



## BRIEFING PAPER

# SEX MATTERS

A gender perspective on internal displacement

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## INTRODUCTION

Internal displacement impacts the livelihood, health, access to housing, infrastructure and education, security, social life and environment of all people affected by it.<sup>1</sup> Yet men, boys, women, girls and people from sexual minority groups suffer from uneven repercussions in each of these areas.

Building on a review of nearly 1,000 publications, this paper presents some of the most frequently reported gender inequalities linked with internal displacement and calls for better disaggregation of all related data and research.

Bridging this knowledge gap is essential to propose tailored solutions for internally displaced men, women, boys, girls and people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ), to mitigate the damages caused by internal displacement on society as a whole.

## DISPLACED MEN AND BOYS

Men and boys are affected in specific ways by the loss of livelihood, disruption of social life and degradation of living conditions that can result from internal displacement.

Across the world, men are often the main bread winners in their families. When their habitual source of income becomes inaccessible, they may undertake dangerous coping strategies to meet the needs of their families and to survive.

Men and boys are especially at risk of recruitment by armed groups in situations of conflict or violence-related displacement. Young displaced Iraqis and Ukrainians have been reported to have enrolled in armed groups in exchange for a salary, as no other livelihood opportunities were available.<sup>2</sup> Forced recruitment of internally displaced men and boys increases insecurity for the entire community, in turn fostering more displacement.

*“My husband was forced to join a paramilitary group at the age of thirteen. He was demobilized as a result of the Peace and Justice law of 2005, and was able to return to school. He wanted to become a doctor, but former members of the paramilitary started putting pressure on him to join them again. He refused, and they killed his father and grandfather. To protect himself, he was forced to join a different armed group.”*

*Testimony by an internally displaced woman in Colombia, November 2018.*

In Ukraine and Iraq, actual or perceived association of men with conflict has been found to lead host communities to be less welcoming to them than to displaced women and children.<sup>3</sup>

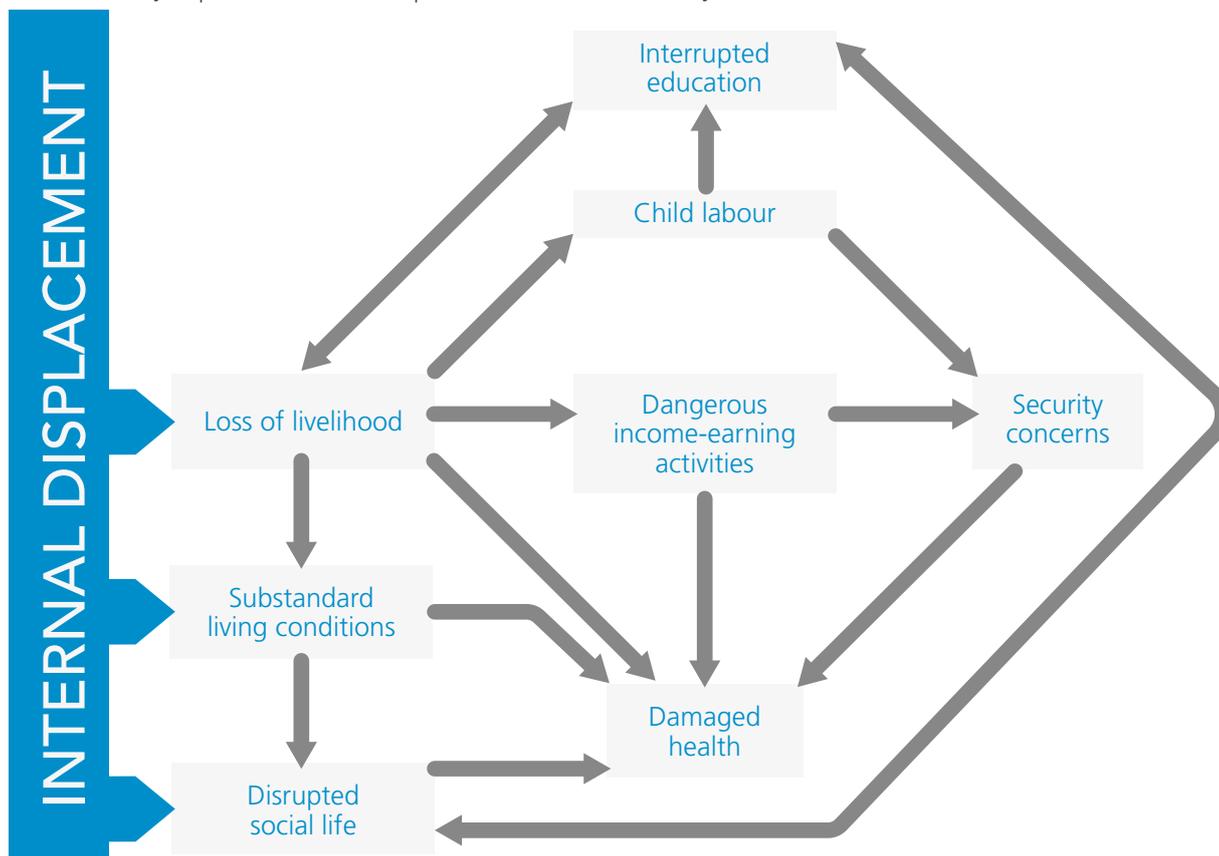
School-age boys may also have to engage in child labour to help their family to survive, interrupting their education and jeopardising their future livelihood. In Afghanistan, having to work is the most frequent reason for displaced boys to be out of school.<sup>4</sup> Child labour is also reported as a barrier to education in Iraq.<sup>5</sup>

