

# The Complex Ties that Bind: Gendered Agency and Expectations in Conflict and Climate Change-related Migration

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## Abstract

For the past decade, western public discourse and the policy world have become increasingly concerned about 'irregular' migration and, to a slightly lesser extent perhaps, what driving role conflict and climate change play in triggering it. Addressing the causes and effects requires having a better understanding of the impacts that climate change has on multi-dimensional crises and the knock-on effect this has on migration. A key factor in understanding how these processes affect different women, girls, men, boys and other gender identities is gender. Much of the analysis, however, has tended to be based on relatively simplistic teleological models and gender stereotypes. Based on case studies, this article argues for more nuanced understandings of how gender and other societal markers affect people differently in different contexts of crisis and climate change-related migration to better formulate policy responses.

## Dots not connected: gender – crisis – displacement

'Irregular migration' and, to a slightly lesser extent, 'climate change' have been key buzz words in Western policy circles over the past few years, at times mixed in with fears of violent extremism. Although the issues are not new, they have gained increasing prominence in the public discourse. This has been especially true after the sudden increase in refugees arriving in Europe in 2015, concerns in the United States of America about undocumented migrants arriving from Latin America and Australia's on-going moral panic surrounding the arrival of undocumented refugees by boat. While climate change, violent conflict, and migration may often be linked, the links are not simple and straight-forward. Nonetheless, the links are often presented in simplistic terms in public and media discourse: climate change leads to conflict, conflict leads to extremism, and this leads to migration. Increased in-migration, or even the mere spectre of it, has in turn been repeatedly linked by populist media and politicians to the threat of terrorism and violent extremism. An example of this was the public debate around the role of climate change as a potential causal factor for the civil war in Syria, and thereby its contribution to violent extremism and 'irregular' migration. In the debate, nuance and complexity were often replaced by one-dimensional models of causation.

Gender is a salient but complex category in determining how people are affected by and react to crisis and displacement. Nonetheless, in public and media discourses, gender roles are also mostly cast in simplistic terms: women are seen as a homogenous category of 'the most vulnerable'

victims; migrant women as oppressed victims without agency; migrant men as aggressive, sexually predatory, and paradoxically as simultaneously lazy and as a threat to jobs. These simplistic representations tend to disregard the complex ways in which gender, crisis and displacement interact and are not restricted to media and public discourse alone. Peacebuilding and development policy as well as practice also often simplistically equate gender with women only, and women are often cast as a homogenous, undifferentiated and essentialist category, such as of passive victims or innate peacemakers (Fröhlich and Gioli, 2015; Myrntinen et al., 2014). What is thereby missed is an examination of how our gendered roles and our responses to crises are, to a degree, conditioned by societal expectations placed upon us and internalised by us, differing not only based on gender but also based on other societal identity markers such as age, location, dis-/ability, class, sexual orientation or ethno-religious background.

In spite of the inter-connectedness of crisis, displacement, migration and gender, policy and media narratives, and also research mostly do not 'connect the dots' between these phenomena. There is thus little in the way of comparative literature or of theoretical frameworks to draw upon (Fröhlich and Gioli, 2015; Myrntinen, 2016). This contribution adds to this emerging body of literature, making the case for using a comprehensive, intersectional and contextualised gender lens in order to better understand the inter-related phenomena of conflict, climate change and migration. I will highlight some of the complexities which are often overlooked in mainstream narratives and how these bind people to certain choices in dealing with crisis and displacement – but also tie them to others. I will first set the scene by

briefly exploring Honduras, a nation heavily affected by violence, migration and, increasingly, climate change. I will then use the example, along with others, to draw out some key issues from a gender perspective.

### Honduras – gendered push factors

Honduras currently has a population of approximately 8.1 million, and according to World Bank (2011) data, ranked eighth highest globally on inequality, based on the Gini index, and is the fourth poorest country in the hemisphere. An estimated 700,000 to one million Hondurans live abroad, the majority of which are in the US, with a large number of undocumented migrants. According to Reichman (2013), the migrant population is approximately 53% male and 47% female. Deportations from the US are not uncommon, with 25,000 Hondurans repatriated from the US in 2009 alone (Hirsch, 2010). Migrants are increasingly citing widespread gang violence as a motivating factor for risking the perilous journey (UNHCR, 2014). A spike of over 50,000 unaccompanied minors arriving in 2013–2014 led to increased concern about migration in the US and led to increased border security not only on the US–Mexican border, but also on Mexico's borders with its Southern neighbours (WOLA, 2014).

