

# LIVELIHOODS, GENDER AND INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

**BETWEEN VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCY**



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**B** | BROOKINGS-LSE  
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# Livelihoods, Gender and Internal Displacement in Côte d'Ivoire

**BETWEEN VULNERABILITY AND RESILIENCY<sup>1</sup>**

Internal displacement is not a new phenomenon in Côte d'Ivoire. Conflict and displacement in Côte d'Ivoire are linked to competition for political power, the economic downturn, and a corresponding sharp increase in poverty in a country that had previously enjoyed a comparatively high standard of development. Many of those displaced in Côte d'Ivoire today were amongst the one million who were uprooted in the political crisis that followed the country's 2010 presidential election. While the vast majority of these internally displaced persons (IDPs) have now returned to their homes, 40,000-80,000 people remain displaced within Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>2</sup> A substantial proportion of the displaced fled to Abidjan; although a number of camps and informal settlements were created to house the displaced, the majority sought shelter with "host families."

In many ways, women have borne the brunt of the country's conflicts and its protracted displacement situation. Displaced women suffered numerous human rights violations, and along with their families have struggled to re-establish sustainable livelihoods – both while displaced, and upon returning to their communities or seeking out another solution to their displacement. The conflict resulted in the destruction of the productive capital of thousands of households, and a marked increase in single-parent families due to the death of many men in the violence. Looting, destruction and land-grabbing have undercut the economic sectors (including subsistence agriculture and petty trade) that typically employ the poorest of the poor, particularly female heads of household. This has undermined the ability of many displaced families to recover from the economic losses associated with their forced migration, and to secure sustainable solutions to their displacement. Inequitable property inheritance practices and heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly amongst internally displaced young women, further complicate the efforts of displaced women to make a living.

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<sup>1</sup> Cover Photo – IDP women in Côte d'Ivoire. Photo by Eric Levron

This document summarizes the results of a study entitled *La mise en perspective des questions de genre et de moyens d'existence des populations déplacées et retournées en Côte d'Ivoire entre 2002 et 2012*, prepared for the Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement by Eric Levron. The study is based on fieldwork conducted in August 2012 in Abidjan and western Côte d'Ivoire (Moyen Cavally). The opinions expressed are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement.

<sup>2</sup> IDMC 2013, Côte d'Ivoire country profile.

*Despite these hurdles, displaced and returnee women have emerged as entrepreneurial and dynamic economy actors, particularly in the informal sector. Indeed, in spite of these challenges, many displaced women have become the primary breadwinners for their families, and leaders in the process of rebuilding and economically revitalizing return communities.*

This research underlines the importance of understanding the gender dimensions of IDP livelihoods, taking into particular account household-level dynamics and the broader socio-economic context within which livelihood interventions are implemented. While many displaced women assume new roles as primary breadwinners for their families, this research suggests that the ability of displaced women to develop relevant adaptation strategies, particularly through the creation of sustainable livelihoods, depends in part on the socio-economic status of their households before the crisis. Without other employed household members, many middle class Ivorian women cut off from their area of origin or from their social networks encountered particular difficulties adapting and re-establishing means of existence – they are the main victims of a conflict-induced drop in social status. Women with access to support structures and who were economically active before the crisis – those aged 30 to 50 years – have been best able to develop and implement strategies to save money and improve their livelihoods.

## **MOBILITY AND HOST FAMILY SUPPORT: KEY FACTORS SHAPING IDPS' LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES**

IDPs in Côte d'Ivoire have relied in particular on mobility and solidarity networks – particularly the support of host families – to secure their livelihoods.

Strategically moving between different camps, between camps and host families, and between host communities and communities of origin, enabled many displaced families to protect key productive assets such as houses, and diversify their livelihood strategies by engaging in various kinds of employment and maintaining professional activities. Maximizing the value of mobility as an adaptation strategy requires the restoration of a minimum degree of security, and the possibility of moving the physical assets associated with displaced persons' livelihoods (e.g. goods for trade, tools, etc.). The extent to which IDPs could use mobility to advance their livelihoods is shaped by gender and family configurations. Mobility is a more accessible option for larger families that include adult men and women. These families could, for example, send an adult family member back to the community of origin to work and assess conditions, while the rest of the family remained in the host community. In contrast, displaced families headed by single mothers were more likely to become “trapped” in camps or informal settlements as they lacked the resources to move between locations.

