

Feminist Foreign Policy and Climate-Induced Migration

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A Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy Briefing

The Issue

Climate change due to global warming represents one of the greatest challenges to humankind today. While industrialised countries and multinational corporations are largely responsible for the current climate crisis, the effects of climate change are felt most severely by people who contribute the least to the acceleration of global warming: communities in the Global South and low-income communities in the industrialised North (Lama, Hamza and Wester, M., 2020).

As sea levels and temperatures rise, governments around the world will face colossal and unprecedented human displacement. Currently, international law has no system to address this (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021).

Estimates of the acceleration and scope of migration related to climate change provide cause for concern. Today, more than 2 billion people globally face uncertain access to sufficient food for a healthy life (Ecowatch, 2020). This number is likely to increase to 3.5 billion by 2050 (Vision of Humanity, 2020). This and other environmental effects of climate change will make it difficult or impossible for people to survive where they are. Most experts agree that more than one billion people worldwide will live in countries with inadequate infrastructure to withstand climate change by 2050 (ibid).

Climate-induced migrants will inevitably encounter a refugee system governed by a decades-old Refugee Convention if substantial changes are not made immediately (Tudor, 2014). The current international system offers neither basic protections nor the right to resettle in habitable places (Vision of Humanity, 2020). While the Paris Agreement of December 2015 brought global leaders together in an ambitious climate change treaty, the Agreement fails to address climate displacement and migration (UNFCCC, 2021).

All solutions to this crisis should have the same goal: to give those displaced by climate change greater agency to choose how and when to move on their own terms, and with as much protection and respect as possible.

Background & Challenges with Defining Climate-Induced Migration

Migration is one means of adapting to climatic and environmental hardships. The International Organization for Migration (a leading inter-governmental organization working to address challenges associated with migration), defines environmental migrants to be:

Persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affects their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad. (IOM, 2007)

Environmental migration is increasing over time as climate change alters existing migration patterns and increases the overall volume of human migration. Migration as a means of adapting to climate change presents multiple challenges to those migrating, as well as to the global community in supporting migrants. First, climate migration can be a difficult concept to define. This is because the displacement of peoples can be (and usually is), the product of a number of interrelated factors, including economic, social, political, demographic, and environmental factors (Johnson & Wilkinson, 2020). Consequently, it can be difficult to determine causation and attribute migration directly to environmental harms, a problem that has hindered the development of scientific studies and responsive legal frameworks (UNFCCC, 1992).

Second, the ways various cultures and subsets of society adapt to climate change will vary dramatically. Climate-induced migration does not occur as a single, uniform event. Rather the movement of people varies in terms of distance, speed, duration, and scale (IOM, 2009). For example, there are differences in the way cisgender, nonbinary, and transgender people are affected by extreme weather events and the ways in which they adapt to climate change (Ukas Rottinger, 2015). The social, cultural and political context may impact the personal safety, economic opportunities and health provisions available, if there are prejudices and assumptions around identity and gender. Therefore, solutions and responses to climate-induced migration must possess the capacity to meet the varied demands of the affected communities.

Mass relocation of people has historically led to significant cultural, economic, and psychological harms (Martin, 2013; Warner, 2009; Johnson, 2012; Perch-Nielson, 2008). So migration (especially international migration), will often serve as a means of last resort for people affected by environmental hardships (Vision of Humanity, 2020). While the term migration generally implies a certain level of agency, environmental migration will, for many, be motivated by insurmountable, adverse circumstances rather than desire or individual autonomy.

Slow-Onset and Rapid-Onset Climate Impacts

Understanding how people move in response to climate change is multifaceted, but most impacts fall into one of two categories: **slow-onset changes** and **rapid-onset changes** (Schilling, Akuno, Scheffran & Weinzier, 2014).

Slow-onset climate change impacts are varied, including the gradual spread of diseases (Xiaoxu Wu et al, 2016), shifting water availability (Environmental Protection Agency, 2019), changes in farming seasons, and a variety of problems created by sea-level rise (Neumann et al, 2015). Slow-onset changes include gradual shifts that happen over time as temperatures increase and sea levels rise (Sonenshine, 2018). As species migrate to higher elevations or northern landscapes, diseases spread.

As sea levels rise, coastal erosion and thinning ice continue to change hunting and fishing patterns (Huntington, Quakenbush & Nelson, 2016).

