



LIMALITY
RESEARCH CONSORTIUM



SURVIVAL STRATEGIES IN
FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Survival Strategies and Health Repercussions in Forced Displacement: A Multi-Country Study on Transactional Sex

Report (Advanced Draft)
June 2024

THE STUDY WAS FINANCED BY THE SWISS NETWORK FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE – CANADA, AND LINDENHOF FOUNDATION



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Abbreviations

FGD: Focus Group Discussion

GBV: Gender-Based Violence

IDI: In-Depth Interview

IPV: Intimate Partner Violence

KII: Key Informant Interview

MH: Mental Health

LAG: Local Advisory Group

LGBTIQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Intersex, Queer and Plus

RIC: Reception and Identification Centre

SEA: Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

SGBV: Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

SOGIESC: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics

SRH: Sexual and Reproductive Health

STI: Sexually Transmitted Infection

TS: Transactional Sex

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Definitions

Asylum-Seeker: Any person who is seeking international protection. In some countries, it is used as a legal term referring to a person who has applied for refugee status or a complementary international protection status and has not yet received a final decision on their claim.

Cisgender: An individual whose gender identity is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth

Forced displacement: Involuntary displacement due to persecution, conflict, crisis, violence, human rights violations, or other reasons.

Gender Identity: A person's deeply felt and experienced sense of one's own gender. Gender identity is distinct from sexual orientation and sex characteristics.

Persons in a refugee-like situation: Groups of persons who are outside their country or territory of origin and who face protection risks similar to those of refugees, but for whom refugee status has, for practical or other reasons, not been ascertained.

Refugee: Under international law and UNHCR's mandate, refugees are individuals outside their countries of origin in need of international protection because of feared persecution, or a serious threat to their life, physical integrity or freedom in their country of origin as a result of persecution, armed conflict, violence or serious public disorder.

Sexual Orientation: A person's physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction towards other people.

Transactional Sex: A sexual activity with mutual understanding between parties that sex will be exchanged for material or non-material benefits. Our working definition of TS in this study implies agency while acknowledging concurrent vulnerability and the possibility of exploitation in forced displacement, where choices are limited.

Transgender: An individual whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth.

Acknowledgments

This multi-country study was completed with the support of various organizations and the collective efforts of numerous individuals, each of whom played a vital role in the research process. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the following:

First and foremost, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to all refugees, asylum seekers, and other forcibly displaced people who participated in the research and offering their time and sharing their stories, allowing us to make their voices heard. We also sincerely thank all the key informants for dedicating their time to this study.

Shirin Heidari and Monica Onyango conceptualized the research study and developed the initial draft of the research protocol. Shirin Heidari served as the Principal Investigator and led the coordination efforts across all countries as well as research activities in Türkiye and Switzerland. Monica A Onyango acted as co-principal investigator, provided scientific advice, and supported data analysis. All researchers (Jinan Usta, Aida Essaid, Meric Caglar, Thanasis Tyrovolas and Vinh-Kim Nguyen) provided input in the development of the research protocol and were heavily involved in the analysis and writing.

Data collection in Lebanon was led by Jinan Usta, with support from Alaa Khaled, Ali Chaito, Adnan Kadri, Alaa Maalabawi, Aseel Eid. Data collection in Jordan was led by Aida Essaid and Hala Abu Taleb, and supported by Rawan Rbihat, Maesara Dammagh, Wafa Ebdah, Nibal Awad, Dalia Haddad, Majed Abu Azzam. Data collection in Türkiye was led by Meric Caglar, under supervision of Shirin Heidari, and supported by Hala Abu Taleb, Rawan Rbihat and Shilan Masroor. Data collection in Greece was led by Thanasis Tyrovolas, with support from Eleftheria Kotsifa, who equally contributed to analysis and interpretation of data from Greece, and Atwa Jaber and Shilan Masroor, who supported ethnographic participant observation in Greece. Data collection in Switzerland was carried out by Atwa Jaber, Shilan Masroor, Anja Natalina Haller and Rose Nelson, under the supervision of Shirin Heidari. Vinh-Kim Nguyen provided expert advice and oversight of the ethnographic participant observations. Data management and analysis were led by Ryan Whitacre with support from all researchers and research assistants, including Aesha Rajan and Nishita Rajeshkumar Patel, Nicole Herrera and Alexia Jones. Project coordination was supported by Kailin Large, Melissa Cigdem Coyle, and Maya Lal Sopory. Rafael Carrano Lelis supported the development of background policy analysis with support from country leads. Numerous individuals supported the recruitment, transcriptions, translations, and interpretation throughout the project.

Laurie Chan Yousman drafted this multi-country report, synthesizing the findings into this report, with extensive input from Shirin Heidari, Ryan Whitacre, Monica A Onyango, and all country research leads.

We further acknowledge the invaluable insights from all the advisory group members and project partners (in alphabetical order) Thomas Abel, (University of Bern), Eirene Chen, Nadine Cornier (UNFPA), Shereen Elfeki (UNAIDS MENA), Robert Feldmann (Gravita SRK - Zentrum für Psychotraumatologie), Berchtold von Fischer, Allen Maina (UNHCR), Alessandro Monsutti, (Geneva Graduate Institute), Kemal Ördek (UNFPA Türkiye), Catrin Schulte-Hillen (UNFPA), Nelly Staderini, (Médecins Sans Frontières), Bernice Staub (Gravita SRK - Zentrum für

Psychotraumatologie), Toan Tran, Katharina Walser (Gravita SRK - Zentrum für Psychotraumatologie), as well as all Local Advisory Group members in Jordan, Lebanon, Türkiye and Greece and all other actors whose contributions added depth and richness to our research study and carefully reviewed and provided input into the multi-country report.

The successful completion of this multi-country study was made possible through generous grants from various organizations. A grant from the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC) supported the research and data collection in Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye. A grant from the Swiss Network for International Studies (SNIS) facilitated the research and data collection efforts in Greece and Switzerland. The study's expanded geographical scope in Switzerland was made feasible by a grant from the Lindenhof Foundation.

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Executive Summary

In recent years, the global community has witnessed a sharp increase in forced displacement, driven by conflicts, persecution, and natural disasters. According to UNHCR, by the end of 2023, over 117 million individuals have been uprooted, with increasing numbers displaced as a result of ongoing conflicts in Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Ukraine. Forcibly displaced individuals often undertake dangerous journeys to reach safer destinations. However, they continue to face severe challenges and precarious living conditions.

Forcibly displaced populations, including refugees, asylum seekers, and those in refugee-like situations (hereafter referred to as refugees), face multiple structural vulnerabilities throughout their displacement journey and in host countries. These include overcrowded and precarious housing, inadequate access to essential services, financial insecurity, and stigma and discrimination. Prolonged legal limbo leaves individuals in a state of uncertainty, restricting access to formal employment, mobility, and various rights, significantly impacting their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Gender inequalities are further exacerbated during forced displacement, resulting in considerable and differential impacts on the physical and mental health of affected individuals.

Displaced populations employ various coping mechanisms and survival strategies to navigate the harsh conditions of forced displacement and meet their needs. Transactional sex (TS) has emerged as a survival strategy for refugees navigating conditions of structural vulnerability and precarity. Refugees engage in TS practices for a variety of reasons, such as to meet their basic needs, advance their journey to a safe destination, or protect themselves against violence and other harm. While the phenomenon is believed to be widespread, data on why, where, and how refugees across the gender and sexuality spectrum engage in TS practices is scarce.

This pioneering research aims to generate a nuanced and gendered understanding of TS practices in forced displacement. In this study, TS was conceptualized as an umbrella term encompassing a spectrum of practices where adults engage in sexual activities with the implicit or explicit intention of exchanging material or non-material benefits, such as money, gifts, goods, services, favors, or other necessities. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with forcibly displaced adults regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Greece, and Switzerland. Additionally, key informant interviews were conducted with local and international stakeholders between 2020 and 2024.

Our findings reveal that TS is widespread as a survival strategy among women, men, and queer refugees. In total, 65% (125/193) of participants observed or experienced TS and 11% (22/193) had first-hand experience of TS. There were major differences based on SOGIE, with 4% (2/58) of cis-hetero men, 6% (5/89) of cis-hetero women, and 33% (15/46) of queer participants reporting having engaged in TS.

Our analysis revealed four main types of TS: sex work, transactional sexual encounters, intimate transactional relationships, and temporary or convenience marriages. The patterns of these TS practices varied across different groups and geographies. Our data cover the spectrum of agency to coercion. While some engage in TS as a way to navigate their complex realities and take control of unstable situations, TS may also occur in contexts of threat and intimidation, with varying degrees of exploitation and coercion. In addition, we observed disturbingly high

levels of violence, with a greater proportion of queer refugees reporting experiencing severe forms of violence.

