SURVIVAL STRATEGIES AND HEALTH REPERCUSSIONS IN FORCED DISPLACEMENT:

Report from a Multi-country study on Transactional Sex

International Report

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ABREVIATIONS

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

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. For the working definition of transactional sex used in this study, please refer to page 12.

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

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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 2024, over 123.2 million individuals have been uprooted, with 1 in 67 people globally displaced as a result of ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Myanmar, Palestine, Sudan, Syria 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 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 aimed 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) between 2020 and 2024 in Lebanon, Jordan, Türkiye, Greece, and Switzerland. Additionally, key informant interviews were conducted with local and international stakeholders.

Our findings reveal that TS is widespread as a survival strategy. In total, 69% (180/261) of participants interviewed observed or experienced TS and 11% (28/26) had first-hand experience of TS. Among cisgender, straight-identifying men, 2% (2/83), and among cisgender, straight-identifying women, 5% (6/118), reported having engaged in TS, while the corresponding figure for people of diverse SOGIESC was 33% (20/60).

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. Across TS types, our findings indicate varying degrees of agency and coercion. While some engage in TS as a means of navigating complex realities and asserting control in precarious situations, it can also occur under conditions where threat and intimidation prevail, involving exploitation and coercion to varying extents. In addition, we observed disturbingly high levels of violence, with a greater proportion of refugees of diverse SOGIESC 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. People are often driven to TS by a lack of safe, legal migration

routes that prolongs legal liminality. This, in turn, creates a ripple effect, resulting in constrained livelihood opportunities, financial insecurity and housing precarity, alongside stigma, discrimination and violence, including on the basis of SOGIESC. These circumstances can further exacerbate their situation, increasing the risk of health concerns, such as sexual and reproductive health and mental health issues, as well as exposure to violence. Engagement in TS may also create greater barriers to accessing essential services, both because of their legal liminality and precarious circumstances, and due to fear of legal and social repercussions linked to their refugee status, involvement in TS, or same-sex practices, particularly in contexts where the latter are legally, socially or culturally prohibited. This can create a vicious cycle that aggravates their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing.

To our knowledge, this report is the first of its kind to generate empirical data that provide a nuanced, gendered understanding of the complexities of TS practices in the context of forced displacement. Global displacement is increasing, while migration policies are becoming more restrictive. At the same time, xenophobia, misogyny, homo- and transphobia are growing, and investment in humanitarian and global health responses is declining. These dynamics create a fertile ground for an increase in TS practices, including those that constitute sexual exploitation and abuse. The lack of understanding and effective policies can render these practices—and those engaged in them—largely invisible. This report offers insights to help policymakers, humanitarian workers and health service providers understand the drivers, gendered patterns and health consequences of TS. It can support the development of effective, targeted interventions to reduce harmful risks and provide the necessary assistance to minimise negative health outcomes. More broadly, it underscores the urgency of comprehensive policies and interventions to support forcibly displaced individuals and address the structural vulnerabilities faced by all refugees.

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 are encouraged to 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 2024, it was estimated that more than 123 million individuals had been uprooted,[1] making forced mobility an unsettling new norm. By the time of our data collection (2021-2024), the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Sudan, Afghanistan, and Palestine had led to forced displacement on a massive scale. In addition, more than 5 million people are estimated to have fled Ukraine as a result of the war[2] and up to 1.9 million people have been displaced as a result of the most recent conflict in the Gaza Strip.[3]

The UNHCR estimates that 13 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 23,000 Palestinians from Syria, in addition to 11,200 refugees from other countries.[6,7] Further complicating the scenario in Lebanon, an additional 200,000 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]

Foto: Salah Darwish

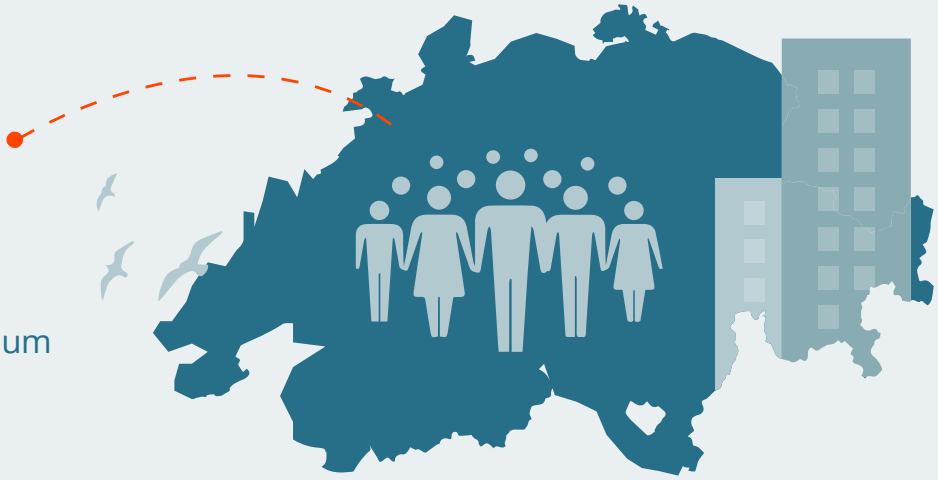
By the end of

2024

there were more than

51 million

refugees and asylum seekers globally.



