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POLICY BRIEF
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Global South Reflections and Recommendations on Gender and Geopolitics

Overview

In 2024, UNHCR reported a 50% increase in instances of gender-based violence against displaced women and girls.[1] Most forced migrants who experience gender-based violence (GBV) live in the Global South, but the control over funding to address this growing challenge of gender protection comes from states in the Global North. Many of these states are changing their understanding of what lies at the heart of gender protection challenges. Populist politics have emerged as a force against gender-informed policies and programming, threatening to erode decades of progress. Given today's rapidly changing policy positions on humanitarian funding, shifting power dynamics in the international system, and gender being interpreted in a reductionist and binary manner, it is essential to consider what these trends mean for the future of gender in global refugee policy.

In response, the IDRC Research Chairs Network on Forced Displacement hosted a webinar in March 2025 entitled Gender, Geopolitics and Forced Displacement: Global South Perspectives. The webinar featured two IDRC Chairs, Paula Banerjee (Thailand)[1] and Mary Setrana (Ghana),[2] as well as Susan Martin, Donald G. Herzberg Professor Emerita of International Migration at Georgetown University. The speakers reflected on the relationships between gender, geopolitics, and the future of gender in a discussion on forced displacement policy, specifically from Global South perspectives. This policy brief outlines the main themes of the webinar and key recommendations that emerged.

Debates, Critiques and Challenges: Perspectives from the Global South

1. Essentializing 'women' and a reductionist interpretation of gender in a binary:

One of the biggest challenges for addressing gender in forced displacement policies is the restrictive understanding of 'gender' and how it is still defined mostly within the binary concept of men and women. Even though UNHCR policies have evolved to recognize gender as an important factor in displacement, global approaches continue to essentialize 'women' within the boundaries of cultures, oversimplifying women's diverse experiences and realities as mere victims, and mostly ignoring the vulnerabilities of the other marginalized gender groups. It is undeniable that women form most of the gender-minorities within displaced populations, and their vulnerabilities are more visible when compared to other gender-vulnerable groups, such as those who identify as LGBTQI+. Increasingly, 'gender' is being replaced by 'women'. These biases and limited understanding of gender reflect on policies and their implementation. Moreover, women from the Global South are typically understood and represented through a neo-imperial frame as disempowered, helpless 'victims' or part of 'vulnerable categories', lacking agency, who need

[1] https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/explainer_unhcr_route_based_approach.pdf
[2] IDRC Research Chair, Professor, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand
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to be rescued from their 'backward' cultures and become objects of development. The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees does not consider gender-based persecution as grounds for refugee status. There have been many efforts to change that, but many governments still do not recognize gender-based violence or persecution as a legitimate cause for people to be forced to flee. Gender stereotypes influence restrictive asylum policies, which make it harder for women, girls and LGBTQI+ people who are fleeing gender-based persecution to access safer routes, protection, and support. For example, at the regional level, research from Ghana shows how the African Union member states are limited in addressing the gendered impact on displaced populations. Among members of the African Union, 48 member states signed and ratified the 1951 Convention, while 8 member states have only signed but not ratified. However, most member states do not address the gender-specific needs of forcibly displaced people: only 6 countries have integrated gender dimensions in their policies on displacement.

2. Understanding the relationship between gender and inequality

Critics argue that even though gender has evolved as a useful lens for advancing protection and rights, it is limited in its impact without challenging structural inequality.[1] Gender-biased and gender-blind policies impose stressful, risky displacement options rather than facilitating safe, orderly, and regular migration for women and gender minorities. Current policies neglect gender and power inequalities, considering displacement realities, particularly in the Global South, which hosts most of the world's displaced populations, including the most vulnerable and unequal groups, such as women and gender minority groups. Displacement is highly gendered, and gender inequality is shaped by factors like race, class, education, and economic status, among others. However, international policies often overlook gender inequality as a fundamental cause of displacement. Inequalities in economic opportunity, political and social access, social security, and susceptibility to violence all contribute to the forced displacement of many women and gender minorities. The lack of financial, human, or social resources needed to move with agency restricts one's destination choices or routes.

Policies in many destination countries tend to be highly gendered in terms of refugee and asylum seeker protection. For instance, family reunification remains a primary route, while options like temporary work permits or programmes for caregivers or domestic workers and access to asylum are few and often inadequate for women and gender minorities. Research from Ghana highlights the gendered impact of 'externalization' policies on the protection of forcibly displaced persons in the Global South. Africa, generally, and West Africa, specifically, have been major targets for the externalization of European refugee policies and border regimes. The resulting refugee and mobility policies challenge international refugee protection, thereby exposing refugees and other forcibly displaced persons, especially women, girls, and children, to diverse forms of discrimination, abuses, and exploitation. The gendered impact of externalization policies is increased violence, which in turn increases vulnerability and unequal power relations. There is an increase in gender-based violence as the securitized borders resulting for externalization policies make the situation worse for women fleeing conflict at the borders.

3. Gender, Geopolitics and Displacement: Feminization of risks and masculinization of borders:

Feminist perspectives on gender, geopolitics, and displacement have challenged the gendered assumptions and stereotypes in the policy-making spaces of forced displacement. These assumptions and stereotypes of gender are seen at work in national and foreign

[4] Brück, Tilman, Lucia C. Hanmer, Jeni Klugman, and Diana J. Arango. "Gender dimensions of forced displacement: a brief review and introduction to the special issue." The Journal of Development Studies 60, no. 12 (2024): 1839-1851.
Ekanayake, A., Lakshman, R., Blitz, B. K., Aghapouri, J., Javed, A., Malik, M., & Rahim, K. (2023). Gender and Forced Displacement in Humanitarian Policy Discourse: The Missing Link. Journal on Migration and Human Security, 11(3), 243-260. https://doi.org/10.1177/23315024231189487

policies, which create the feminization of risks and the masculinization of borders. The implications of militarized notions of territorial citizenship, using masculinist ideas of power, security, and victimhood, are that woman and vulnerable groups, like LGBTQI+ persons, become more vulnerable.

