



IDPs in the Global North: Women's Journeys to Escape Domestic Violence

Tens of thousands of women and children in the UK are displaced due to the human rights violation of violence against women, but they are not recognised or responded to as IDPs. Their individual and hidden journeys to escape violence cause support needs, and a loss of rights, but state and service responses are often inadequate. What does that say about women's citizenship in countries of the Global North? And would using the lens of internal displacement focus minds and actions on more just, effective, and rights-based responses?

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Though the definition of Internal Displacement in the [Guiding Principles](#) clearly references “violations of human rights” as forcing people to leave their homes, this seems to be the driver of displacement that is least addressed in data, rhetoric or action.

My work – research, policy, frontline support, and advocacy – focuses on the human rights violation of violence against women. Again, this has been recognised in [international statements on human rights](#) over decades, but is rarely focused on in work on internal displacement, except when it intersects with other more-recognised drivers of displacement, such as conflict and generalised violence.

Violence against women is everywhere – and yet also somehow nowhere. Part of the scenery – just how things are. And, even when it is acknowledged and maybe even addressed within internal displacement, that is more commonly in countries of the Global South. It’s an issue that is somehow about someone else, somewhere else.... Nothing to see here in the Global North....

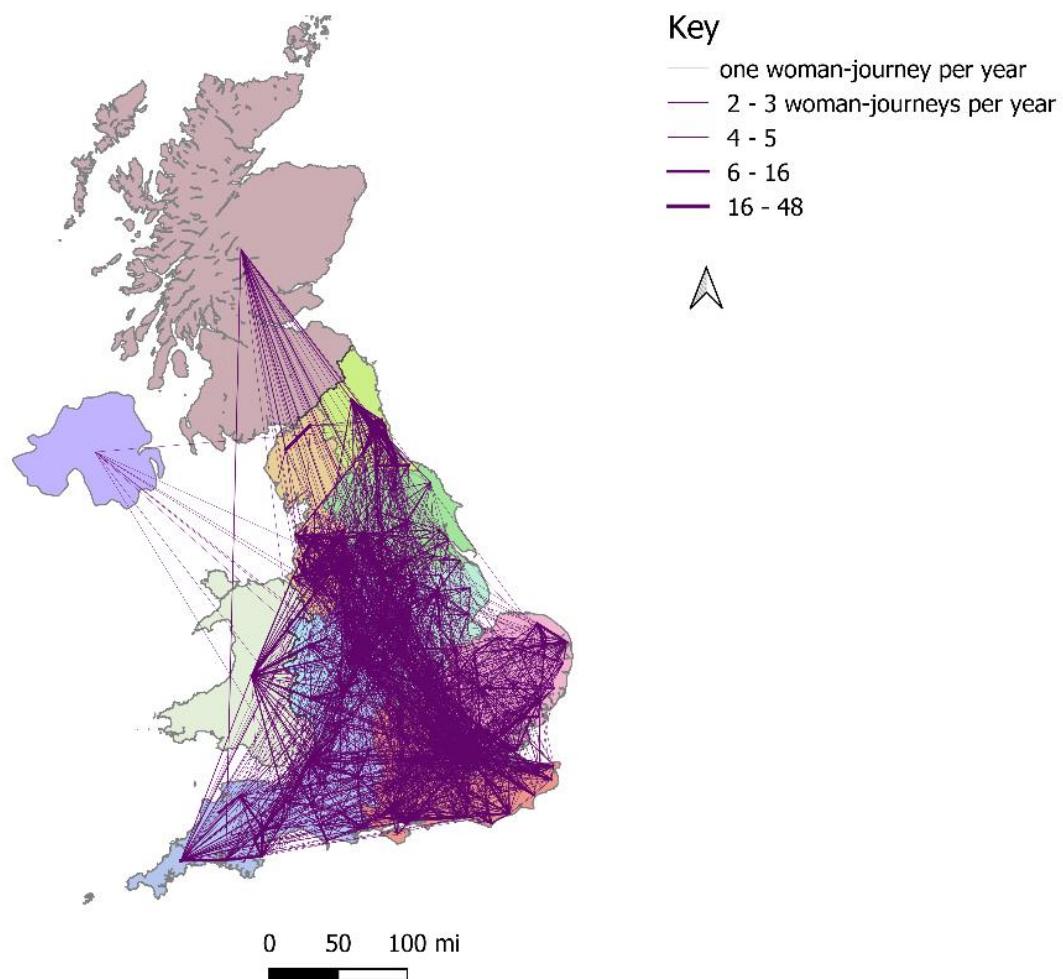
In terms of disaster displacement, [Ana Mosneaga](#) has argued that:

“The dominant perception among the policy-makers as well as the general public in the Global North continue to regard internally displaced persons (IDPs) as if it was an issue that can be only encountered in the Global South.”

