

Gender & climate-induced migration

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Why should we talk more about climate justice and gender justice?

The climate crisis affects millions of people worldwide. However, not everyone feels its effects equally. The main causes of global heating are the burning of fossil fuels and our current economic system, which is based on the exploitation of nature and people. People in the Global South and young people have not contributed as much to these causes, but they have to live with and deal with the effects. Climate justice means that richer countries, i.e. those who have been causing the problems, take responsibility. In concrete terms: reducing emissions, building an economic system that is socially just for all, promoting and demanding adaptation measures, and paying for climate-related loss and damage, among others.

Gender justice means the achievement of full equality and equity between different genders with the same access to rights as well as opportunities for (political) participation. It also includes dismantling power relations. Women* are hit by the impacts of the climate crisis particularly hard. For example, women* are the ones who often work in climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture. They often live in unequal power relations that result in less access to education and fewer resources and land available for women* and girls*. In the event of a (climate) disaster, it is often women* and girls who are left behind to care for family members. When climate policy decisions are made, women* are often not included, which in turn leads to policies that do not sufficiently address the needs of women*.

The climate-related loss of livelihoods tends to aggravate gendered power relations. Likewise, gender equality improves the agency of women*; their resilience and ability to act. Thus, no climate justice without gender justice!

Climate induced migration explained

While a direct link between the climate crisis and migration decisions might not always be evident, research shows that the climate crisis acts as an exacerbating factor for pre-existing vulnerabilities that often lead to migration. Climate induced migration is highly complex and context specific, migration decisions are multicausal. There are variations among countries and regions, making it challenging to draw overarching conclusions. Nevertheless, recurrent patterns emerge including that it refers mostly to internal migration or migration to neighboring countries; often, but not exclusively non-voluntary / forced in nature, with a prevailing desire among individuals to return. Gender dynamics also frequently intersect with climate mobilities. (Climate) Migration is often portrayed as negative by media and right-wing politicians. Though, for many, it stands as a successful adaptation strategy that can save lives.

Two primary drivers underpin human migration due to climate factors: slow-onset events and rapid-onset events. Slow-onset events include droughts, sea level rise, and desertification, resulting in loss of livelihoods over time. In contrast, rapid-onset events, for example hurricanes or flooding, necessitate immediate relocation. Even though climate related events like droughts and hurricanes



"Vive les femmes!"

Ndeye Yacine Dieng, a women's rights and climate activist, Senegal

Photo © Isabella Szukits

have existed for a long time, it is undeniable that the effects of the human-made climate crisis have led to more climate catastrophes in frequency and intensity.

In discussions about climate-induced migration, addressing immobility becomes essential, i.e. focusing on people who cannot relocate. Migration requires resources, which are unavailable to a significant portion of the population. Staying behind without resources means even more exposure and fewer opportunities to adapt in case of climate disasters.

While countries from the Global North are mainly responsible for the current situation, politics have been characterized by restrictive migration policies. The focus has been rather on border control than on saving lives and implementing human rights for all.

Gender aspects and climate mobilities

The relationship between climate, migration, and gender is intricate and multi-faceted, involving a range of factors and intersections. Rather than a straightforward causal explanation, this connection is shaped by various influences that must be considered together. Gender, for instance, cannot

be examined in isolation; it interacts with other aspects like race, class, age, disabilities or ethnicity. These intersections have been socially produced and reproduced over time within societies.

Research has often focused on the binary categorization of men and women, resulting in data and statistics that primarily recognize this binary division. Additionally, mobility patterns have frequently been limited to their physical interpretation, ignoring their broader social, and existential implications.

Migration doesn't occur in a vacuum; it unfolds within societal contexts, and gendered dynamics are inherent to societies. This means that gender plays a role in shaping migration patterns including socio-economic and political factors such as poverty, discrimination, violence, and inequality, factors that are inherently intertwined with gender. Moreover, the physical spaces are influenced by gender norms. Spaces women* and men* can occupy affects the range of opportunities available to them. However, it's important to view gender not merely as a measurable variable, but as a framework of social relations that both organize and are influenced by mobility patterns.

