



POLICY BRIEF

Women's Economic Empowerment in Contexts of Migration and Forced Displacement

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INTRODUCTION	2
TOPIC FRAMING AND DEFINITIONS	3
CURRENT STATE OF WEE IN CONTEXTS OF FORCED DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION	5
AVENUES FOR PROGRAM DESIGN	7
RECOMMENDATIONS	9
CONCLUSION	10

BACKGROUND: This brief summarizes the DCED's Women's Economic Empowerment working group scoping study [On the Move: Women's Economic Empowerment in Contexts of Migration and Forced Displacement](#). It also builds on a recent

[DCED Synthesis Note on private sector development \(PSD\) for refugees](#), by more specifically addressing the need and opportunity for gender-responsive economic programming in migration and displacement settings.

Key Takeaways



- Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is an inherently complex process, even in stable contexts. With migration or forced displacement, a wide range of additional opportunities and risks add to this complexity, at each stage in the journey.
- WEE is also an inherently long-term process. Migration or forced displacement can accelerate WEE, for example by exposing women and men to new opportunities and social norms. Conversely, migration or forced displacement can bring risks, for example of gender-based violence and discrimination - isolating women and stifling WEE.
- Interventions must therefore take account of legal and political contexts, with nuanced understanding of women's motivations and circumstances.
- In practice, interventions tend to work on the supply side of the labor market (e.g. training and entrepreneurship), with less connection to demand. Further, few programmes address agency, or work with other household members.

Introduction

Women make up nearly half of the 65.6 million forcibly displaced people¹ and half of the world's 244 million economic migrants.² Migration and displacement can be a double-edged sword; on one hand, women may experience increased access to economic and educational opportunities and be exposed to more open social and gender norms. Conversely, their economic and empowerment opportunities may be stifled by lack of documentation, weak protection, no or limited right to work, and limited or no opportunities that match their skills. In most cases, migration and forced displacement also expose women to greater vulnerabilities, such as sexual and gender based violence, including forced and child marriage, trafficking and exploitation by employers and smugglers. As migration grows globally, effective programming is needed to provide sustainable livelihood solutions for women and men in such settings, and to realize the broader development and human rights benefits of women's economic empowerment (WEE).

Why promote WEE in contexts of migration and forced displacement?

Women are more vulnerable than men in displacement and migrant situations, but often end up with greater responsibilities in providing and caring for other members of their family and community. Social protection and WEE therefore must be integral to emergency responses and long-term livelihood programming.³ However, in situations of protracted displacement, the international refugee regime has not adequately met the need for sustainable economic solutions⁴ as the average length of displacement is 17 years,

often without a legal right to work. This calls for a concurrent and gender-responsive humanitarian response, economic development and political advocacy to minimize negative impact on both displaced populations and host communities, and to leverage the social and economic power of women's economic empowerment for migrant/displaced and host communities.⁵

Global initiatives and coordination of WEE programming, advocacy, and humanitarian response

Donors, multi-lateral institutions, development and humanitarian actors recognize the need for more coordinated, gender-responsive, and cross-sector approaches in meeting the needs of migrant and forcibly displaced populations. Major international initiatives, such as [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security](#) affirm the critical role of women in preventing and resolving conflict, peace-keeping, humanitarian response and reconstruction. The [New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants](#), adopted in 2016 led to two landmark Global Compacts. The [UN Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) is the first global agreement that aims to mitigate adverse effects of migration and risks to migrants, while creating conducive contexts for migrants to enrich new communities and contribute to sustainable development. The [UN Global Compact on Refugees](#) aims to improve the international response to large movements of refugees and protracted refugee situations, ease pressure on host countries, increase refugee self-reliance, expand resettlement solutions, and support conditions for safe repatriation. These initiatives, along with learning in PSD and humanitarian programming create an ideal context in which to deploy and refine innovative approaches to promote WEE and its myriad benefits in migration and forced displacement settings.

¹ Women. UNCHR 2011-2018. Accessed April 25, 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/women.html>

² Hennebry, J., Williams K., and Walton-Roberts, M. (2016). [Women Working Worldwide: A Situational Analysis Of Women Migrant Workers](#). UN Women.

³ UNHCR (2017). [Gender Equality Promising Practices: Syrian Refugees in the Middle East and North Africa](#).

⁴ N. Omata (2012). [Refugee livelihoods and the private sector: Ugandan case study](#). Working Paper Series No. 86. Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.