Conversely, **rapid-onset climate impacts** are changes based on natural disasters or environmental tipping points. For example, the hurricanes that have increased in frequency and intensity, devastating the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts in the United States (Fountain, 2020). While natural disasters have occurred for millennia, climate change increases both the intensity and frequency of such disasters (van Aalst, 2006).

International Immigration Law

The current system of international immigration law is not equipped to protect climate-induced migrants, as there are no legally binding agreements obliging countries to support climate migrants. While climate-induced migrants fleeing unbearable conditions resemble refugees, the legal protections afforded to refugees do not extend to this group.

One major challenge in using immigration-focused frameworks lies in distinguishing between forced and voluntary migration. Most international legal frameworks tend to draw a line between those who exercise agency in their choice to migrate and those who migrate as a result of forces outside their control (Johnson, 2012).

The forced nature of climate-induced migration led many scholars to consider the issue in terms of refugee status, coining the term "environmental refugee" in the 1990s (Martin, 2010). If refugee-related frameworks are designed to assist those individuals experiencing forced migration, then environmental migrants should be protected under those same principles (Mayer, 2016). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has explicitly drawn this parallel in publications relating to climate change management (UNHCR, 1998) but it has thus far refused to grant these people refugee status, instead designating them as "environmental migrants," in large part because it lacks the resources to address their needs (Podesta, 2021).

The term refugee represents a rigidly defined concept, which has not been understood to encompass environmental migrants. The term is defined in the 1951 Refugee Convention ("The Convention", General Assembly Resolution 429, 1951). Unlike international immigration law where no single body has been tasked with the development and implementation of the law, the UNHCR is recognised as the institution responsible for implementing international refugee law and policy (Manou et al, 2017). Although state parties hold obligations under The Convention, they have narrowly defined the term to limit individual state responsibility under The Convention.

The Convention defines a refugee to be someone who, "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country" (General Assembly Resolution 429, 1951).

One can split the definition into three parts: first, the individual must have a well-founded fear of persecution; second, the individual must be outside her country of origin; and third, the individual must be unwilling or unable to avail herself of the protection of her home country.

The first requirement - that an individual possess a well-founded fear of persecution - presents the most significant challenge for climate-induced migrants seeking refugee status (General Assembly Resolution 217, 1948). Here, the term "persecution" generally requires the individual to face an infliction of harm at the hands of another person (US Department of Justice, 1985). The impacts of climate change are typically

too indirect and broad to be attributable to one person or group of people; thereby, excluding many climate-induced migrants from the benefits of refugee status.

The second requirement – that an individual is outside her state of origin – can also present a challenge for some climate-induced migrants seeking refugee status. More often than not, displaced people move within state borders. Refugee status offers no protections to these internal migrants.

The third requirement – that an individual must be unwilling or unable to avail herself of the protection of her home country – may easily be met in states which have not yet created programmes or support frameworks for people experiencing loss or harm due to climate change.

International immigration frameworks, including The Convention, don't acknowledge the vast majority of climate-induced migrants. As severe climate change displaces more people, the international community may be forced to either redefine "refugee" to include climate migrants or create a new legal category and accompanying institutional framework to protect this growing group of people.

Case Study – Climate-Induced Migration in Bangladesh

As mentioned above, the effects of climate change are felt most acutely by people who contribute the least to the acceleration of global warming. This includes communities in the Global South and low-income communities in the industrialised North. Bangladesh is widely recognised as one of the most vulnerable countries to the impacts of global warming and climate change (Ahsan et al, 2014). This is due to its unique geographic location, low elevation from the sea, dominance of floodplains, and high population density (McDonnell., 2021). The country has a history of extreme weather events claiming millions of lives. Variability in rainfall pattern, combined with increased snow melt from the Himalayas, and temperature extremes are resulting in crop damage and failure, preventing farmers and those dependent from meaningful earning opportunities (UN, 2019). The climate change in Bangladesh has created, and will continue to create insecurities for food, water, property, settlement, and livelihoods (Cohen et al, 2021). The consequence will likely involve a mass relocation of people not only within the country but also into neighboring countries (Deutsche Welle, 2019).