Honduran migration patterns are gendered, with migration to the US, in part due to the dangers involved in the crossing, being traditionally seen as a mainly male undertaking (Reichman, 2011). Increasingly, however, Honduran women are migrating as well, with Spain being a preferred destination according to anecdotal data.<sup>1</sup> The different migration patterns have the potential to change gendered socio-economic and demographic patterns, as male migration to the US tends to be more circular and shorter-term than European migration, and women working in the service sector in Spain are earning more than men doing menial jobs in the US. The jobs available in the European Union would also seem to be, based on anecdotal evidence, more appealing than those available to Honduran men north of the Rio Grande.<sup>2</sup> A knock-on effect of the availability of only low-skilled jobs for Hondurans in the US has been a reduction in the value placed on education among men (Reichman, 2011).

Although Honduras has not been party to an active conflict since the 1969 'Football War' against El Salvador, levels of violence are extremely high. Urban and rural violence have led to the country having the highest per capita homicide rates on the planet and its industrial capital, San Pedro Sula, gained the unenviable epithet 'most violent city in the world' (CCSPJP, 2012) with a homicide rate of 173 per 100,000 residents.<sup>3</sup> Much of the urban violence is blamed on gangs (*maras*), which originated in Los Angeles and spread to Central America through the deportation of gang members from the US. Much of the gang violence is targeted against other *maras*, but is also used as a way of furthering the groups' economic activities, such as extortion, kidnapping and involvement in the sale and transport of drugs, mainly marijuana, cocaine and crack. The violence of

the *maras* has been exacerbated by local policies, such as the 'iron fist' approaches of the state authorities and the so-called 'social cleansing' (*limpieza social*) of suspected *maras* and lower-class teens by death squads (Cruz, 2014; Pine 2008). Although gang membership and exposure to lethal violence is predominantly young and male, women and girls play a larger role in the Central American *maras* than usual for urban gangs. They are often exposed to high levels of physical abuse and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), as well as targeting by anti-gang death squads along with their male colleagues (Interpeace, 2013). As Breneman (2012) points out, however, as violent as membership in the *maras* is, young members sometimes consider it a safer, less violent and more liberating space than abusive families they may have fled from. The dysfunctional families themselves are in part a result of migration, as parents leave their children behind with foster families in order to find better lives in the cities or abroad.

Other forms of violence in urban areas include targeted killings of women (especially of young women employed in the *maquilas* of the textile industry), substance abuse, domestic violence and SGBV (Pine, 2008; Small Arms Survey, 2014). Lower class men, as in other countries, often have to settle for jobs in the dangerous and precarious private security sector (Dickins de Girón, 2011). Rural violence tends to take on other forms and is often related to either land issues or the control of trans-shipment routes of drugs (Gillard, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2014). Domestic violence and SGBV are also major concerns in rural areas. The various forms of physical violence which Hondurans are exposed to are thus linked closely to gender, age, class and location. In recent years, the impacts of climate change have further exacerbated vulnerabilities in rural regions, driving migration into struggling and violent urban areas and further abroad, using gendered networks of migration (Reichman, 2011).

Coffee is the main export product of Honduras, and it is the region's largest exporter. Coffee crops are, however, increasingly being affected by coffee leaf rust fungus caused by *Hemileia vasatrix*, known locally as *roya*, the spread of which is linked to climate change (ICO, 2013; IICA, 2013; Oxfam, 2014). Based on initial research by Fairtrade Finland, the impacts are not spread evenly: those most affected tend to be the poorest farmers who have not been able to care for their shrubs as effectively as wealthier landowners have.<sup>4</sup> Given the substantial amount of time and money that needs to be invested in coffee, farmers are also often reluctant to give up on coffee farming once they have invested in it. Migration to urban areas (for women and men) and the US (mostly for men) has been a coping mechanism in times of crisis in the coffee sector (Reichman, 2011), and will likely accelerate in the future, especially following a series of intense droughts (IFRC, 2014). Among the impacts of migration will likely also be a skewing of age pyramids and new forms of family, as younger adults leave their children with grandparents and move to urban areas and the US, in part for short stints and in part more permanently.

## Crisis, gender and migration

As the Honduras case highlights, gender determines in part the choices available to people and the paths of action they choose to follow. Gender – the way in which society and we define ourselves as women, boys, girls, men, trans\* or intersex persons – is often a key factor in determining social spaces and opportunities available or not available to us, thereby setting the parameters of vulnerability or agency. It is, however, not the only factor in determining these: neither women nor men are a homogenous category with the same needs and possibilities, nor do all of the needs and concerns of sexual and gender minorities overlap. Rather, gender needs to be seen in conjunction with other social identity markers, such as social class, age, sexual orientation, marital status, disability, urban/rural location and, at times, ethnic or religious background.