⁵ Center on International Cooperation, OCHA, UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF, WFP, World Bank (2015). [Addressing Protracted Displacement: A Framework for Development-Humanitarian Cooperation](#).

Topic Framing and Definitions

Defining migration and forced displacement

Categorizations of migrants and forcibly displaced persons are based on geographic, legal and political contexts. **Voluntary migrants** have some choice in when and where to travel. **Forcibly displaced persons**, including refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons (IDPs), are fleeing conflict, persecution, violence or human rights violations.⁶ People forced from their homes due to natural disasters, or loss of livelihoods due to environmental degradation or climate change are another migrant group expected to grow dramatically.^{7,8} The term “**forced migration**” describes anyone moving due to some element of coercion, whether environmental or man-made, as shown in **Figure 1**.

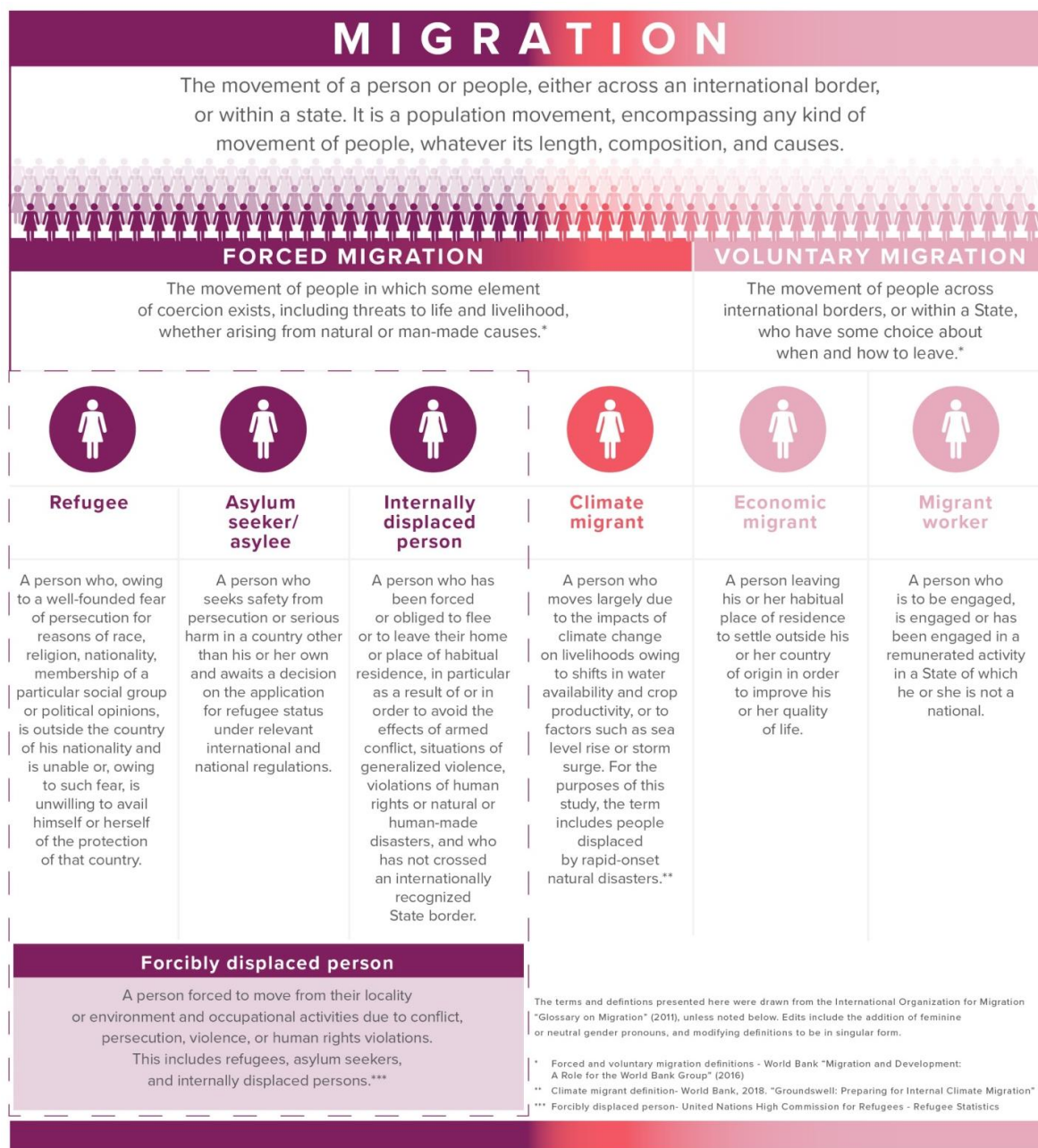


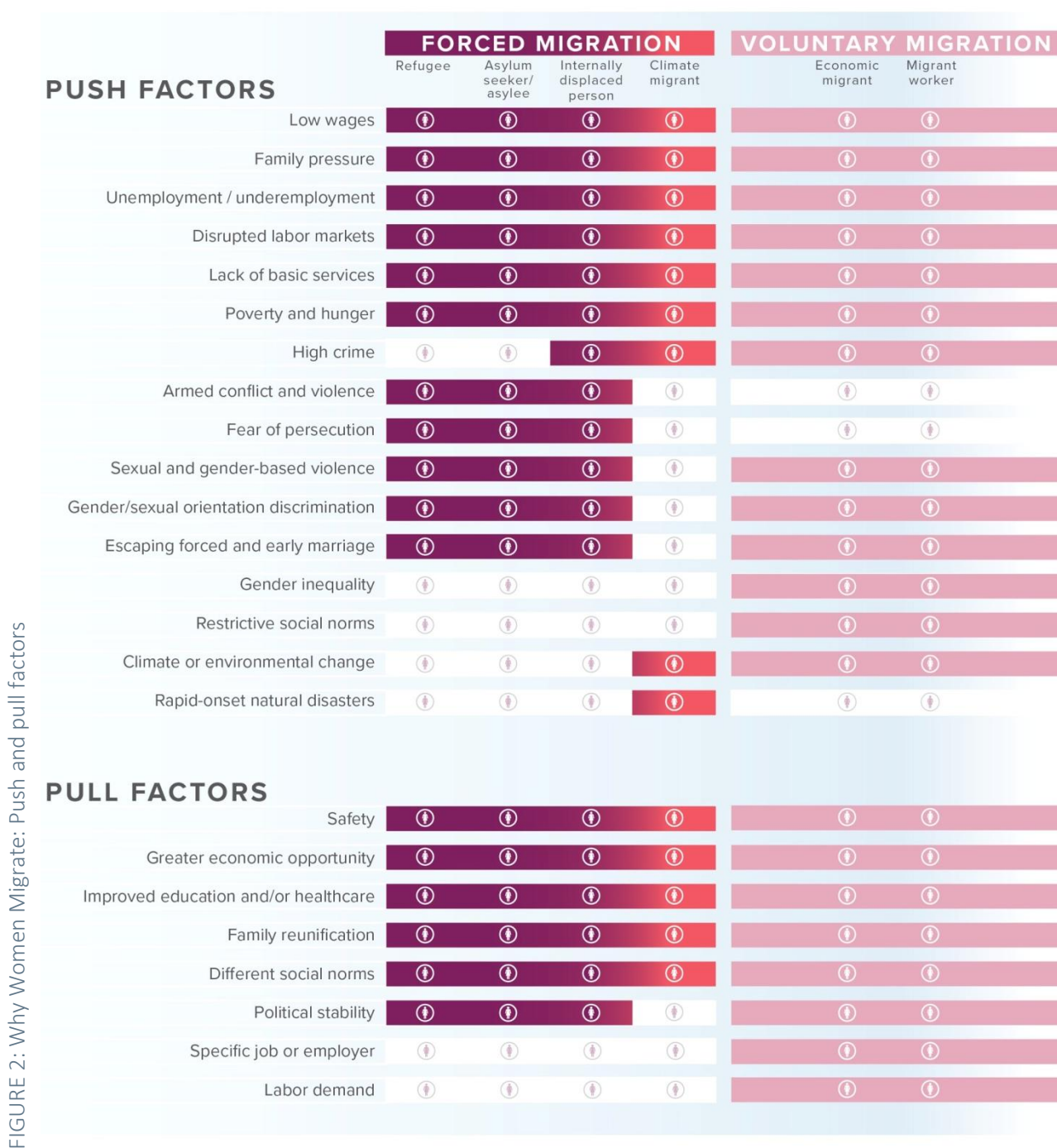
FIGURE 1: Definitions of voluntary and forced migration

⁶ UNHCR (2014). [World at War: Global Trends – Forced Displacement 2014](#).

