in some contexts, child, early and forced marriage. These risks are exacerbated for women without secure legal status, single mothers, women who head households, older women, women with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ persons and girls travelling alone. While GBV is consistently identified across all subregions, **the availability of comparable and systematic data varies significantly**. Data gaps are most pronounced in **Central Asia and the South Caucasus**, where administrative reporting on GBV among migrant, displaced and returnee women is limited and often not publicly accessible, and where survey-based evidence is sparse. In the **Western Balkans and Türkiye**, data are uneven: GBV is better documented for asylum-seekers and survivors of trafficking but remains underreported for women in irregular migration, informal employment and transit situations. In **Eastern Europe**, including Ukraine and neighbouring host countries, conflict-related sexual violence and protection risks are documented, but information on intimate partner violence, exploitation in informal work and recovery contexts is fragmented and inconsistent across countries. Across all subregions, **GBV experienced in transit, private households (as workplaces), rural areas and return settings is particularly under-recorded**, requiring cautious interpretation of prevalence and cross-country comparisons.

Care chains are widely recognized in global migration research as a distinctive gendered feature of international mobility: women frequently migrate to meet strong demand for paid care and domestic services in more developed economies, while care services for their children and other dependants must be reorganized in their home countries. As available datasets rarely capture migrants' **family composition and care responsibilities** (for example, whether women migrate alone while leaving dependants behind, or migrate with their partners and children), available evidence did not allow for a systematic analysis of transnational care chains across all subregions. What the subregional findings do document consistently is women's **sectoral concentration in care-related and low-paid service work** in destination contexts. For the Western Balkans, women migrants are reported as mostly employed as cleaners, personal care workers, service staff, sales workers and health associate professionals, reflecting a persistent gendered segmentation of labour mobility. For Türkiye as a destination, immigrant women cluster strongly in **domestic work**, with patterns differing by country of origin (for example, women from Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan tend to concentrate in domestic work). The principal analytical gap is therefore the limited ability of data on **marital and family status, dependants, and the living arrangements of migrant women,** to trace how far this mobility produces 'care chains'. This limitation is present across all subregions. Only some indirect, occasional qualitative and anecdotal evidence points to this phenomenon. In particular, interview-based and stakeholder-reported accounts in the **Western Balkans** (notably among female labour migrants and returnees) and in **Eastern Europe**, especially in relation to Ukraine-related displacement and labour migration, indicate that some women migrants remit earnings primarily for **children's education, daily household expenses or eldercare**, and they maintain **frequent transnational contact** with children and other relatives remaining in the country of origin. These narratives provide an **initial indication that care-chain dynamics are present at least to some extent** in the region. However, they are **not systematically linked to information on household composition**, such as the number and age of children, the identity of caregivers left behind, or the duration and organization of care arrangements, which limits the ability to draw stronger or comparable conclusions.

Gendered dynamics intersect with specific migration situations in ways that differ across subregions. Women affected by forced displacement and by climate-related hazards and disasters, most visibly in Ukraine, parts of Central Asia and environmentally vulnerable rural areas, play a central role in sustaining households and communities but face persistent barriers to livelihoods, services and participation in decision-making. Women returnees across the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and Central Asia often bring back skills, savings and altered expectations, yet they encounter limited childcare provision, discriminatory labour markets and strong social pressures to resume unpaid domestic roles, which can erode gains achieved abroad. Intersectional disadvantages

are particularly evident for Roma, rural, older, low-income and minority women, women with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ persons, although systematic comparative data on these groups remain scarce.

Across all subregions, migration governance frameworks remain **largely gender-blind in practice**, despite formal commitments to equality. Legal frameworks frequently guarantee non-discrimination, and some countries have introduced sex- or vulnerability-related provisions, most notably in asylum, anti-trafficking and temporary protection regimes. However, gender considerations are rarely integrated in a systematic way across labour-migration schemes, border management, integration policies, or return and reintegration frameworks. As a result, women are insufficiently recognized as distinct rights holders with specific risks, needs and contributions, a pattern observed consistently across the region—albeit with variation in institutional capacity and political commitment.

Finally, the analysis highlights that **persistent data gaps significantly constrain gender analysis** of migration experiences in the ECA region. Sex-disaggregated data are often limited to headline stocks and flows, while intersectional information by age, family status, disability, migration status, sector of employment or socioeconomic background is rarely available or comparable across subregions. These limitations are particularly acute for irregular migration, environmental mobility, transit experiences and return trajectories. As a result, some conclusions, especially regarding the scale and differentiation of vulnerabilities, are necessarily interpretive, grounded in qualitative evidence and triangulation rather than comprehensive statistical coverage. Addressing these gaps is essential for making women's diverse migration experiences, contributions and risks fully visible and analytically comparable across the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING GENDER-RESPONSIVE MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

The recommendations presented in this section are grounded in the empirical findings and comparative analysis of this report, which identified recurrent gendered patterns across migration types and subregions, alongside context-specific dynamics shaping gendered migration experiences. They respond to cross-cutting structural gaps, particularly in migration data systems, governance frameworks, protection mechanisms and policy coherence, while also addressing subregional specificities related to labour markets, migration regimes, displacement dynamics and institutional capacities.

The recommendations are organized around four interrelated dimensions that emerge as key entry points for strengthening gender-responsive migration governance across Europe and Central Asia.

9.1 Migration data systems

Strengthening migration data systems is essential to address persistent gaps in the visibility, comparability and analytical use of gender-sensitive migration data across the region.

- Efforts to **strengthen the alignment of migration definitions and classifications across institutions and countries** would contribute to improved comparability of data across migration types and over time. Building on existing international statistical standards to ensure greater consistency in how migration categories are defined and applied would support more robust analysis of migration trajectories, including transitions between legal statuses and forms of mobility.

- There is a need to **expand the scope and systematic use of gender-sensitive indicators**, moving beyond basic sex-disaggregation to capture structural dimensions shaping migration experiences. This includes indicators related to care responsibilities, employment conditions, informality, skills utilization, remittance use and exposure to violence. Strengthening institutional capacity to analyse and interpret these indicators is equally important to ensure their effective use in policy and planning.

- Enhancing **interoperability across administrative, statistical and sectoral data systems** remains a critical priority. Improved coordination and data exchange between migration authorities, labour ministries, social protection systems and other relevant institutions would enable more integrated and longitudinal analysis of migrant outcomes.

- Addressing gaps in the **measurement of under-captured forms of mobility**, including circular, seasonal, irregular, return and environmentally influenced migration, would improve the evidence base. These forms of mobility are often episodic or informal, requiring the combined use of administrative data, targeted surveys and qualitative approaches to capture less-visible migration experiences.

- Greater integration of **migration modules into household and labour-force surveys** would support more representative and systematic analysis of migration trajectories, labour-market outcomes and the distribution of care responsibilities within households.

- Finally, strengthening the **institutional use of gender-sensitive migration data**—including through regular analytical outputs, improved reporting practices and enhanced coordination across data-producing institutions—would support more consistent evidence-informed policymaking.

9.2 Migration governance

The findings point to the need for more systematic integration of gender considerations across migration governance frameworks and their implementation.

- Strengthening the **operationalization of international commitments** within national migration governance systems remains a key area for action. While most countries are aligned with relevant international frameworks, including CEDAW, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and ILO standards, their translation into policies, procedures and accountability mechanisms varies significantly.

