Migration, Mobility and Marginalisation: Consequences for Sexual and Gender Minorities

POLICY BRIEFING

As a strategy to avoid discrimination, violence and economic marginalisation, sexual and gender non-conforming people often turn to migration as a route to achieve independence and build social capital. Recent studies by the IDS Sexuality, Poverty and Law programme demonstrate that while migration can provide liberation from some experiences of marginalisation and an ability to contribute economically towards family households, for many it leads to a precarious existence. To ensure these groups are not 'left behind' in development, policymakers and aid programming must recognise and address marginalisation of these groups as part of overall strategies to reduce risks of migration.

Within a rapidly evolving global context of instability around conflict, climate change and extreme poverty and marginalisation, migration has moved up the political agenda. There is currently very little examination, however, of the consequences of migration for those people marginalised as a result of their sexual and gender identities.

Studies undertaken by the IDS Sexuality, Poverty and Law (SPL) programme in 15 countries demonstrate that the effects of social, economic and political marginalisation can 'force' people to move either within their country or overseas. People can also choose to migrate for strategic reasons in order to counteract existing marginalisation, by moving to more accepting locations where they can economically contribute to families remotely and express their identities freely.

Traditionally, there is a greater likelihood of movement from smaller towns or rural communities to urban contexts. This is primarily due to greater financial prospects being available in urban as opposed to rural contexts as labour tends to flow naturally from low-wage regions to high-wage areas.

Whether forced or strategic, there are costs and opportunities linked to migration. These are explored in this briefing, specifically in relation to social mobility, which might entail upward or downward mobility depending upon the context that individuals find themselves moving away from or towards.

Forced migration

For many, migration might necessitate a move as economic migrants, refugees or asylum seekers to more tolerant countries where opportunities for a safe, authentic and economically productive life are more possible. An increasing number of countries are now considering persecution of homosexuality as a ground for seeking asylum, although there is now a body of documented cases highlighting how the process can be onerous, inappropriately intrusive for applicants and has low rates of success.

Those individuals whose sexual and gender identities do not conform to traditional expectations (non-conforming) often face compounded barriers and challenges in migrating, especially when borne of necessity. Ensuring you have

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official recognition of legal personhood on arrival is crucial to being able to obtain state support or enter many occupations. Being a newcomer to a country can complicate the process of obtaining travel documents, with cultural and language barriers impacting on their ability to negotiate the job market and state support on arrival.

Additionally, in countries (as outlined in the SPL Ethiopia case studies) where internal travel can be incredibly hard to negotiate without proper ID documents, individuals who need to travel away from their place of origin can find their ability to access state benefits or support curtailed by the difficulties of establishing legal personhood in a new municipality. Long-held residential addresses might be required before registration for these can be successful, which can be problematic for those who change location regularly for work purposes or because of discrimination.

In some countries, activists operating in nascent lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) organisations can find themselves forced to leave their countries as a result of their campaigning. For example the organisation Rainbow-Ethiopia formed and made attempts to establish itself within the public health field, but this ended when its leader, Dereje Teferi, fled the country after talking about men who have sex with men (MSM) issues at an international AIDS conference. The departure of such activists can have a detrimental effect on the building of capacity and credibility of the sexual activism networks they leave behind. This inability to retain expertise and organisational continuity is compounded by the difficulties faced by these organisations in obtaining long-term and secure funding.

Strategic migration
Evidence shows that migration patterns have traditionally represented the migrants (and the motivating reasons that underscore their choices) in tightly defined traditional gender and sexual roles. Yet, migration also has the potential to be sexually liberating and alongside the economic advantages there can be an important contribution to levels of wellbeing, with the consequent virtuous impacts upon health and productivity outcomes. Establishing a life within a new environment allows individuals to cast aside some of the social expectations and surveillance that characterises the lives of gender and sexual non-conforming individuals, although rigid gender norms may still impact on their lives.

The SPL programme found, too, that for some of those in contexts of entrenched poverty, who have a limited range of economic options in front of them and consequently choose to engage in sex work, the choice to migrate is essential. The majority of sex workers tend to travel away from their home areas to work. Whilst this may be for purely economic reasons, anecdotal evidence from Ethiopian research with sex workers illustrates that it is also a means of expressing a sexual orientation safely within a more anonymous environment. In recent years, this has become a less gendered activity, with the numbers of men engaging in sex work in major cities in Ethiopia for example, also rising significantly.

When looking at female migration, there is an increasing awareness among development professionals of the harmful care deficits that can be created through migration. For example, when women from developing countries migrate it can result in a domestic or childcare deficit within the familial home which is then usually borne by female relatives and peer networks. For gender and sexual non-conforming migrants, this trend can place a similar burden on women, but migration can also provide significant strategic benefits in terms of transforming familial relationships. Earning financial resources that can contribute to the family household can often lead to acceptance for many sexual and gender non-conforming individuals.

Remittance payments from migrating workers back to their households have become a staple element of migratory behaviour and the influx of this capital back to the country of origin can have a positive effect on offsetting inequality and boosting employment. In the Philippines context, respondents reported that family members, whilst still not accepting their sexual or gender identity, would provide tacit acceptance of their lives if they could provide a regular income. The option to work abroad and significantly increase earning power is therefore seen as a legitimate route

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by which LGBTI people can obtain a degree of acceptance from their kin. Findings from Nepal and the Philippines highlighted the role of remittance payments as a strategy to bridge conflicts around their gender or sexual non-conformity.