⁷ World Bank Group (2016). [Migration and Development: A Role for the World Bank Group](#).

⁸ Rigaud, K. et al. (2018). [Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration](#). World Bank, Washington, DC. World Bank.

These nuances, frequently misunderstood, have major implications for legal rights and protection. Those fleeing for their lives from violent conflict and persecution face a very different situation than people pursuing greater economic opportunity. However, “voluntary” migration can also be precipitated by disruptions to life and livelihoods and driven by a sense of desperation and fear. Motivations for leaving one’s home frequently include a combination of economic, social and safety concerns, making it complex to distinguish between voluntary migration, forced migration, and forced displacement.⁹ Figure 2 illustrates how different push and pull factors specific to women intersect with definitional distinctions between groups of migrants.



⁹ World Bank Group (2016). [Migration and Development: A Role for the World Bank Group](#).

Defining WEE in private sector development

WEE goes beyond income generation to account for deeper transformative processes in women, their families, and the surrounding society. According to recent frameworks, an effective empowerment process includes changes in both **access** to resources and economic opportunities, and in personal **agency** to have a voice in the family and community and to contribute meaningfully to economic decision-making.¹⁰ From a private sector development perspective, broader behavior changes among actors within the surrounding market environment or social context must also take place for scale and sustainability. This could include shifts in behaviors among private sector actors that lead to greater economic opportunities for migrant women, or even changes in how humanitarian actors are sourcing services and goods within the local economy to support WEE.

Already in stable contexts, WEE is an inherently complex and long-term process. As women and their families face migration or displacement, the interplay of gendered social norms and opportunities for empowerment increases in complexity. Living and working in a new cultural and economic setting may offer women a window into new gendered social norms and greater economic independence. On the other hand, migration and displacement may reduce support systems that previously promoted psycho-social wellbeing and contributed to unpaid care work.¹¹ These dynamics shift during each stage of migration or forced displacement, with risks to women, but also opportunities for new and meaningful ways to promote women's well-being, and that of their families and communities.

Current State of WEE in Contexts of Forced Displacement and Migration

Contextual factors determine how migration or forced displacement affect women's personal agency and access to resources or opportunity at each stage of the journey, from the decision to leave home, transiting, displacement, migrant work, resettlement and repatriation. Gender-specific risks and restrictions are present to varying degrees throughout the process. Thus, a complex interplay of opportunities and risks posed by migration and forced displacement as well as compounding "push" and "pull" factors force women to make difficult choices and trade-offs. Such choices may be empowering or disempowering depending on the context of the decision, women's role in it, and the results.¹²

Based on scoping study research, the considerations outlined in **Figure 3** are crucial for understanding opportunities to promote WEE at each stage of the migration or forced displacement process.

The social norms of women's communities of origin and destination influence both access to economic opportunity and personal agency. For example, women and men may feel the threat of losing of their cultural and social identity in new settings, leading families to more proactively preserve existing norms.¹³ In cases where women begin contributing to household income, or if the family is supported by humanitarian assistance, men may resent a diminishment of their identity as breadwinners and decision-makers. This can lead to increased conflict and gender-based violence.¹⁴ Women also face intersecting gender and migrant/refugee status discrimination in their

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Fleury, A. (2016). [Understanding Women and Migration: A Literature Review](#). *Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development*.