- There is a need to **promote more consistent integration of gender across all forms of migration**, including areas where it remains less developed, such as labour migration, return and environmentally influenced mobility. This would require strengthened coordination between migration, labour, social protection and gender equality institutions.

- Addressing **structural barriers within labour migration and integration systems** is particularly important. Women's migration outcomes continue to be shaped by informality, occupational segregation, limited skills recognition and unequal care responsibilities. More integrated approaches linking labour migration governance with employment, social protection and care systems would help address these constraints.

- Institutionalizing **participation mechanisms involving migrant women and women-led organizations** would contribute to more inclusive and responsive migration governance. Ensuring that such participation is structured and sustained, rather than ad hoc, would enhance both policy relevance and accountability.

- Strengthening the **consistent application of survivor-centred protection approaches** remains essential, particularly across border, transit, reception and service systems. This includes ensuring that gender-sensitive screening, referral pathways and access to services are systematically implemented across contexts.

- Finally, there is a need to **strengthen linkages between migration governance and care systems**, recognizing the role of transnational care arrangements and the redistribution of unpaid care work in shaping migration decisions and outcomes.

9.3 Regional cooperation

Regional processes offer important opportunities to address shared challenges, but their potential for advancing gender-responsive migration governance remains unevenly realized.

- Strengthening the **systematic integration of gender equality across regional migration processes** would enhance policy coherence and comparability. This includes the use of gender-sensitive indicators, regular analytical outputs and more consistent reporting mechanisms across platforms.
- There is scope to **promote more coordinated approaches to safe and regular migration pathways**, particularly in sectors where women are concentrated and where risks of informality and exploitation remain high.
- Enhancing **regional coordination on labour standards and social protection portability** would support more consistent protection of migrant women's rights across countries, particularly in relation to health, maternity protection and pensions.
- Efforts to address **trafficking and exploitation** would benefit from stronger cross-border cooperation that complements existing enforcement approaches with survivor-centred protection, recovery and reintegration measures.
- Finally, supporting the development of more **systematic knowledge-generation and exchange mechanisms** would enable better documentation, dissemination and use of evidence on gender and migration across the region.

9.4 Participation and accountability

Strengthening participation, accountability and implementation capacity is critical to ensuring that gender-responsive approaches are effectively translated into practice.

- Efforts to **institutionalize structured consultation mechanisms** would help ensure sustained engagement of migrant women and women-led organizations in policy design, implementation and monitoring processes.
- Enhancing **gender-responsive monitoring and accountability mechanisms** within migration governance frameworks would support more systematic tracking of gender outcomes and strengthen accountability.
- There is a need to **strengthen institutional capacity for gender mainstreaming**, including through dedicated functions, coordination mechanisms and technical support within migration-related institutions.
- Improving the **implementation and enforcement of legal protections for migrant women workers** remains particularly important in sectors characterized by informality and private employment arrangements.
- Expanding **research and evidence on emerging risks**, including forced criminality and other forms of exploitation, would support more informed and coordinated responses.
- Strengthening **access to GBV prevention and response frameworks for migrant women**, regardless of migration status, remains a key priority.

- Enhancing the **use of data and evidence in policy processes** would support more effective translation of research into decision-making.
- Finally, strengthening the **capacity of front-line actors** to apply gender-responsive approaches in practice would contribute to more consistent implementation across migration contexts.

9.5 Subregional priorities

While the above areas reflect cross-cutting dynamics across the region, the analysis also highlights a number of subregional specificities that require more tailored responses.

9.5.1 Western Balkans

In the Western Balkans, migration dynamics are shaped by a combination of high emigration rates, transit migration and ongoing alignment with European Union frameworks.

- Addressing **administrative forms of irregularity**, including those linked to dependency-based residence status, is particularly important in this subregion, where such pathways contribute to the statistical invisibility of women's migration trajectories and limit their access to rights and services.
- The region's role as a **prolonged transit corridor** calls for strengthened analytical and policy attention to gender dynamics in transit, including the limited visibility of women in quantitative data and the need for complementary qualitative approaches.
- Ongoing **EU accession processes** provide an opportunity to further integrate gender equality and labour standards into migration and labour governance frameworks, particularly through alignment with EU acquis and monitoring mechanisms.
- High levels of emigration, particularly in care-related sectors, highlight the need to better integrate migration considerations into **workforce planning and care systems**, including the management of care shortages and the redistribution of unpaid care work.

9.5.2 Türkiye

In Türkiye, migration governance is shaped by the scale of refugee populations, the temporary protection framework and complex labour-market dynamics.

- The interaction between the **temporary protection regime and labour migration policies** creates structural constraints affecting women's access to formal employment, often reinforcing concentration in informal sectors such as care and domestic work.
- The design of **work permit systems**, particularly those linked to employer sponsorship, contributes to dependency and limits labour mobility for migrant and refugee women, increasing exposure to informality and exploitation.

- The predominance of **urban refugee contexts** introduces specific barriers related to language, access to services, childcare and labour-market integration, requiring more tailored and gender-responsive service provision.

- The scale and institutional complexity of migration governance in Türkiye also point to the need for strengthened **coordination across data systems and service delivery structures**, alongside a more consistent application of protection and GBV risk mitigation measures.

9.5.3 Eastern Europe

In Eastern Europe, migration patterns are strongly shaped by large-scale displacement, particularly in relation to Ukraine, as well as evolving recovery and reconstruction processes.

- Strengthening responses to **complex displacement trajectories**, including transitions between internal displacement, temporary protection and return, remains central to understanding and addressing gendered migration outcomes.

- Persistent patterns of **deskilling and overqualification among displaced women** highlight gaps in skills recognition, labour-market integration and access to appropriate employment opportunities.

- The transition from **humanitarian response to longer-term inclusion and recovery frameworks** requires more integrated approaches that ensure sustained access to employment, services and social protection.

- At the same time, emerging processes related to **reconstruction and diaspora engagement** introduce new dimensions that require gender-responsive approaches to ensure women's participation and equitable access to opportunities.

9.5.4 Central Asia

In Central Asia, migration systems are strongly shaped by labour migration corridors, administrative practices and regional cooperation frameworks.

- Administrative and policy frameworks often continue to reflect **gender biases in the classification of women as dependants**, limiting their recognition as independent economic actors and constraining the visibility of their migration trajectories.

- Specific legal and administrative challenges, including **statelessness in cross-border marriages**, affect women's access to documentation, rights and services.

- Migration governance is closely linked to **labour migration systems characterized by intermediated recruitment and cross-border mobility**, requiring strengthened regulation and oversight to reduce risks of exploitation.

- Regional cooperation platforms play a key role in shaping migration governance, highlighting the importance of strengthening **coordination mechanisms and data harmonization efforts** at the regional level.

9.5.5 South Caucasus

In the South Caucasus, migration dynamics are influenced by a combination of transit migration, displacement and climate-related pressures.

- The region's role as a **transit and staging space** remains insufficiently reflected in data and policy frameworks, limiting the visibility of gender-specific risks and experiences along transit routes.
- **Displacement linked to regional hostilities** continues to shape migration patterns, requiring sustained attention to gendered access to services, housing and livelihoods.
- **Climate- and livelihood-related mobility**, particularly in rural and agricultural contexts, represents an emerging dimension of migration that requires greater integration into analysis and policy responses.
- Limited institutional coverage along transit routes highlights the need to strengthen **protection systems and cross-border coordination**, particularly to ensure access to services and referral mechanisms for women in transit.