Our findings reveal that structural factors create zones of vulnerability and conditions of precarity that facilitate TS and exacerbate its risks. Legal liminality often creates a ripple effect, imposing structural vulnerabilities that manifest in socio-economic hardship. The key drivers of TS include a lack of safe and legal migration routes, legal liminality, financial insecurity, limited livelihood opportunities, housing precarity, and stigma and discrimination, particularly based on SOGIESC.

Furthermore, TS is associated with numerous health concerns, including unwanted pregnancy, increased risk of HIV and other STIs, sexual and gender-based violence, and mental health concerns. Limited access to quality sexual and reproductive health services, such as contraceptives and safe abortion, as well as mental health services, creates a vicious cycle, aggravating refugees' physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

This study identifies structural factors that facilitate TS and create barriers to accessing services that mitigate its consequences. This nuanced and gendered understanding of the broad spectrum of TS practices and their implications can guide policymakers and service providers to develop effective and targeted interventions. More broadly, it further emphasizes the urgency of comprehensive policies and interventions to support forcibly displaced individuals and mitigate the structural vulnerabilities that all refugees face.

Collaborative and coordinated efforts at local, national, regional, and international levels are imperative to address the multifaceted gendered structural drivers and consequences of TS in forced displacement, ensuring that the rights, health, and dignity of displaced individuals are respected and protected. Government and multilateral agencies should revisit policies that place individuals at greater risk and in precarious conditions, ensuring the provision of gender-responsive and adequate protection and health services. This includes enabling and advocating for safe and legal migration routes, providing adequate financial assistance and appropriate housing, permitting access to the formal job market, and ensuring legal and health protections. Specifically, interventions to support the sexual and reproductive health and mental health needs of refugees, particularly those who are of diverse SOGIESC, are essential for promoting the safety well-being of individuals affected by forced displacement.

Introduction

In recent years, the global community has witnessed an alarming increase in number of people forcibly displaced due to war, conflict, persecution, and natural disasters. At the end of September 2023, it was estimated that approximately 114 million individuals had been uprooted,¹ making forced mobility an unsettling new norm. By the time of our data collection (2021-2023), the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Palestine had led to forced displacement on a massive scale. More recently, more than 6 million people are estimated to have fled Ukraine as a result of the war² and up to 1.7 million people have been displaced as a result of the most recent conflict in the Gaza Strip.³

The UNHCR estimates that 11 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced since the conflict's inception in 2011.⁴ Nearly half of these refugees have sought protection in neighbouring countries, with Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan being primary destinations.⁵ In addition, many seek safety and security in European countries, often entering Europe from Türkiye through Greece, aspiring to settle in European countries.

Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita of any country in the world, totalling nearly 1.5 million Syrians and around 45,000 Palestinians from Syria, in addition to 20,000 refugees from other countries.^{6,7} Further complicating the scenario in Lebanon, an additional 174,000 Palestinian refugees fall under UNRWA's care, enduring restrictive conditions that limit their rights to work and property ownership.⁸⁻¹⁰ For many refugees, living conditions are poor; they reside mainly in poverty-stricken urban areas, with over 1 million refugees facing acute food insecurity.¹¹

Jordan shelters the world's second-largest number of refugees per capita. Registered refugees in the country are comprised of more than 600,000 Syrians, over 55,000 Iraqis, and approximately 13,000 Yemenis, amongst others.¹² Over 2 million Palestinian refugees reside in Jordan, most of whom have full citizenship.¹³ However, many remain unregistered, lacking access to essential services and financial aid. Such deprivation has led to an increase in negative coping strategies, like early and forced marriages and child labour.^{14,15}

Türkiye hosts approximately 3.5 million Syrians under temporary protection, in addition to nearly 300,000 international protection applicants and status holders from countries like Afghanistan and Iran, making it the country with the highest total number of refugees and the fifth highest per capita.¹⁶ Türkiye has been the primary destination for Syrian refugees.¹⁷ The majority of refugees live in local communities, often in very poor conditions, without secure and appropriate housing.¹⁸

Many refugees further seek protection and safety in European countries. By the end of 2022, nearly 13.7 million refugees and asylum-seekers had reached Europe, mainly from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and other war-torn countries.¹⁹ Greece stands as a pivotal gateway for refugees attempting to cross into Europe, mainly through Türkiye. Since 2015, nearly 2.3 million refugees have travelled from Türkiye to Greece, aspiring to continue their journey to other European countries in pursuit of a safer life.²⁰ These movements necessitated comprehensive reforms in Greece's migration and asylum policies. Of note was the 2016 Joint EU-Türkiye Statement, which intended to curb the increased number of refugees and migrants ("mixed

migration flows”) into the European Union and established “hotspot” centres on the Aegean islands where refugees were detained.^{21,22} However, the heightened security measures and constrictive changes to asylum laws have elicited significant concerns, especially around the reported pushbacks and diminished access to international protection.²³

Switzerland is considered a ‘destination country’ in Europe but maintains restrictive border controls. Switzerland is home to over 180,000 refugees, primarily from crises in Ukraine, Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan, and Türkiye.¹⁷ According to estimations, approximately 80,000 undocumented refugees and migrants without proper residence status (“sans-papiers”) live in the country.²⁴ Switzerland instituted new asylum procedures in March 2019, attempting to provide an accelerated decision-making process and grant asylum-seekers free legal advice. However, asylum-seekers are mandated to stay in assigned federal processing centres and are not allowed to engage in paid employment.²⁵ As a result, many work under precarious conditions in the informal sector, with low revenues and no safety net. Despite attempts at expediting the process of attaining legal status, individuals encounter considerable obstacles when entering and settling in the country.^{26,27}

Compounding Challenges

Across multiple countries, forcibly displaced populations (refugees, asylum seekers, and those in refugee-like situations, including undocumented forcibly displaced people, hereby collectively referred to as refugees for readability) encounter structural conditions that reinforce their vulnerability. Multiple forms of structural vulnerability exist throughout the forced displacement journey and across the asylum-seeking process. These individuals often find themselves living in overcrowded and substandard housing, lacking access to essential amenities, and facing unsanitary conditions. Furthermore, the pervasive conditions of poverty and financial insecurity compound the difficulties they face, limiting their access to adequate healthcare, education, and employment opportunities. Discrimination and issues with integration further amplify existing challenges with attaining employment and housing. Asylum seekers and those in refugee-like situations often confront protracted legal liminality, stuck in a state of uncertainty, often for years, as they await decisions on their asylum claims or refugee status. During this period, the job market may be inaccessible. Even when refugee status is granted, it does not necessarily grant the right to work. The 2022 Global Refugee Work Rights Report states that at least 55% of refugees live in countries where work rights are significantly restricted in practice.²⁸ According to UNHCR, 70% of refugees live in countries with restricted or no right to work.²⁹ This extended period of legal uncertainty not only restricts their access to formal employment, but also limits their mobility and access to various rights, and takes a significant toll on their mental and emotional well-being.

The already challenging circumstances for refugees were compounded during the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating their vulnerabilities and limiting access to essential services and livelihood options.^{30,31} The economic crises triggered by the pandemic further strained the resources available to support displaced populations, and the onset of the Ukrainian crisis had a ripple effect. The overlapping crises resulted in a complex web of challenges, leaving them in even more precarious conditions, with limited resources and support networks to rely on.³²

Gender inequalities are further exacerbated in the forced displacement and humanitarian context, magnifying the challenges faced by individuals. Across various settings, women, men, and people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC, hereafter referred to queer for readability) subject to intersecting discriminations, encounter distinct and additional obstacles to access safety, adequate housing, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities.

Transactional Sex in Forced Displacement

Under such precarious conditions, refugees adopt various coping mechanisms and survival strategies to navigate the harsh realities of forced displacement and the complex web of asylum and humanitarian systems. Transactional sex (TS) is one such survival strategy used to navigate conditions of structural vulnerability and precarity. Refugees may engage in transactional sexual activities to meet their basic needs, including securing food and shelter, or to send money to their families in dire circumstances.³³ TS is frequently considered one of the few if not the only option to earn a living in the absence of language skills or work permits in transit or destination countries. Additionally, TS serves as a strategy for obtaining security and protection from sexual violence, particularly for women within camps or during perilous displacement journeys. In some instances, refugees may be forced to engage in TS with border officials to cross borders or paying smugglers to facilitate their journey further. Women in particular may also engage in TS as a result of coercion threats and intimidation from law enforcement, peacekeepers, and aid workers, constituting *de facto* sexual exploitation.^{34,35}

Reports have also shed light on the distressing reality of refugee young men and boys, especially in Greece, turning to transactional sex as a means to secure essentials such as food and shelter.^{36,37} Reports from Lebanon and Jordan indicate a rise in convenience and temporary marriages among refugee women.³⁸ Temporary marriages, characterized by time-limited marriage contracts against dowries, can be considered a religiously sanctioned form of TS.