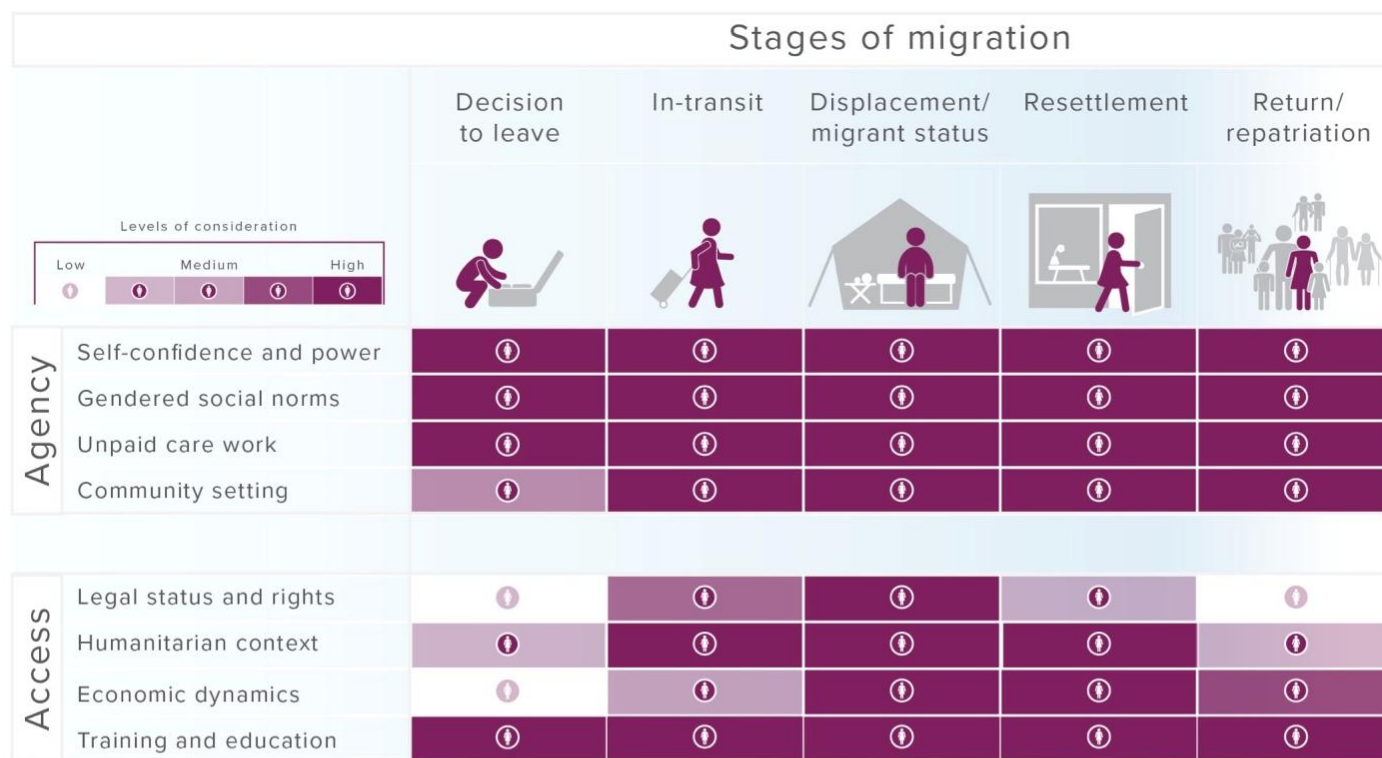
¹⁴ Hughes, C. Bolis, M., Fries, R. & Finigan, S. (2015) Women's economic inequality and domestic violence: exploring the links and empowering women, *Gender & Development*, 23:2, 279-297, DOI: 10.1080/13552074.2015.1053216.

¹⁰ Markel, E., L. Jones (2014). [Women's Economic Empowerment: Pushing the Frontiers Of Inclusive Market Development](#). USAID – Leveraging Economic Opportunities.

¹¹ FGD with young refugee women from Somalia and Myanmar. June 4, 2018. Denver, Colorado, USA.

search for work and while at work. Further, working outside the home frequently comes in addition to domestic duties, constraining women's time and ability to rest or engage socially or politically.¹⁵

FIGURE 3: Access and agency considerations at each stage of migration or forced displacement



Agency

Self-confidence & power	Gendered social norms	Unpaid care work	Community Setting
Decision-making ability	Sexual and gender-based violence	Childcare responsibilities	Psycho-social support
Language skills	Sexual and reproductive health	Time burden	Leadership roles
Communication skills	Men's presence & engagement		
	Household decision-making		

Access

Legal Status and Rights	Humanitarian Context	Economic Dynamics	Training and Education
Regular or irregular status	Basic needs	Market distortions	Existing skills and education
Services and institutions	Host community response	Market opportunities	Training and upskilling
Legal right to work	Sexual and gender-based violence	Private sector engagement	
		Capital and financial services	
		Remittances	

¹⁵ Ibid.

