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Flooding in Noakhali, in Bangladesh, affected millions in August 2024.

A photograph showing a woman in a pink headscarf carrying a young child on her back, wading through a flooded path. Other people are visible in the background, also wading through the water. The scene is surrounded by lush green vegetation.

Disaster displacements disproportionately impact women, girls in fragile contexts

This analysis is the result of a collaboration between the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the UN's sexual and reproductive health agency, and the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), looking into the scale and impact of disaster-related internal displacements on women and girls.

KEY FACTS

- Disaster-related internal displacement is a truly universal phenomenon, with major impacts seen in even high- and middle-income countries – including many of the countries that have contributed the most to global climate change.
- While exposure to disasters is widespread – ability to cope is not: Almost a quarter of disaster displacements took place in countries with low Human Development Index scores (HDI measures social and economic development); almost a quarter took place in low-income countries; over a third of displacements are in countries with the highest vulnerability to climate change and least capacity to address it.
- Floods and storms, which are increasing in frequency and intensity due to climate change, were found to account for 73 per cent of all disaster-related displacements.
- The impacts of displacement are far from gender-neutral: Women and girls face physical and mobility consequences from poor sanitation, lack of menstrual supplies, lost access to reproductive health services, and increased vulnerability to gender-based violence
- The prevalence of displacements in high-income, high HDI countries could sap attention, political will and resources away from the most vulnerable: women and girls in some of the most gender-unequal countries in the world.

DEFINITIONS

DISASTER DISPLACEMENT: The forced flight of individuals due to natural events such as floods, earthquakes, landslides, droughts, storms, fires or other disasters. IDMC monitors internal displacements due to disasters. All displacement figures in this analysis refer to internal displacements, or displacements taking place within the borders of one's country.

INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT: Internal displacement is when people are forced to flee their homes due to armed conflict, generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters but remain within their own country. Each of the displacements indicated in this analysis refers to a new forced movement of a person within the borders of their country within the year; individuals can, and often do, experience multiple displacements.



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Destruction in Blantyre, Malawi, caused by a record-breaking cyclone.

METHODOLOGY

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre recorded over 26 million internal displacements linked to close to 4,000 disaster displacement events in 2023. For the most part, these data did not include displacements disaggregated by age and sex. To bridge this gap, this research overlaid geocoded internal displacement data with the latest demographic-gridded population data, using the share of women and girls among the total population in each grid to calculate the number of women and girls among the total displaced population for each event.

Internal displacement is measured either by the number of internally displaced people at a specific point in time (e.g., the end of the year) independent of when the actual movement occurred (days, months, years ago), or as the number of internal displacement incidents within a time period, usually a year. In this analysis, we measure the

number of internal displacements because, in the context of weather-related disasters, a displaced person – especially when displaced by a pre-emptive evacuation – sometimes return to their residence as soon as conditions allow. These individuals would be missed by an annual count.

It is important to note that the number of displacements (i.e., incidents of displacements involving a woman or a girl) cannot be equated with the number of displaced people, as the same individual could be displaced multiple times by the same or different events.

Additionally, it must be emphasized that not all disaster displacements are related to climate change, but as climate change continues to make extreme weather events more common and more intense, ever more people are at risk of being forced to flee their homes.



©UNFPA Nigeria/Dawali David Exodus

A caseworker provides counselling to a **survivor of gender-based violence** in the **aftermath of flooding** in Maiduguri, Nigeria.

BACKGROUND

There are important reasons to focus attention on people who have been internally displaced. For one, the number of people who are internally displaced has been increasing over the last decade, reaching 75.9 million at the end of 2023.¹ By contrast, the global refugee population, which is also growing but receives comparatively more international attention, stood at 43.4 million at the end of the same year.² Additionally, while internally displaced people may benefit from the services provided by the country where they are living – if it has the resources and institutions to provide these services – they will not be eligible for the legal status or international protections and treatment standards afforded to refugees.

Of the world's 75.9 million internally displaced people, a minority, 7.7 million, were displaced by disasters – meaning extreme weather events, earthquakes, droughts and other hazards. (By contrast, some 68.3 million people were displaced by conflict and violence.) Yet many individuals were displaced multiple times, and when looking at the overall number of displacements – that is, forced movements – the majority were due to disasters. In 2023, out of 46.9 million displacements, 26.4 million were disaster-related.