For families facing insecure conditions in host communities, mobility was not always an entirely free choice and could in fact undercut their livelihoods. For example, many displaced women in Côte d'Ivoire work in petty trade. The need to move multiple times in search of improved security meant that these women had to constantly restart the process of establishing a place to do business, and building networks and a customer base, with negative impacts on the profitability of their work.

Drawing on their social capital, the majority of displaced households took refuge in urban areas with relatives or other members of their ethnic group. Community solidarity and in particular the ability to access support from host families significantly shaped IDPs' livelihood prospects. While IDPs who sheltered with host families had better outcomes in terms of their livelihoods, supporting the IDPs often put considerable strain on host families' limited financial and environmental resources. Many host families in Côte d'Ivoire faced heightened risk of food insecurity, and the decision to shelter the displaced could have detrimental effects on their own longer-term livelihood prospects, as funds that would otherwise be spent on expenses such as schooling may be diverted to cover the costs of accommodating displaced family members. Experiences in Côte d'Ivoire underline the importance of equitably distributing aid and access to livelihood support programs so that they benefit not only IDPs in camps, but also those living with host families, and the host families themselves. This is essential to ensuring that options remain open for IDPs to live outside of camps, where livelihood opportunities can be particularly restricted.

## THE ROLE OF STATE AND INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

National authorities in Côte d'Ivoire took the positive step of promoting the equitable distribution of aid, with the aim of benefitting both IDPs and host community members. Their efforts to restore security facilitated the movement of both people and goods, which has proved critical to reviving livelihoods, especially for displaced women who rely on trade to make their living. As recognized by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Chaloka Beyani, the Ivorian national authorities have, over a relatively short period of time, played a key role in re-establishing law and order and, in cooperation with the international community, ensuring the voluntariness of IDP returns. However, relatively few IDPs and returnees have directly benefited from the state mechanisms charged with reintegration and the promotion of livelihoods. There has been considerable confusion regarding government-supported livelihoods initiatives, with many of the institutions charged with supporting IDPs unaware of the livelihood programs. Lacking effective guidance and clear communications from the government, many marginalized and potentially vulnerable individuals, including displaced women and youth, were excluded from these mechanisms. When the fieldwork for this study was conducted, authorities had yet to follow through on their commitments to support income-generating activities for IDPs in Abidjan.

While humanitarian assistance has been the main resource of urban displaced populations, especially those located in camps/informal settlements, humanitarian initiatives intended to promote sustainable livelihoods for IDPs and returnees in Côte d'Ivoire have had limited positive effect as the support

provided has tended to be short term, overly focused on encamped populations, and has not been strategically designed to facilitate the attainment of economic self-sufficiency. However, the provision and investment of modest amounts of capital (often from religious institutions, in the order of \$40-\$60) was particularly successful in enabling displaced women to cover unmet household needs. Using this capital as a foundation for revitalizing their livelihoods, some displaced women were even able to finance the reconstruction of their damaged or destroyed houses in their village of origin.

The continued provision of humanitarian assistance has been a critical bridge for those IDPs who lack a robust social support structure, and who have struggled to establish sustainable livelihoods. Single-headed families, often led by displaced women, comprise 75 percent of what the humanitarian community has deemed “specific cases,” a term referring to highly vulnerable groups in need of assistance, including separated children, unaccompanied children and child parents, children with physical disabilities, female heads of household, older persons, the chronically ill, and victims of sexual and gender-based violence. However, it is clear that humanitarian assistance and housing relocation allowances are not substitutes for support for sustainable livelihoods, particularly for IDPs living in urban settings where they cannot depend on local agricultural production to meet their basic needs. As the government moves to close the remaining urban camps, care is needed, in line with the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur, to ensure that any evictions are carried out in line with international standards, do not disproportionately impose negative effects on displaced women, and result in durable solutions and sustainable livelihoods for former IDPs.