Gender roles and expectations are also situational – and time-bound – both in the historical sense and in a more everyday sense. Historically speaking, Victorian-age, British middle-class masculinities differ in central ways from those of today, for example. In the more every day sense, we also slip into various roles over the course of a day; a male office worker will for example likely display a different kind of masculinity nine to five in the office compared to after work in the pub with his mates.

Both in violent conflict and in disasters – be they short or long-term – gender is a key co-determinant of vulnerability and opportunity. In conflict, for example, certain men (mostly young, often lower class) are socially conditioned, both by other men and also by their mothers, girlfriends, wives, to use the physical capital of their bodies either for protection or for their personal and/or communal benefit, for example, by acting as soldiers, gangsters, guerrillas, cattle raiders or the like (Wright, 2014). Sometimes they are joined by women in their enterprises, but more often women and other men provide the social, moral and material support without which they could not act violently.<sup>5</sup> Older men and women, in the meantime, may often use their relative position of power to draw on younger men to do their violent bidding, and rely on the reproductive labour of younger women to sustain their own societal positions.

As Ormhaug et al. (2009, pp. 2–3) point out, quantitative data on how violent conflict impacts on women and men is difficult if not impossible to come by: ‘there are practically no global data available that allowed us to investigate conflict mortality disaggregated by gender’, although, based on the data, they were able to gather that ‘men are more likely to die during conflicts, whereas women die more often of indirect causes after the conflict is over’ (see also Urdal, 2010). Physical casualties are of course not the only victims of conflict: for those displaced, those caring for wounded family members or those carrying the emotional scars of conflict, gender plays a key role in determining access to resources, vulnerability and also socially accepted ways of dealing with their suffering. Other groups may, for example, be far more vulnerable to SGBV, such as young, unmarried or widowed women, street

children or people deemed to be ‘visibly’ not conforming to heterosexual norms (Myrntinen et al., 2017).

As with conflict, disaster affects different men and women in a variety of ways. Some challenges will be similar, but gendered access to resources and political decision-making processes, or exposure to violence, including SGBV, also mean different vulnerabilities for different groups. As Neumayer and Plümper (2007, p. 551) put it:

‘a vulnerability approach to disasters would suggest that inequalities in exposure and sensitivity to risk as well as inequalities in access to resources, capabilities and opportunities systematically disadvantage certain groups of people, rendering them more vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters’.

With climate change, vulnerability to disaster can be increased as these gendered pathways to reducing resilience are no longer available. Furthermore, displacement disrupts the access of those displaced to previous safety nets and places increased pressure on those nets which exist in host communities. Equitable access to economic resources is a key component of social inclusion and therefore to peacebuilding, and sustainability is key to ensuring that these resources continue to be available to current and future generations. Climate change, however, is placing increased stress on these resources, especially in a range of already fragile and conflict-affected states, thus potentially jeopardising peacebuilding processes or exacerbating conflicts (Peters and Vivekananda, 2014; Vivekananda et al., 2014). Given the inevitable complexities of such processes, one should however avoid simplistic assumptions that there is an automatic or inevitable linear causality along the lines of climate change leads to resource degradation, resource degradation to increased inequality, inequality to conflict, and conflict to displacement.

Contrary to most mainstream depictions of forced displacement, violence and vulnerability is not restricted only to the situation of crisis which people are fleeing from. Rather, the process of displacement tends to be a gendered continuum of violence that people are exposed to (Khatab and Myrntinen, forthcoming; Krause, 2015; Myrntinen et al., 2017). As highlighted in the Honduras case, gendered violence, coupled with gendered expectations, are often among the push factors leading to displacement. Violence, however, is also experienced along the route of displacement, when crossing (often multiple) borders and lastly upon arrival in the country of destination. Arrival does not mean the end of gendered obligations and expectations, but rather the triple pressure of having to deal with both those of the host community, prejudices included; of building up one’s own (and possibly one’s family’s) life up from scratch and the expectations back home of relatives – including importantly often that of remittances.

## Masculinities and femininities as access and agency

Gender, along with other social factors, is often a major determinant in mediating access to resources, land, jobs

(some of which are socially 'coded' masculine, some feminine), information and networks of patronage. Dominant forms of masculinity are often defined through access to these. On the other hand, gender norms often reduce access of women to these more generally and, in particular, the access of more vulnerable groups such as widows, single women or abandoned wives. Often, it is also the young and very old, the lower classes, the rural population, the displaced, the sexual and gender minorities, particular ethnic or religious groups and especially those with disabilities who are at a disadvantage. Many people thus find themselves struggling with not only one, but multiple forms of discrimination, based partially, but importantly on gender.