The climate crisis acts as a threat multiplier, exacerbating existing challenges and even contributing to the emergence of conflicts. Research suggests that individuals dealing with climate variability might exhibit greater support for violent actions. While the link that the effects of the climate crisis directly lead to more conflict is moderate, the reverse relationship, i.e. climate vulnerability in times of conflict, is highly relevant. In this context, women*, who often engage in caregiving roles rather than combat, face particularly daunting challenges. Moreover, adaptation during war or conflict becomes much more difficult.

It's essential to emphasize that women* are not a homogenous group. Women* in the Global South are frequently portrayed as vulnerable and disadvantaged. However, they are far from being a uniform entity; they are diverse and, most importantly, play a crucial role in adapting to climate variations and driving solutions.

At the CSW67 (2023) women from Fiji shared their situation from the forefront of climate disasters. They claimed that some women* are at home, cooking and caring for the community and some are involved in immediate disaster response. Being at different locations, they try to stay connected, which is often difficult due to a lack of energy, telecommunication or internet service. "You can scream in order to help each other", one of them said. More access to information about flooding and weather conditions would also help them as they could keep their children at home in case of a warning. At the moment there are high death rates due to drowning as the window to react in case of emergency is very small. The group of women* at CSW called for education and training on technologies, but also for knowledge on how to act in case of harassment as well as knowledge and scope of action about legislative rights and policies.*

Who moves

The act of migration itself carries gendered implications. Women's* (in)ability to move is influenced by factors extending beyond physical barriers. Societal norms and expectations place a higher value on their caregiving roles, restraining them to specific spaces and roles. This results in a cycle where women's* limited mobility becomes both a cause and a consequence of their gender-defined societal roles.

While men* often migrate to urban areas in pursuit of opportunities, women* remain at their location, shouldering a growing burden of responsibilities. These responsibilities encompass a wide array of tasks, including agricultural labor, water management, and household chores.

Even though there are significant regional differences across the globe, UN data indicates that globally, women* account for almost half (48,1%) of global migrants and have been doing so for almost 60 years. While international data needs to be treated carefully in the context of migration, the numbers show a tendency, highlighting that it is not only men* who migrate. Their destinations may vary, according to gender-specific labor market opportunities or limitations in the available means for migration.

Exploring the root causes of vulnerabilities in the face of climate crisis

Recent research suggests a shift in perspective regarding vulnerabilities related to gender in the context of the climate crisis. Rather than solely examining the direct effects of climate on gendered vulnerabilities, emphasis should be placed on comprehending the dynamic nature of vulnerabilities. Women* are not vulnerable because they are women*, but because of constructed patriarchal power structures that they often live within.

These power structures result in restricted access to essential resources and public services, limited educational opportunities, and constraints on owning land. Women* typically possess fewer businesses, encounter challenges in formal employment, and encounter barriers in accessing credit and financial resources compared to men*.

A significant portion of unpaid care work falls upon women* within families. These responsibilities encompass tasks such as procuring water and food, duties that become increasingly burdensome in climate-vulnerable areas where resources are scarce. The existing gendered division of labor further exacerbates the challenges faced by women*.

Navigating on migration routes: Challenges women* face

When women* embark on migration journeys, they encounter a distinct set of vulnerabilities that must be understood and addressed. These vulnerabilities often arise from various intersections including gender, age, disability, ethnicity or race among others and their status as migrants.

Women* on migration routes frequently face heightened risks to their safety and well-being. They are susceptible to various forms of violence, exploitation, and abuse, including human trafficking, sexual harassment, and forced labor. Additionally, inadequate access to sanitation facilities, hygiene products, sexual and reproductive as well as general healthcare services further deteriorate their situation.

A case study about Guatemala and climate mobilities from 2022 shows that the impact of natural disasters disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, including the elderly, women (particularly indigenous women), children, and those residing in impoverished rural regions. Moreover, it has been reported that six out of ten women who migrate experience rape during their journey, with girls traveling alone and LGBTQI+ individuals being at a heightened risk of human trafficking.

(University of Bologna: Beyond Panic? 2022)

For women* traveling with children or as primary caregivers, migration brings forth additional challenges. Balancing the responsibilities of parenting and caregiving within the confines of migration contexts strains their physical and emotional well-being. Lack of adequate childcare facilities and support mechanisms compounds their situation.