Annex: List of interviewed stakeholders

Institution/organization	Name	Position
Western Balkans		
Grupa 484	Miroslava Jelacic, Tanja Pavlov, fieldworkers	NGO Team
IOM Serbia	Ivana Ivljanin Nevena Brajovic	PSEAH/AVRR Associate
IOM Bosnia and Herzegovina	Elma Salman Isic Liam	National Protection Coordinator; Senior PSEA Associate
South Caucasus		
IOM Armenia	Ilona Ter-Minasyan	Head of Office
Sana Sezim (NGO) (Kazakhstan)	Shakhnoza Khassanova	Director
NGO "Insan"	Gulnara Derbisheva	Director
IOM Uzbekistan	Kseniya Rijkova Jasur Saidov Ravil Iskhakov	Senior Project Assistant Migrant Protection and Assistance Unit (PxD)
Central Asia		
ICMPD	Ekaterina Belukova	Project Manager Migration Dialogues and Cooperation
Eastern Europe		
Info Sapiens	Inna Volosevych	Deputy Director
Centre for Economic Strategy	Iryna Ippolitova	Senior Researcher
Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine	Olena Strelnik	Senior Researcher
National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy / Free University of Berlin	Tetiana Kostiuchenko	Senior Lecturer in Sociology
Türkiye		
SGDD ASAM (NGO)	Uğur Oruç	Programme Officer

Endnotes

Chapter 1

1 Christou and Kofman 2022.
2 Morokvasic 1984; Kofman 1999.
3 Kofman 2004.
4 Boyd and Grieco 2003.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Pessar and Mahler 2003.
9 Danaj 2022.
10 Ibid.
11 IOM 2019b.
12 Ibid.
13 Individuals who are seeking international protection, who submitted request for asylum, but whose claim has not yet been finally decided. Asylum is a form of protection granted by the State on its territory to persons outside their country of nationality or habitual residence who are fleeing persecution or serious harm or for other reasons. Asylum encompasses a variety of elements, including non-refoulement, permission to remain on the territory of the asylum country, humane standards of treatment and eventually a durable solution (Ibid., p. 13).
14 Persons recognized as refugees, by a State or the UNHCR, on the basis of objective criteria related to the circumstances in their country of origin, which justify a presumption that they meet the criteria of the applicable refugee definition (Ibid., p. 171).
15 Various mechanisms used by States to regularize the stay of persons falling outside the scope of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol, but who are nevertheless in need of international protection (Ibid., pp. 35–36).
16 Ibid., p. 217.
17 Ibid., p. 109.
18 Ibid., p. 65.
19 "Administrative, logistical or financial support, including reintegration assistance, to migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host country or country of transit and who decide to return to their country of origin" (Ibid., pp. 12–13).
20 "The act of returning an individual, against his or her will, to the country of origin, transit or to a third country that agrees to receive the person, generally carried out on the basis of an administrative or judicial act or decision" (Ibid., p. 77).

Chapter 2

1 UNDP 2023f.
2 World Bank 2023a.
3 UNDP 2023f.
4 World Bank, n.d.
5 Ibid.
6 Eurostat, n.d.-b.
7 Economist Intelligence Unit 2023.
8 Transparency International 2023.
9 Eurostat, n.d.-a.
10 The Global Economy 2024.
11 UNDP 2023f.
12 World Bank, n.d.
13 Ibid.
14 Eurostat, n.d.-b.
15 UNDP 2023f.
16 World Bank, n.d.
17 Eurostat, n.d.-b.
18 Economist Intelligence Unit 2023.
19 Transparency International 2023.
20 World Economic Forum 2024.
21 Eurasian Research Institute 2023.
22 UNDP 2023f.
23 World Bank 2025d.
24 UNDP 2023f.
25 World Bank, n.d.
26 World Economic Forum 2024.
27 European Commission 2025b.
28 UNDP 2023f.
29 World Bank, n.d.
30 Ibid.
31 World Economic Forum 2024.
32 Economist Intelligence Unit 2023.
33 Transparency International 2023.
34 UNDP 2023e.
35 The GSNI draws on World Values Survey (WVS) data and measures the share of people aged 15 and over who express at least one biased belief across four dimensions—political, educational, economic, and physical integrity—using seven attitudinal indicators.
36 The data refer to the latest available WVS wave, primarily 2017–2022, except for Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, where the most recent data are from the period 2010–2014.
37 UNDP 2023d.
38 Please see section 1.2 on methodology for reference to the countries included in the ECA region for the purpose of this research.
39 This includes persons emigrated from the country of origin outside and within the ECA region. The Population Division of the United Nations, in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), publishes datasets on the world's population and analyses global demographic trends. The 2024 edition of the International Migrant Stock dataset presents the latest United Nations estimates of the numbers and characteristics of international migrants around the world. Covering the period from 1990 to 2024, the dataset includes estimates of the total number of international migrants by sex, as well as their places of origin and destination, for 233 countries and areas (UN DESA 2024a).

40 UN DESA 2024a.
41 From outside the region and international migrants within the region.
42 UN DESA 2024a.
43 Home page: Prague Process on Migration.
44 ICMPD, n.d.
45 Home page: Budapest Process on Migration and Asylum.
46 Home page: Almaty Process on Refugee Protection and International Migration.
47 Home page: MARRI Regional Cooperation Centre.
48 European Commission 2009.
49 European Parliament 2016.
50 IOM 2022d.
51 IOM 2023a.
52 European Commission 2024.
53 European Union 2024a.
54 European Union 2024c.
55 European Union 2024b.
56 Council of Europe, n.d.-b.
57 Home page: European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA).
58 Home page: Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency.

Chapter 3

1 A state response to structural labour-market pressures whereby outward labour migration was encouraged to absorb surplus workers, despite the official commitment to full employment, which the domestic economy could not fully deliver in practice.
2 It was a policy objective of increasing inflows of hard currency through migrants' remittances, thereby supporting national foreign-exchange reserves and macroeconomic stability.
3 Brunnbauer 2019.
4 Brunnbauer 2025.
5 Demographic decline has contributed to emigration by weakening domestic labour markets and economic dynamism: shrinking and ageing populations reduce job creation, constrain public revenues and social services, and limit long-term development prospects, thereby reinforcing incentives, especially among younger and working-age cohorts, to seek employment and life opportunities abroad.
6 Esch 2020.
7 Data on emigration from the WB6 in North America and Australia are not available.
8 Eurostat, n.d.-d.
9 Author's calculations based on Eurostat, n.d.-c.
10 OECD 2022b.
11 EIGE 2023.
12 World Bank 2020, 2024f.
13 Across the WB6, the remittances proportion of GDP ranges from 2.7 per cent in North Macedonia to 17.3 per cent in Kosovo (World Bank 2024c).
14 OECD 2022b.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Gender differences in overqualification reflect distinct patterns of labour-market segmentation rather than better skills-matching for women. Highly educated men from the WB6 are more likely to work in male-dominated sectors such as construction, manufacturing, transport and agriculture, where formal qualifications are rarely required or recognized, resulting in very high overqualification rates. Highly educated women, while more likely to seek employment in regulated sectors such as health, education and social services, often face barriers including non-recognition of qualifications, language requirements, lengthy accreditation procedures, limited professional networks and care-related constraints. When access to regulated professions is blocked, women frequently enter lower-skilled feminized service and care jobs, which explains why overqualification remains widespread among women despite their higher educational attainment.
20 OECD 2022b.
21 Ibid.
22 OECD, n.d.
23 Ibid.
24 World Bank 2024a.
25 OECD 2022a.
26 Poteyeva and Wasileski 2016.
27 European Commission 2022.
28 OECD 2022b.
29 Ibid.
30 Miaci and Seri 2025.