Source: UNHCR Global Trends 12 June 2025

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 one of highest total and per capita number of refugees.[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 2024, nearly 13.2 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 200,000 refugees, primarily from crises in Ukraine, Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan, and Türkiye.[17] According to estimations, approximately 150,000 undocumented refugees and migrants without proper residence status ("sans-papiers") live in the country.[24] Switzerland instituted new asylum procedures in March 2019, updated and extended most recently in 2025,attempting to provide an accelerated decision-making process and grant asylum-seekers free legal advice. However, asylum-seekers are initially mandated to stay in assigned federal processing centres, during which time they 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]

RIGHT TO WORK

62%

of refugees live in countries where **access to formal employment is restricted.**

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

33%

of refugees live in countries with **restricted freedom of movement** (the right and ability to move).

Source: UNHCR MUN Refugee Challenge. Background Guide: Refugees" access to jobs and financial services 2023

Compounding challenges of displacement

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. Refugees 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, 62% 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, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC—hereafter referred to as "queer" for readability) face intersecting forms of discrimination. These can create distinct and additional barriers to accessing safety, adequate housing, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities.

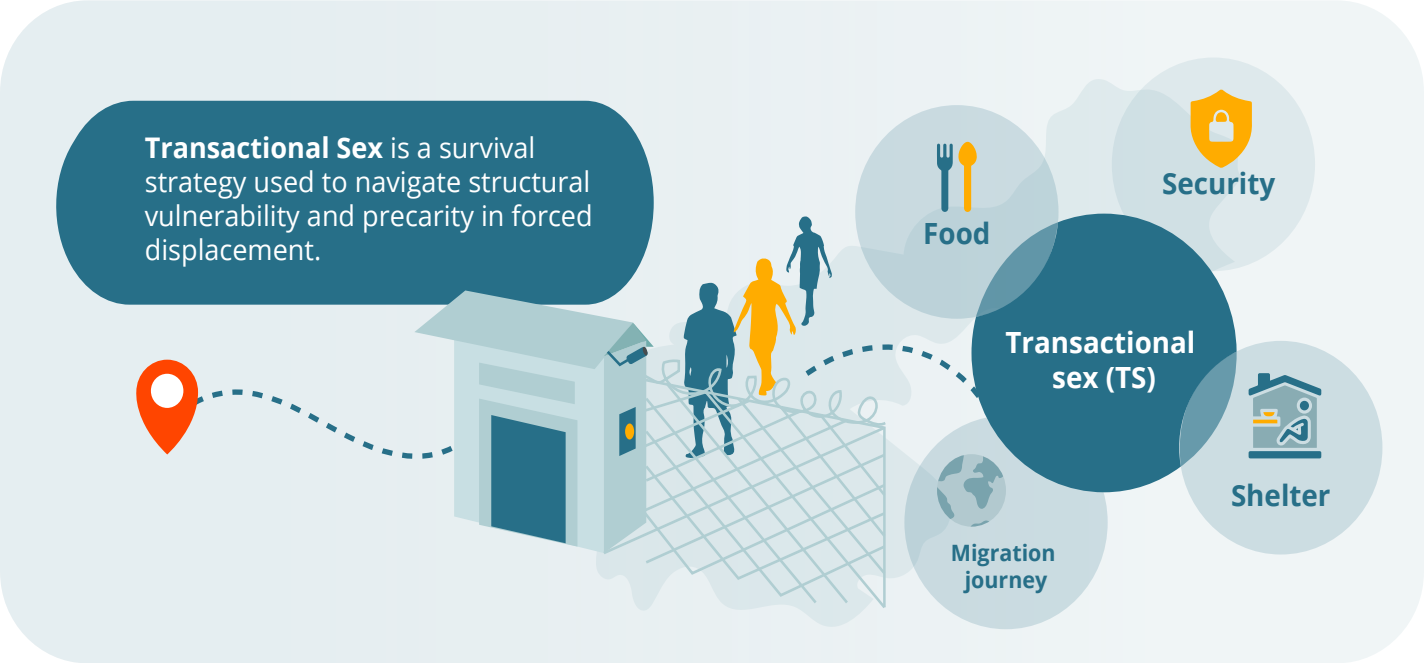
Transactional Sex in Forced Displacement

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 into 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 or 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.[39–41]

Engagement in TS carries significant sexual and reproductive health implications, including a heightened risk of unwanted pregnancies. Many individuals face an unmet need for contraceptives and have limited access to safe and legal abortion.[42] Consequently, refugees engaged in TS often have greater health needs while facing substantial barriers to accessing essential services.



