

## Environmental Migration: A Gendered Sociological View

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### Abstract

Environmental migration is an increasingly critical global issue, shaped not only by ecological disruptions but also by deeply entrenched social structures and power dynamics. This paper adopts a gendered sociological lens to examine how environmental changes disproportionately affect men and women, influencing their migration decisions, experiences, and vulnerabilities. Drawing on feminist theory, intersectionality, and environmental sociology, the study explores the roles of gender norms, labor divisions, and access to resources in shaping migratory responses to climate-induced stressors such as droughts, floods, and sea-level rise. It further investigates how displacement amplifies pre-existing gender inequalities, often marginalizing women in both origin and destination contexts. Through a review of empirical studies and sociological frameworks, the paper highlights the urgent need for gender-sensitive policies that recognize women not merely as victims but also as agents of resilience and adaptation. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more inclusive understanding of environmental migration, advocating for intersectional approaches in policy and practice.

### Introduction

Human migration is intricate and diverse, but climate disasters are increasingly causing more internal displacement than political conflicts. The UN predicts that by 2050, climate change will force 150 million or more individuals to migrate due to severe weather and gradual events like rising sea levels, flooding, water and soil salinity, (Crane, 2018; Haider, 2019) and crop failures (Roy et al., 2018) are all environmental issues that are increasingly prevalent due to climate change effects in Bangladesh, one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world (Ahsan, 2014). These factors push people to move seasonally or permanently to the larger urban areas (Mayers, 2002; Gray & Mueller, 2012). Several studies show that an important portion of the slum dwellers come from environmentally degraded areas, left following a disaster or moved to Dhaka due to the impacts of climate change (Swapanal et al., 2017; McNamara et al., 2015; Ayeb-Karlsson, 2016). The IPCC forecasts

that numerous individuals will move due to coastal flooding, erosion, desertification, and agricultural losses. Migration is influenced by gender, with distinct patterns emerging for men and women at every stage (pre-departure, transit, arrival, stay, and return). Nevertheless, the IOM states that climate change does not directly instigate migration but exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, making survival in their home regions difficult. As a result, people flee their regions under highly intricate circumstances. Furthermore, while the impacts of climate change are detrimental worldwide, they primarily affect marginalized and disadvantaged groups within many societies (such as women, the elderly, migrants, and Indigenous communities) who are most at risk due to their high level of vulnerability influenced by discriminatory social processes. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), which states that, in year 2021, some 1900 natural or climate-related disasters generated 23.7 million displacements in 141 countries and territories. This is the highest number recorded since 2012, exceeding the number of displacements due to conflict and violence by three times. In year 2022, disasters caused as many as 32.6 million internal displacements worldwide.

Consequently, the most affected sectors of the population are also at risk, even before climate-related effects. Climate impacts introduce new challenges to society, with climate change shaping, governing, and influencing all forms of human movement: from the decision to leave to the conditions of transit and the ability to return. Additionally, the state of multidimensional inequality and insecurity exists throughout the migration journey. It is particularly hazardous for migrant women and girls, who make up 80% of all climate-displaced individuals. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Gender and Climate Alliance. The UNDP emphasizes that "Climate change is not gender neutral." Women's responses to the global climate crisis are influenced by societal and community expectations and roles that are shaped not only by gender but by additional social identifiers such as age, location, class, sexual orientation, and religious identity. However, in general, existing strategies and legal frameworks do not adequately address or protect the unique situations of women migrants, perpetuating inequalities, ongoing liabilities, and a lack of protection.

This operational vulnerability increases when women and girls become 'environmental migrants.' This paper examines the various challenges and uncertainties faced by women and girls around the world.

## **Research Methodology**

This research study aims to explore the specific challenges encountered by women and girls who are classified as environmental migrants. The following objectives guide the research: it investigates significant concepts and terminology related to environmental migration. The article also analyzes the various stages of environmental migration's adverse effects on women and girls. Additionally, it seeks to assess feasible and practical policy recommendations to address the challenges they face due to this phenomenon. The study includes inquiries into existing literature on environmental migration, such as research papers, reviews, reports, and articles published across various journals.