31 Çaro and Papathimiu 2025.
32 Poteyeva and Wasileski 2016.
33 Zogaj 2015.
34 Barslund et al. 2017.
35 Qaisrani et al. 2023; Halilović et al. 2018.
36 Institute of Statistics of Albania 2024; IOM 2022c; Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia 2024.
37 Ibid.
38 Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia 2024; Institute of Statistics of Albania 2024; IOM 2022c; Ministry of Internal Affairs of Kosovo 2019; Republic of Kosovo 2022; Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024.
39 Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia 2024; Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024.
40 MONSTAT 2025.
41 Montenegro Business Country Gateway 2025.
42 IOM 2023c; Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025.
43 Institute of Statistics of Albania 2024.
44 MONSTAT 2025.
45 Ipsos 2025.
46 Ibid.
47 Pavlov and Petronijević 2024a.
48 Pavlov and Petronijević 2024b.
49 Ibid.
50 Institute of Statistics of Albania 2024; Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024; IOM 2022c; Republic of Kosovo 2022; Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia 2024.
51 No available data for Albania.
52 IOM 2021c.
53 Institute of Statistics of Albania 2024; Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024; IOM 2022c; Republic of Kosovo 2022; Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia 2024.
54 At entry points, gender-neutral rules can have gender-differentiated effects. Requirements to present complete documentation, demonstrate sufficient financial means, or clearly establish the purpose of one's stay may disproportionately affect women, particularly those travelling with children, those whose documents are linked to a spouse or sponsor, or those whose access to financial resources is mediated through family members. These factors can increase the risk of delayed entry, temporary admission, or administrative scrutiny, even when women are otherwise eligible to enter legally.
55 Insajder 2023.
56 IOM 2025k.
57 IOM 2025s.
58 IOM 2025t.
59 Ibid.
60 IOM calculations based on IOM 2025c.
61 Ibid.
62 IOM 2025s.
63 Ibid.
64 IOM calculations based on IOM 2025c.
65 IOM 2025s.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 Interviews with IOM representatives, CSOs working with the migrants along the route and experts.
71 Interview with CSO working with migrants in Serbia.
72 Ibid.
73 IOM 2025t.
74 IOM calculations based on IOM 2025c.
75 Grupa 484 2023a.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Stojanović 2023.
79 IOM 2025t.
80 Stojanović 2023.
81 Ibid.
82 Interviews with CSO in Serbia.
83 Bjekic et al. 2019.
84 Ibid.
85 UNHCR 2025m.
86 UNHCR 2025f.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ministry of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025.
91 Ibid.
92 Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia 2024.
93 Gender-sensitive procedures in asylum systems are measures that recognize and respond to the different risks, experiences and needs of women, men, girls and boys throughout the asylum process. They include registration and screening practices that ensure privacy and enable safe disclosure of experiences such as sexual and gender-based violence; interviewing arrangements that allow access to female interviewers and interpreters upon request and apply trauma-informed approaches; and asylum determination procedures that recognize gender-related forms of persecution, including domestic violence, forced marriage, trafficking and sexual violence. Gender-sensitive procedures also take into account caregiving responsibilities by providing child-friendly arrangements and flexibility in scheduling, and they ensure referral pathways and protection measures for survivors of gender-based violence, including access to medical, psychosocial and legal support (UNHCR 2002).
94 APC/PPRC 2021.
95 UNICEF Serbia 2021; ECRE 2024.
96 Ibid.
97 Marković and Cvejić 2017.
98 Ibid.
99 For example, the CEDAW Committee in its Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of Albania notes that refugee, asylum-seeking and migrant women and girls face intersecting forms of discrimination and disproportionate levels of gender-based violence, and that the cumbersome process and onerous fees for recognized refugees to obtain documentation and the centralization of the refugee documentation process, further increase the costs and their risk of detention, extortion and gender-based violence during travel (CEDAW Committee 2023).
100 Stojanović 2023; IOM 2025t.
101 Ibid.
102 European Commission 2025c.
103 UNHCR, n.d.-a.
104 UNHCR, n.d.-c.
105 Danish Refugee Council 2022.

106 UNFPA 2025a.
107 Migrants & Refugees Section, Holy See 2023.
108 Home page: Centre for Research and Policy Making Kosovo.
109 Home page: Kosovo Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims.
110 UNHCR, n.d.-d.
111 UNCAC Coalition, n.d.
112 UNHCR, n.d.-e.
113 Home page: Macedonian Young Lawyers Association.
114 Home page: Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia.
115 UNHCR, n.d.-g.
116 CFAB, n.d.
117 MARRI, n.d.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 GRETA 2022c, 2023a, 2023b, 2025a, 2025d.
124 GRETA reports are monitoring reports produced by the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), an independent body of the Council of Europe. GRETA monitors the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by conducting country evaluations, including legislative analysis, country visits, consultations with public authorities and civil society, and assessments of prevention, protection of victims, prosecution, and gender-sensitive measures. The reports provide detailed findings and recommendations to improve national anti-trafficking frameworks (Council of Europe, n.d.-a).
125 Summary based on the latest GRETA evaluation reports listed previously.
126 Ibid.
127 SeConS Development Initiative Group and ASTRA 2023.
128 GRETA 2023b.
129 GRETA 2022c.
130 GRETA 2025a.
131 GRETA 2023b.
132 ASTRA 2023.
133 GRETA 2025d.
134 Ibid.
135 GRETA 2022c, 2023a, 2023b, 2025a, 2025d.
136 Ibid.
137 GRETA 2025a.
138 GRETA 2023b.
139 Ibid.
140 Summary based on the latest GRETA evaluation reports for the Western Balkan countries listed previously.
141 Ibid.
142 In the context of the Western Balkans, internal displacement is defined in terms of population forced movements within the borders of newly established sovereign states after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, also including groups of population moved from Kosovo to Central Serbia or Vojvodina which are considered as IDPs in Serbia.
143 IDMC, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d, n.d.-e, n.d.-f.
144 Ibid.
145 Home page: Regional Housing Programme.
146 United Nations Democracy Fund, n.d.
147 UNHCR 2018.
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
150 Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2025.
151 IDMC, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d, n.d.-e, n.d.-f.
152 Joint IDP Profiling Service 2018.
153 UN Women 2015b; OSCE Mission in Kosovo 2025; IDMC 2019.
154 UNHCR 2025a.
155 UNHCR 2018.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia 2024.
159 Author's calculations based on Eurostat, n.d.-e.
160 UNDP 2023a.
161 UNDP 2023b.
162 Ibid.
163 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
165 Ibid.
166 Ibid.
167 IOM 2023b.
168 Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate and Security 2022.
169 IOM 2023b.
170 Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate and Security 2022.
171 IOM 2023b.
172 Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate and Security 2022.
173 IOM 2023b.
174 Ibid.
175 Ibid.
176 United Nations, European Union and World Bank 2020.
177 Interview with IOM BiH representatives.
178 IOM 2023c.
179 IOM 2021c.
180 IOM 2018b.
181 IOM, n.d.
182 As demonstrated by migration profiles of the Western Balkan countries used for this analysis.
183 Stojanović 2023.
184 Atina 2018.
185 Council of Europe, n.d.-a.
186 Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia 2018.
187 UNDP 2023a, 2023b, 2023c.
188 Expert Group of the International Military Council on Climate and Security 2022.
189 United Nations, European Union and World Bank 2020.
190 IOM 2018b, 2023c.
191 Observation is based on all sources used for the analysis of immigration, particularly the migration profiles of the respective countries which publish official data.
192 For reference, see the official migration profiles of the respective countries.
193 As noted by GRETA evaluation reports for the respective countries.
194 Grupa 484 2023b.
195 Ibid.