Host populations themselves frequently suffer from gender inequality, poverty, unemployment or underemployment, which lead to resistance to the integration of displaced families and restrictive government policies. However, when forcibly displaced women and men are unable to access formal markets, they are pushed into informal markets and negative coping strategies, which can further erode the wages of nationals and have destabilizing results.¹⁶

The interplay of gendered social norms and global market economics also have consequences for female economic migrants, intensifying the concentration of women in unskilled, low-paid positions in informal sectors where they may be subjected to exploitation, abuse and/or sexual harassment.¹⁷ Almost 1 in 5, or 11.5 million of the world's 67 million domestic workers are international migrants. Over 8 million (73%) migrant domestic workers are women or adolescent girls.¹⁸ However, most legal avenues for temporary or seasonal labor target men. Women tend to work in settings with few legal channels,¹⁹ leaving them vulnerable and making it difficult and dangerous to travel abroad and return home.

Avenues for Program Design

Donors and policy makers recognize a need to change the narrative around displacement and migration events to focus on the potential for migrants to contribute to their host communities. As such, more integrated programming is needed to reduce dependency on temporary humanitarian aid, and to build opportunities for sustainable development. These include projects that catalyze private sector development in sectors conducive to WEE, psychosocial support

activities paired with skills training and cash-for-work programs in camp settings, and efforts to reintegrate returnees into local economies and markets. Efforts to specifically address the need for WEE as a critical part of this process are in relatively early stages, but gaining attention and traction.

WEE interventions in protracted forced displacement

The displacement context largely determines feasible program innovations. In settings where the host country is hostile to integration, economic empowerment activities may only be feasible within the camp, by integrating refugees into the camp economy. With more accepting host governments, working with the private sector to build out value chains that benefit both refugee women and men and local communities is a real possibility. This approach requires partnership between donors, humanitarian actors, the private sector and host governments. In each instance, interventions must balance the specific legal and political context of the host country with the overarching goal of providing sustainable and effective economic empowerment solutions. Interventions can range from value chain analyses and market integration of refugees, to programs that combine cash-for-work, skills up-grading and market linkage programs, and programs that add aim to make traditional development activities more responsive and connected to local and international markets.

For example, the ILO and UNHCR are adapting ILO's methodology on inclusive market systems to implement market-based programming for refugees.²⁰ Although the program currently does not have a gender component, by focusing on contexts where refugees are already active in value chains, this approach recognizes and enhances refugee contributions to local economies and value chains.

Likewise, UN Women has developed programs that strengthen the voice of women and girls and

¹⁶ O'Neil, T.; Fleury, A., and Foresti, M. (2016). [Women on the move: Migration, gender equality and the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development](#). Overseas Development Institute and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Newland, K. and Riester, A. (2018). *Welcome to Work? Legal Migration Pathways for Low-Skilled Workers*. Washington, DC: *Migration Policy Institute*.

²⁰ Interview with Ziad Ayoubi, Head of Livelihoods Unit at UNHCR.

that remove structural barriers to gender equality and empowerment.²¹ The Leadership, Empowerment, Access and Protection in Crisis Response Program (LEAP) is being implemented in over 30 countries and works to ensure that protection, gender issues and WEE are addressed in response strategies in humanitarian settings. Supported interventions include cash-for-work programs, skills up-grading, and market linkages.²² Finally, UNHCR is partnering with the private sector to increase the profitability and sophistication of crafts and jewelry making activities through the Made 51 initiative, which harnesses artisan skills in refugee communities and connects them to retailers through a global platform.²³

WEE interventions in migration contexts

Migrant women often move for specific job opportunities, leading to an absence of programs that diversify job options, improve access to services, and foster greater agency during the stages of migration. Interventions typically focus on protection, in response to incidents of abuse and exploitation, or repatriation support. Countries like Kenya²⁴ and Ethiopia²⁵ recently banned outward labor migration until they could develop a better regulatory framework. Governments are also active in pre-departure training and awareness raising among migrant workers.²⁶ The Philippines restricted the age limit for female migrants to 23, set a minimum wage and waived employment placement fees, which exposed migrants to debt bondage and made it difficult to leave abusive employers. While measures were well-intentioned, irregular migration was shown to increase,²⁷ demonstrating the difficult

trade-offs when designing and implementing migration regulation frameworks.

Despite being constrained to work in gendered and informal sectors and shadow economies, migrant women show incredible resilience and economic power. Indeed, half of the world's remittances come from women, equaling to 582 billion USD.²⁸ When women contribute to household finances, they are more likely to gain agency over household decision making, while their absence from the home may lead to more equitable distribution of domestic and care duties²⁹. In Ecuador and the Philippines,³⁰ women are also more likely to send remittances to another female relative, empowering them to make financial decisions and make investments as well.³¹ Finally, migrant women transmit social remittances (i.e. shared changes in perspective about women's roles, capacities and rights) to communities of origin.