## **Operational Definitions**

The International Organisation for Migration utilizes different terms when discussing migration influenced by environmental factors.

- Environmental migration refers to the movement of individuals or groups compelled to leave their usual place of residence, either temporarily or permanently, as a result of significant environmental changes that negatively affect their living conditions, which may involve relocation within or outside their country of origin or habitual residence
- Climate migration is a subset of environmental migration; it denotes a specific type of environmental migration where the environmental changes are attributed to climate change.
- Disaster displacement refers to situations in which individuals are forced to vacate their regular residences to escape the impacts of natural hazards. This displacement may occur as an unplanned evacuation initiated by authorities, and it can happen either within a country or across national borders.

## **Detrimental Impacts**

Women and girls play a vital role in the protection of the environment and the development and well-being of their communities and nations. Environmental migration disproportionately affects women and gender-diverse groups due to existing structural inequalities, gender norms, and intersecting vulnerabilities. Sociological perspectives examine how patriarchal systems, power imbalances, and social institutions exacerbate these impacts. Women often lack decision-making power in the migration process and may be left behind during male-

dominated migratory movements, becoming “trapped populations.” Trapped populations are those “who do not migrate, yet are situated in areas under threat, at risk of becoming ‘trapped’ or having to stay behind, where they will be more vulnerable to environmental shocks and impoverishment. The notion of trapped populations applies in particular to poorer households who may not have the resources to move and whose livelihoods are affected” (IOM, 2019). When women do migrate, they frequently face greater insecurity, including exploitation and limited access to resources and gendered based violence (GBV), sexual harassment and human trafficking increase significantly. When women do migrate, they frequently face greater insecurity, including exploitation and limited access to resources and gendered based violence (GBV), sexual harassment, and human trafficking increase significantly. Displacement often breaks down traditional protection systems, leaving women and girls more vulnerable. Displacement often breaks down traditional protection systems, leaving women and girls more vulnerable. Female environmental migrants often faced economic insecurity and labor exploitation like, work in low-paid, informal, or domestic sectors without labor protections. They are excluded from access to land, credit, and property—critical resources for adaptation. Environmental displacement increases stress, trauma, and anxiety—especially for women juggling survival, caregiving, and emotional labor. Lack of access to mental health care worsens the situation in displacement zones. A study conducted in Nepal in 2015 found that witnessing earthquakes heightened the likelihood of mental health disorders. Displacement often leads to erosion of traditional roles and practices, particularly among indigenous and rural women. Migrant women may experience a double alienation—from their homeland and within unfamiliar patriarchal structures in host communities. Displaced women are often excluded from formal adaptation and decision-making processes, including resettlement planning. Their needs and voices are underrepresented in climate policy and migration governance. Women and girls contribute significantly to the well-being and development of their communities and countries, as well as to the conservation of the environment. However, the often overlooked or undervalued links between women and the environment, especially in relation to land, water and biodiversity conservation and management, together with persistent hetero patriarchal power dynamics- which exclude women from decision-making processes- have prevented the proper integration of a gender perspective into policies and legal standards for environmental protection. According to UNESCO evaluations, 781 million individuals age 15 and older,

