displacement today has many causes other than persecution. Poverty and miserable living conditions are forcing a growing number of people to move. And since it is not always possible for these people to obtain visas or even travel documents that will make the journey to a new country easy, most of them end up as so-called irregular migrants.

Irregular migrants worldwide are trapped in a grey area. They might be accepted in society as cheap labour but they work illegally and have no access to education, health care or other services. Being without legal rights, they are vulnerable to violations of their human rights and risk becoming victims of trafficking, human smuggling and inhuman treatment, or even losing their life. Reports of such abuses and suffering are regularly found in documentation of migratory flows between, for example, West Africa and the Canary Islands, the Horn of Africa and the Gulf States, and across Central and Eastern Europe.

The loss of rights associated with the status of irregular migrant establishes the need for protection of individual fundamental rights. DRC is already working with groups of people who are considered irregular, such as rejected asylum seekers who are not living legally in Denmark.

Dilemmas and challenges
Although it has been an obvious and appropriate decision for DRC to extend its mandate and include new target groups, assisting the new groups of beneficiaries has raised new challenges for the organisation. For example, offering assistance to IDPs has required the organisation to become adept at humanitarian diplomacy. DRC tries to meet the many challenges by focusing on transparency in its work, by ensuring involvement of displaced people and by always staying in close contact with authorities and governments with regard to DRC’s humanitarian mission.

Recent complex trends in migration have contributed to increasing xenophobia in receiving countries. Over the next 50 years, climate change will increasingly undermine livelihood opportunities for many people in the developing world; for many people a natural response is likely to be to migrate in search of alternative opportunities elsewhere. There may well be other triggers of displacement and DRC will need to continue to exercise flexibility in its interpretation of rights and of its mandate.

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IDP camp closure and gender inequality in Timor-Leste
Phyllis Ferguson

The goal of humanitarian assistance in Timor-Leste during a series of crises from 2006 to 2008 became increasingly focused on IDP camp closure, with the assisted return of IDPs to their communities or to alternative living situations.

From 2006 to 2008, over 150,000 people were displaced into over 65 IDP camps and transitional shelters. During this time, there was a rise in the number of cases of domestic violence and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) for reasons intrinsically related to changing social relations, family breakdown, a destruction of trust and economic hardship. IDPs suffered loss of property and housing, separation, insecurity, the threat of violence and ill health. The last camps and transitional shelters were due to close at the end of 2009 but a recent World Bank Study on Dili, Timor-Leste’s capital city, reported constant levels of violence, with up to 40% of returning IDPs in one city ward stating that they continue to experience conflict.

Camp closure is not a panacea.

IDP camp closure, gender inequality and violence
Cases of forced sex, sexual assault and rape were reported in the early months of IDP life in 2006, as were instances of ‘unwanted’ pregnancies from these incidents. Some of these were expressions of male frustration over loss, dislocation and uncertainty, often exacerbated by increased alcohol abuse. These were characteristically domestic violence cases, sometimes including incest. IDP women’s concerns over contributory physical factors such as the lack of electricity at night and camp insecurity – combined with a lack of security generally – were taken up. Attempts were made to rectify these problems, although little could be done to redress the lack of privacy in two-family tents.

Women’s Committees formed in some of the camps – supported by Rede Feto1 – did much to change reactive to proactive policies and planning. Subsequent media campaigns on domestic and SGB violence and on trafficking used posters, theatre performances and radio programmes in the camps. These played an important role in reducing violent incidents.

Local NGOs, international NGOs, civil society organisations, UNDP and the government all promoted these strategies.

However, de facto family breakdown often occurred as a result of camp life, with mothers and their very young children having to live in one camp while late primary, pre-secondary or secondary school children lived in another, close to their schools. Often the father was in yet another camp or in rural areas outside the capital, often moving between the family’s former damaged or destroyed house and the other members of his family in their
respectively IDP locales. Polygamy was also reported to be rising.

This separation of family members, combined with the closure of many schools in Dili for long periods of time in 2006 and 2007, resulted in a breakdown of domestic life and a rupture in the established routines is too young to marry and cannot assume responsibility for the young woman and her child/children. Some deny paternity. The young woman and her family have stark choices. The Judicial System Monitoring Programme (JSMP), an East Timorese NGO, can provide legal advice and support to take the issue to court

and patterns of school and work. Even when schools re-opened, often there was no possibility of resuming schooling; it was too expensive.

Some ‘unwanted’ pregnancies in the IDP camps came from ‘boyfriend-girlfriend’ relationships in the unusual and exceptional circumstances of camp life. Such relationships were previously uncommon because of the traditional pressures and values exerted by parents, neighbours and community in ‘normal’ times. These new friendships naturally formed in the IDP camps as old neighbourhood attachments and pastoral support were interrupted. Pregnancies occurred, with some young women now with one child and a second unwanted pregnancy as they left the IDP camps.