While roughly half (49.6 per cent) of disaster-related internal displacements are experienced by women and girls, the impacts of displacement are far from gender-neutral. Maintaining decent health is significantly more challenging for women and girls experiencing menstruation or pregnancy.^{3,4} Poor sanitation and menstrual hygiene in emergency settings can lead to illness and curb mobility.⁵ While the gendered needs of women and girls are well known – and predictable – in the onset of a crisis, access to reproductive healthcare, menstrual supplies, and life-saving maternal health services are often overlooked in disaster responses.⁶

Displaced women and girls also experience greatly increased vulnerability to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation, but their protection needs and access to survivor services are likewise often neglected.⁷

The world is currently experiencing a surge in extreme weather events. If current trends continue, the number of disasters per year globally may increase from around 400 in 2015 to 560 per year by 2030.⁸ The impact of these disasters on women and girls can and must be prioritized in humanitarian responses.

1 www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data

2 www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-06/global-trends-report-2023.pdf

3 www.unfpa.org/menstruationfaq

4 www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/MMR_in_humanitarian_settings-final4_0.pdf

5 www.unfpa.org/news/5-reasons-why-menstruation-support-critical-humanitarian-crisis

6 www.frontiersin.org/journals/global-womens-health/articles/10.3389/fgwh.2024.1364603/full

7 www.unfpa.org/resources/gender-based-violence-humanitarian-settings

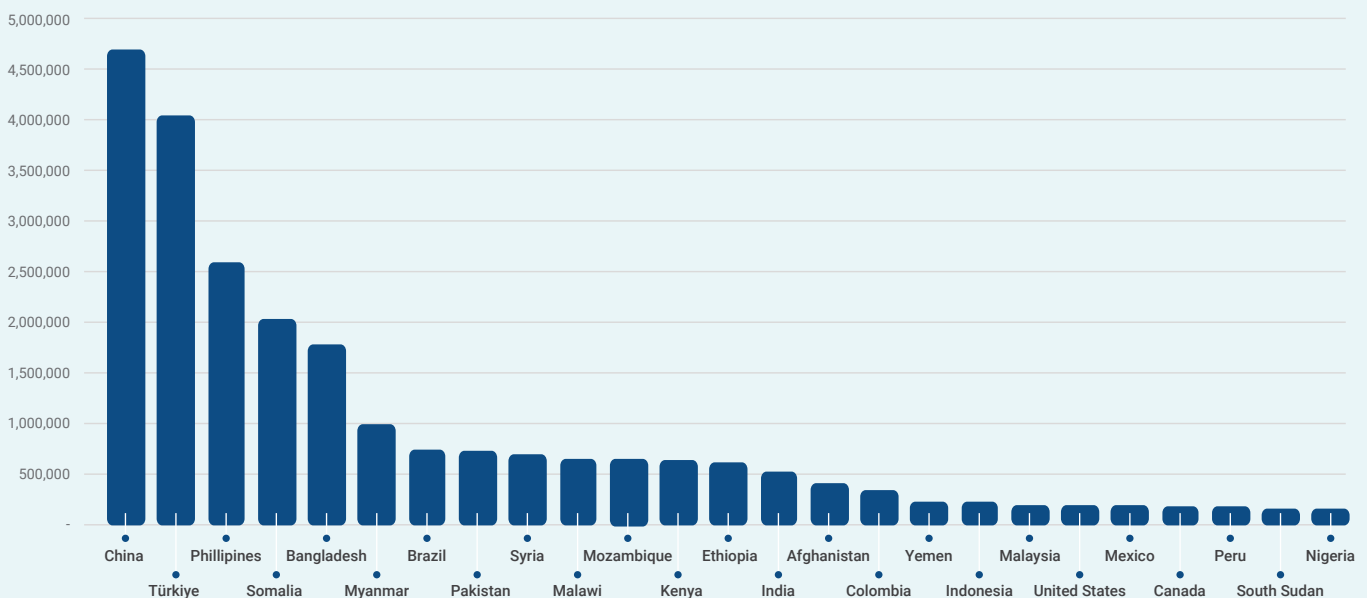
8 www.undrr.org/media/79595/download?startDownload=true

