



# THE JOURNAL OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT

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## EDITORIAL

### Forced Migration and Displacement: Impact on Women

**Seema Shekhawat, PhD (Guest Editor)<sup>1</sup>**

As the guest editor of this special issue, I am thrilled to present an assortment of articles exploring the intersection of gender and displacement. Situated in various conflict situations the articles have focused on variegated experiences of displaced women: while some of them have prioritized the gendered challenges in conflicts others have focused on the narratives of resurgence, resilience and survival.

Displacement is an all-pervasive phenomenon particularly in the developing world. The last few decades provide ample testimony to it. The complex story of displacement does not end at leaving the conflict-ridden region or even after arriving at a comparatively peaceful place. When exposed to atrocities and difficulties in conflict situations or natural calamities, civilians are forced to flee their homelands. But the flight does not end the spiral of sufferings that ensue in aftermath of the displacement in terms of a protracted struggle for survival, settlement and return. The 'new home' of the displaced away from their 'old home', which they were forced to leave, pushes the displaced to the brink of a paradox: they are often not welcome in their 'new home' and their 'old home' is not their own at least for the time being. The volatile situation exposes the displaced to myriad problems: they are herded together in camps; they are in many cases exposed to adverse climate conditions and consequent health hazards, they have no steady supply of food, water and medicines; they have no comfort of social bonding; and the list goes on. The humanitarian assistance provided by various local, national and international organizations often fall short of requirement to address the plight, which often assumes catastrophic proportions. Long-term displacement causes loss of traditional livelihood skills, changes in socio-cultural life patterns, disintegration of families and community structures. As the prospects of income-generation in the new land wilt the survival for the displaced in the land of displacement becomes a subject of everyday struggle. Many of the displaced have to resettle in distant places, learn new languages and new livelihoods. They have to search for new

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identities and attachments. The trauma for the displaced is not mere physical – or bodily – as it brings in its trail a host of other sufferings including psychological trauma.

The experiences of the displaced can be broadly categorized general – the experiences of the civilian population as a whole and specific – the experiences of different groups of population such as women, children and elderly. The displaced women as a major constituent of the civilian population partake in the travails of the displacement but their plights are compounded due to their socially ascribed lower position. The gender-specific experience for displaced women is rooted in the culture of discrimination that deprives them of equal status with men and their basic rights to education, mobility and participation in decision-making process.

Women confront economic, socio-cultural, physical, sexual and psychological consequences of displacement-related violence in specific ways. The dilapidated camp conditions, poor health facilities, lack of privacy and proper sanitation facilities, and constraints on mobility accentuate the deplorable situation of the displaced women. In the absence of their men folk, they are responsible for feeding the family and rearing children even when aid and assistance is meagre or unavailable. The breakdown of social fabric and disintegration of families affect them adversely. They become victims of sexual exploitation ranging from rape to forced prostitution and trafficking. They also become victims of increasing domestic violence perpetrated by male members of family.

Displaced women and men deal differently with trauma of dislocation by renegotiating identities and rebuilding social networks. Though the impact of displacement is relatively severe for women than men in the beginning, there are instances when women display more resilience to adapt to their new environment by finding new spaces and making informal support networks. They show resilience in adverse conditions and in the process become empowered. In that sense, though displacement is a harbinger of sufferings it may prove empowering, howsoever limited it may be, for women.

While carrying out surveys in the camps of the displaced in India for my doctoral and post-doctoral research, I came across narratives of unremitting agonies and exceptional courage of the displaced women. These narratives either remain unheard of or are ignored with the consequences being gender insensitive assistance, rehabilitation and resettlement processes. There is an urgent need to factor these narratives and experiences of women in displacement not merely as an academic exercise to add to the literature but to sensitize the displacement related policy making nationally and internationally.

With this special Issue the JID aims to enrich the debate and encourage further research on this issue of global relevance. I do not claim that this Volume of the JID reflects all the issues and concerns involving the displaced women. Also, it is not possible to cover all questions related to a subject of enormous significance in a single volume. If the volume could evoke in its readers urgency in understanding the intersection of gender and displacement and sensitize their actions in this direction my job as guest editor will be amply rewarded. JID will continue to focus on vulnerable sections of the displaced population with the wider aim to impact the discourse on internal displacement.

My special thanks to Veronica Fynn, Editor-in-Chief of JID for being supportive of this exercise and to all the contributors for bringing their perspectives to one of the most pressing issues of our time.