These implications present an opportunity for the international donor community to bring transformative empowerment changes for women in countries of origin and destination, as well as their families and communities. Not only can interventions increase economic opportunities and protections, but they can also capitalize on the systemic and social norm changes that occur as a result of female migration.

Interventions can include diversifying and formalizing work options based on market realities, increasing access to education and training, creating stronger protections and safe travel routes. Additionally, working with women who are left behind by migrant husbands and other family members, creative solutions to maximize the impact of remittances (e.g. forced savings mechanisms) and investment opportunities all have the power to address both

²¹ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/flagship-programmes>

²² Interview with Gisela Duetting, Senior Specialist Gender and Livelihood, Humanitarian Action and Crisis Response Office, UN Women. April 24, 2018.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mang'era, A. (2018). [Fears of fresh abuse of migrants in Middle East as Kenya set to lift ban](#). Reuters.

²⁵ Interview with Aida Awel, Chief Technical Adviser on Labor Migration, ILO.

²⁶ ILO. (2015). [No easy exit – Migration bans affecting women from Nepal](#). ILO Geneva.

²⁷ Guevarra, A. R. (2006). Managing 'Vulnerabilities' and 'Empowering' Migrant Filipina Workers: The Philippines' Overseas Employment Program, Social Identities, 12:5, 523-541, DOI: 10.1080/13504630600920118

²⁸ Hennebry, J., Williams K., and Walton-Roberts, M. (2016). [Women Working Worldwide: A Situational Analysis Of Women Migrant Workers](#). UN Women

²⁹ O'Neil, T.; Fleury, A., and Foresti, M. (2016). [Women on the move: Migration, gender equality and the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development](#). Overseas Development Institute and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

³⁰ Ghosh, J. (2009). Human Development Research Paper: [Migration and gender empowerment: Recent trends and emerging issues](#). UNDP.

³¹ Ibid.

access and agency components of economic empowerment.

Overview of efforts to integrate PSD principles

Efforts to understand and harness private sector incentives to promote WEE have become more sophisticated in recent years. However, few programs working in migration or forced displacement settings integrate gender-responsive programming while promoting market-based WEE approaches. However, PSD and market systems approaches have an important role to play in supporting refugee and migrant livelihoods.³² This is equally true for promoting WEE in migration and forced displacement settings, where initiatives are frequently abstracted from market opportunities. Programs tend to work on the supply side of the labor market through skills development, entrepreneurship, and employability training, with little connection to demand, or strategic facilitation with the private sector.³³ Further, few integrate strategies to promote agency, or work other household members in transformation processes. Because of this gap, interventions rarely lead to sustainable economic solutions, let alone WEE.

WEE considerations can be incorporated in existing programs by conducting gendered market research and analysis to understand the unique access and agency dynamics at play within a given setting, and piloting gender-responsive interventions. The DCED has provided a comprehensive [Synthesis Report](#) and [Policy Guide](#) on how to integrate gender and women's economic empowerment into private sector development programs. Existing efforts to promote WEE for migrant or forcibly displaced women that do not take a market-based approach would greatly benefit from integrating market and private sector partnership, while working with humanitarian actors to reduce distortions and aid dependency. In both cases, longer timelines and greater flexibility are needed to understand and adapt to highly unique and dynamic market contexts.

³² DCED (2017). [Private Sector Development Synthesis Note: Private sector development for refugees](#).

³³ Crawford, N., Cosgrave, J., Hayson, S., and Walicki, N (2015). [Protracted displacement: uncertain paths to self-reliance in exile](#). HPG Commissioned Report.

Figure 4 highlights the scales of markets that are important to explore in determining program design options for WEE, and the market systems that would be most relevant to work within given different settings.

Women's access to and connection with economic actors in each sphere may be greatly limited, or alternatively, expanded due to migration and displacement. The possible entry points for promoting WEE in such contexts therefore depend on if/how/why market access is limited for women (e.g. the legal right to work, language/education levels, agency and self-confidence, violence from host communities, distance from markets, etc.), and opportunities to facilitate solutions to those constraints.