Chapter 4

1 UN DESA 2024c.
2 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, n.d.-b.
3 Migration Research Foundation 2025.
4 OECD 2024a.
5 TURKSTAT 2024b.
6 Nakipoğlu 2023.
7 Migration Research Foundation, n.d.
8 Van den Berg and Neels 2024.
9 Güveli and Spierings 2022.
10 Elveren and Toksöz 2019; Van den Berg and Neels 2024.
11 Salikutluk, Giesecke and Kroh 2020.
12 Ibid.
13 Van den Berg and Neels 2024.
14 Mikolai et al. 2025.
15 Ibid.
16 TURKSTAT 2025b.
17 Güveli and Spierings 2022.
18 Ibid.
19 Güveli and Spierings 2022; Boztilki 2023.
20 Çitil-Akyol 2024.
21 TURKSTAT 2025a.
22 Metin 2023.
23 Ibid.
24 TURKSTAT has been publishing higher education brain drain statistics since October 2024, covering Turkish citizens who completed their undergraduate education in Türkiye and subsequently resided abroad for extended periods after graduation. The first dataset concerns the period between 2021 and 2023 (TURKSTAT, n.d.).
25 TURKSTAT 2024a.
26 Elveren and Toksöz 2017.
27 Özbilgin et al. 2025.
28 Özbilgin et al. 2025; GIGA 2022.
29 Kaya 2023.
30 Deutsche Welle 2024.
31 Eurostat, n.d.-b.
32 Elveren and Toksöz 2019.
33 Lüküslü 2024, pp. 2–3.
34 Ibid.
35 Çitil-Akyol 2024.
36 EUAA 2024.
37 OECD 2024a, pp. 40–42.
38 Göndemir 2024.
39 Educational Testing Service 2025.
40 UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.
41 Ibid.
42 İçduygu, Erder and Gençkaya 2014.
43 UN DESA 2024b, Table 1.
44 Migration and Diaspora Foundation 2024.
45 TURKSTAT 2024b. Note that the data also involve Turkish citizens moving back to Türkiye (as shown in Table 4.1), while for the purpose of this study, only foreign nationals are included in the analysis of immigration.
46 No disaggregated data exist on immigration by country of origin, sex and age, so the figures pertain to the total number of immigrants provided by TURKSTAT, including Turkish citizens.
47 Note that the same definition for 'foreign population' (provided above) is used for these calculations (i.e. Syrian nationals and foreign citizens with a duration of stay that is shorter than three months are excluded).
48 IOM 2025i.
49 A residence permit is obligatory for foreigners who stay in Türkiye for longer than 90 days. It also includes valid work permits and work permit exemption confirmation documents.
50 Migration Research Foundation 2025.
51 The top 10 nationalities enrolled in Turkish universities in 2021/22, according to the same report, were Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Somali, Syria, Turkmenistan, Jordan and Yemen.
52 Ibid.
53 Migration Research Foundation 2025.
54 Demirdizen 2013.
55 For a more detailed account of this process, see Demirdizen 2013.
56 Demirdizen 2013; Toksöz and Ünlütürk 2011.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 OECD 2025.
60 Demirdizen 2013; Toksöz and Ünlütürk 2011.
61 Akkoyun and Dalaman 2024.
62 Özbay 2012.
63 Deniz 2018.
64 Presidency of Migration Management, Ministry of Interior of Türkiye, n.d.-a.
65 Ibid. For the most recent information from IOM, see IOM 2025i.
66 IOM 2025j.
67 Ibid. For the most recent information from IOM, see IOM 2025i.
68 Ibid.
69 İçduygu, Erder and Gençkaya 2014.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 GRETA 2024.
73 Demirdizen 2013.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Mixed Migration Centre 2025b.
77 İçduygu, Erder and Gençkaya 2014.
78 Mixed Migration Centre 2025b.
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid. This is based on interview data with 2,694 Afghan and Syrian refugees and migrants moving through Iran, Türkiye and Greece throughout 2023, 2024 and early 2025, 19 per cent of whom were women.
81 Aksel and İçduygu 2019.
82 UNHCR 2025k.
83 Mülteciler Derneği 2025.
84 Presidency of Migration Management, Ministry of Interior of Türkiye, n.d.-b.
85 Mülteciler Derneği 2025.
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87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
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90 ICMPD 2025b.
91 IOM 2024a.
92 Akgündoğdu and Trissel 2023.
93 IOM 2024g.
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95 Kaya 2023.

96 Migration and Diaspora Foundation 2024.
97 UN Women 2019.
98 GRETA 2024.
99 Ibid.
100 Interview with SGDD-ASAM, November 2025.
101 Mavi Kalem 2024.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
104 Aybars 2024.
105 GRETA 2024.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
108 Kuloğlu 2020.
109 Ibid.
110 GRETA 2024.
111 United States Department of State 2024c.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 GRETA 2024.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Migrant Protection Platform 2013.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 OECD 2024b.
123 Dudu and Rojo 2023.
124 Güngör and Tansel 2014.
125 Elveren and Toksöz 2017.
126 IOM 2016b.
127 UNFPA 2023b.
128 Aydın et al. 2025.
129 IDMC 2025.
130 OECD 2024a, pp. 40–42.
131 Eraslan 2024.
132 Ibid.
133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 Aydın and Aytaç 2023.
136 Kaya 2023.
137 Williams, Coşkun and Kaşka 2020.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
141 Demirdizen 2013.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
144 Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation 2024.
145 Kıvılcım 2016.
146 Coşkun and Eski 2020.
147 Ibid.
148 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye, n.d.-a.
149 IOM 2016b.
150 Ibid.
151 Doğan and Buz 2026.
152 Ibid.

Chapter 5

1 IOM 2015b.
2 IOM 2016c; UN DESA 2024a.
3 National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, n.d.-b.
4 Centre for Economic Strategy 2025b.
5 Eurostat 2025a. Sex-disaggregated data are not available.
6 World Bank 2024c. This figure changed from 14 per cent to 10.5 per cent in Moldova, and from 10.4 per cent to 6.3 per cent in Ukraine between 2022 and 2024.
7 World Bank 2025a.
8 UN Women 2016.
9 Eurostat 2025a. Sex-disaggregated data are not available.
10 IOM 2024r.
11 Toc and Guțu 2021.
12 For the most recent information from IOM, see IOM 2025i.
13 Cojocaru 2021.
14 Parreñas 2012.
15 Bauer and Österle 2013.
16 Toc and Guțu 2021.
17 Eurostat 2025a.
18 IOM 2024r.
19 Kurbet et al. 2025.
20 UN Women 2022a.
21 Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency 2020.
22 Eurostat 2025a.
23 Stadniy 2025.
24 Hnatiuk 2018.
25 Stadniy 2025.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 UN Women 2024a.
32 Eurostat 2025a. Sex-disaggregated data are not available.
33 Toc and Guțu 2021.
34 OECD 2023b.
35 Panchenko 2023.
36 Charity Humanitarian Women Fund "Sukhumi" 2025.
37 IOM 2024s.
38 Centre for Economic Strategy 2025b.
39 Arroyo 2025.
40 Centre for Economic Strategy 2025a.
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44 National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, n.d.-b.
45 DMSU 2024.
46 IOM analysis of Government of Ukraine data on the number of foreigners and stateless persons temporarily residing in Ukraine by nationality and sex, 2024–2025.
47 Republic of Moldova 2025.
48 IOM 2024q.
49 Glavcom 2021.
50 National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, n.d.-a.