Transactional Sex

The term transactional sex first emerged in the context of HIV prevention studies in Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s. In this literature, transactional sex is frequently 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 transmission through transactional sexual relationships. The literature on TS in development contexts often distinguishes it from commercial sex work. Transactional sex is understood as the exchange of material support within a sexual relationship, whereas commercial sex work is defined as explicit negotiation and a predetermined, immediate cash payment 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 conflations, 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—developed in the context of HIV and development settings, and framed as distinct from sex work or sexual exploitation and abuse—does not reflect the diverse forms, motivations, and meanings of transactional sex in humanitarian and forced displacement contexts. 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 lack of a clear definition and sufficient evidence on TS in forced displacement has rendered the practice largely invisible, resulting in limited policy guidance and ineffective 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 working definition includes temporary and convenience marriages, relationships entered into with the explicit expectation or intention of accessing benefits, and instances where TS occurs as a result of coercion or intimidation, which may fall under the definition of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA).

This approach aimed to capture the nuanced complexities of such encounters in forced displacement, acknowledging agency while recognising concurrent vulnerability and the potential for exploitation where choices are limited and access to legal or social protection is compromised.

Study Rationale

Our research sought to address the evidence gap by advancing understanding of TS and examining its characteristics in the context of forced displacement, where livelihood choices are limited, access to legal and social protection is restricted, and the boundaries between agency and vulnerability are often blurred. To this end, our research aimed 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.

Study context: Adult refugees, asylum seekers, and people in refugee-like situations residing in Jordan, Lebanon, Türkiye, Greece, and Switzerland at the time of research.

METHODOLOGY

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 resided in Jordan, Lebanon, Türkiye, Greece, and Switzerland at the time of research. 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.

The study employed participant observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with forcibly displaced people. In addition, key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with local and international stakeholders.

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were utilized to recruit participants. Inclusion criteria for FGDs 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. Participants 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, 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 cover travel expenses, all participants, regardless of whether they completed the IDIs or FGDs, received a voucher valued at 10–20 EUR.

Box 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Aged 18 years or older.
- 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.
- Able and willing to provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Younger than 18 years of age.
- Lacking the capacity or willingness to provide informed consent.
- Not meeting the definition of forcibly displaced outlined above.
- Holding official permanent residency and a work permit that grants rights and benefits comparable to those of nationals.

IDIs and FGDs were carried out in spaces that guaranteed anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality. Data were stored in secure, locked locations, and electronic files were encrypted and password-protected in accordance with the data management plan. All transcripts and project outputs were anonymised, with no identifiable information about individuals collected or included. 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 IDIs and FGDs and focused mainly on eliciting narratives about the participants' displacement journeys, the challenges they faced, and the survival strategies they employed. Additionally, we inquired whether participants had engaged in, witnessed, or heard of refugee women, men, or people of diverse SOGIESC who chose or were forced

to engage in sexual activities or intimate relationships in exchange for support or for something they needed or wanted (e.g., food, cash, favours, shelter, gifts, assistance to migrate to another country, or anything else) during their journey or at their current location. This approach allowed us to explore the phenomenon without imposing a specific label and gather information on different ways TS can occur. The 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, 261 IDIs and 23 FGDs were conducted across the five study countries between 2021-2024. Most participants originated from Syria and Afghanistan, although participants from other countries, including Ukraine, were also recruited. Additionally, 73 key informants were interviewed, representing the healthcare sector, humanitarian organisations, non-governmental organisations, UN agencies, and government officials in each of the countries.

Participants across all research sites recounted experiences and observations of transactional sex (TS). Overall, 69% (180/261) of participants reported experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about TS, indicating its widespread occurrence, with comparable proportions reported by cis-heterosexual women 68%, cis-heterosexual men 63%, and queer people 79%. In addition, 11% (28/261) reported personal experience of TS, with a trend revealing more queer people (33%; 20/60) having had personal experience of TS compared to cis-heterosexual women (5%; 6/118) and cis-heterosexual men 2%; 2/83). 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. (Table 1)

Table 1: Overview of Data Collection by Country

Countries	In-depth Interviews	Focus Group Discussions (Total Number of Participants)	Key Informant Interviews
Jordan	51	10	8
Lebanon	53	6	18
Türkiye	55	4	11
Greece	39	1	18
Switzerland	63	2	18
Total	**261**	**23**	**73**

