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WOMEN AND GIRLS SUFFER MOST IN A WORLD FORCED TO MOVE

Asian Institute of Technology & Canada's IDRC launch Center on Gender and Forced Displacement

By Shawn Kelly

Around the world, people are increasingly moving – but not for the right reasons. From the U.S. border with Mexico, to the Mediterranean Sea and across the myriad frontiers and borders of Asia, the number of people forced to flee their homes stands at the highest level since records began, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees confirms.

According to the UNHCR, forced displacement “occurs when individuals and communities have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of events or situations such as armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights abuses, natural or man-made disasters, and development projects.”

At the end of 2021, the total number of people worldwide who were forced to flee their homes was 89.3 million, up 8 per cent on a year earlier and well over double the figure of 10 years ago, according to UNHCR's Global Trends report.

In fact, UNHCR estimates that over 100 million people are now forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, economic hardships, climate change and prolonged instances of political fragility. In 2023, 117.2 million people will be forcibly displaced or stateless, according to UNHCR's estimations.

Asia and the Pacific hosts 19% of the world's refugee population and 55% of the world's stateless popula-

tion. The number of displaced and stateless people in Asia and the Pacific reached 11.3 million people at the end of 2021.

New AIT Center on Gender and Forced Displacement

To strengthen knowledge, evidence-based application and leadership in the Global South on the forced displacement issue, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Gender and Development Studies (GDS) program at the Asian Institute of Technology in Thailand have teamed up to launch a new Research Chair and Center on Gender and Forced Displacement (CGFD).

Professor Paula Banerjee, a renowned scholar on gender, migration, and forced displacement, will lead the center as its director and IDRC-funded Research Chair Professor at AIT. She aims to generate locally-led, context-informed, multi-disciplinary and gender responsive knowledge on forced displacement in South and Southeast Asia, to inform policies at national, regional, and global levels.

“The inauguration of the Center and the Research Chair Professor signifies a crucial advancement in tackling the gender aspects of forced displacement in the region,” AIT President Kazuo Yamamoto said, at the Center's launch on 9 May 2023.

Canada's Ambassador to Thailand, Cambodia and Laos Dr. Sarah Taylor commented on the post-Covid patterns of increased risks for Rohingya and many



Canadian Ambassador Dr. Sarah Taylor (above, left) speaking at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand in Bangkok.

The ambassador was joined by AIT President Prof. Kazuo Yamamoto and Mr. Kundan Mishra, Senior Program Officer for Democracy and Inclusive Governance, IDRC.

other displaced persons around sexual harassment, rape and trafficking into the sex trade, for vulnerable women who are often travelling alone in the region. "The gender differences certainly bring with it different patterns and profile of the risks," she noted.

"For the Government of Canada, this initiative sits at the intersection of a number of our key priorities, not least because our international assistance policy is explicitly feminist and our foreign policy is for that matter," Ambassador Taylor said. "The plight of the growing number of forcibly displaced populations, most of them in the Global South, is a top concern for Canada."

Complementing AIT, the ambassador informed that the financial commitment of 1 million dollars from Ottawa-based IDRC will support two hubs in Thailand, at Chiang Mai University and AIT, to address forced displacement in the region.

"It also includes a five-year commitment to amplify the work of the individual chair professors and centers of forced displacement to increase their impact, both nationally and globally, in partnership with Carleton University in Canada's capital," Ambassador Taylor said.

The project is part of a global IDRC initiative on forced displacement that funds a total of eight research chairs in established universities in four different areas of the world. IDRC funds research and innovation as part of Canada's foreign affairs and development efforts.

Dying To Live

Recently arrived in Bangkok, Prof. Banerjee aims to fill the existing research gap on important drivers of forced displacement in the region and offer appropriate policy recommendations.

The scholar's work will cover both internal and cross-border mobility of people caused by displace-

ment, and will place gender as the main research focus. Other research objectives include evaluating political trends, climate change and investments and analyzing existing policy responses to forced displacement at different jurisdictional levels.

Delivering a talk at the launch event in Bangkok titled "Dying to Live," Prof. Banerjee posed a cutting question: "Why do the displaced have to die to live?" A powerful orator, she challenged perceived narratives, saying "displacement might lead to human vulnerability but more importantly vulnerability leads to displacement." Put bluntly – "only vulnerable people get displaced. The powerful merely move," she said.

The former president of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) has studied the issue for decades and doesn't hold back when pinpointing power dynamics as a prime culprit, in her view. "There is usually a power hierarchy," she says, "and the powerful decide to displace the powerless, who they then mark as aliens unworthy of support."

A fierce advocate for their struggle, she went on: "Displaced persons are only remarkable in their death. In life they are inconsequential. The displaced die because they are willing to face all odds so that they can live. Their struggles are markers of their courage and not intransigence."

Women Hardest Hit, Especially During Crises

Prof. Banerjee underscored that in situations of displacement, neither men nor women are winners, but women's lives become dramatically more endangered as a result of displacement.

Women are disproportionately vulnerable to different kinds of crises and displacement risks, and are significantly more at risk than their non-displaced counterparts. These inequalities are born out of regular socio-political disparities which are exacerbated during periods of crisis, she stated. As such, women's work sectors need to be increasingly formalised to



ensure socioeconomic security in times of crisis, she recommended.

“Displaced women are frequently robbed of their livelihood, they lack adequate access to health and education, and they are significantly more exposed and vulnerable to violence – physical, sexual, verbal and mental.”

To aid women in times of crisis, she called for sex-disaggregated data collection and gender-sensitive disaster planning that takes into account the voices of women in Asia.

“Women’s voices should be actively included in disaster preparedness plans and repatriation efforts. Emergency efforts should take into consideration the vulnerabilities and specific needs of women, in addition to general aid,” Prof. Banerjee concluded.

Research in Asia Surprisingly ‘Gender Blind’

Assoc. Prof. Phillippe Doneys, a Canadian expert at the AIT Gender and Development Studies program, said plenty of research exists in Asia regarding the multiple pressures that drive forced displacement. “Yet responses and research remain surprisingly gender blind,” he said. “Data available is often not gender-disaggregated, undermining our ability to understand and research gender dimensions of forced displacement.”

Dr. Doneys explained the need “to understand how gender influences or intersects with other forms of social differentiations, including displacement experience and impact on diverse ethnic and indigenous communities, sexual and gender identity groups, or different caste categories, among other social groups.”

He pointed out that lack of data can result in questionable policy responses, with governments in the region showing a tepid commitment to gender, with vague and general pronouncements.

According to Dr. Doneys, scholars in the Global North dominate research that influences policy and practice on forced displacement. “This means local knowledge from the Global South is underutilized in decision making, and existing research on displacement has produced some poor policy responses to improve gender equality.”

Moving forward, gender and development scholars at AIT say the center will build and expand networks for research capacity development in Asia. “We hope to make this process a multi-stakeholder initiative, working in partnership with other universities, governments, the UN system, international, national and local nongovernmental organizations, as well as community-based organizations and representatives of displaced people and groups,” Dr. Doneys said.

Contact:

Prof. Paula Banerjee, Director and IDRC Research Chair Professor, Center on Gender and Forced Displacement (CGFD)

Gender and Development Studies (GDS): Department of Development and Sustainability
Asian Institute of Technology, P.O. Box 4, Klong Luang, Pathumthani, Thailand

Email: paula@ait.asia, gendev@ait.asia

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Prof. Paula Banerjee (above) and expert speakers at the FCCT.



Shawn Kelly is Executive Director of International and Public Affairs at the Asian Institute of Technology