This is similarly so in terms of human rights violations causing displacement in the Global North – in high-income countries – not least the pervasive, but often individualised and even ‘private’ abuses of violence against women.

My [research](#) is therefore attempting to uncover IDPs in the United Kingdom – the tens of thousands of women and children forced to relocate to escape domestic abuse/interpersonal violence. But the displacement is individualised – often hidden at the time and kept secret long-term because of the ongoing risk from a known abuser. It is therefore vital that research does not risk safety by exposing the secrets – so interviewed individuals may not want to disclose where they left the abuse, where they have been on their journey, or what their next plans may be in terms of location.

A key part of my research has therefore been to use administrative data; but these were only available for a period of eight years of a [funding programme for services](#) in England. There are [challenges and opportunities in using such data](#), but they showed more than 140,000 women (over half accompanied by children), relocating to access support due to domestic violence. It was worth the work of applying to use the data under special licence, to process the data to enable the location analysis, and to begin to uncover (safely) the previously hidden journeys of forced displacement.



Flow map of one year of women's journeys to access services in England due to domestic violence ©Janet Bowstead

The map shows just one year of the woman-journeys ($n=9,276$) across local authority boundaries to access services in England; so not including the shorter journeys ($n=8,227$) of residential displacement within an administrative area. The extent and numbers are striking, but the pattern of spatial churn – from everywhere to everywhere – further clarifies the under-recognition of the extent. There is no net effect and no strong flows: no North to South trend, or rural to urban trend; and there is no distinctive London effect on the rest of the country. Three-

quarters of London journeys stay within London; and London, like all major cities, experienced net leaving due to domestic abuse.

Most local authorities had around the same numbers arriving as had left due to domestic violence, so, at the scale of the country – England – the net effect is that there is hardly any overall displacement. But at the scale of individual women's and children's lives, there is the enormous displacement and losses of often multi-stage journeys and ongoing precarity of home, work, education, and social and cultural connections.

And this is a country that claims that it has no IDPs, and only a few hundred people [internally displaced](#) by disaster events.

Interestingly, the numbers per year bear comparison with the number of asylum seekers, though the issues are not engaged with politically, in the media, or in terms of funding in the same way. Around the same period as when there were 17,503 women, with 16,282 children, relocating and accessing formal support services in England in a year due to escaping domestic violence (i.e. 33,785 IDP journeys), there were 17,524 asylum seekers [provided with dispersed accommodation](#) in England.

Looking at women's domestic violence help-seeking through the lens of displacement reveals the hidden extent; and highlights the significant impact on individuals and society of all that forced relocation.

But what does such reframing do?

It does not have an immediate effect in terms of rights: being internally displaced is not a [legal status](#). As the Handbook on the Guiding Principles points out:

“Unlike refugees, the internally displaced have not left the country whose citizens they normally are. As such, they remain entitled to

the same rights that all other persons in their country enjoy. They do, however, have special needs by virtue of their displacement.”

But it does call into question the response – from state and services – to such needs. It widens the focus beyond individualised welfare responses to put the state in the spotlight as responsible for minimising the harms and investing in the resettlement of women and children displaced within its borders.

If a country like the UK can under-recognise the experiences of tens of thousands of displaced women and children – IDPs due to the human rights violation of violence against women – what does that say about women’s citizenship in countries of the Global North? And would using the lens of internal displacement focus minds and actions on more just, effective, and rights-based responses?

Dr Janet C. Bowstead has a professional background in frontline, policy, and coordination work on violence against women. Her academic research is interdisciplinary in nature, across geography, social policy and sociology; integrating quantitative, spatial, qualitative and creative participatory methods. She has research articles in journals in geography and wider social sciences and social policy. Her research draws on theory, concepts and analysis techniques from migration research and applies them to the internal migration journeys of women within the UK escaping domestic violence (<https://www.womensjourneyscapes.net/>).