Figure 1: Overview of IDI Participants

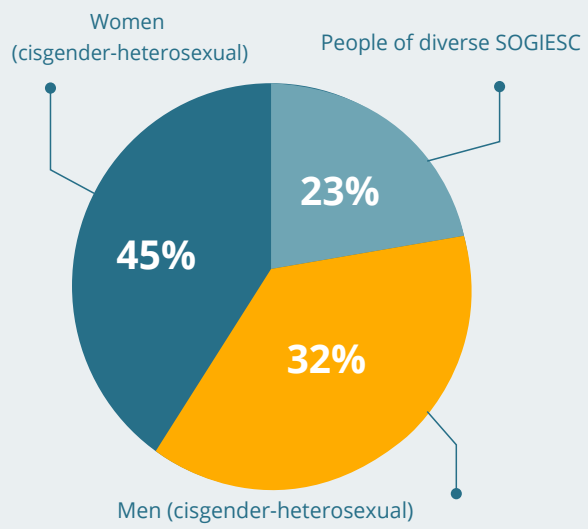
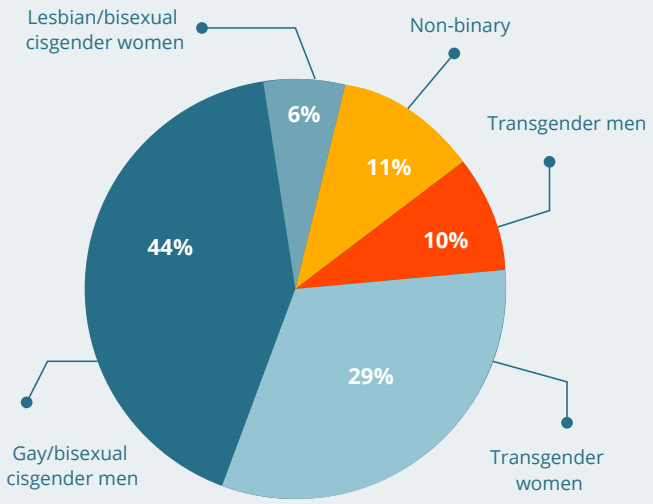


Figure 2: Overview of Queer IDI Participants



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

Similarly, of the 72 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 they 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 reported structural drivers of TS across the displacement continuum. Emerging from the data, the main drivers were security and protection; financial Hardship; limited livelihood opportunities; housing precarity; and discrimination on the basis of SOGIESC. These drivers operate cumulatively and are shaped by prevailing gender norms, systemic gender inequality, and intersectional discrimination, resulting in differentiated experiences of TS across genders and sexualities.

Security and Protection

For many participants, the displacement journey was the earliest site of exposure to TS, frequently in interactions with police, border patrols and guards, and with smugglers on whom they depended to reach safer destinations. 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 enable them 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 sexual exploitation, assault, and gender-based violence also contributed to TS practices in host and transit countries. In refugee camps, it was commonly known that women associated with a male partner were less likely to face harassment or violence. As a result, some participants described engaging in short-term relationships as a strategy to navigate unsafe camp conditions, prevent sexual assault, and protect their children. These forms of TS often involved difficult trade-offs. Women weighed the risks of engaging in TS against the threat of harassment or rape, and some accepted relationships that involved violence or abuse, perceiving them as offering greater protection than being alone.

> *"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 [...], 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."*
>
> Key Informant, 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 emphasised that conditions along the displacement journey create environments that facilitate and intensify TS, often underscoring its exploitative nature.

> *"Some of the girls who are traveling alone are afraid. So, they find a man and propose this to them, that they act as though they are married so that other people leave them alone. Some girls do this out of fear."*
>
> Cisgender heterosexual woman, Zurich

Financial Hardship

Participants faced financial hardship stemming from legal restrictions on their right to work, limited income-generating opportunities, and the pressure to support their families, whether in host countries or countries of origin. Depending on national policies, asylum seekers awaiting decisions, individuals on temporary permits, and those without documentation are often ineligible for financial assistance or the right to formal employment, forcing many to rely on informal and precarious work to meet their basic needs.

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.

Limited Access to Aid
Many participants were excluded from financial assistance because they were undocumented or not registered as asylum seekers.

> *"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—especially those with children—were described as having fewer economic opportunities and greater financial and material needs. Mothers were identified as particularly vulnerable, as their limited access to income was compounded by the responsibility to provide for and protect their children. These concerns were sometimes cited as motivations for entering long-term intimate relationships or marriages to secure basic needs, though such arrangements also carried a heightened risk of exploitation.

> *"There are men who take advantage of the vulnerable situation of women and their economic hardship."*
>
> Key Informant, NGO employee, Istanbul

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 emerged as another key driver of transactional sex, as participants sought ways to cope with ongoing financial hardship. Often confined to precarious and unsafe informal work due to legal restrictions and the lack of work permits, many faced severe barriers to securing stable income.

> *"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, Zurich

Those unable to secure formal employment or legal work relied on government aid and took up informal jobs, where they frequently faced xenophobia, discrimination, and exploitative conditions. Even those with the right to work often encountered language barriers and the non-recognition of qualifications from their countries of origin, and were typically limited to low-wage jobs in sectors such as hospitality, cleaning, manufacturing, construction, and agriculture. These roles were often characterised by long hours, precarious arrangements, and poor working conditions.