Over the last decade, 700,000 Bangladeshis were displaced on average each year by natural disasters, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC. 2021). That number spikes in years with catastrophic cyclones, like 2009's Cyclone Aila, which displaced millions of people and killed more than 200 (Paul, 2009). The number of Bangladeshis displaced by the varied impacts of climate change could reach 13.3 million by 2050, making it the country's number-one contributing factor to internal migration, according to a March 2018 World Bank report (Rigaud et al, 2018).

Due to the unique qualities and vulnerabilities of Bangladesh, many researchers have studied the migration patterns following environmental changes and events. While poverty is often assumed as a triggering factor for migration, it can also play a significant role in limiting migration. The general trend of migration seen in Bangladesh showed that people decide to migrate as a last resort (Petrova, 2021). After the erosion of land and loss of homes due to mass flooding, scholars found 88% of migrant agricultural communities remain within two miles of their previous home (Haque & Zaman, 1989). Such rapid-onset disasters generally led to temporary displacement to nearby areas as people lacked adequate resources to move farther, and many returned and reconstructed their homes (Szczepanski et al, 2021). Movement was often short-term and occurred internally over short distances. Moving to cities often demands different skill sets, and more capital (Naser, 2013). International migration is not a likely option for those experiencing extreme poverty.

Case Study continued

The women of Bangladesh are among the first to face the impacts of climate change, and their suffering is disproportionate to their male counterparts. In the cyclone disaster of 1991, 90% of the 140,000 people who died in the country were women (Howe, 2021). Bangladeshi women have less access to land, resources and decision-making than men, and their wages are lower, making it harder to survive post-displacement (Environmental Justice Foundation, 2021). Furthermore, women who migrate are often at risk of trafficking. The Indian anti-trafficking organization Prerana reported a sharp increase in the number of women being trafficked from Bangladesh to Mumbai brothels after extreme weather events that lead to migration (Chandran, 2016).

A 2012 study following 1,500 Bangladeshi families migrating to cities, mainly Dhaka, showed that almost of all of them cited the changing environment as the primary reason for their decision (McPherson, 2015). Most of those arriving in Dhaka ended up in the urban slums around the periphery of the city, with only rudimentary housing conditions, very high population density and poor sanitation.

Those who migrate within the borders of Bangladesh are not likely to find support under the protections typically afforded to refugees. Bangladesh, like many other countries, has yet to provide any policies or systems that would support people who are displaced due to climate change (McDonnell, 2021). Despite facing some of the earliest and most extreme effects of climate change, people in vulnerable countries such as Bangladesh continue to face these challenges with little domestic or international support.

There is a clear gap in terms of international and domestic policies regarding both internal and external migration in the context of climate change, with few countries having policies in place to guide such migration. Next, we will offer some recommendations aiming to support these migrants and address the shortcomings of international law in this context.

Climate-Induced Migration is a Feminist Issue

Climate change developed in an inequitable world and is now exacerbating the vulnerabilities and inequalities experienced by women, particularly those who live in rural areas or the Global South and those who are Black, Indigenous, or other people of colour (Johnson & Wilkinson, 2020). The climate crisis grew out of a patriarchal system that is entangled with racism, white supremacy, and extractive capitalism. The unequal impacts of climate change only make it more difficult to achieve a gender-equal world.

Feminist theorists and advocates have long warned about the disproportionate effects of migration for women and non-binary people (Crenshaw, 1991). Women may experience extreme climatic events and the slow-onset impacts of climate change differently than their male counterparts. Women make up the majority of the world's poor and are responsible for most of the agricultural work and food production in many countries. This increases their personal and economic vulnerability to lost harvests, which result from changes in temperature, floods and droughts (Osman-Elasha, 2021). Since disasters disproportionately affect those already living in poverty (Fothergill, 2004), they have disproportionate effects on women across the globe and tend to leave poor women even more impoverished, especially when women's incomes are resource dependent (Enarson, 2001).

Internal and international migration may also be experienced differently based on gender. When climate change pushes people to new residential locations, access to and experiences in temporary and permanent housing will likely vary by gender. Bureaucratic procedures in government agencies, relief organisations, and insurance companies can further disadvantage those whose pre-disaster living arrangements do not meet narrow definitions of “family” or “household.” Women-headed households often face obstacles receiving aid from official relief programs that draw upon models of single headed households that privilege men (Morrow & Enarson, 1996).