Costs and opportunities of migration

The choice to migrate entails balancing the risk of discrimination at home with the potential loss of established social networks. For many, the loss of existing networks at 'home' can be offset by the formation and growth of fresh networks amongst their peers following migration to another city or country. These can allow them fresh opportunities to access resources and build social capital amongst other sexual and gender non-conforming individuals. That said, moving away from one's family or community inevitably involves some loss of status and informal assistance that others would take for granted in making their way in the world.

Evidence from Brazil, India, the Philippines, South Africa and Ethiopia has illustrated that identifying as LGBTI can lead to restrictions in health, education, housing, employment and civil participation and can affect individuals' ability to access and build upon the social capital available to others. This might be within the family itself, such as a refusal by family to support school attendance, or forced marriage (particularly amongst women) to avoid bringing shame to families. Within the wider community, it can impact upon the ability to access decent housing and/or result in harassment from neighbours, police or landlords.

Findings from the SPL programme chime with other international studies, and indicate that in societies with strong social and/or legal opposition to same-sex or non-traditional gender expression, the individual who is 'outed' publicly (especially if this takes place within the workplace) can experience the fall-out as an economic shock. Traditionally, such shocks would be understood to be micro-level events such as an illness or the death of a principal breadwinner. Some interviewees from Ethiopia acknowledged that such exposure of gender or sexual non-conformity could prove to be similarly 'fatal' to their ability to support themselves.

The availability of obtaining an education both prior to and as part of a migratory experience represents a key principle for many in broadening their ability to obtain a decent livelihood. The experience of those individuals who undertake this in a more progressive environment can flourish, but this is usually reserved for those who can afford the significant cost this entails. As may be expected, for those without family support, this can be hard to secure and the balancing act of studying coupled with the necessity of survival can make this a distant dream for many.

Migration is frequently a problematic process. Findings from Nepal highlight that many migrant workers experience abuse, are underpaid and can experience horrendous working conditions or are forced back into normative roles by employers. Those that choose to migrate to countries that also have restrictive cultural practices around sexuality and gender expression, such as parts of the Middle East, can often find themselves with even less ability to express themselves. Even in countries with a more progressive environment, the cold reality is that obtaining legal rights from the government to remain and obtain employment there as a migrant worker can be exceptionally difficult.

Migration and sex work can also be quite precarious, with workers facing exploitation, abuse and police harassment, leading them to remain mobile and not put down roots in communities. Young male sex workers in Ethiopia have been described as 'the most marginalised of the marginalised' because they suffer the double burden of dealing with their stigmatised sex trade and sexual practices.

Even those who have completed a high level of educational achievement can find themselves experiencing workplace discrimination. Consequently, many of them find themselves having to take low-paid or informal employment and for those moving into the global North, the majority of opportunities remain in labour-intensive industries. Interviewees who had moved from the Philippines to Hong Kong reported that due to the way they looked or dressed, they were unable to attain gainful employment in spite of having professional credentials.

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Policy recommendations

Whilst migration has challenges for everyone who attempts it, there are particular measures that would assist in ensuring it has a positive impact on economic and social prosperity of sexual and gender minority communities:

- International organisations should become more sensitive to the reality that all international development activity affects those with non-normative sexual and gender identities and reflect this in their approach in designing, assigning resources and measuring the effectiveness of all aid programming.

- International donors should introduce mechanisms to support 'underground' forms of LGBTI activism, even when this is with young organisations that might represent a small element of financial risk or where measurements of success are harder to quantify.

- Same-sex relations should be decriminalised as a step towards securing the social, political and economic rights of gender and sexual non-conforming individuals and shifting public and familial attitudes.

- Development programmes should not aim to discourage migration or sex work (and other forms of livelihood strategies), but instead work to resolve the multiple barriers faced by gender and sexual minorities, alongside offering diverse skills training, language and employment options.

- Invest in research that helps to provide a greater understanding of the particular experiences of gender and sexual minorities living in rural contexts, as current evidence around exclusion is dominated by that undertaken in urban contexts. In addition, policymakers should make recommendations for improvements that can mitigate the push-and-pull factors that encourage migration.

- Support strategies to simplify the process of obtaining identification papers for people from gender and sexual minorities (such as sex workers) who need to migrate regularly.

- Invest further in increasing population research studies around social mobility and migration of gender and sexual non-conforming individuals.

- Encourage and fund time for LGBTI organisations to form strong alliances with the rest of the international SOGIE (sexual orientation and gender identity and expression) community (especially regional partnerships), so that when individuals migrate to another country there is a network available to support them in the transition and the possibility of joint campaigning around common issues.

Further reading

Overs, C. (2015) *BOOSHTEE! Survival and Resilience in Ethiopia*, IDS Evidence Report 129, Brighton: IDS

Coyle, D. and Boyce, P. (2015) *Same-sex Sexualities, Gender Variance and Livelihood in Nepal: Exclusions, Subjectivity and Development*, IDS Evidence Report 109, Brighton: IDS

GALANG Philippines (2015) *How Filipino LBTs Cope with Economic Disadvantage*, IDS Evidence Report 120, Brighton: IDS

Overs, C. (2014) *Sex Workers, Empowerment and Poverty Alleviation in Ethiopia*, IDS Evidence Report 80, Brighton: IDS

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