Engagement in TS is associated with adverse health outcomes, including an elevated risk for sexual and reproductive ill-health, such as increased risk of HIV and other STIs, as well as increased mental health (MH) concerns. Individuals across sexuality and gender spectrum engaging in TS have also been reported to have a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence.³⁹⁻⁴² In the face of sexual and reproductive health implications when engaged in TS, including the heightened risk of unwanted pregnancies, individuals often experience an unmet need for contraceptives, and have limited access to safe and legal abortion.⁴² Consequently, refugees engaged in TS confront amplified health needs while simultaneously encountering formidable obstacles in accessing essential services.

Definition of Transactional Sex

The term transactional sex first emerged in the context of HIV prevention studies in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in the 1990s. In this literature, transactional sex is defined as consensual non-commercial, non-marital engagement in sexual relationships motivated by the implicit assumption that sex will be exchanged for material support or other benefits.^{43,44} While the definition of transactional sex appears gender-neutral, the literature predominantly focuses on

women and is primarily concerned with the risk of HIV infection through transactional sexual relationships. The literature on TS in development contexts often distinguishes transactional sex as a material exchanges in sexual relationships from commercial sex work, where an explicit negotiation and predetermined and immediate cash payment takes place between a 'sex worker' and their 'client'.⁴⁵

An examination of the literature on transactional sex in the humanitarian and forced displacement context, however, reveals that there has been far less research on this issue and that there is an ambiguity of the term, conceptual connotations, and contradictions. It further overlooks the structural factors that create the conditions that facilitate transactional sexual practices and disregards the experiences of men and persons of diverse SOGIESC who may also engage in transactional sex.

It may be argued that the rigid definition of transactional sex as distinct from sex work or sexual exploitation and abuse which has been developed in the context of HIV and in development contexts do not align with the diverse forms, motivations, and meanings of transactional sex in humanitarian and forced displacement context. In fact, it may be the case that an attempt to transpose the definition of transactional sex in development settings to contexts of forced displacement further highlights the limitations of this term and its use to describe sexual-economic exchanges where boundaries between categories are often blurred and at times overlapping.⁴⁶ The stigma surrounding TS in forced displacement has enforced a void of evidence and thus lack of policy guidance, hindering effective responses.

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the diverse and gendered nuances of transactional sexual practices in the context of forced displacement, in this research, TS is used as an umbrella term encompassing a spectrum of practices wherein adults engage in sexual activities with the implicit or explicit intention of exchanging material or non-material benefits, such as money, gifts, goods, services, favours, or other necessities. Our definition extends to temporary and convenience marriages, relationships entered into with the expectation of benefits, and even instances where TS may fall under the definition of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA). This approach aimed to capture all the nuanced complexities of these encounters in forced displacement and acknowledges agency while recognizing concurrent vulnerability and the potential for exploitation where choices are limited and access to legal and social protection is compromised.

Study Rationale

In response to this evidence gap, our research aimed to advance the understanding of TS by examining its characteristics in the context of forced displacement, where individuals have limited livelihood choices and access to legal and social protection, and where the boundaries between agency and vulnerability are blurred. To this end, our research aims to generate evidence about the hidden yet complex phenomenon of transactional sex in forced displacement, seeking to identify the gendered drivers and patterns of TS during refugees' displacement journeys and in host countries. Our study focused on experiences of adult refugees, asylum seekers and those in refugee like situations, including undocumented forcibly displaced individuals, across gender and sexuality spectrum, who at the time of research

resided in Jordan, Lebanon, Türkiye, Greece, and Switzerland.

Methodology

This research project involved in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with forcibly displaced people, and key informant interviews (KII) with local and international stakeholders. The research was supported by Local Advisory Groups (LAGs) in each country, comprised of multiple stakeholders, including individuals affiliated with academic institutions, international organizations, civil society and community organizations. The LAGs were consulted to ensure a participatory and respectful approach to recruitment and data collection processes. The research protocol, instruments, and data management plans were developed in a consultative process with the research team. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Geneva Graduate Institute in Geneva, Switzerland. Ethical approval from relevant research ethics committees and ministries was obtained per local requirements in each country.

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were utilized to recruit participants. Inclusion criteria for IDIs are provided in Box 1. Upon being informed about the study's objectives—understanding survival strategies and health repercussions in forced displacement—participants provided verbal informed consent in the presence of a witness, ensuring no personal identifiable information was documented. They were informed of their right to terminate IDIs and FGDs and were free to withdraw from the study at any point of time. Before data collection, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information: age, country of origin, gender, sexual orientation, education, profession, current occupation, current country, and years in the current country. No personal identifying information was collected at any time, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by assigning unique interview numbers for internal data management. In FGDs, pseudonyms were used. As a token of appreciation for their time and to compensate for their travel expenses, all participants, regardless of whether they completed the interview or not, received symbolic compensation in the form of a voucher equivalent to 10-20 EUR.

Box 1: Study Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Be above 18 years of age
- Be forcibly displaced, including refugees, prospective or actual asylum seekers, and persons in refugee-like situations regardless of country of origin.
- Residing in the study site at the time of research
- Provide informed consent

Exclusion Criteria:

- Participants younger than 18 years of age
- Participant does not have the capacity or willingness to provide informed consent.
- Participant that are not forcibly displaced according to the criteria above.
- Participant is an official resident in the country with a permanent residency and work permit that allows them similar rights and benefits as nationals.

Interviews and Group Discussions were carried out in spaces that guaranteed anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality. Data were kept in secure, locked locations and encrypted and password-protected if in electronic form, according to the data management plan. All transcripts and project outputs ensured the anonymization of participants, refraining from collecting or including identifiable information about individuals. A referral pathway was established in consultation with local NGOs working with vulnerable and marginalized groups and LAGs and was made available to participants following the interviews and FGDs. Any referrals were done confidentially with participant permission.

IDIs and FGDs were semi-structured, aiming to understand critical topics related to forced displacement and allow participants to volunteer additional pertinent information. They consisted of five main topic areas and various sub-topics: displacement journey (countries, challenges, coping strategies), current living situation (living conditions, security situation, resources, income, challenges, health issues), transactional sex (exchanges, intimate partnerships), effects of COVID-19, and future aspirations.

Given the sensitivity of the subject of transactional sex and the lack of consensus on the exact definition of the term, we refrained from explicitly using the term in our interviews and focused mainly on eliciting narratives about the participants displacement journeys and the survival strategies they employed. Additionally, we inquired whether participants engaged in, witnessed, or heard of refugee women, men or people of diverse SOGIESC, who chose to or were forced to engage in sexual activities or intimate relationships in exchange of support or for something they need or want (e.g., for food, cash, favours, somewhere to sleep, gift, to migrate to another country, or anything else) during their journey or current location? This approach allowed us to explore the phenomenon without imposing a specific label and gather information on different ways TS can occur. This indirect questioning was intended to be respectful and culturally sensitive, reduce desirability bias, and limit the risks associated with asking about sensitive topics. Yet, it also allowed insights into the circumstances and characteristics of sexual interactions, perceptions of exploitation, and implications for sexual and reproductive health related to TS.

IDIs, FGDs, and KIIs were conducted in several languages, in the preferred language by the participant. They were conducted either by a research assistant with fluency in any of the languages or in the presence of trusted interpreters. Audio recordings were transcribed and translated into English. Researchers at each study site managed the translation process and reviewed transcripts for accuracy and completeness. Transcripts were imported into Dedoose, the qualitative data analysis software for coding and analysis. The initial qualitative codebook was structured with primary codes to represent the main study themes; secondary codes were inductively developed and refined. At least two members of the research team coded each transcript.

In this inductive coding process, we refined a set of secondary codes associated with each of the primary codes: Journey (Security and Protection); Current Living Situation (Financial Hardship, Limited Livelihood Opportunities, Housing Precarity, Legal Status, Discrimination, LGBTQI+ Vulnerability); Transactional Sex (types of TS); Health Conditions (Sexual and Reproductive Health; Mental Health; Violence, Harassment, Exploitation, and Abuse; Societal

Perceptions of Risks of TS). Types of TS codes were ultimately categorized into four types: Sex Work, Transactional Sexual Encounters (one-off or short term), Intimate Transactional Relationships (longer term), and Temporary and Convenience Marriages.

Inter-rater reliability (IRR) was assessed by testing how research team members applied the 10 most frequently used codes and the 'types of TS' codes across a sample of twenty randomly assigned excerpts. In this IRR test, the team members achieved an excellent Kappa score of 0.88.

Findings

In total from the five study countries, 193 IDIs and 20 Focus Group Discussions were conducted with refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented individuals (hereafter referred to as "refugees" for brevity) across gender and sexuality spectrum across the five study countries (Tables 1-3). Most participants originated from Syria and Afghanistan, although participants from other countries, including Ukraine, were also recruited.