Migration routes often lack gender-sensitive services and resources. Women* frequently encounter barriers to accessing shelter, food, healthcare, and legal assistance tailored to their specific needs. This unequal access not only heightens their vulnerabilities but perpetuates cycles of disadvantage.

Recognizing Women's* Role as Agents of Change in Climate Discourse

Women* have often been portrayed as victims of the climate crisis within political discourse and broader narratives, overshadowing their crucial role as agents of change. Nevertheless, women* hold a pivotal position in adaptation strategies and decisions related to migration. They play a crucial role in disaster response and their ability and strength are often the reason for the families' survival.

Because of the patriarchal system we live in, women* mostly do not have the same possibilities to participate in decision making processes compared to men. However, research indicates that when women* are involved, it results in more climate friendly politics. Several theories shed light on this phenomenon:

- Women* are more exposed to climate crisis impacts, including displacement.
- Societal norms have promoted women* and girls to be sensitive and caregiving.
- Societal toxic masculinity can discourage men* from participating in environmental care. This happens because taking care of the environment may be perceived as "unmanly" within their societal roles.
- Women's* experience with oppression fosters a connection to the exploitation of nature and the planet, heightening their awareness of its perils.
- Men* may benefit from the existing economic system, potentially reducing their motivation for transformative change.

When examining the relations off women's rights*, climate, and migration, adopting a decolonial lens is imperative. We need to refrain from portraying women* solely as powerless victims and acknowledging their agency for change. Furthermore, it also means understanding the power structures and power dynamics between the Global North and the Global South and recognizing that this situation did not come to exist naturally, but is part of a global system that favors a privileged few.

Conclusion

This paper shows that the climate crisis impacts people differently and calls for climate and gender justice. It aims to give an introduction to the complex relation between climate, migration and gender and has no claim to provide one universal and all-encompassing perspective of the topic.

The climate crisis hits societies that are shaped by gendered power relations meaning that women* and girls often face different challenges when it comes to adaptation and climate induced migration. Gender aspects of climate mobilities are complex and have various intersections like class, race, age, ethnicity or disabilities that have been produced and reproduced by societies.

In order to understand these gendered aspects and intersections, research suggests to emphasize on the patriarchal power structures that lead to gendered vulnerabilities. These power structures result in limited access to public services, fewer educational opportunities, less property and formal employment among others.

Not only do women* and girls face particular challenges when staying at their location during climate disasters and taking care of children and elderly, they also deal with specific issues on migration routes

with higher risks to their safety and well-being. Violence and exploitation, insufficient hygiene products or a lack of reproductive healthcare services are only some examples.

In the discourse of gender and climate induced migration it is important to highlight that women* are agents of change. They come up with solutions when facing direct threats and difficult situations. They are often the ones who ensure the family's survival. Moreover, when having the opportunity to participate in decision making processes, results are often more climate friendly and inclusive.

Research shows that studies as well as public funds on gender, climate and mobilities are rare. Thus, we need more funding and attention for this specific nexus. Concrete conclusions about gender and climate induced migration should be context specific and should be based on gender analyses and apply an intersectional lens. The focus should be both an empowerment and a decolonial approach where women* participate and are not talked about but talked with.

In order to protect people when facing climate disasters, a legal framework for protection is needed. At the moment there are no sufficient global instruments that do justice to the people who are affected by the climate crisis, but have not contributed to the problem. Firstly, there is a need for resources, i.e. the global community needs to provide money for mitigation, adaptation and losses and damages. This climate finance needs to be gender sensitive, involve women* on the ground and address their needs. Secondly, a knowledge transfer can help to strengthen peoples' capacities, countries' resilience and improve the conditions in places relevant for migratory movements. When implementing projects, social and gender experts should be a crucial part of the planning and implementation phases. Lastly, we need laws and regulations that center people and the planet. This includes a wellbeing economy where companies are held accountable for applying human rights and protecting our environment. It also means human rights based global migration politics that allow for an intersectional approach to protect people. All these measures should prevent the loss of livelihoods and enable all people to live a self-determined and good life.

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