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52 Kholidniak 2025.
53 Cedos 2021.
54 National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, n.d.-a.
55 Ibid.
56 Radiomoldova 2023.
57 Ziarul de Gardă 2024.
58 CitizenMatch 2025.
59 IOM 2024q.
60 Mayerchyk, Plakhotnik and Yaremchyshyn 2025.
61 Glavcom 2021; TSN 2025.
62 Ukrainian Women's Fund 2025.
63 Council of Europe 2023b.
64 DMSU, n.d.
65 UNODC 2025.
66 Eurostat 2025b.
67 UNODC 2025.
68 Council of Europe 2023b.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
71 Andrews et al. 2023; OECD 2023b.
72 ICMPD 2025a.
73 UN Women 2022b.
74 IOM 2022e.
75 IOM 2024v.
76 IOM 2022e, 2024c, 2024v.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
79 IOM calculations based on IOM 2026a.
80 IOM calculations based on the IOM 2024 Crossings Back survey.
81 IOM 2022e, 2024c, 2024v.
82 Council of Europe 2023b.
83 UNODC 2025.
84 IOM 2022e.
85 IOM 2024v.
86 UNHCR 2025l.
87 UNDP 2024.
88 Federal Ministry of the Interior of Germany 2023.
89 UNHCR 2025h.
90 Ibid.
91 Federal Ministry of the Interior of Germany 2023.
92 UNHCR 2025h.
93 UNHCR 2025l.
94 UNHCR 2025e.
95 UNHCR 2021b.
96 Chargaziia and Panchenko 2025.
97 Adema et al. 2023.
98 UNDP 2024.
99 IOM calculations based on the IOM 2024 Crossings Back survey.
100 Ibid.
101 Chargaziia and Panchenko 2025.
102 OECD 2023b.
103 IOM calculations based on the IOM 2024 Crossings Back survey.
104 Ibid.
105 Liebig and Tronstad 2018.
106 Bazhenova 2023; UNFPA 2024d; Centre for Economic Strategy 2025a.
107 İneli-Ciger 2025.
108 GRETA 2025c.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
111 Government of the Republic of Moldova 2023.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 GRETA 2025c.
116 UNODC 2025.
117 OECD 2023b.
118 United Nations General Assembly 2022.
119 IOM 2015b.
120 UNODC 2025.
121 United States Department of State 2024e.
122 IOM 2021d.
123 IOM 2026c.
124 IOM 2025b.
125 Ibid.
126 IOM 2025p.
127 IOM 2026c.
128 Ibid.
129 IOM 2019a.
130 Ibid.
131 IOM 2025b.
132 IOM 2019a.
133 Ibid.
134 UN Women 2024c.
135 UN Women 2015a.
136 Council of Europe 2020.
137 IOM 2025p.
138 IOM 2025o.
139 Opendatabot 2025.
140 Vremis 2016.
141 IOM analysis of the IOM 2023 Returnees survey.
142 IOM 2026c.
143 IOM 2025q.
144 IOM 2025b.
145 UNFPA 2024e.
146 IOM 2025b.
147 IOM 2025q.
148 IOM 2025b.
149 Ibid.
150 Wahba 2026.
151 WECF 2023.
152 Oldaç 2023.
153 Siemens Stiftung 2024.
154 IOM 2021e.
155 WECF 2023.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 IOM 2025q.
159 UNDRR 2022.
160 IOM 2024f.
161 Republic of Moldova 2024.
162 IOM 2025a.
163 WWF 2024.
164 Explainer.ua 2025.
165 IOM 2025d.
166 Ibid.

167 UN Women 2023a.
168 Agtivate, n.d.
169 IOM 2024t.
170 Home page: EU4Climate Programme.
171 UNDP 2025b.
172 UN Women 2023a.
173 UNDP Ukraine 2024.
174 Prague Process 2024b; ETF 2024.
175 Ukraine Science Diaspora 2025.
176 Slovoidilo 2025.
177 European Union 2014a, 2014b.
178 OECD 2021.
179 UNESCO 2025.
180 European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training 2025.
181 IOM 2024q.
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183 UNFPA 2019.
184 Visit Ukraine 2024.
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid.
187 Europol 2023.
188 Frontex 2007.
189 Council of Europe 2011.
190 Federal Ministry of the Interior of Germany 2023.
191 ICMPD 2023b.
192 UNHCR 2025o.
193 CEDAW Committee 2022.
194 Government of Ukraine 2024.
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196 Ibid.
197 Government of the Republic of Moldova 2023.
198 OECD 2023b.
199 GRETA 2025c.
200 IOM 2024u.
201 United Nations Moldova 2021.
202 UNFPA 2024c.
203 UNFPA 2024b, 2025b.
204 UNFPA 2024c.
205 Andrle 2025.
206 Starodub 2025.
207 UN Women Ukraine 2025.
208 Green Climate Fund 2023; Government of the Republic of Moldova 2022.
209 IOM United Kingdom 2025.
210 Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2020.
211 IOM 2024b.

Chapter 6

1 UNDP Uzbekistan 2023.
2 IOM calculations based on IOM 2025m.
3 UN DESA 2024c.
4 IOM calculations based on IOM 2025l.
5 IOM calculations based on IOM 2026b.
6 IOM calculations based on IOM 2025m.
7 "Migration is a gendered process... there is a demand for women migrant workers in specific service sectors, such as domestic and care work" (UN Women 2020a).
8 World Bank 2024e.
9 Ibid.
10 UN Women 2020b.
11 IOM 2025f, p. 24.
12 UNESCAP 2025.
13 Ibid.
14 IBRD and World Bank 2024, pp.1–22; Eren-Benlisoy and Tuncer 2021.
15 Bossavie and Bartl 2024.
16 IOM 2025f.
17 APWLD 2022.
18 IOM 2025f.
19 UNESCAP 2025.
20 Ibid.
21 Bossavie et al. 2025.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 ICMPD 2024b; Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Insan-Leilek 2024.
25 Center for International Programs "Bolashak" 2025.
26 Rakhmonov 2024.
27 Ibid. (this tendency is more pronounced in traditional societies such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan); see also World Bank 2021.
28 Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022; UNICEF Uzbekistan 2019.
29 Coşkun and Rittersberger-Tılıç 2024; Jo 2018.
30 UN Women 2020b.
31 Ibid.
32 IOM 2021b, 2025f.
33 More detailed information is provided in section 6.5 on human trafficking.
34 UN Women 2025b; APWLD 2022.
35 UNICEF, n.d.
36 The Times of Central Asia 2025; UNICEF Kyrgyzstan 2020.
37 24.kg 2022.
38 IOM 2025f.
39 In Central Asia, administrative steps can raise the real cost of migration. For example, in Tajikistan the effective price of an international passport increases when applicants must make repeated trips to passport offices and regional centres to submit biometrics and collect documents. Historically, some states also required exit permits. This information is supported by interviews with experts in Kazakhstan and others (IOM 2018a).
40 Matusevich 2024; European Commission 2020; Kyrgyz Republic 2007b; Ibraeva and Ablezova 2016; European Commission 2021.
41 UN DESA 2024c; for national records: datasets available from national statistics offices.
42 Ibid.
43 ICMPD 2024b.
44 IOM 2024i.
45 UNHCR Tajikistan 2024.