Table 1: Overview of IDI Participants

	Lebanon	Jordan	Türkiye	Greece	Switzerland	Total
Women (cisgender-heterosexual)	9	19	23	17	21	89
Men (cisgender-heterosexual)	8	16	6	14	14	58
People of diverse SOGIESC	10	0*	15	8	13	46
Total	27	35	44	39	48	193

*Data from queer participants could not be collected in Jordan.

Table 2: Overview of Queer IDI Participants*

	Lebanon	Türkiye	Greece	Switzerland	Total
Lesbian/bisexual cisgender women	0	1	1	0	2
Gay/bisexual cisgender men	4	7	4	5	20
Transgender women	4	4	1	4	13
Transgender men	2	0	2	1	5
Non-binary individuals	0	3	0	3	6
Total	10	15	8	13	46

*Data from queer participants could not be collected in Jordan.

Additionally, 69 key informants were interviewed, representing healthcare, humanitarian, non-governmental, and social protection organizations in each of the countries (Table 3).

Table 3: Overview of Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions by Country

	Focus Group Discussions	Key Informant Interviews
Lebanon	6	18
Jordan	7	8
Türkiye	4	10
Greece	1	18
Switzerland	2	15
Total	20	69

Transactional Sex in Forced Displacement

Participants across all research sites recounted experiences and observations of transactional sex (TS). Overall, 65% (125/193) of participants reported experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about TS, indicating its widespread occurrence, with similar proportions reported by cis-heterosexual women, cis-heterosexual men, and queer people. In addition, 11% (22/193) reported personal experience of TS, with a trend revealing more queer people (33% (15/46) having had personal experience of TS compared to cis-heterosexual women (6%; 5/89) and cis-heterosexual men (4%; 2/58). It is important to note that our intentional use of indirect questioning methods may have led participants to share personal experiences in the third person due to perceived stigma. Therefore, the reported number of personal experiences could potentially underestimate the true extent of the phenomenon. Despite our study being a qualitative inquiry and the sample not being representative, the significant number of participants experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about TS underscores the widespread nature of the practice. Similarly, of the 69 key informant interviews (KIIs), the majority had heard directly from clients or beneficiaries they served or second-hand about instances of TS, acknowledging it as a common phenomenon.

Participants described structural challenges that influenced why and how engaged in TS as a survival strategy, as well as the resultant consequences. The following sections present the key findings, highlighting the drivers, patterns, and consequences of TS. These findings reflect the intricate interplay of agency, choice, exploitation, and coercion in forced displacement.

Drivers of Transactional Sex in Forced Displacement

Refugees, asylum-seekers, and other forcibly displaced participants encountered structural vulnerabilities throughout their displacement journey, which were often associated with specific instances of TS. The sections below highlight the most common conditions of vulnerability mentioned, including security on the displacement journey, financial hardship, limited livelihood opportunities, housing precarity, legal status, and discrimination based on SOGIESC in relation to TS.

Security and Protection on the Displacement Journey

Participants reported engaging in TS during their displacement journeys, especially when crossing borders and dealing with smugglers, police, and border guards. Participants in our study reported having engaged in, witnessed, or heard about TS when crossing borders or transiting in Greece, Lebanon, Türkiye, Egypt, and Libya. Several participants reported engaging in sexual interactions to facilitate border crossings. One participant mentioned that her interaction with a security officer facilitated her onward journey, as quoted below:

“I asked a security member about the toilet location, and he kissed me on lips, and I went to this office (police station) and I had sex with him.”

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Beirut

Participants mentioned that forming short-term relationships with smugglers was often a means to secure funds to be able to continue the displacement journey, with younger single women and single mothers more commonly finding themselves in such situations.

“Now I've heard that there are a lot of smugglers who recommend to women who are a bit beautiful and thin that if they stay with them for a while, they'll be able to take them to other countries by plane. So, they're staying with them for a while — obviously for the flight and not for anything else.”

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Athens

Several participants interviewed also emphasized that young women, whether single, married, or mothers, were the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation or assault and thus sought protection from a male protector. In Türkiye, participants emphasized the dangerous nature of traveling through illegal routes, particularly for single women without male companions, who became targets for smugglers. In Jordan and Lebanon, instances of women being sexually assaulted were reported.

Key informants also reiterated how women were at risk of exploitation and abuse during the displacement journey. One key informant working in Zurich noted the high prevalence of this phenomenon.

“I would assume that with girls, the vast majority have experienced sexual exploitation during the journey. I hardly know a girl who hasn't experienced it. I think a significant portion of boys experience it, too.”

Key Informant, Civil Servant, Zurich

Concerns about vulnerability to sexual exploitation, assault, or sexual and gender-based violence underpin TS practices. In refugee camps, it was known that women would be more protected if they were known to be associated with a male partner. Hence, some reported they engaged in short-term relationships to navigate unsafe camp conditions, prevent sexual assault, and maintain security and stability for their children. Indeed, different types of TS involved

trade-offs. Women weighed the risks of harassment against rape. They accepted TS relationships that involved some violence and abuse, knowing they would be more vulnerable without the security the relationship could provide.

“If you are a woman alone or a single-headed family, you are at risk of being harassed, being raped in many sites or RICs, but if you have someone, ok, yes, he might abuse you a bit, but maybe that is less harm, it could be less harm I mean, I don't want to justify something, but being slapped is less harm than being raped every day, for example. So, unfortunately, they are trying to make these decisions about what is better for them at that given moment.

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Athens

Parents expressed their fears for the safety of their families, whether from criminal gangs, army soldiers, or extremist groups like ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Due to these concerns about the potential of sexual assault on girls and women, some parents decided to arrange for their daughters' marriage.

Key informants also highlighted how the conditions during the journey potentiate TS and exploitation. One informant from the UN in Athens noted how these vulnerabilities result in “survival sex.”

“Survival sex is a form of exploitation – you’re exploiting the other person’s vulnerability, their powerlessness, their need to survive. People are sexually exploited so that they can get enough money to continue their journey to get to the EU borders – to Türkiye and eventually to Greece.”

Key Informant, UN staff, Athens

Financial Hardship

Participants encountered financial hardship due to legal restrictions on their ability to earn income, limited opportunities for securing income, and obligations to provide for their families, whether in host countries or countries of origin. Depending on country policies, asylum-seekers awaiting decisions, individuals on temporary permits, or those without documentation may be ineligible for financial assistance and barred from formal employment, leading to reliance on informal work for income.

In cases where government-provided financial assistance was available, it was frequently inadequate or difficult to access. Many participants were deemed ineligible for aid because they were undocumented, were not registered asylum-seekers (in the country or the city they resided in) or lacked refugee status. Even those eligible for financial assistance often found the

allocated funds insufficient to cover their living expenses.

“From organizations, nothing! No rent, no help. I only received 300,000 LBP support once. I got to the point where I was sleeping in the motels for one night in exchange for sex.”

Transgender woman, Beirut

“Some people sell sex so they can buy things and feed themselves because they can’t have a job, and they aren’t eligible to receive anything from the government. They are forced to have sex to have a little bit of money to feed themselves or not just for something that could be for their livelihood, even for something much smaller, even to get some soap or some toothpaste.”

Transgender man, Athens

In many cases, women were described as having fewer economic opportunities and more significant financial and material needs if they had children. Mothers were highlighted as a particularly vulnerable group, as their financial precarity from lack of economic opportunity was compounded by the increased need to provide for and protect their children. These concerns were sometimes highlighted as motivations for entering long-term intimate relationships or

“There are men who take advantage of the vulnerable situation of women and their economic hardship.”

Key Informant, NGO employee, Istanbul

marriages to meet their basic needs or opportunities for being subject to exploitation. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated their financial vulnerability, reinforcing mobility restrictions and business closures, and disproportionately impacting the service sector and informal workers. Participants consistently voiced difficulties affording essentials, such as, food, transportation, and childcare. Some endured non-payment for their work, notably in Lebanon. In moments of severe financial hardship, some individuals turned to TS as an alternative income source.

“We are hearing stories about women who get married, and their husbands ask them to engage in sexual intercourse with strangers. These stories are everywhere and common, especially exacerbated by the economic crisis for the need for money, not just due to the Syrian refugee crisis.”

Key Informant, NGO employee, Beirut

Limited Livelihood Opportunities

Limited livelihood opportunities, with precarious and unsafe informal work conditions, exacerbated financial hardship; thus, some participants engaged in TS as a survival strategy. They encountered severe limitations in finding stable income due to legal restrictions on accessing formal employment opportunities, mainly stemming from the lack of work permits.

“The girl didn’t have anything else apart from what they pay here — she has an F permit with which you can’t work, and she does not know the language. So she has gone with a guy who has accepted her and has a good financial situation.”