with nearly two-thirds being women, lack education, while access to information and education through relevant communication channels is crucial for ensuring women's empowerment, particularly during crises. When water and sanitation initiatives are being negotiated, women and girls encounter numerous health and safety threats. They also disproportionately shoulder caregiving and household responsibilities when resources are scarce or hard to obtain during emergencies. The responsibility of caring for children, the elderly, and the sick often falls unequally on women and girls. As a result of spending more time supporting their mothers in managing an increased workload, girls are more likely to leave school. This burden during crises, such as those that may occur after a disaster, can impose a significant psychological toll on them. Consequently, the needs of women and girls in a context of climate change are magnified by inequalities and discriminatory social and cultural norms, which prevent them from having equal access to financial services, infrastructure, comprehensive health services-including sexual and reproductive rights-water supply, ownership of land and other assets, and enjoying a safe environment. These barriers prevent them from learning and applying their knowledge and skills, from receiving equal pay for equal work, and from participating in the political, community and household decision-making processes that affect their lives and taking leadership roles in public life. For example, during the 2004 Asian tsunami (70% of the victims were women), many women and children were trapped in their homes, while most men were outside. Cultural and religious norms about respective gender roles sometimes limit women's ability to make quick decisions in disaster situations and, in some cases, the clothes they wear and/or their childcare responsibilities may hinder their mobility in times of emergency. Economic and social disparities and access to productive resources increase climate vulnerabilities, which in turn fuel other discriminatory vulnerabilities, conditioning the ability to migrate. The legal frameworks do not adequately address either climate migration or the differential situation of women in these contexts determined by climate change impacts. This is largely due to the lack of women's participation, at least on equal terms and representing diversity, especially from the Global South, in national and international decision-making fora. In contexts where climate change impacts force people to flee, women, and especially those in situations of poverty and exclusion, are the most likely to be "trapped" by circumstances. In addition to higher mortality and a greater likelihood of suffering assaults and other forms of sexual violence, women tend to be excluded from the post-disaster rehabilitation and reconstruction

phases, which increases their marginalisation and vulnerability. Those who stay behind too often face further discrimination for being part of a female-headed household rather than a male-headed household. Added to this is the discrimination they still suffer in many countries due to the registration and inheritance rules in favour of men as heads of household and owners, which represent an additional obstacle for women to exercise their rights inherent to legal personality and to recover ownership and possession of the family property when the men on whom they depend have died or disappeared in the disaster. When there is an opportunity to flee the consequences of disasters, women and girls in transit migration face a situation of ongoing risk, insecurity and violence, which is replicated for all of them, regardless of the reasons for their displacement.

Numerous studies have pointed out that local authorities frequently overlook vital sanitation facilities and maternal health services for climate migrants. Climate migrants face challenges in accessing relief resources, coupled with a lack of resource allocation at the household level, which hinders their ability to obtain sexual and reproductive health care. The necessity of forced relocation and resettlement into a new environment influences individuals' comprehension of the health systems and services available in the new community, as well as their access to other support networks. The limited access to relief resources and the lack of control over resource distribution within households significantly impact the pursuit of sexual and reproductive health care.

## Recommendations

Policy adjustments are necessary to address the challenges faced by women migrants, which include:

- Provide economic support for women, as well as implement gender-responsive adaptation and mitigation strategies that recognize the needs of climate migrants.
- Enhancing health systems in various communities and countries involves integrating a broader spectrum of care services, such as support for menstrual health and mental health services, alongside improving infrastructure related to both physical and human resources. Endorsed strategies to mitigate the health effects of climate migration include planning for disasters ahead of time, engaging communities in discussions before resettlement occurs, establishing health schemes focused on migrants that

prioritize access to healthcare facilities, and fostering collaboration among various agencies and government entities.

- For instance, a gender-sensitive initiative aimed at enhancing climate resilience in Bolivia not only empowered women to take on decision-making roles but also developed long-term capacity by leveraging their knowledge and skills within the program.
- This encompasses community-driven participatory programs like women's groups and emergency transportation or care initiatives that offer support or service delivery.
- It is essential to enhance both the volume and the quality of empirical evidence regarding the impact of climate migration on women. Gathering, analyzing, and regularly distributing sex- and age-disaggregated data is necessary to gain a clearer understanding of migration trends and to create more effective policies.

## Conclusion

This article examined the obstacles encountered by women climate migrants, focusing on sanitation, economic conditions, legal issues, and reproductive rights. It highlights the critical challenges faced by women both before and after environmental disasters. Numerous studies emphasize the significance of involving stakeholders and participants at all levels, especially the women directly affected, in the development and implementation of solutions. The challenges faced by women climate migrants cannot be resolved within a specific timeframe; rather, they require ongoing efforts over time through effective partnerships among all countries and levels to improve the conditions for women migrants. It is essential to prioritize achieving sustainable development goals concerning women climate migrants to foster inclusive development across all levels.

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