Recommendations

The following recommendations will support more effective integration of WEE principles in livelihood and PSD programming in migrant or forced displacement contexts:

1. **Apply a gender-responsive market systems approach to WEE programming in migration and forced displacement settings.** Given the context-specific and dynamic nature of migration and displacement situations, using a market based approach that includes gendered assessment and design is necessary to identify unique constraints and opportunities for WEE within a given setting, and to design programs that are likely to have sustainable results. Getting the perspectives of a cross-section of women and men, local actors, institutions, host communities, humanitarian agencies and private sector actors is essential to this process.
2. **Design programs that provide flexibility to implementing partners to pilot and adapt strategies and interventions as dynamic contexts change and learning occurs.** Due to complex settings, programs must integrate flexibility into

intervention design, and monitoring and evaluation systems.

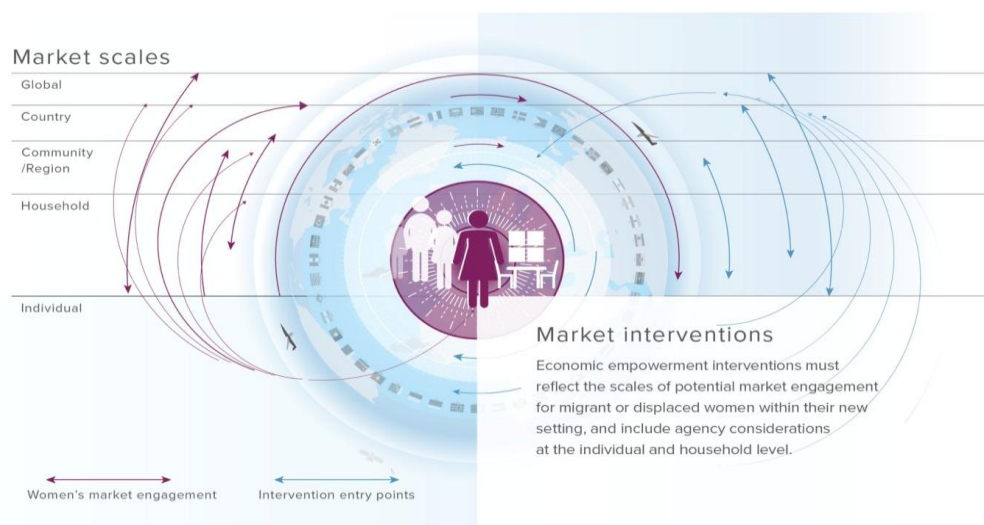
3. **Actively engage with both women and men to promote WEE.** Deliberately supporting men and women to navigate unsettling changes that occur in gender dynamics due to forced displacement or migration can mitigate domestic violence and improve power sharing among women and men.
4. **Actively engage host communities.** Wherever possible, work to support the development of subsectors with a potential to promote WEE among migrant or displaced women, while benefitting local people. This reduces resentment, and shows development opportunities for host communities.
5. **Design and implement interventions in viable economic sectors that build on women's skills.** By using a participatory process and working with both women and men, explore innovative new options for women that draw on existing skills, account for their preferences and responsibilities, and that are rooted in market dynamics.
6. **Develop private sector initiatives in coordination with other humanitarian efforts.** The higher prevalence of trauma, SGBV, and other vulnerabilities among migrant/forcibly displaced women call for programming that may not be fully addressed by market-based solutions.

Initiatives that increase self-confidence, address SGBV and domestic violence and provide psychosocial assistance along with access to market opportunities lead to more holistic empowerment outcomes.

Conclusion

While migration can disempower women by forcing them to make difficult choices and trade-offs and exposing them to heightened risks and vulnerabilities, it can also empower women through newfound safety and economic opportunity. By creating conditions for women's increased rights, protection, access to markets and services, and cultivating their agency to capitalize on these resources, there is potential to change the narrative from vulnerability, dependency and exploitation to empowerment and choice. As the number of women migrating continues to increase, so do opportunities to harness their experiences for transformative changes that benefit women, their families and communities at all stages of the migration process. Here, donors, host governments, the private sector, and innovations in the humanitarian sector can come together to simultaneously decrease risks, increase access to resources, and create environments that foster women's access and agency. In doing so, communities and countries of origin and destination stand to reap

FIGURE 4:
Market scales
to consider in
WEE
programming
for migrant or
displaced
women



Icons made by Freepik from www.flaticon.com