Cisgender heterosexual man, Geneva

Those unable to work legally in the host countries depended on government aid and informal work, often facing xenophobia, discrimination, language barriers, and the invalidation of their certifications from their home countries. Those permitted to work often landed in formal low-wage jobs. Many engaged in informal jobs in hotels, restaurants, cleaning, manufacturing, construction, and agriculture. They often endured exhausting hours, precarious contracts, and exploitative conditions at work.

“I look at this as a job [TS], before it made me sad, I was depressed... but now I think it is a job. It is not shame or a bad job... I don’t want to continue this job... but when I see a person doing this job, I won’t go and say it is shame or dishonor him\her. He\she needed a job, society did not give them a job...they couldn’t be a doctor, not a nurse, not a teacher...”

Transgender woman, Istanbul

Undocumented participants faced increased exploitation, lacking legal recourse for unpaid wages, and enduring threats of police involvement. Unsafe workplaces, long hours, and limited childcare options affected income-generating activities for families, especially those with a single primary caregiver.

Furthermore, some participants reported experiencing workplace discrimination, with one woman interviewee sharing that her employer prohibited her from wearing a headcover (hijab) at work, illustrating the challenges faced. Importantly, those subjected to discrimination lacked legal protection due to their immigration status and the absence of work permits.

In Switzerland, participants noted gender differences in transactional sexual practices, largely influenced by differing job opportunities, with men having more alternative work options. Women faced substantial obstacles in accessing formal employment due to cultural norms, domestic duties, and limited flexible work options, resulting in high unemployment rates among women, in particular, reported in Türkiye, Jordan, and Lebanon. Additionally, women

frequently encountered workplace sexual harassment.

“I wish there were more opportunities for me to work here. If there were job opportunities for women, it could be better economically. Women want a suitable work environment to work without fear of the male gaze, where they can earn their own money.” - Cisgender heterosexual woman, Istanbul

Queer participants, especially transgender individuals, reported significant hurdles in securing employment due to homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia, leading to employer discrimination (e.g., requiring a transgender woman to present as a man to be hired). In some instances, TS was perceived as the sole remaining option for livelihood.

Housing Precarity

Housing precarity is a significant concern reported by many participants, reinforcing the structural vulnerability. Across most countries, participants reported difficulty accessing government-provided housing programmes due to deficiencies in asylum and humanitarian systems. They encountered rigid eligibility criteria to qualify for government support systems, which were generally limited to registered asylum seekers or those with refugee status in some countries. Those awaiting asylum decisions lived in temporary shelters for several months or even years at a time. In Switzerland, where government housing is provided, wait times were longer for those needing larger accommodations. Additionally, special considerations for queer refugees were generally not made when assigning temporary accommodations, which exacerbated the difficulties faced by queer refugees. Queer participants reported facing homophobia and transphobia while residing in mixed accommodations, affecting their safety, mental health, and privacy. Individuals with disabilities were also not provided adequate accommodation.

“There should be a district or place where only LGBTQ could stay and live. They can work for themselves and earn money, then maybe they wouldn’t do sex work.”

Cisgender gay man, Istanbul

Government housing programmes also relocated beneficiaries across cities without considering safety, social networks, or other personal needs. Living spaces were reported to be small, with minimal and often inadequate furnishings. Some participants reported sleeping on the floor. In some cases, buildings were infested with pests or otherwise unsanitary. For those who could find housing, there were ongoing challenges with the quality and accessibility, often experiencing discrimination when seeking accommodation. Some reported periods of homelessness.

“We don’t have anywhere to live – no job, money, or food! What do you think we should do? We have to become sex workers.” - Cis gay man, Athens

In Greece, upon receiving a final positive asylum decision, individuals were required to secure housing independently and were subsequently evicted. Undocumented individuals or those with a negative asylum decision received even less support – many faced persistent challenges of unstable housing and risks of homelessness. Precarious housing added instability and financial pressure on individuals who needed funds to secure and furnish their accommodations.

Securing stable housing was a priority for participants, and different types of TS were used to secure it. Participants reported engaging in one-time sexual encounters for shelter for the night; they also engaged in longer-term transactional relationships to secure more stable housing solutions. Women were particularly vulnerable to engaging in TS in exchange for accommodation.

P1: “For accommodation, some people use you — they rape you.”

P2: “Or they offer an exchange: ‘You need accommodation, you need to sleep with me.’

P3: “It’s sex for accommodation. After I went through that, I had to sleep on the street...”

P4: It’s everybody. It’s not like it’s a Cameroonian, Congolese, or Turkish — it’s EVERYBODY!

P5: “Everybody that want to use the advantage. Like a business.”

- FGD with cisgender heterosexual women, Athens

“What I know is that the mother knows the house owner and he allows her to stay at the house and not pay the rent for exchange of this relationship with her. The house owner’s financial situation is very good. He helps her and gives her money for exchange of the relationship.”

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Amman

Key informants also reported concerns about housing precarity, noting it was a key driver for the sexual exploitation and coercion of women into transactional sex.

“They will kick her out of the house if she cannot pay anymore. So, she either works in the houses and offers sexual favours, or she must live on the streets where she will be subjected to abuse.”

Key Informant, NGO employee, Beirut

Legal Status

The prospect of obtaining essential documents that could improve their legal status or facilitate their onward journey led some participants to engage in transactional sexual relationships despite the risks and challenges involved. Stories shared by participants in Greece, Switzerland, and Jordan highlighted the complex interplay between survival strategies and navigating structural hurdles in the context of forced displacement.

"[T]here is no such thing as love. The only reason that relationships starts is because they want to have some kind of insurance for themselves, money or support from the partner and the easier way to get in their hands a passport or an ID. [...] So usually, they get married for passport or ID... or a roof over their head, a warm bed."

Cisgender heterosexual man, Athens

"She wanted to travel but her financial situation does not help. So, he is married with children but he wanted a Syrian woman to be a second wife. They got married temporarily for exchange of helping her enter Jordan with her children."

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Amman

Some transactional sexual relationships were born out of a need for legal status. Participants engaged in these relationships were particularly vulnerable to intimate partner violence (IPV). These relationships offered one partner significant power over the other and prevented the vulnerable partner from leaving or taking any action.

"I had no energy for the asylum-seeking procedure and this man just told me there was no need to apply for asylum. It was the biggest mistake of my life to marry him. He asked me to do everything for him. I told him NO. He was treating me badly. He said he would report me to the municipality and tell him that I only got married because I wanted to stay there." - Cisgender gay man, Geneva

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression Discrimination

Queer participants confronted heightened challenges, limiting their livelihood and housing opportunities and increasing the risk of discrimination and rejection.⁴⁷ In Greece and Switzerland, where many participants were residing in government-provided refugee camps or centres, safety concerns and a lack of appropriate housing for queer refugees posed significant issues. Consequently, queer participants often sought protection from NGOs or relocated to different areas to avoid safety risks. Participants frequently exercised caution in revealing their sexual orientation or gender identity to prevent harassment and discrimination.

This situation resulted in queer participants having limited options, leading to TS becoming one of the few survival strategies available. In Lebanon, queer participants turned to convenience marriages as a cover for their sexual orientation, ensuring their safety. Some were forced to engage in TS as a means to survive after being expelled from their homes due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

"I had to start sex work because I had no other choices. I had nothing. I was going to die."

Transgender woman, Istanbul

"Basically she discovered what an escort is, and she started doing it. This is the only way for her to be able to afford her life in Beirut, and her family is living in a far away village because she can't live with her family, because she's a disgrace, her father wouldn't allow it."

Cisgender gay man, Beirut

Transgender individuals faced unique vulnerabilities and multiple challenges influencing their involvement in transactional sex practices. These challenges included concealing their gender identities and expressions in various settings and lacking financial means for hormonal therapy or other gender-affirming care. For one transgender woman, TS reinforced an existing lack of respect. A transgender man expressed being compelled to engage in TS as the only viable option to secure funds for his gender-affirming surgeries.

"They're just under misery. Those things, they push people to sell their bodies... As a person who wants to be trans now, there is no possibility to do all these surgeries in the public hospital, so I had to do it. What can I do now? I will sell my body."

Transgender man, Athens

Patterns of Transactional Sex in Forced Displacement

Amid structural vulnerability, participants reported engaging in TS to meet their needs and wants during their displacement journey and in host countries. They described various transactional sexual practices as part of their survival strategies, which differed in duration and benefits exchanged. Our analysis of these practices identified four main categories: sex work, transactional sexual encounters, intimate transactional relationships, and temporary and convenience marriage.