> *"I look at this [TS] as a job, 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 them. They 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 were particularly vulnerable to exploitation, as their lack of legal status left them without access to formal complaints mechanisms or protection. Many endured unpaid wages, abusive working conditions, and persistent threats of being reported to the police.

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 discrimination in the workplace. One woman described being prohibited by her employer from wearing a headscarf (hijab), highlighting the everyday challenges faced in balancing religious expression and economic survival.

Gender differences in income-generating opportunities shaped participants' experiences of transactional sex across contexts. In Switzerland, for example, men were perceived to have greater access to alternative forms of work, making them less reliant on transactional sex than women. In Türkiye, Jordan, and Lebanon, women faced additional barriers to accessing formal employment, including prevailing gender norms, unpaid domestic responsibilities, and limited availability of flexible work, contributing to high levels of unemployment among women. More broadly across countries, women also frequently reported experiences of sexual harassment in the workplace.

> *"I wish environment to work without fear of the male gaze, where they can earn their own money." 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."*
>
> 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 emerged as another key theme in the data, reinforcing participants' structural vulnerability and shaping conditions that contributed to transactional sex. 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."

Cisgender 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 various forms of transactional sex were used as a means to obtain it. Participants reported engaging in one-time sexual encounters for shelter for the night, as well as entering longer-term transactional relationships to secure more stable housing. 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..."

FGD with cisgender heterosexual women, Athens

Housing precarity was a critical concern and emerged as a structural driver of transactional sex.

"... 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 reiterated the 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

Some transactional sexual relationships emerged from the desperate need to obtain legal status, such as through marriage or cohabitation arrangements with a citizen or resident. Participants described these relationships as highly unequal, with the partner holding legal status often exercising significant power and control. This dynamic left the more vulnerable partner at heightened risk of intimate partner violence (IPV) and abuse, and constrained their ability to leave the relationship or seek support, for fear of losing residency rights or facing legal repercussions.

> *"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

Discrimination based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

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

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

Typology 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. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Typology of Transactional Sexual Practices in Forced Displacement

Sex work | Transactional Sexual Encounter | Intimate Transactional Relationship | Temporary or 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. Unlike much of the literature, which often assumes that sex work is primarily undertaken by women, participants and key informants in our study emphasised that both women and men engage in sex work. In Türkiye, for example, a key informant noted that some refugee men seek income by working in sex clubs or by finding clients in bathhouses.

Our data also echoed reports and news outlets about younger refugee men in Greece being solicited by older men and engaging in sex work. While our study did not recruit participants under the age of 18, second-hand accounts from participants and key informants as well as from individuals who were underage at the time of their arrival in Greece but over 18 at the time of interview, revealed instances where adolescent boys resorted to sex work to meet their basic needs.

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 explicit transactional sex 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."

Participant, Geneva

In Greece, narratives focused on younger, unmarried individuals (both men and women) perceived as more exposed to solicitations. In the absence of alternative opportunities, key informants noted that indirect propositions and solicitation, particularly on the islands, often served as entry points into transactional sex. Many participants described engaging in TS as a means of generating income when other livelihood options were unavailable.

"...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 Encounter

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.

Foto: Sakorn Sukkasemsakorn

"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

Transactional sexual encounters 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 and key informants noted that women, particularly mothers, more often found themselves in situations of vulnerability that led to transactional sexual encounters. These were frequently driven by limited livelihood opportunities, caregiving responsibilities, and the pressing need to provide for their 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, Geneva

Intimate Transactional Relationships

Participants reported short-term and long-term transactional sexual relationships in exchange for non-monetary benefits. Some participants opted for longer-term arrangements over short-term exchanges, as they were seen as offering more stability and less stigmatising. 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

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

Key Informant, UN, Amman

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."

Key Informant, 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 increasingly abusive behaviour– 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 for themselves and their children but also enhanced protection, and help navigate social judgment.

"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 or 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.

Such marriages were often seen as more socially acceptable and carried less stigma than other forms of transactional sex. While women may have entered these formal or legally recognised arrangements strategically—to secure protection, legal certainty, or to meet their own and their children's basic needs—participants also described how these relationships were shaped by deep gender inequalities and power imbalances. These dynamics created conditions for exploitation and abuse, with limited recourse or safe exit options for many women, particularly when legal status or housing security depended on maintaining the relationship. In some instances, the promise of protection, financial support, or legal status was also used to lure women into marriages that were, in effect, transactional.

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 used manipulatively to pressure women into remaining in relationships under false pretences. In Switzerland a participant 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 know some women who are without guardians ("bisaprarast") in Lausanne, Zürich, Lucerne. These are women who find their monthly allowance is not enough because they have permit F or N. They befriend people in exchange for money. I heard this happens a lot in Geneva."