Men have been found at higher risk of some certain conditions associated with internal displacement. In Pakistan, a much higher prevalence of Hepatitis B was found in older internally displaced men than in displaced children or women. This was linked with the sharing of razor blades, syringes and other items, along with unsafe sexual activities and the overall poor socioeconomic conditions of IDPs.<sup>6</sup>

Men also seem more vulnerable to an increased consumption of alcohol in situations of displacement.<sup>7</sup> Men are consistently found to drink more than women in all countries, but the stress, trauma and challenges of internal displacement can heighten their consumption. A survey conducted in Georgia amongst IDPs and returnees showed that 71 per cent of men reported drinking, compared with 16 per cent of women.<sup>8</sup> Another study from Uganda also highlighted higher prevalence of harmful alcohol use for men.<sup>9</sup>

All of these effects of internal displacement act as aggravating factors on each other, as illustrated in Figure 1. If the specific needs and vulnerabilities of displaced men and boys are not considered in response plans, they may worsen over time and affect the welfare and wellbeing of entire families. One study linked for instance the degradation of displaced men’s status, through loss of work, home and social ties, to an increase in violence inflicted upon displaced women.<sup>10</sup>

FIGURE 1: Key impacts of internal displacement on men and boys







*An indigenous community leader defending the rights of Adivasi people from the Ho tribe at risk of displacement by a dam in Jharkhand, India, is honoured at the International Women's Day celebration in Ranchi. Photo: IDMC/Marita Swain, March 2016*

Displaced and returning women in Nigeria, Georgia and Ethiopia are also more vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety than displaced men or non-displaced women.<sup>22</sup> Mental distress has been linked with the disruption of social life, increased risk of violence and poor living conditions, including lack of privacy and hygiene facilities in substandard settlements. The latter can also lead to menstrual irregularities, reproductive tract infection, pelvic pain or dysmenorrhea.<sup>23</sup>

Internally displaced women living in insecure shelter are at higher risk of sexual violence. In some displacement camps where men and women are separated, women can no longer be protected by the men in their family and community, leaving them at higher risk of and with reduced protection from sexual and other violence by camp officials or hosts.<sup>24</sup> Women and girls are also at risk of attacks when they leave the camp to carry out tasks often expected of them, such as collecting water or firewood.<sup>25</sup>

Women and girls who return home after having been displaced often face stigmatisation in their community of origin because of common knowledge of the prevalence of sexual violence. They are considered tainted because community members assume they have been raped, even if they have not.<sup>26</sup>

Violence against women can also take other forms. The most commonly reported gender-based violence in the displaced population in Colombia is inflicted by intimate partners, including forced sex and forced abortions, control over

contraception and physical violence during pregnancy.<sup>27</sup> More than half of displaced Colombian women have experienced domestic violence, compared with 41 per cent of non-displaced women.<sup>28</sup> In Afghanistan, two thirds of displaced women reported domestic violence. More than 12 per cent said it occurred more often than before their displacement.<sup>29</sup>

The consequences of displacement can last for a lifetime, especially when it interrupts education and limits future opportunities. In Mogadishu, Somalia, only 22 per cent of the internally displaced girls over five years old have ever attended school, compared with 37 per cent of boys in the same age group.<sup>30</sup> In Kosovo however, a strong focus on the need to provide primary education in displacement camps led to an increase in primary school enrolment rates for girls. This trend was not reflected in secondary school, where girls were less likely to complete their studies and gain qualifications than boys.<sup>31</sup>

The disadvantages suffered by displaced women and girls reinforce each other in a vicious circle of lasting vulnerability, as is the case with the impacts of internal displacement on men and boys. Even though evidence seems to show that women and girls are often the largest group in internally displaced populations, their specific needs are not systematically addressed. Failing to do so can result in a loss of human development for them, their children and their community as a whole.