46 UNHCR 2025c.
47 Ibid.
48 IOM 2024k, 2024l, 2024m.
49 IOM 2024p.
50 IOM calculations based on IOM 2025l.
51 IOM calculations based on IOM 2026b.
52 IOM calculations based on IOM 2025m.
53 Embassy of Uzbekistan in India 2023.
54 IOM 2025h.
55 Migration Data Portal 2022.
56 Winrock International and Freedom Collaborative 2023; FIDH 2016.
57 Turaeva and Urinboyev 2021.
58 Ibid. Also confirmed by an interview with a CSO representative in Kazakhstan working in the border region.
59 FIDH 2018.
60 This point is more relevant in the case of Kazakhstan. It is confirmed by numerous reports, studies and surveys. For example: Matusevich 2024; IOM 2025g.
61 Ibid. See also EBRD 2024a.
62 University of Central Asia 2024; Oshchepkov, Tilekeyev and Gerry 2024.
63 Krawatzek and Sasse 2024.
64 Ibid.
65 Krawatzek and Sasse 2024; EBRD 2024a.
66 University of Central Asia 2024; Oshchepkov, Tilekeyev and Gerry 2024.
67 Interview with the CSO representative in Kazakhstan working in the border region.
68 IOM 2023f.
69 IOM 2017.
70 Caspian Policy Center 2024.
71 Akchabar 2022; The Moscow Times 2022; VC.ru 2023.
72 United States Department of State, n.d.
73 Najibullah, Zarifi and Yusufzoda 2025.
74 National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic 2024, table 3.16 (reporting 184 persons convicted for "illegal crossing of the state border of the Kyrgyz Republic" in 2023, 259 in 2022, and 326 in 2021); Border Service of the National Security Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2024 (reporting that in 2023, the service detained 35,487 violators of Kazakh legislation in the border area, including 1,094 foreign nationals).
75 ICMPD 2024b.
76 IOM 2006.
77 Chatterjee 2021.
78 ICMPD 2024a.
79 EEAS 2019; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2023; UNDP 2025a; ICMPD 2024a.
80 OHCHR 2025.
81 Human Rights Watch 2020.
82 IOM 2020a; UNICEF Kazakhstan 2021; IOM 2020c.
83 University of Central Asia 2024.
84 University of Central Asia 2024; Krawatzek and Sasse 2024.
85 Human Rights Watch 2020.
86 Mixed Migration Centre 2025a; UN Women 2024b; EEAS 2019; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2023; UNDP 2025a; ICMPD 2024a.
87 UNHCR 2024e, 2025b.
88 WHO 2022.
89 IOM Tajikistan 2020; IOM 2020b, 2021a.
90 OHCHR 2025.
91 Based on the data provided by UNHCR. Data are provided for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan only.
92 UNHCR 2021a.
93 University of Central Asia 2024; Krawatzek and Sasse 2024.
94 Migration Policy Institute 2006.
95 Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund 2024.
96 Meduza 2023.
97 UNHCR 2024g.
98 UNHCR, n.d.-h.
99 UNHCR 2019b.
100 UNHCR Central Asia 2024a; ICMPD 2024a; UN Women Europe and Central Asia, IBC Gender and IBC LMPDR 2022.
101 UNHCR 2019a, 2023a, 2025b.
102 UNHCR 2019b.
103 There are no datasets that directly document GBV cases among displaced people and refugees in the region. The statement is an inference drawn from UNHCR and UNFPA guidance on GBV risk in displacement, as well as the presence of known risk factors in Central Asia such as precarious legal status, economic insecurity, language barriers and reliance on informal work.
104 UNODC 2024.
105 Danayeva 2025.
106 United States Department of State, n.d.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 United States Department of State 2024d, 2025.
115 From 2018 to 2023, Uzbekistan consistently had the highest number of its citizens identified as trafficking victims abroad among Central Asian states. IOM data (2018–2023) show 775 Uzbek victims assisted, the most from any single Central Asian country. Many are women trafficked to Kazakhstan, Russia, the Middle East or South Korea for sexual exploitation or domestic servitude. The Uzbek Government has stepped up efforts post-2020: in 2022, it reported identifying 219 victims, though details on gender were not given in the summary (IOM 2024j).
116 United States Department of State, n.d.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 UNODC 2008.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 WHO Regional Office for Europe 2023; ODIHR 2023.
124 UNODC 2023.
125 UNODC 2024.
126 United States Department of State, n.d.
127 Ibid.
128 Ibid
129 Human Rights Watch 2023a; OCHA 2022.
130 IFRC 2022b.
131 ADRC 2024.
132 IDMC 2023.
133 Human Rights Watch 2022.
134 IFRC 2022a.
135 IDMC 2023; Human Rights Watch 2023b.
136 GPPAC 2024.
137 ASTI and FTI 2024.
138 *Propiska* refers to the Soviet-era internal residence registration system. Individuals must register their place of residence with the authorities to access services such as healthcare, education, employment and social benefits.