Cisgender heterosexual woman, Geneva

"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

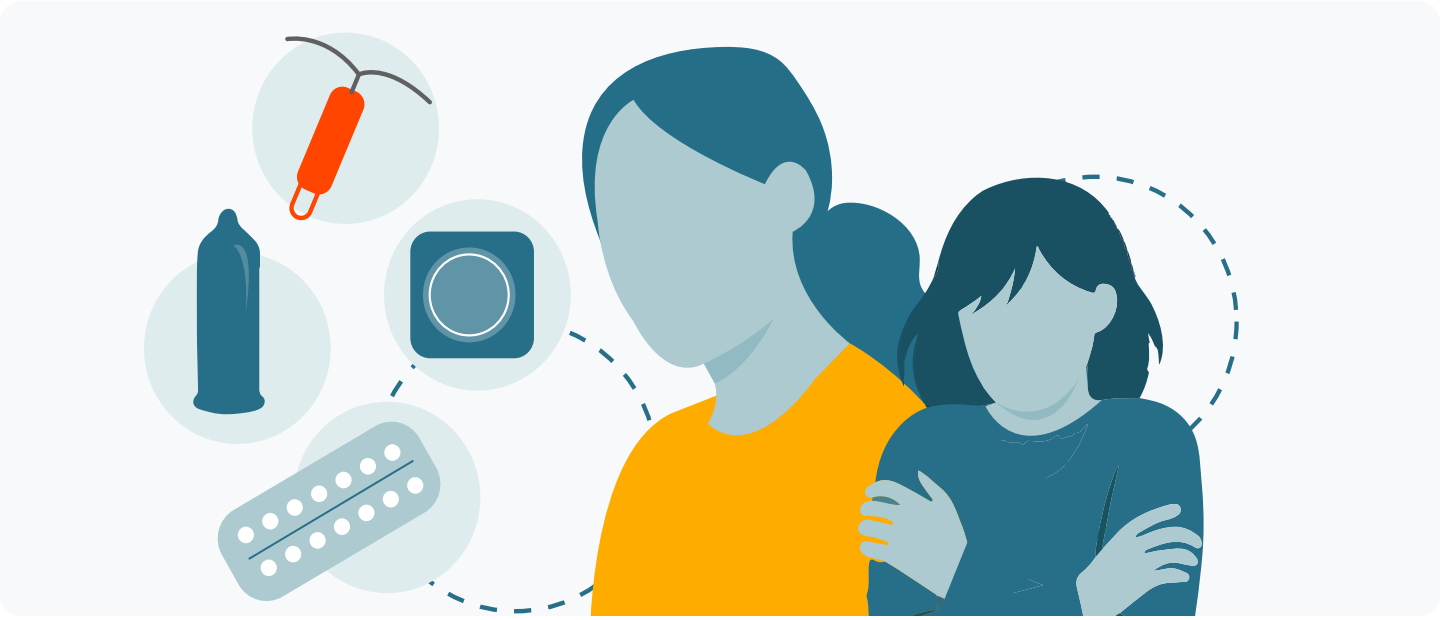
Participants across countries regardless of sexual orientation and gender identities commonly discussed pregnancies, and HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) among the significant health implications of TS, especially for those involved with multiple partners or engaging in this practice 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 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.

Queer refugees faced additional challenges, particularly those with specific sexual and reproductive health needs such as hormone therapy or gender-affirming care. These services were rarely available or accessible, and many reported discrimination, lack of provider knowledge, or complete exclusion from care. As noted above, limited access to such care also led some to engage in TS to afford or obtain these services. At the same time, these practices heightened their health risks and needs, reinforcing a vicious cycle of vulnerability and unmet care.

> *"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 reveal disturbingly widespread prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence experienced by participants. Some suggested that all refugees, 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."*
>
> Key Informant, UN, Istanbul

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."*
>
> Queer particpant, 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 displacement journey and risk for abuse during TS practices have led to potentially serious mental health concerns, though individuals differed significantly in their perception of their involvement in TS. Some 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."*
>
> Cisgender 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. Participants' experiences indicated a strong need for additional mental health care and supportive services. Many, however, remained reluctant to seek help—either unwilling to disclose their experiences, particularly those related to transactional sex and sexual and gender-based violence, or sceptical that psychological support would address the structural causes of their distress or alleviate their immediate socioeconomic and protection needs.

> *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."*
>
> Cis hetero woman, Istanbul

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 towads those who engaged in TS 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 frequently.

> *"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 practices than men based on assumptions made by law enforcement.

> *"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

Gendered cultural attitudes towards TS significantly shaped participants' experiences, particularly among women. Women were often subject to stigma, social exclusion, and loss of social standing. In some cases, participants reported severe consequences such as family rejection, violence, or threats to their safety. Others described how engagement in TS could lead to relationship breakdowns or family tensions, sometimes resulting in separation from children or loss of caregiving roles.