## IDPS FROM SEXUAL MINORITIES

In all regions of the world, people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ) face specific challenges and suffer from formal or informal discrimination. Gender-based violence has even been reported as a cause of urban displacement in Colombia, Guatemala and El Salvador.<sup>32</sup>

The disruption to social life that results from internal displacement is particularly harmful for people from sexual minorities, as they often rely heavily on community for support, information and access to livelihoods or housing. Added to the loss of home and livelihood, it can push them into severe deprivation and vulnerability to abuse and violence. Figure 3 summarises the most widely and regularly documented impacts of internal displacement on LGBTIQ communities, where loss of livelihood, shelter and social life can ripple through to affect security and health.

Limited research has been conducted on IDPs who identify as LGBTIQ, but several studies point to their extreme impoverishment. In India, intergender people displaced by the 2004 tsunami were denied access to shelters and emergency assistance because their appearance did not match the gender on their identity cards.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in Pakistan, transgender people displaced by the 2011 floods were unable to access aid because they lacked identity cards.<sup>34</sup>

Failure to include tailored support in response plans can force IDPs from sexual minorities to hide their gender or take on a

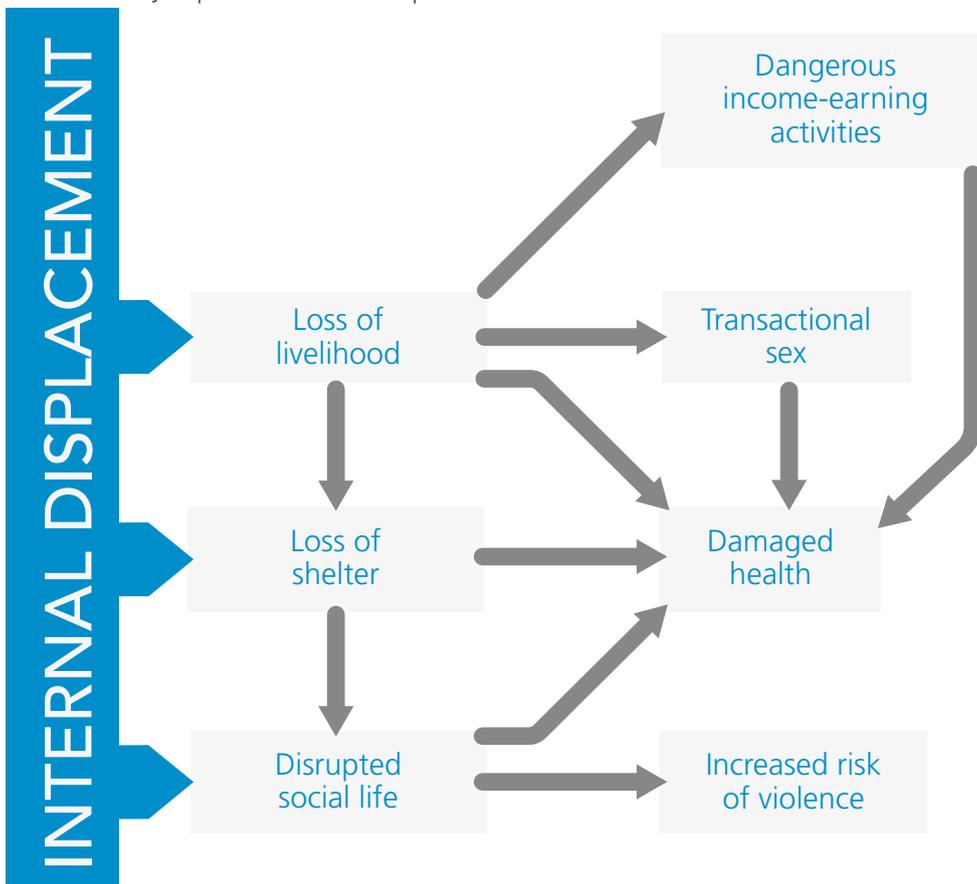
different persona to survive. This makes it even more challenging for aid providers to support them adequately, as they become virtually invisible.