Sex Work

Some participants referenced sex work, characterized by the explicit exchange of sexual services for money in a one-time encounter, often conducted informally. While participants across countries shared various examples of one-time transactional sex encounters in exchange for monetary compensation, they may not have self-identified as sex workers. The methods and

locations for finding transacting partners varied among countries. In Switzerland, for instance, a participant described their informal sex work, where they determined prices and practices, feeling secure while meeting clients through a website for men who have sex with men.

“In Geneva, sex is for pleasure! The Swiss population has no challenge. So calm and easy! I did sex for money! When I arrived, I did sex work to get some money as I did not know the language and my psychological health was destroyed because of the toxic guy. Sex work in Switzerland is good money and you can find it easily.” - Non-binary participant, Geneva

In Greece, narratives focused on younger, unmarried individuals (both men and women) perceived as more vulnerable to solicitations. In the absence of alternative opportunities, indirect propositions and solicitation on islands were highlighted by key informants as pathways into transactional sex. Many highlighted engaging in TS as an income-generating opportunity without other livelihood options.

“...what I know and have seen with my own eyes is this: kids around 20 years old, who may go to old men here, and unfortunately this has become a trend, they go to old men. They’ve put the money that is for their ‘gaming’ aside, they don’t touch it and for their daily money they go with old men, go in the morning, return at night with their pocket full of money [...] and many-many kids do it and it has become very popular.”

Cisgender heterosexual man, Athens

“Lots of cisgender heterosexual men are working in the sex sector as well, for example, in sex clubs or the hammam culture in Türkiye.”

Key Informant, NGO employee, Istanbul

Transactional Sexual Encounters

Transactional Sexual Encounters are short-term or one-off sexual exchanges characterized by implicit or explicit expectations of reciprocity, often involving benefits such as food, shelter, necessities, services, or favours to meet acute needs. These encounters were reported particularly during times of acute need in transitional phases.

In Greece, for instance, participants described how young men, confronted with critical survival challenges, sexually engaged with elderly local men or tourists in exchange for basic needs such as a warm shower, shelter, or even just a pack of cigarettes. In Lebanon and Jordan, incentives for transactional sex included essentials like food, medications, job security, rent payments, and

access to education for children.

“There is one, actually, I know a lot of women, she’s Syrian, like you go to her and bring her yogurt with you, bread or food for example, and you have sex with her and go. The important thing is to bring her something with you.”

Cisgender heterosexual man, Beirut

“They engage in sexual relationships for exchange of, for example, food.”

Key Informant, UN, Amman

TS also occurred in the form of debt settlements or exchange for drugs, or as reported by Key Informants, in exchange for employment opportunities.

“Women receive lots of offers to get jobs by having sex with their employers.”

Key Informant, Researcher, Istanbul

Discussions about men engaging in TS were more prevalent in Greece and Switzerland. In Greece, transactional sexual encounters primarily occurred within same-sex interactions, involving gay-identifying men or, more commonly, men who identified as straight but engaged in TS with other men. Most accounts revolved around individual encounters solicited by older men or tourists.

“A woman is more vulnerable, and many women who could not eat gave their bodies away in return for food. In Greece, even men sold their bodies to be able to eat.”

Cisgender heterosexual man, Geneva

In addition, multiple participants highlighted that women, and in particular, mothers, were vulnerable to engaging to transactional sexual encounters due to outsized vulnerability and the need to care for children.

“There are some people who have money, they are not poor but they don’t spend for their household. Their wives and children need food. Then the wife finds other ways to satisfy her children’s needs.”

Cisgender heterosexual man, Amman

Intimate Transactional Relationships

Participants reported short-term and long-term transactional sexual relationships in exchange for non-monetary benefits. Some participants opted for long-term arrangements rather than engaging in short-term exchanges with various individuals. Such intimate relationships are often entered with the intention or expectations of financial or material support for survival or for navigating the precarious and liminal conditions of forced displacement. The transactional element might not be overt but is integral to the relationship dynamics. Some participants, mainly women, mentioned forming such relationships during their journeys with smugglers or fellow refugees to enhance their safety and security during their passage. However, intimate transactional relationships that formed during the displacement journey conditioned dependency, limiting the possibility of exiting the relationship.

"Nobody would do such things voluntarily. Because they have needs, because they cannot make their living at all, they do such things, they engage in relationships with men."

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Istanbul

One could enter such a relationship for various promises. The quote below demonstrates how a woman rekindled a previous relationship to protect herself from potential sexual assault by other men.

"I'm alone in the camp, I was raped once, so that it doesn't happen again I'm going to make up with this guy so that I can stay in the same tent with him so that I feel safe, and I can be his wife because in the community it's not very normal to be alone [...] Uh, and you make a choice from what's in front of you. I think it's a common mechanism."

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Athens

There were many instances of mistreatment and violence within intimate relationships entered for survival that are experienced and normalized by the individuals, resulting in high psychological distress and, in some cases, suicidal ideation. One woman in Switzerland revealed that she had trusted a man who offered to take her along to Türkiye because of her need to escape a forced marriage. The resultant financial reliance on her partner enabled her to progress through her journey; however, she also had to endure his behaviour as it became more abusive – physically, psychologically, and sexually. This pattern was more prevalent among women, who were more often driven by protection and stability concerns, potentially for their children, and were more frequently reported participating in transactional relationships.

Stable housing and access to food were often mentioned as incentives for such arrangements. These relationships not only offered increased financial stability but also enhanced protection, and stability for their children.

“there are times when a woman has dated a man here to support her children. She’s getting beaten by the man, [...] but since she’s supporting her kids and giving them food and there’s a roof above their heads, she’s never going to talk. Sitting down, getting beaten, breaking her character against the people and society, swearing at her in front of the people, yelling at her, while the one who can, has the right to demand her rights, doesn’t do it because she fears for her children’s future.”

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Athens

Some participants in Greece shared accounts of refugee men engaging in sexual relationships with affluent middle-aged Greek women, whom they referred to as, "sugar mommies." In these relationships, the men received financial support, housing, and other necessities or other "luxurious" items. Certain male participants differentiated these relationships from other forms of transactional sex, as they were not driven by immediate survival pressures. While these relationships were often perceived as caring by participants, they were also seen as strategic and not based on mutual sexual attraction.

“There are a lot of sugar mommies around [laughs]...I have some people I know [...] they’re involved with a woman, a Greek woman—not just Greek, [...] or Italian or American that [...]live here for a long time and they’re maybe forty-fifty years old and they have a [hesitates] a boy which [...] they get from what they want and they’re giving what the young man wants; accommodation, money.” - Cisgender heterosexual man, Athens

Temporary and Convenience Marriage

Participants and key informants also reported that refugees, predominantly women, entered marriages with other refugees and local men to secure safe passage, legal status, and financial benefits.

“Maybe she was hoping for a better life. She was living poorly, and he was an officer who may provider her with a better life. She got married to him and they have a child now. But he always beats her.”

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Amman

In some cases, participants entered temporary marriages practiced in Muslim-majority countries. Temporary marriages are contracts between a woman and a man for a predetermined duration agreed upon by both parties. They typically involve a financial exchange, a dowry, negotiated between the parties. Temporary marriages are governed by

Islamic law and often do not require legal registration.

"In Al-Sater they took advantage of us. Some of the bad Free army soldiers did not allow some of the girls to enter to Al-Sater until they get married. So, if girls get married, they allow them in. They make the man conclude a marriage contract in Jordan and in Syria."

FGD among men, Amman

Others highlighted instances where people enter marriages or civil partnerships to obtain legal status. In particular, women were highlighted as being more frequently engaged in convenience marriages based on financial and housing needs.

"There are stories of marriage based on needs. Some are also made in secret, but once they are known, they cancel the marriage. For example, a woman needs shelter and income, and a man already has kids, but no wife wants someone to love him. But once people learn the man is married to a refugee, he ends the marriage."

Key Informant NGO employee, Beirut

In certain cases, the promise of legal status was manipulated to maintain a relationship falsely. For instance, one participant in Switzerland described marrying a local man who threatened to denounce the relationship and report the marriage as a residency scheme if they chose to end it. Another participant in Greece shared her experience of marrying a fellow refugee who falsely claimed she could benefit from his legal status.

"I explained to him "I have issues in my country from which I left. Would you like to help me leave Greece, go to another country and for me to return that money with which you helped me when I have it?" He rejected my request [...] he told me "I've been here for many years, and I have all my papers sorted. If you marry me, you will automatically get papers as well." And so, I was forced to accept his offer, to marry this man- to be in a civil partnership with him in order to have my papers sorted. [...] Before accepting to stay with this man I was living in the streets for four days, my friends had left [...]. And he told me that he had papers. Then I found out that he had received a second rejection, he was not even a recognized refugee; he had no papers- no nothing. But I had already signed the civil partnership."

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Athens

Consequences of Transactional Sex

Sexual and Reproductive Health

Participants across countries regardless of sexual orientation and gender identities commonly discussed pregnancies and HIV and other STIs among the significant implications of TS, especially for those involved with multiple partners or engaging in this practice for an extended period. Several participants raised concerns about the infrequent use of condoms during transactional encounters, increasing SRH-related risks.