At the same time, straight-identifying men who engaged in TS with other men feared homophobic stigma and discrimination, often preventing them from disclosing engagement in TS or experiences of coercion, violence, or abuse during these practices. Gendered assumptions about vulnerability and victimhood in patriarchal societies, where women are more commonly associated with sex work or sexual and gender-based violence, can further obscure awareness of TS practices among men and the associated risks of violence they face.

Queer refugees frequently faced multiple and compounding forms of stigma, both in relation to their SOGIESC, as well as their involvement in TS. Many also reported discriminatory attitudes and practices when interacting with authorities and health or social services.

> *"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 its strengths, this study has limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. As a qualitative study based on a non-representative sample, any figures related to the prevalence of transactional sex, survival strategies, or gendered patterns are indicative only and should not be interpreted as conclusive. 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

This study sheds light on the diverse and complex ways in which transactional sex operates as a survival strategy among forcibly displaced individuals. Our findings reveal that transactional sex is widespread across settings and population groups and shaped by intersecting structural vulnerabilities, e.g., legal liminality, financial hardship, housing precarity, limited access to livelihoods, and discrimination on the basis of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and legal status.

Although not designed to produce generalisable prevalence estimates, the high number of first- and second-hand accounts, reported by nearly two-thirds of participants across five countries and a range of gender and sexual identities, strongly suggests that TS is more widespread than recorded. Participants were not recruited based on prior experience with TS, and indirect questioning was used to reduce social desirability bias. Nonetheless, disclosure was likely constrained by stigma, legal risks, and safety concerns, indicating that these figures likely represent a conservative estimate.

By actively engaging individuals across the gender and sexuality spectrum, our study challenges heteronormative framings that position TS as an issue solely affecting women. Our data show that queer refugees and cisgender, straight-identifying men also engage in TS, though in ways that are shaped differently by social norms, cultural scripts, and legal contexts. It is important to note that the queer participants in this study were primarily gay men and transgender women. Reaching lesbians, bisexuals, transgender men, non-binary, and intersex individuals proved more challenging, and their relative absence in the sample calls for caution when interpreting and generalising findings across the broader SOGIESC spectrum. These findings call for more inclusive, context-specific research and responses grounded in an understanding of how patriarchal, heterosexist, and racialised assumptions shape

vulnerability and agency. Based on four recurrent patterns identified in the data, we propose a typology of transactional sex comprising sex work, transactional sexual encounters, intimate transactional relationships, and temporary or convenience marriages. Rather than fixed categories, these forms overlap and operate along a continuum in which agency and coercion co-exist to varying degrees, negotiated in contexts where autonomy is limited, social protections are lacking. Participants reported engaging in TS to secure food, shelter, onward mobility, safety, or a degree of stability amid profound structural exclusion. While some described these practices as strategic or relational, many recounted experiences shaped by fear, intimidations, and unequal power dynamics.

While this study deliberately sought to affirm the agency and resilience of forcibly displaced individuals, it is essential to acknowledge the structural constraints under which choices are made. TS is not inherently exploitative, but it often unfolds within conditions of systemic inequality, violence, and coercion. It is precisely within these overlapping exclusions, produced and sustained by policies, laws, and institutional neglect, that exploitation becomes normalised. Our data point to alarmingly high levels of abuse and violence, with many TS exchanges occuring under coercive or exploitative conditions. By actively engaging individuals across the gender and sexuality spectrum, our data highlight that TS is not confined to any one group. Rather, it is a practice found across diverse gender and sexual identities, although the experiences, meanings, and implications of TS are shaped by prevailing gender norms, cultural expectations, and patriarchal constructions of vulnerability and agency. These findings challenge the dominant narratives that position TS primarily as a practice among women, and underscore the need for more nuanced, inclusive, and context-specific policy responses.

By applying a socioecological lens, this study moves beyond individual-level framings to expose the broader architecture of constraint. Legal precarity, hostile asylum regimes, unsafe housing, discriminatory policies, and inaccessible services create the conditions in which TS emerges and persists, not always as a free choice, but as a coping strategy in a landscape of limited options. While economic need is often cited as the rationale for TS, our findings reveal these needs as symptoms of deeper, structural injustices.

Implications for Policy and Action

Transactional sex in displacement contexts cannot be understood or addressed in isolation from the systems that produce it. Structural conditions that facilitate TS, including legal precarity, unsafe migration routes, exclusion from formal employment, inadequate housing, and limited access to health and protection services must be confronted.

We hope this evidence contributes to raising awareness and fostering deeper dialogue among policymakers, service providers, humanitarian actors, researchers, civil society, and grassroots movements. Understanding the nuances of transactional sex, including its diverse forms, the conditions in which it occurs, and its intersections with gender norms, legal status, and structural violence, is essential to ensuring responses that are effective, respectful, and grounded in lived realities. The areas outlined below reflect key entry points for co-developing responses and recommendations through inclusive, multi-stakeholder dialogues.