In Haiti, some gay and transgender people were reported to dress as women to access food rations that were handed to women only, and dress as men to access emergency housing, healthcare and livelihood support.<sup>35</sup> Some lesbian, bisexual or transsexual women felt unsafe during food aid distributions where they feared gender-based violence triggered by the nervous crowd.<sup>36</sup> In Ukraine, some internally displaced gay men have lied about their family life to obtain work or housing.<sup>37</sup>

Access to housing is especially challenging for IDPs from sexual minorities. A study conducted in Colombia, Kenya, Haiti, and Thailand found that displacement sites were consistently unable to meet the specific needs of LGBTIQ individuals. Only two out of 39 studied sites were able to report that they had sheltered LGBTIQ persons. Additionally, the attitude of staff was deemed unwelcoming by IDPs from sexual minorities.<sup>38</sup>

Another publication reported that a displacement site in Kenya refused to house them, while those who found shelter in Colombia were forced to hide their identity for fear of violence.<sup>39</sup> Interviews conducted with IDPs from sexual minorities in Ukraine showed that they were anxious about sharing accommodation with heterosexual and cisgender people and concealed their identity to avoid abuse and harassment by other residents.<sup>40</sup> In temporary settlements after Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, IDPs from sexual minorities reported

FIGURE 3: Key impacts of internal displacement on IDPs from sexual minorities





*“In the east, it’s not possible to be open, you lead a hidden life.” Olena Shevchenko, director of the Ukrainian LGBTI organisation Insight, stands in front of a mural of the activist Serhiy Nigoyan in Heavenly Hundred Square in Kyiv. Olena’s NGO provides shelter and legal aid for gay Ukrainians and has been inundated with people internally displaced by conflict in the east. Photo © UNHCR/Anastasia Vlasova, July 2017*

discriminatory comments and difficulties accessing sanitation facilities, as well as exclusion from aid.<sup>41</sup>

The risk of gender-based violence increases in times of displacement for people from sexual minorities, as it does for women and girls. In Honduras, IDPs who belong to sexual minority groups fear violence from gangs and from the police, and were found in need of dedicated protection measures.<sup>42</sup> In Colombia, displaced members of the LGBTIQ community experience higher rates of sexual and physical abuse and were at a greater risk of contracting HIV than non-displaced members.<sup>43</sup>

*“When I was sixteen, pamphlets were disseminated in my neighbourhood by a paramilitary group, demanding the departure of all members of the LGBT community. My name was included in the pamphlets, so I had little choice but to flee. Since then, I have been displaced multiple times. Sometimes, I am forced to have sexual relations in exchange for “permission” to stay – permissions that are then always revoked. In my current host community, I am still threatened. Opportunities for employment are limited as a result of discrimination. In the past, I have been forced to sell sex to survive.”*

*Testimony from a self-identifying transgender IDP in Colombia, November 2018.*

As a result of accumulated trauma, internally displaced LGBTIQ people suffer from serious mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>44</sup> Displacement can also prevent their access to hormone therapy that may be overlooked in emergency healthcare plans, as was the case after the 2011 earthquake in Japan.<sup>45</sup>

All aspects of the life of people who identify neither as a man nor a woman are disproportionately affected by internal displacement, creating irremediable risks to their integrity, their wellbeing and even their life.

## CONCLUSION

Even though research and practice has highlighted the specific needs of men, boys, women, girls and people from sexual minorities in internal displacement situations, few data publishers provide information by gender. This lack of data disaggregation prevents governments and aid providers from tailoring their support to IDPs for more efficiency.

Demographic models can help estimate the number of women and men in a displaced population by assuming that their distribution is the same as in the national population. But case studies have shown that this is not always true: men are sometimes engaged in conflict, injured or dead, or prompted to move abroad to earn an income for their family. As a result, women, older people and children are often overrepresented in IDP groups. As for LGBTIQ people, statistics at national level are extremely rare as most countries do not recognise their distinct identity.

Primary data collection in internal displacement crises must therefore systematically include gender, as it should include other characteristics such as age or disability, which can help plan better responses. This should be done in full protection of sensitive information so as to avoid further discrimination, especially for sexual minority groups.

This would be in line with the world's commitment to monitor progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals by increasing the availability of data by gender and migratory status, under target 17.18 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.<sup>46</sup> For this to happen, however, governments and their partners must first act on the equal right of all IDPs to receive adequate support.

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*Internally displaced boys in Mpati, North Kivu. Many internally displaced children miss out on education and boys often end up being recruited by armed groups. The Mpati area is currently under the control of armed groups. Photo: NRC/Christian Jepsen, March 2017*

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Cover photo: Maritza, an internally displaced woman, gives a workshop to a group of neighbors about women's health and assistant programs available to them in Buenaventura, Colombia. She is part of the "Butterfly network", described as a 'protection network of women helping women within the armed conflict.' Photo © UNHCR/Juan Arredondo, August 2014

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