Gender may determine some long-term consequences of climate-induced migration. Women usually have less control over the decision to migrate than men and this lack of agency when displaced from their homes, exacerbates the risks of human trafficking (Piacentini, 2017). Women, queer and non-binary asylum-seekers and refugees are subject to overt violence and systematic gender-based violence while in transit or during waiting periods where they are suspended without rights, status, citizenship, or support. In many accounts, abuse is perpetrated by state officials such as customs officers or law enforcement (Agius & Clark, 2019).

Even though the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) now formally recognises women's unique vulnerability to climate change, in many countries women are still excluded from the seats of power where decisions about environmental sustainability are made. For example, in the European Union it is estimated that women hold only about a quarter of climate change related decision-making positions. Today, countries like Sweden, Canada, France, and Mexico have formally adopted a Feminist Foreign Policy, yet none of them make explicit references to immigration nor address the specific and intersectional contexts that migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers come from. None of the existing FFP frameworks pay any attention to migration as Feminist Foreign Policy issue. This must change.

Key Recommendations

- Advocacy aimed towards mitigating the effects of climate change and supporting climate-induced migrants must be centered around the human rights of all migrants. Solutions must consider the various elements that could be limiting people's ability to migrate safely. Climate change adaptation and subsequent migration calls for comprehensive and feminist policymaking. The adaptation strategies should be designed in such a way that those strategies build the capacity of the people to cope with the adverse effects of climate change that prevents displacement. A feminist approach to migration reform must address the underlying conditions of inequality and insecurity that give rise to the need to flee to other countries. For many, those underlying conditions involve the effects of climate change.
- The policy responses need to address the vulnerabilities of the people who remain in the affected area in the face of adverse climatic impacts. As the effects of environmental events can never be totally eliminated, it is crucial to build the resilience of future communities through measures to enhance rural livelihoods and social protection.
- The international community must either expand the definition of “refugee” to include climate-induced migrants or create a new legal category and accompanying institutional framework to protect this growing group of people.
- All key national, regional and global processes and mechanisms on migration, as well as advocacy organisations and agencies, should focus on female migrants and recognise how gender affects migration experiences and outcomes.
- Wealthy nations should identify potential funding streams that could be used to relocate and support affected climate-induced migrants.

- International organisations should adopt frameworks to analyse the gendered dimensions of climate-induced migration and apply findings to new and existing areas of international immigration laws.
- Nations and organisations which heavily contribute to climate change must support the leadership of women, and indigenous women in particular, in the areas of climate change adaptation and mitigation. In particular, encourage the development of climate and gender specific projects with local communities in countries facing the greatest impacts of climate change.
- Policymakers must engage with civil society to better understand the experiences of migrants displaced due to climate change and collaborate on intersectional solutions.
- Individuals, organisations, and policymakers must shift the rhetoric from a fear of migrants and unregulated migration to one focused on the impact of investing in countries experiencing high levels of displacement and the facilitation of safe and sanctioned movement for those who need it most.
- Countries with Feminist Foreign Policies should incorporate immigration and climate change as feminist issues and establish frameworks to support climate-induced migrants.

Glossary

Climate Migration: the movement of a person or groups of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment due to climate change, are obliged to leave their habitual place of residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, within a State or across an international border (ICOM, 2016)

Climate Refugee/Environmental Refugee: there is still no official, recognised legal definition of either Climate Refugee or Environmental Refugee. The term “climate refugee” incorrectly suggests that people who fit the definition might be entitled to some kind of refugee status. There are several problems with this:

- The Refugee Convention specifies very clear things that people must be fleeing in order to gain refugee status. The impacts of climate change are currently not included on that list. Therefore, even if someone is described as a “climate refugee” it does not mean they would legally be in the same position as other refugees.
- Most climate-linked displacement will be internal. To be a refugee someone has to be outside their country of residence. As well as meeting other criteria, they must have crossed an international border. People who are forced to move within their country are Internally Displaced Persons. Given that climate change is likely to create internal movement, the term “climate refugee” can be misleading.

Disaster Displacement: Disaster displacement refers to situations where people are forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of a disaster or in order to avoid the impact of an immediate and foreseeable natural hazard. Such displacement results from the fact that affected persons are (i) exposed to (ii) a natural hazard in a situation where (iii) they are too vulnerable and lack the resilience to withstand the impacts of that hazard. **Cross-Border Disaster Displacement** refers to situations where people flee or are displaced across borders in the context of sudden- or slow-onset disasters, or in the context of the effects of climate change.

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