Policy Level

The absence of safe and legal migration pathways emerged as a key structural driver of TS. When individuals are forced to rely on irregular routes or remain in prolonged legal limbo, they are more likely to experience coercive and exploitative forms of TS, as well as heightened risk of violence and harassment. The lack of legal alternatives increases dependence on others for protection, passage, or survival creating conditions where unequal power dynamics are easily abused. Expanding safe, legal,

and dignified migration options is essential to reducing vulnerability and safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of those on the move.

Legal and administrative systems play a central role in shaping the lived realities of displacement. Prolonged legal uncertainty, driven by restrictive asylum policies, delayed documentation, or lack of residency rights, undermines autonomy and reinforces dependency. Reducing legal liminality through more inclusive and rights-based asylum and migration frameworks is an important area for further attention and action.

Access to formal employment is often governed by restrictive labour laws and migration policies. Without the right to work legally, many displaced individuals are pushed into informal economies and precarious survival strategies. Enabling equitable access to dignified work should be part of broader policy discussions. A pressing concern is the criminalisation of sex work, same-sex practices, and the identities and expressions of transgender people. Laws that penalise those engaged in sex work and TS, or that criminalise queer and trans people, increase vulnerability to coercion and violence, limit access to justice, deter disclosure, and reinforce stigma. Decriminalisation, alongside legal protections that uphold rights regardless of legal status, sexual orientation, or gender identity, is critical to creating safer conditions and enabling access to essential services and redress.

Programmatic Level

TS was recurrently reported as a strategy to secure shelter, pay rent, or access safer accommodation. A key area for action is housing allocation that recognises the distinct needs and risks faced by women with or without dependents, queer refugees, and young cisgender, straight-identifying men who are often deprioritised in vulnerability assessments. Minimum standards for safety, privacy and anti-harassment, together with clear pathways to affordable longer-term options, are programme gaps.

Limited access to formal employment, shaped by restrictive labour and migration policies, emerged as another recurring factor pushing individuals toward transactional strategies. Expanded support to secure legal employment, alongside vocational training, language education, and skills-building, may offer more stable pathways to self-reliance. Where access to formal work remains restricted, financial assistance and inclusive cash-based interventions become particularly critical. The data suggest these should be designed to reach individuals commonly excluded from traditional aid mechanisms, including those without legal status or marginalised due to gender or sexuality.

Access to health and psychosocial support services also emerged as a critical area of concern. Many participants described barriers to timely, inclusive, and stigma-free sexual and reproductive healthcare, including pregnancy prevention and termination, and care for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. For transgender and non-binary refugees, the inability to access hormonal therapy or gender-affirming care was not only a source of distress but, in some cases, a driver of transactional sex to cover medical costs. Mental health and psychosocial support, particularly trauma-informed care, was also lacking, despite the cumulative toll of hardship, violence, and displacement. These gaps highlight the need for programmatic responses that are gender-responsive, queer-affirming, and grounded in rights-based principles, capable of addressing the layered vulnerabilities that underpin TS in humanitarian settings.

Research and Evidence

Further research is needed to deepen understanding of the gendered and structural dimensions of TS in displacement. Intersectional feminist approaches, grounded in participatory and community-led methods, are essential to ensure that research reflects the lived realities and priorities of those most

affected and contributes to meaningful change. This requires a clear link to policy and programming needs, with a focus on informing gender-transformative, rights-based responses.

There is also value in identifying and sharing promising practices in gender-responsive programming. Systematic and ethically grounded data collection, rooted in safety, consent, confidentiality, and data ownership, can help identify who is being left behind and where inequities persist. When integrated into broader humanitarian assessments, such data can strengthen coordination and support more inclusive and effective interventions.

Final Reflection

These findings emerge against the backdrop of a turbulent global landscape, marked by conflicts and humanitarian crises, climate disasters, political and economic instability, and a sharp decline in investment in humanitarian aid and global health. Although data were primarily collected between 2021 and 2024, their relevance is only heightened by the continued rise in forced displacement and the erosion of systems intended to offer protection and support. As humanitarian and global health institutions become increasingly fragmented, under-resourced, or inaccessible, the structural conditions that fuel transactional sex, rooted in heteropatriarchal and colonial systems of power, are likely to intensify.

Addressing transactional sex in displacement contexts requires more than temporary or piecemeal responses, and cannot be tackled in isolation. It demands structural reform, grounding responses in rights, not rhetoric; in justice, not systems of control; and in collective action, not performative gestures. This entails building gender-responsive and inclusive systems that centre dignity, safety, and equity. It requires governments, multilateral institutions, and civil society to act on this evidence, moving beyond symbolic responses towards meaningful and sustained transformation.

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