Modern warfare disproportionately affects women in death, displacement, and disenfranchisement. Geopolitical violence is both spatial and sexual, and gendered violence is made invisible by masculinist metrics of conflict. Women are not only the collateral damage in conflict but have become the core battleground. Geopolitical shifts in the post-Cold War world have seen a new reconfiguration of power in this world where 'statecraft' functions through the control of bodies, not just maps. The masculinization of the border creates masculine spaces where capital is encouraged to flow, but bodies are not.In such situations, bodies become contested grounds. As 'alien bodies' are created as subjects of scrutiny, it is not surprising that these alien bodies are always coming from the Global South. As securitized borders perform masculine virility through the exercise of power and control, gender plays a crucial role in these power dynamics and shifts at the borders where the migrant women's gendered bodies are doubly marked – as aliens and as women. In the post-pandemic world, institutionally made borders are increasingly masculinized, where women, minorities and indigenous people have been clumped together to build a south-within-the south. They form the lowest rung in the hierarchy of power at the borders.

Recommendations for Policy Makers and Implementing Stakeholders

Understand the biopolitics and geopolitics of forced displacement beyond the binaries of gender

The challenge lies in connecting geopolitics with gender, intersecting with class, race, and religion. Changes in national and global policies relating to refugees and forced migration must be imagined beyond the concept of the binary of 'sex/gender' system, essentializing 'women' as passive victims without any agency and understanding gendered inequality as the root cause of vulnerability of women and other gender minorities experiencing displacement. Special care and attention must be paid to the LGBTQI+ communities because of their multiple marginalizations resulting in various forms of harm, including physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual assault, bullying, and discrimination, that are their lived realities in most countries in the world, especially in the Global South. This policy process must involve a compassionate understanding of the multifaceted interplay of personal vulnerabilities and systemic factors while ensuring protection and prevention of gender-based violence, as well as gendered inequalities. An active role for rassroots organizations, like civil society organizations (CSOs) and displaced-led organizations, can be the key to effectively advocating for the rights of people on the periphery.

Advance gender equality through policy reforms

Recognizing and addressing inequality as the root cause of gendered violence and discrimination must be at the core of all policies. Policy reform based on gender analysis is essential. Reform efforts should be focused on a) policy and practice to stop all forms of gender based violence and sexual exploitation of women, and other gender vulnerable minorities; b) providing quality education, reproductive health and rights services, and empowerment, including through financial independence; c) investing in resilience-building development programs; d) reinforcing the need to consult with displaced women and gender-vulnerable groups; e) reinventing international cooperation in sharing responsibilities in reducing vulnerability of displaced women and minorities; reducing protracted displacement and finding durable solutions; and f) closing the gap between rhetoric and realities in ensuring the participation of women and all gender minorities in decision making processes.

Include the demilitarization and de-masculinization of borders in peacebuilding processes

Since most forced migration takes place in the Global South, it is essential to address the geopolitical shifts of power and new configurations regionally, as these have maximum consequences on women and other vulnerable minorities. In situations of wars and conflicts, biopolitics and geopolitics connection and analysis must be the basis for policy making because women and children rank very high in the list of casualties of wars. De-masculinization of discourses and languages defining sovereignty, borders and demonization of refugees and migrants can change gendered policies and treatments for women and other minorities who are forcibly displaced. Feminist cartographers can contribute to exposing the state's fear of the mobile, maternal and the multiple. It can help reimagine borders not as fences but filters of care, and work towards spatial justice. To destabalize masculinist security logic and demilitarize migration discourse, feminist ethics must be embedded into border policy.

Incorporate feminist theory, knowledge, and ethics in policy

Feminist theories and grounded knowledge must play a significant role in forced migration discourse, policy and practice. Feminists have a history of ensuring that discussions around gender include necessary consideration of, and problematizing, the special and diverse needs and situations of women and gender minorities, the importance of sex segregated data for comparison between gender identities, the importance of addressing structural and systemic gender inequalities, and the critical importance of engaging with intersectional analysis to better understand vulnerability and resilience. Evidence-based knowledge on gendered experiences of displacement will help to move away from a binary concept to allow more nuanced interpretations of gendered relations. The feminine and feminist knowledge is a powerful tool when and if women and gender minorities participate in global forums and negotiation tables, especially in refugee and forced displacement policy spaces. The reality, however, is that women and gender minorities are patronized, infantilized, and not taken seriously as political agents. The expertise of women and gender minorities can play critical roles in finding new, effective responses to the challenges of displacement and in resolving the root causes of displacement itself.

This Policy Brief is a result of ***Gender, Geopolitics and Forced Displacement: Global South Perspectives,*** webinar organized by IDRC Research Chairs Network on Forced Displacement, 27 March, 2025.

Listen to the full webinar here: https://carleton.ca/fd-chairs-net/?p=1351

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The IDRC Research Chairs Network on Forced Displacement is a community of twelve scholars based at universities in countries experiencing mass displacement working to reframe the narrative of forced displacement and transforming the field of forced migration studies to mainstream Global South perspectives.
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