“She had to sell her body to get money to pay for these small boats to send her to Greece, and on the way, she got pregnant. The father of her child is nowhere to be found. So, you see the kind of trauma they put up with. She came to Greece before she discovered she was pregnant.”

Key Informant, NGO employee, Athens

Limited information about safe sex practices, lack of free access to condoms, and the health risks of unprotected intercourse were highlighted by some participants. The decision to use condoms could vary depending on the availability of condoms, but more importantly, one’s acute needs. Refugees may not insist on condom use if they urgently need money. At times, they may be offered more money for unprotected intercourse.

“They get a lot of STDs, and they try practicing safe survival sex, but it isn’t always possible. They try, but it doesn’t always work because they cannot access products that could keep them safe.”

Key Informant, NGO employee, Beirut

Women, in particular, are often at greater risk of SRH complications and encountering barriers to accessing appropriate care. They had less power to negotiate safe sex practices, both in situations when they sell sex to multiple partners and when they engage in other forms of transactional relationships.

“When I was with this person, he would say to me ‘in our culture it’s not in our nature to use condoms, in our culture everything happens naturally, and you should bear children’ and I replied to him that ‘in this condition that I’m in I cannot raise a child too.’ I had a friend that would go to a doctor and take some medicine for herself, but she would give it to me so that I don’t get pregnant.”

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Athens

Women faced gendered risks like unintended pregnancy, gynaecological injuries, and sexual violence, heightened by limited access to contraception and safe abortion. There were multiple barriers to accessing reproductive health services for participants, particularly those engaging in TS. Although many medical centres offered SRH care, the costs of transport, treatment, or medications and the fear of stigma and discrimination were prohibitive.

“Transportation became costly, and it is rare for the programs to cover transportation costs. Sometimes refugees live very far from the hospital or the clinic, and other times they cannot go to the clinic because of the high cost of transportation.”

Key Informant, NGO, Beirut

Additionally, limited access to health care is a significant issue in many places because it is linked to the legal status of people who have been forcibly displaced. Those lacking documentation or social security are excluded from the public healthcare system in certain countries. Many participants reported they feared being recognized and mistreated by medical professionals or the stigma associated with medical procedures, such as safe abortion or HIV testing. In addition, in Jordan, those who test positive for HIV may risk deportation.⁴⁸

“It is about health insurance schemes. International protection applicants’ health insurance is activated whenever they register with migration authorities. Thus, they can access health services, consultations, treatment, etc. After one year, it is deactivated even if their asylum claims are still being processed.”

Key Informant, UN, Istanbul

Participants cited numerous barriers to accessing comprehensive and specific sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. Participants and key informants spoke about how SRH services were fragmented, scattered, and insufficient, especially considering the broader systemic challenges that refugees face.

“You've got a condom, but you don't know how to use it. What does a condom do for you when the culture of using it hasn't been created? There's nothing right about this. LGBT groups in Türkiye are starving, they don't have a place to sleep. Giving us a condom is insulting.”

Transgender woman, Istanbul

Violence, Harassment, Exploitation and Abuse

Our findings underscore the disturbingly widespread prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence experienced by participants. Some suggested that all asylum-seekers, regardless of gender, face the risk of sexual exploitation and assault at various points during their journey. Many participants highlighted the connection between transactional sex practices and an elevated risk of physical and sexual violence. Women and queer participants frequently reported instances of rape and sexual assaults, including by authorities. Several key informants also highlighted the severe levels of violence experienced by refugees they had encountered or served. Violence, harassment, exploitation, and abuse were associated with structural

vulnerabilities, including power imbalances along the journey and at border crossings.

"...they were trying to cross the Turkish border, both men and women, and actually the Greek police [...] stripped them, made them take off their clothes, in front of their families, in front of their husbands, in front of unknown men, [...], took their mobile phones and money and drove them away to the Turkish side of the border[...]. I am of the opinion that one shouldn't look at just what the smugglers and the outlaws do, one should also look at the legal ones [i.e., authorities], because sometimes the legal ones behave much worse than you think. ... there is something I've heard others say, and because they were a group together, I think it's true. There were five women, they were arrested by the police and one by one they were frisked. But one policeman was not very nice, he took one, the pretty one of the groups; put her in the room to search her. This "search" took two hours, now you understand, I think."

Cisgender gay man, Athens

Power imbalances and lack of access to legal protection can significantly restrict an individual's agency during transactional sexual interactions. While these transactions are often viewed as choices driven by scarce resources and limited options, participants and key informants emphasized how the potential for negotiation is severely compromised within these contexts and how TS among refugees often co-occurs with varying degrees of exploitation.

Even in cases where individuals willingly engage in TS to address a pressing need, the interaction might escalate beyond initially agreed-upon terms. Instances like non-consensual condom removal, unauthorized recording, or withholding compensation were noted as examples.

"When someone pays another person to have sex then they agree that this sexual act will take place. But if the one who pays then asks the other person to do something they don't want to do, then we are talking about forced prostitution. For example, someone may ask you to have sex and you go to their house and they have a camera, and they start filming. That's him exploiting you, it's not just prostitution, he's exploiting you and what you're doing at that moment. Or you meet someone, and you go to his house to have sex and all of a sudden you realize there's a third guy and instead of two there's three of you and even though you don't want to, you do it because you need the money he's going to give you, and that's kind of coercive."

Cisgender gay man, Athens

Individuals engaged in transactional relationships are at increased risk of prolonged violence and exploitation. People involved in longer-term transactional relationships often rely on their partner for security, financial support, and potentially legal status. In instances of marriage to attain legal status, participants were especially vulnerable to this dynamic.

Survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, particularly when undocumented, frequently chose not to report incidents due to a lack of trust or fear of authorities. Those who sought help from authorities could be dissatisfied with the system's response. In settings where sex work is

criminalized, survivors feared repercussions that jeopardized their asylum process or legal status.

“He was asking me to satisfy him sexually... My papers were not legal. I couldn’t go to the police. So he was giving me two options, either I could stay at his house and do what he was asking me to do, or he would throw me out.”

Non-binary person, Geneva

Even in settings where sex work is legal, sex work was practiced in a context of severe structural vulnerability because refugees faced strict rules that limited their access to work permits. In Greece, sex work is legal but has strict stipulations that incur fines if violated. It was reported that individuals were penalized with fines for their TS activities, which could lead to a vicious cycle of engaging in TS longer than initially planned.

Mental Health

Participants stressed that the compounding effects of instability during passage and risk for abuse during TS practices have led to potentially serious mental health (MH) concerns, though individuals differed significantly in their perception of their involvement in TS. They expressed stress, sadness, and guilt associated with the practice.

“You can imagine the psychological burden. You’ll hate your body at night when you get home, and that can lead to much worse relations, like suicide.”

Cis hetero woman, Istanbul

Participants were subjected to a series of traumatizing encounters during displacement and in TS practices, which impacted their perceptions of self, and negative feelings were compounded by the social stigma they felt because they participated in TS. In Switzerland, many participants reported post-traumatic stress from abuses and events they witnessed during their displacement journey. The MH consequences had long-lasting effects. Some participants reported that alcohol or drug use was a potentially harmful coping mechanism, introducing further MH challenges.

“I remember a refugee woman who told me that she sold her honor [meaning had sex] in exchange for a chicken. This was in the camp in Lebanon, and she repeatedly tried to commit suicide.”

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Geneva

Despite the increased need and availability of MH support, there were limited resources to support seeking care in general and about TS. Frequently, these services operated in isolation, detached from the socioeconomic needs and comprehensive support essential for overall stability and well-being. Key informants reported that services were inadequate to address the MH needs of displaced people. The participants' experiences confirmed the great need for additional MH care and further supportive services to overcome hesitancy to share their

experiences or beliefs that MH care would not be beneficial, reflecting a general awareness that MH care does not resolve structural barriers, yet reaffirming hesitancy to access MH services.

"I think it's a very irrelevant issue — if there is a psychologist for them or they need a psychologist, [...] I think it's irrelevant because their problem is not psychological, their problem is clearly money. You can't go to a psychologist and ask for money."

Cisgender heterosexual man, Athens

Societal Perceptions

Perceptions of those who engage in TS vary widely and are influenced by gender and cultural norms, religion, personal perspectives, ethical systems, and beliefs. Some participants held sympathetic opinions that recognized systemic drivers behind the practice. In Greece, some participants and key informants highlighted a normalization of TS as a means of survival. Within queer communities, there is potentially additional acceptance, as TS was mentioned more spontaneously by queer participants, and some noted that those within their community engaged in TS.