Vulnerability is, however, not only an issue of large-scale structural issues and socio-cultural norms. It can also be exacerbated by seemingly small, mundane manifestations of these disparities: do women and girls have access to telecommunications, are they allowed to open bank accounts without the approval of male relatives, can they evacuate from an area under threat or are they expected to wait for a male relative, are their nutritional needs jeopardised by expectations of men and boys eating meals first, with only leftovers for them?

In many societies, the public and private spheres as well as productive and reproductive sectors of the economy tend to be differently gendered. At the risk of making a vast generalisation, women tend to be expected to be more in the private and men in the public sphere, with women undertaking both reproductive and productive tasks, and men, as presumed primary breadwinners, undertaking paying tasks in the productive sector. These often tend to be the idealised roles. In practice, especially among lower socio-economic classes, and in situations of conflict, disaster, displacement and migration, *de facto* roles are very different (see also Gutmann, 2006). Nonetheless, and in spite of real-life experiences to the contrary, these 'ideal' roles live on as the ones to aspire to, both for women and for men (Dolan, 2001, 2002; Turner, 1999).

Agency and decision-making is, in many cultures and societies, traditionally seen as a primarily male prerogative, with women and 'lesser' men expected to follow the decisions of those men (and, on occasion, women) in more powerful societal positions. This often extends to the key decision if a family or community should flee, as well as when or where, a pattern repeated in societies as diverse as rural DR Congo (Kesmaecker-Wissing and Pagot, 2015), urban Pakistan (Mustafa et al., 2015) or rural Timor-Leste (Myrntinen, 2010). If it is not the whole community or family fleeing, it is often the physically stronger (i.e. younger adult) men who are expected to go abroad or to urban areas first, either sending remittances or setting up a base there so that the rest of the family can follow. These expectations are, however, not always straight-forward. In our research on Syrian refugees, some had felt compelled to fulfil their male protector/breadwinner role by fleeing, others by remaining and fighting (Khattab and Myrntinen, forthcoming).

These societal expectations of male agency, of being a breadwinner and protector, and conversely of female

subordination, often come under immense stress in times of crisis. Dolan (2002, p. 64) has noted that in the 'context of on-going war, heavy militarisation and internal displacement it is very difficult, if not impossible for the vast majority of men to fulfil the expectations contained in the model of masculinity' prevalent as the idealised form in society. Nonetheless, for his case study area of northern Uganda, Dolan (2001, p. 11) argues that:

'the normative model of masculinity [...] exercises considerable power over men, precisely because they are unable to behave according to it, but cannot afford not to try to live up to it. The relationship between the social and political acceptance which comes from being seen to conform to the norm, and access to a variety of resources, is a critical one in a conflict situation'.

The 'thwarting' of men's gender identities by a yawning gap between aspirations and reality can be further, wittingly or unwittingly, exacerbated by outside interventions. In many ways, external interventions (e.g. humanitarian aid) can 'infantilise' men who are expected to, and expect themselves to, be breadwinners by turning them into agency-less aid recipients. Not being able to support themselves economically can often leave young men trapped in a 'social moratorium' of being perpetually considered 'youth' (and thereby excluded from social and political decision-making processes), in spite of their generational age (Vigh, 2006). State agencies, NGOs and international donor agencies also often have a tendency to, in the name of gender equality, focus on women as agents of change and demonise local masculinities as lazy, violent, irresponsible and culturally backward (Myrntinen et al., 2014; Turner, 1999). As Kesmaecker-Wissing and Pagot (2015, p. 19) highlight '[unskilled] men find it more difficult to get work because their skills may not be appropriate in an overstretched local job market'. Men who are unable to provide for their families may also internalise shame, which in turn can lead to negative coping mechanisms including violence, substance abuse and self-harm (Dolan, 2009; Kesmaecker-Wissing and Pagot, 2015).

Women, in the meantime, often need to take on traditionally 'male-coded' tasks roles and responsibilities in situations of crisis and displacement, especially if male members of households are absent or men's mobility is restricted due to security reasons (Kesmaecker-Wissing and Pagot, 2015; Khattab and Myrntinen, forthcoming). This often occurs in the face of societal norms which attach a degree of opprobrium to women's newly-found agency and an expectation to return to more 'normal' gender role behaviour after the end of the crisis. While the recognition of the multiple, new and vital roles played by women and girls in times of crisis, the promotion of women's rights and changing of harmful masculine behaviours is extremely important, doing so in a non-conflict sensitive manner can lead to frustration and to backlash from men (and also some women), which may put women at a higher risk of violence (International Alert, 2010).