This has several social outcomes for all concerned. In many cases, the boyfriend and his family say he but the judicial process is slow, due to the backlog of cases, and the potential outcome is uncertain, so this prospect is daunting. Often, it is also logistically and financially impossible. The family of the young women suffers a loss, in the sense that the prospect of barlake (bride-price dowry) traditionally paid to the bride’s family, has now been foreclosed unless the young man and his family agree through traditional forms of mediation to make payment.

Additionally – partly due to the crisis – in many cases these young women have not completed their education and have no skills. Their prospects for further education and training are complicated by the responsibility they have for their infants. They return to their birth families with their dependent children and thus constitute an additional burden on their families in the context of ever-scarcer resources with IDP camp closure. Where are they to go, and what can they do to support themselves? Some have turned to sex working.

Government payments to returning IDPs

As the IDP camps closed, kiosk owners called in debts for payment. Many women IDPs had asked for credit for the small necessities of life. In some cases, having been incurred over a period of more than three years, the amount owed was considerable. Women had every reason to fear as the kiosk owners reported the magnitude of these debts to unknowing husbands or partners. What women assumed and hoped was that part of the ‘return’ packet provided by the government could be used to settle such debts.

This situation on top of all the other uncertainties of IDP camp closure heightened the feelings of frustration and powerlessness of IDP men. The dependency culture of IDP camp life fed into a destructive dynamic of gendered family mistrust that remains unresolved. These resentments have accompanied family members as they resettle. On the whole, women have not been the ones to receive the returnee payments, either to use for debt repayment or to assist themselves and their children to resettle after leaving the camps.

The settlement offered by the government to returning IDPs upon re-verification of the level of destruction of their former homes was paid to the male heads of households. The incidence of polygamy has increased with men’s access to cash, leading to poor family relations, loss of trust, men refusing family responsibilities, and sometimes the abandonment of women and children. As there was nothing to stop them, the numbers of cases of men disappearing with these funds have risen. This has also created a burden on state services.

The sharp rise in the purchasing power of men was reflected in the recent acquisition of large numbers of cars used as taxis and motorbikes. Tailbacks and traffic jams in Dili were evidence of this. Cock-fighting, gambling, the consumption of alcohol and other gendered leisure pursuits also markedly increased, as did the incidence of domestic violence. Quarrels over access to money and its use continue to be reported by women in many of these cases of
Family breakdown in Bogotá

Ofelia Restrepo Vélez and Amparo Hernández Bello

Forced displacement not only disperses and uproots families but also fractures their framework of beliefs, identities, daily routines, relationships and social fabric, and causes physical, emotional and psychological breakdown.

A study of displaced populations in Bogotá shows how forced displacement due to political violence has had a profound impact on the family unit in Colombia.1 When forced displacement occurs, some family members – mainly adults and young men – are killed or ‘disappear,’ are forced to flee or recruited to fight. Some 47% of families living in Bogotá following such displacement break down as a result, with the average family size of 6.2 people prior to displacement reduced to 5.2 people afterwards.

Approximately 77% of those displaced originated in rural areas where the patriarchal traditional Colombian family was the predominant model. Family breakdown reinforces certain family structures while it weakens or eliminates others. New forms of arrangement have appeared such as: single female heads of household with children under 18 years of age; restructured families made up of people from previous unions; and homes with children living with relations other than their parents or with non-blood relations. In our study we found that 50% of displaced families had an intact nuclear structure, compared with 60% of families amongst the non-displaced population in the same residential or host areas; there were 37% female heads of household amongst the displaced, compared with 30% in the host population; the percentage of families with children cared for by their father was 9.2% in displaced families, compared with 6.5% in host families; and single female heads of household with children numbered 17% and 10% respectively.

Families experience abrupt change and new challenges. The weakened social fabric of their new, urban environment leads to precarious situations – most live in overcrowded conditions – and the schisms and difficulties they face as displaced people force some couples to separate and leave their children. In the traditional family the woman’s role is focused on reproduction and the socialisation, education and care of children, while the man is the producer and provider. Following displacement, many women have to assume the role of provider, due to the change in context, lack of opportunities for the partner if still present, or the absence of the father due to abandonment, death or disappearance. These women take on outside domestic work consistent with traditional female roles: caring for children, cleaning, producing food. Most of the men are poorly educated small-scale farmers who only know how to work the land – a skill the city does not need.

Women see their opportunities for daily interaction with their children and husbands greatly reduced, and their absence from home causes problems with partners and impacts negatively on child development. For the women, their absence from home creates a responsibility overload, a loss of self-esteem and authority, and a feeling of guilt for failing to fulfil their family obligations and duties:

“…why don’t you cry, you become very sensitive to the world. … everything makes you feel there is no one to help you, to give you a hug. … everything makes you want to cry, you become very sensitive”

1. Rede Feto (Women’s Network) is an umbrella network of 17 national organisations, established in 2001 as a direct result of deliberations at the First National Women’s Congress in 2000 to promote gender equality and women’s rights and to support women in development.