"But the people who do this, we shouldn't judge them, we should advise them, we should give them more advise, more protection, more opportunities, because you cannot tell someone who needs that 10 euros to not take it, you can just somehow educate them that, in order to get that 10 euros, you have to be a little more careful, you have to choose a little more carefully the people you sleep with."

Cisgender gay man, Athens

However, many retained negative opinions of those who engage in TS. Most believed engaging in TS was unnecessary, viewing those who engaged in the practice as weak and looking for an easy way out instead of struggling for a "decent" living. Negative attitudes additionally varied based on gender and type of TS. Women were more likely to be associated with TS and face harsher judgment, mainly when selling sex instead of engaging in an intimate relationship. For example, a participant in Greece recounted that women were more likely to face fines for TS

"The way they think is ancient, old way of thinking. Do not expect from them to think like you 'this is sex for something, or she has to do it to survive.' They are going to embarrass her, humiliate her, point finger, sorry — 'she is a bitch.'"

Cisgender heterosexual man, Athens

practices than men based on assumptions made by law enforcement.

Gendered cultural attitudes towards TS could drastically impact the experience of women. Women would be ostracized, stigmatized, and lose any chance of marriage. In some cases, they may be abused or killed by their families. Some also mentioned family disruption and divorce,

with children suffering from their mother's absence.

"The perception about women who get involved in this is negative while for the man it is ok, no one can judge him. He has the 'right.'"

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Beirut

Given gendered violence and barriers, many women did not openly discuss their involvement in TS and may avoid support services that could potentially reveal themselves. Stigma and shame were significant barriers to timely support and may impact a person's well-being, health, and protection from violence. Community stigma was also closely linked to self-stigma and internalized feelings of shame. How one perceived and interpreted actions could mitigate or exacerbate social consequences and mental health risks.

Study Strengths and Limitations

This pioneering research project was the first of its kind at such scale, focusing on a highly stigmatized and hidden practice within a population in vulnerable situations. The study's strength lies in its extensive sample size for a qualitative study and the use of a variety of qualitative methods, ensuring in-depth, comprehensive, and nuanced insights into transactional sexual practices. Most importantly, its inclusive approach, recruiting participants across diverse sexualities and gender identities, adds a unique strength as it highlights the extent and commonality of the practice across populations. This approach also reveals the gendered patterns and drivers that create differential experiences and impacts. Additionally, the inclusion of research participants from five different countries enhances the study's scope, capturing a diverse range of experiences and perspectives that not only enriches the data but also provides a more holistic understanding of the issue across different cultural and geographical contexts.

Despite these strengths, there are limitations that should be considered when interpreting its results. As this was a qualitative research project, conclusions about the prevalence of survival strategies or access to resources cannot be drawn. Additionally, while snowball and purposive sampling were used to access refugee populations, this method introduces a risk of sampling bias and limited generalizability. However, despite this limitation, given that participants were not recruited based on any prior experience of transactional sex (TS), the high number of participants reporting first-hand or second-hand experiences of TS suggests that it is a common practice. This indicates that TS may be more widespread than previously understood, highlighting the necessity of targeted interventions and further research to address this issue.

Furthermore, the challenges faced by queer refugees significantly impacted reaching this group for participation in the research, resulting in a smaller sample size. Notably, reaching lesbians, bisexuals, non-binary individuals, and transgender men proved even more challenging. Furthermore, none of the participants identified as intersex. This difficulty could stem from the higher number of gay men and transgender women being forcibly displaced, potentially because they are more at risk of exposure and subject to harassment and violence. It may also be due to the greater invisibility of lesbians, transgender men, and other non-binary identities and intersex individuals within the refugee context. As such, it is crucial to exercise caution when interpreting the findings and avoid generalizing the experiences of the queer population

as applying to all sub-populations under the SOGIESC umbrella. The diverse queer population experiences unique challenges and lumping them together can obscure these differences. Hence, future research should be highly vigilant in examining the differential and distinctive experiences of various sub-identities under SOGIESC to provide accurate insights and address the specific needs of each group.

This study exclusively involved adult participants. Any activities resembling transactional sex with individuals under 18, including instances of child marriage mentioned by multiple participants, are considered *de facto* sexual exploitation and sexual violence. It is important to acknowledge that due to the specific scope of our study, data on potential child abuse and exploitation were not collected, nor were the potential impacts of children witnessing their parents' abuse or exploitation or their involvement in transactional sex. This represents an area with an evidence gap that warrants future research.

Conclusion and Way Forward

Refugees face numerous challenges throughout their journey and resettlement, including financial hardship, housing instability, and limited livelihood opportunities. The existing government and humanitarian support structures often fail to address these issues. Our findings reveal that various structural factors, including migration policies, asylum procedures, and entitlement to humanitarian assistance, are influenced by gender assumptions that perpetuate vulnerability and create zones of precarity conducive to transactional sexual practices. Faced with multifaceted challenges, many refugees resort to or are forced to enter transactional sexual practices as a strategy to secure their livelihood, pursue stability, obtain protection, access services, or reach a safe country. Our findings suggest that TS is commonly practiced across countries and genders, with variations influenced by social, cultural, and policy contexts, as well as gender norms, roles, and expectations.

Participant reports of transactional sexual practices illustrate the agency and resilience of participants as they navigate the challenges and harsh realities of forced displacement, striving to secure their livelihoods and safety amidst adversity. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that within these contexts, conditions of exploitation often coexist with agency and resilience. While refugees demonstrate agency in navigating hardships, they frequently find themselves compelled by circumstances, power imbalances, and limited options, highlighting the complexity of their choices. This nuanced interplay between agency and exploitation underscores the need for comprehensive support systems and targeted interventions. These measures should empower refugees and address systemic vulnerabilities to minimize TS under exploitative and coercive conditions, offering alternatives and ensuring that any transactional practices are a matter of choice and agency rather than a last resort.

Importantly, engaging in TS in such dire circumstances often leaves participants vulnerable to physical, mental, and societal harm, exacerbating the already precarious situations they navigate while in forced displacement and exposing them to sexual and gender-based violence. Gender plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of transactional sex, highlighting the need for tailored approaches and additional support for women, men, and the diverse queer populations of refugees in the context of forced displacement.

There is an urgent need to identify and eliminate barriers to accessing quality and timely Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) and Mental Health (MH) support, independent of the legal system. This includes promoting better information sharing and education on SRH and safe sex practices among refugees in a gender-responsive manner and providing clear information on accessing services.

Moreover, efforts should focus on increasing education and resources for survivors of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and sexual violence. Creating a supportive environment and providing necessary resources are essential steps toward promoting the well-being and safety of individuals impacted by forced displacement and transactional sex practices.

Removing barriers to legal protection—such as ensuring access to registration and justice mechanisms—is essential. Without these protections, individuals may be forced to engage in TS and remain trapped in coercive or exploitative relationships. Furthermore, fear of criminalization and deportation remains a significant obstacle to accessing adequate services for those engaging in TS. Decriminalizing those involved in transactional sex and framing sex work legally to protect their rights are additional crucial steps toward providing adequate services, safeguarding their rights, and promoting their well-being.

Our findings illuminate the diverse array of practices encompassed by the umbrella term *transactional sex*, emphasizing the necessity for rethinking this concept within the context of forced displacement. A nuanced understanding of the broad spectrum of TS practices and their implications is crucial for policymakers and service providers in asylum systems and humanitarian actors to refine strategies, better identify instances of transactional sex, and provide the necessary social, health, and protection support in a respectful, non-judgmental, culturally appropriate and gender-responsive manner.

We hope our evidence can incentivize raising awareness and building capacity among government agencies, international organizations, and civil society organizations. Culturally destigmatizing and legally decriminalizing transactional sex (TS) practices is essential for better identifying and meeting the health and protection needs of those engaging in transactional sex. It is imperative to develop tailored policy measures to reduce and eliminate the structural drivers facilitating TS, and to develop targeted interventions that can effectively mitigate the negative health, protection, and social implications of transactional sex. By understanding the nuanced experiences and challenges faced by individuals involved in TS, these entities can work collaboratively to implement targeted interventions that prioritize the well-being and safety of vulnerable populations affected by forced displacement.

Most importantly, these findings point to the need for government and multilateral agencies mandated to support forcibly displaced people to revisit laws, policies, and processes to prevent conditions that compel individuals into transactional sexual practices against their will or as a last resort due to a lack of other choices. These include enabling safe and legal migration routes, improved financial assistance, more adequate and hygienic housing and accommodation, and providing provisions that facilitate refugees' access to the formal and legal job market, and guarantee legal protections to prevent exploitation. Applying an intersectional gender lens is crucial to identifying gendered vulnerabilities and unique needs, allowing for tailoring policies and programs to serve diverse groups effectively and equitably. These steps

are vital for fostering a more just and equitable environment for all individuals affected by forced displacement.

Advanced Draft

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