## Kinship ties and new forms of kinship and living

Migration research has long shown that kinship as well as other ties (such as friendship, regional, ethnic and other ties) are important in terms of information flows, of mediating the process of migration, determining where to migrate to and in the process of establishing new lives. At the same time, migration and displacement also disrupt old and create new forms of living and networking together. These processes are highly gendered, yet have been largely overlooked in analyses of gender, migration and displacement. Here it is again necessary to look beyond broad, supposedly homogenous gender categories and examine gender in intersectional and context-specific ways. In terms of examining households, the need to go beyond heteronormative assumptions is heightened in at least two ways (Jauhola, 2013). First, outside interveners need to let go of assumptions that all or most households in post-conflict, post-disaster and attendant situations of displacement conform to a nuclear or extended family unit based on a father, a mother and several children (Kesmaecker-Wissing and Pagot, 2015). In reality, households are often far more complex and fluid, and this needs to be taken into account in order for policy and programming to effectively meet the needs of the populations affected. Second, both in post-conflict and post-disaster programming, the particular needs of registered or, more usually, unregistered same-sex couples and of transsexual, transgender and intersex persons require far more attention than they have received to date (Couldrey and Herson, 2013; Dominey-Howes et al., 2014; Knight and Sollom, 2014; Myrntinen et al., 2014; Naujoks, 2016), particularly in situations of conflict, disaster and displacement. While international agencies such as the UNHCR (2015) are incrementally but increasingly becoming cognisant of the need to take the needs of LGBTI into account in their responses, other non-traditional ways of living together have received less attention, in spite of their ubiquity.

## Conclusions

Gender, in interplay with other social identity factors, is a key factor in determining people's agency and vulnerability in times of crisis and resultant displacement. In spite of rich evidence of this, and of the complexities involved, policy responses and public discourses tend to approach it in a simplistic way, and as an add-on rather than a primary category of analysis. Taking gender, its contextual specificities and intersectional and shifting nature into account will lead to more effective interventions and thereby a reduction of vulnerabilities and suffering. Achieving this means going beyond simplistic stereotypes and embracing complexity, and will allow for a better understanding of lived realities, thereby leading to more targeted and effective interventions. This includes understanding gendered expectations placed by other members of society on men, women and those who do not conform to gender binaries; how gender affects positions of

vulnerability and agency; and how conflict, climate change and displacement can exacerbate pre-existing, gendered structural inequalities – but also create new opportunities for coping with crises and displacement, increasing equality and inclusion. Current approaches, be it in the media or the policy world, which either ignore gender completely or rely on simplistic assumptions and stereotypes, will at best lead to ineffective responses and at worst can cause serious harm, backlash and conflict.

At the heart of these simplistic approaches is an understanding of gender as something static and straight-forward, embodied by and tied intrinsically to the biological body of a man or woman. Rather, we should perhaps start seeing gender as a dynamic, relational product that emerges out of a complex set of role expectations which are constantly renegotiated and co-constructed by all members of a given society as well as internalised by the individual. These gendered expectations are the ties that bind us to our communities, our peers, our families and ourselves, and that come under stress in times of crisis. They can be our lifelines and guidelines – or webs that entangle us and drag us under. Understanding these relational dynamics will help us better comprehend particular responses to crises, but also identify particular needs and vulnerabilities.

With a record number of people displaced globally, with continued violent conflict, climate change likely accelerating and increasing tensions around issues of migration, the need to engage critically and constructively with these issues is anything but academic. National, regional and international responses to climate change, conflict and displacement therefore need to better integrate gender dimensions into their practical responses and policy frameworks, drawing on a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic gendered nature of the phenomena they seek to address.

## Notes

1. Interviews, Tegucigalpa, July–August 2014; the available 2013 data from the Spanish *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (INE, 2014) does not allow for a confirmation of this anecdotal information, as the public data does not list Hondurans among the 16 largest migrant groups.
2. Interviews, Tegucigalpa, July–August 2014
3. Much of this violence disproportionately affects young men. Of recorded homicide victims, 93.1% were male (UNODC, 2011) and according to the Small Arms Survey (2014), 'when calculating only for the male population aged 15 – 49.33 per cent of all deaths were attributable to violence'.
4. Personal communication with Fairtrade Finland, May 2014. This seems to be corroborated by initial findings from other research in the area.
5. On the multiplicity of the roles played by women in conflict-affected situations, see for example Cohn (2012), Coulter (2009) and Myrntinen et al. (2014).

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