139 IFRC 2022b.
140 UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2025.
141 Oshchepkov, Tilekeyev and Gerry 2024; Migration Data Portal 2024.
142 IOM 2024e.
143 Ibid.
144 World Bank 2025b.
145 UNDP Uzbekistan 2023 (section on recognizing competencies gained abroad and entrepreneurship and reintegration support); see also World Bank 2025b.
146 APWLD 2024; ADB 2021; IOM 2021e.
147 UNDP Uzbekistan 2023; World Bank 2025b; Government of Uzbekistan 2022.
148 UNICEF Uzbekistan 2019; UNICEF Tajikistan 2011.
149 USIP 2021.
150 Ibid.
151 UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2023.
152 Radio Azattyk (RFE/RL Kazakhstan) 2021a, 2021b.
153 In 2021–2022, the UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office commissioned a regional needs assessment on women returnees and their children in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.
154 Karin 2021; UNDP 2023g.
155 USIP 2021.
156 Kazinform 2025.
157 EBRD 2024b.
158 Ibid.
159 The Astana Times 2021b.
160 *Oralman* is a Kazakh term that was widely used to describe ethnic Kazakhs who returned ('repatriated') to Kazakhstan from other countries, usually through State-supported repatriation programmes after independence.
161 Sazanova 2021.
162 ICMPD 2025a.
163 CABAR.asia 2024a.
164 Ibid.
165 BBC News 2022.
166 Caspian Policy Center 2025.
167 Prague Process 2024c.
168 CABAR.asia 2024b.
169 World Bank 2023c.
170 ICMPD 2025a.
171 UNDP Europe and Central Asia 2024.
172 The Diplomat 2018.
173 Fallah et al. 2024.
174 Khitarishvili 2016.
175 IOM 2024x, pp. 165–195.
176 CIS Legislation 2017; Asia Plus 2024 (includes reference to organized recruitment agreements with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and construction projects).
177 Bossavie and Bartl 2024.
178 IOM 2025e; EEAS 2025.
179 Bossavie and Bartl 2024.
180 For example, in Tajikistan, stateless persons can apply for citizenship after just two and a half years of permanent residence. Kyrgyzstan offers a simplified path for stateless persons and others, including refugees and spouses of citizens. Uzbekistan provides a simplified procedure for stateless persons with an ancestral link to Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, a child born to one stateless parent and one citizen parent will be a citizen regardless of birthplace.
181 Republic of Kazakhstan 1991; Republic of Tajikistan 1995; Search for Common Ground 2021; Kyrgyz Republic 2007a; Republic of Uzbekistan 2020.
182 UNHCR Central Asia 2024b.
183 UNESCAP 2024.
184 UNHCR 2011, 2025p.
185 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2021.
186 The Diplomat 2022.
187 Tengrinews.kz 2021; Eurasianet 2021.
188 UNHCR 2024f; OHCHR 2024.
189 Republic of Kazakhstan 2009; UNHCR 2019c, 2025b.
190 UNHCR 2025b.
191 UNHCR 2025c.
192 United States Department of State, n.d.
193 Ibid.
194 UNHCR 2025b.
195 UNHCR 2023d.
196 Spotlight Initiative, UNFPA and UNDP 2024.
197 UNHCR 2025n.
198 Home page: Spotlight Initiative, the United Nations high-impact initiative to end violence against women and girls.
199 UNFPA 2024a; Spotlight Initiative 2023a.
200 Spotlight Initiative 2023b.
201 United States Department of State, n.d.
202 In July 2024, it adopted a stand-alone Law No. 110-VIII "On Combating Human Trafficking", establishing a unified legal framework for prevention, investigation, and prosecution, and guaranteeing victim identification and access to specialized support services such as psychological assistance, temporary accommodation, and reintegration support (Republic of Kazakhstan 2024).
203 OSCE 2025.
204 United States Department of State, n.d.
205 Ibid., country report on Uzbekistan.
206 Ibid., country report on Tajikistan.
207 Ibid. Kazakhstan TIP report mentions an inter-agency working group, hotline funding, and referral mechanisms; Kyrgyz Republic TIP report states that the government did not operate a trafficking-specific hotline and instead supported a labour hotline; Tajikistan TIP report mentions a 24-hour hotline operated with international support.
208 United States Department of State 2024b.
209 United States Department of State, n.d.
210 Hasan et al. 2025.
211 IOM 2022b.
212 Ibid.
213 IOM 2023h.
214 Government of Kazakhstan 2021 (the action plan includes an activity on developing methodological recommendations for rehabilitation and reintegration of women and children returned from Iraq and Syria); UNICEF Kazakhstan 2023.
215 UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2023 (frames the approach as age- and gender-sensitive; documents psychosocial support and social assistance; includes examples of vocational training and employment assistance for women/mothers in Uzbekistan's reintegration support package); USIP 2021.
216 Razdykova et al. 2024; Search for Common Ground 2021.
217 USIP 2021.
218 USIP 2021; UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2023.
219 UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2022; UNICEF Tajikistan 2024.
220 The Astana Times 2021a; Bondal 2021; Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kazakhstan 2020; USIP 2021; UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2023.

221 UNICEF Uzbekistan 2024.
222 UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office 2024.
223 UNICEF Kazakhstan 2023, 2025.
224 UN Women 2023a.
225 Ibid.
226 IOM 2012.
227 Gampp 2022.
228 By contrast, ethnic returnees, known as 'kandas' in Kazakhstan, are granted special support, but no such status exists for climate-displaced families.
229 Migration Data Portal 2025b; IOM 2024x.
230 UNODC 2024; United States Department of State 2024b.
231 UNICEF Syria 2025; OHCHR 2023.

Chapter 7

1 Bara et al. 2013.
2 UN DESA 2024a.
3 Armstat and IOM 2023.
4 IOM 2023d.
5 Eurostat 2024b.
6 Ibid.
7 Geostat 2025.
8 Armstat and IOM 2023.
9 Ibid.
10 UN DESA 2024c, Table 2.
11 Honorati and Bartl 2020.
12 Prague Process 2024a.
13 ICMPD 2023a.
14 IOM 2023d.
15 ETF 2024.
16 Eurostat 2024a.
17 World Bank 2024c.
18 Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa 2021.
19 Armstat and IOM 2023.
20 EVN Report 2024.
21 Hochschild 2000; Yeates 2009.
22 ETF 2013; Armstat and IOM 2023.
23 World Bank 2024b.
24 IOM 2023d.
25 Honorati and Bartl 2020.
26 Government of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2022.
27 UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2024a.
28 UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2024b.
29 Eurostat 2025a.
30 UN DESA 2024a.
31 Armstat and IOM 2023; IOM 2023d.
32 UN DESA 2024c, Table 1.
33 Ibid.
34 Armstat and IOM 2023.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 IOM 2024n.
38 Eurasianet 2023.
39 Ibid.
40 Armstat and IOM 2023.
41 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia 2024; United Nations Armenia 2025.
42 BBC News 2024; World Bank 2023b; ETF 2021.
43 IOM 2024h.
44 Mundo 2024.
45 IOM 2023d.
46 Ibid.
47 State Migration Service of Azerbaijan through the IOM Country Mission.
48 Ibid.
49 Armstat and IOM 2023.
50 IOM 2024n.
51 EMN 2025.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Korableva 2023.
58 UN Women 2025a.
59 UN Women 2022c.
60 KPMG 2025.
61 Ulrichs 2016.
62 IOM 2015a.
63 EMN 2023.
64 IOM 2023d.
65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.
67 EMN 2025.
68 IOM 2015a.
69 Armstat and IOM 2023.
70 IOM 2023d.
71 UNFPA 2024f.
72 OECD 2023a; ADBI 2021.
73 UNODC 2018.
74 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime 2023a.
75 European Commission 2025a.
76 IOM 2023d.
77 Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime 2023b.
78 ICMPD 2025a.
79 IOM 2021f.
80 Ibid.
81 UNDP 2024.
82 Council of Europe 2023a.
83 Ibid.
84 UNDP 2024.
85 Council of Europe 2023a.
86 IOM 2021f.
87 Ibid.
88 UNODC 2018.
89 Institute for Security Analysis 2023; EEAS 2023.
90 Amnesty International 2016.
91 Ibid.
92 UNHCR 2023c, 2024b.
93 UNHCR 2024b.
94 Ibid.
95 UNHCR 2024a, 2025d.
96 UNHCR 2023b; UN Women 2023b.
97 Ibid.
98 UNHCR 2024d.
99 UN Women and CARE Caucasus 2024.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 UNFPA Armenia and Women's Fund Armenia 2024.
103 Ibid.
104 UNHCR 2023e.
105 Women's Resource Center 2023.
106 UNFPA 2023a; International Planned Parenthood Federation 2023; Women's Resource Center 2023.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Women's Fund Armenia 2023.
110 Ibid.
111 UNHCR 2024b.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 UNHCR 2024a, 2025d.
115 UNHCR 2024b.
116 UNHCR 2025d.
117 Ibid.
118 Compared to 148,024 refugees in Armenia, which was reported by UNHCR in February 2025 (UNHCR 2025d), Azerbaijan hosted a more modest number of 8,087 refugees in September 2024 (UNHCR 2024c).
119 UNHCR 2024c.
120 Ibid.
121 IOM 2023d.
122 UNHCR, n.d.-f.
123 IOM 2023d.
124 UNHCR 2024c.
125 Ibid.
126 UNHCR, n.d.-b.
127 IOM 2023d.
128 United States Department of State 2024a.
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