ANALYSIS

Perhaps counterintuitively, over half of disaster displacements in 2023 took place in countries with high or very high human development index (HDI) scores. Some 45 per cent took place in high or upper-middle income countries. In fact, among the 25 countries experiencing the largest numbers of disaster-related displacements were those with some of the highest GDP in the world: China (#1 for disaster displacements, #2 for GDP), India (#14 for disaster displacements, #5 for GDP), the United States of America (#20 for disaster displacements, #1 for GDP), Mexico (#21 for disaster displacements, #12 for GDP) and Canada (#22 for disaster displacements, #10 for GDP).⁹

Meanwhile, close to a quarter of disaster displacements took place in countries with low HDI scores. Some 23 per cent took place in low-income countries. Over a third of displacements – 38 per cent – took place in countries that have the highest degree of vulnerability to climate change and are among the least prepared to address it, per the ND-GAIN Country Index.¹⁰ And close to a quarter of all disaster displacements took place in countries at very high risk from humanitarian crises and disasters that could overwhelm national response capacity, as indicated by their ranking on the INFORM Risk Index.

Top 25 countries with the most disaster displacements in 2023



These figures show that disaster-related internal displacement is a truly universal phenomenon, with major impacts seen in even high- and middle-income countries – including many of the countries that have contributed the most to global climate change. (The United States, China, India and Canada are considered to be among the top 10 historical

contributors, according to various measures.¹¹) While not all weather-related disasters and their associated displacements are directly linked to climate change, many are: Floods and storms, which are increasing in frequency and intensity due to climate change, were found to account for 73 per cent of all disaster displacements.

9 data.worldbank.org/

10 gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/

11 www.nature.com/articles/s41597-023-02041-1

Every single disaster-related displacement represents a humanitarian concern. But the prevalence of disaster displacements in high-income, high-HDI, high-GDP countries could have additional unexpected consequences for the most vulnerable people living in countries with weaker and less adaptive response mechanisms. For example, disaster displacements in high-income countries with robust media markets may distract international attention away from those in low-income, low-HDI, low-GDP countries. The rising needs in high-income countries may sap political will to contribute to disaster response and climate adaptation programmes operating in more fragile disaster-prone settings. Finally, there are significant gaps in gendered vulnerabilities of disaster-displaced populations, with some disaster-affected countries less able to secure the rights, safety and health of women and girls. The needs of the most vulnerable women and girls, therefore, may be further overlooked.

According to the analysis, 37 per cent of all disaster-related displacements occurred in

countries ranked in the top quarter of the Gender Inequality Index (GII), i.e., those performing well, while 34 per cent occurred in countries ranked in the bottom quarter of the GII, i.e., those performing poorly.¹²

Of those performing poorly in the GII index, four are among the worst performing in the world: Yemen [#1 lowest], Nigeria [#2 lowest], Somalia [#3 lowest] and Afghanistan [#5 lowest].

The sexual and reproductive health needs of women and girls are similarly under-resourced in these disaster-affected countries. Among the 25 countries with the most disaster-related internal displacements, six have some of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world (Malawi [381 deaths per 100,000 live births; #24 globally], Kenya [530 deaths per 100,000 live births; #12 globally], Afghanistan [620 deaths per 100,000 live births; #8 globally], Somalia [621 deaths per 100,000 live births; #7 globally], Nigeria [1,047 deaths per 100,000 live births; #3 globally], South Sudan [1,223 deaths per 100,000 live births; #1 globally]¹³).

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Does the prevalence of disaster-related displacement in high-income, high-development countries impact the political will to support those in low-income, low-development countries?
2. Does it impact the flow of resources to women and girls in these most vulnerable communities?



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Children play in a part of rural Colombia that is significantly affected by climate change.



¹² hdr.undp.org/data-center/thematic-composite-indices/gender-inequality-index#/indicies/GII

¹³ www.unfpa.org/publications/trends-maternal-mortality-2000-2020