

BRIEF 13: A GENDER APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRATION

OUR KEY MESSAGES

- Environmental change and natural disasters affect men and women in different ways. Vulnerability to climate and environmental stressors is also shaped by gender roles and responsibilities.
- Gender is a key analytical tool when looking for adequate and durable responses to environmental migration that are mindful of differentiated gender needs and impacts.
- Gender roles and relations significantly affect women's and men's decisions to migrate for environmental reasons and experiences of migration.
- Gender-equality concerns must be integrated into international negotiations and agreements on climate change mitigation and adaptation, and environmental migration discussions more broadly, to ensure that policies are effective, fair and implementable on the ground, and that they do not exacerbate existing inequalities and vulnerabilities or create new ones.

KEY IOM RESOURCES

- [IOM Infosheet: Gender and Migration](#)
- [IOM Infosheet: Gender Focus in Emergency and Post-crisis](#)
- [IOM Infosheet: Rural Women and Migration \(2009\)](#)
- [Gender and Labour Migration in Asia \(2009\)](#)

It is increasingly acknowledged that gender is one of the most important factors shaping the migratory experience. Migration is inherently gendered – women and men tend to have different migration patterns at every stage of the migration cycle (pre-departure, transit, arrival, stay and return). The pressure to migrate, risk perception, priorities, strategies, destination choices, employment prospects, access to integration or reintegration activities also vary by gender.¹ Experience shows that migration can lead to shifts in gender roles, contribute to changing oppressive gender relations, and provide new opportunities to improve women's and men's lives.

However, it is important to underline that migration can also exacerbate existing inequalities between women and men, expose them to new vulnerabilities, and intensify gendered experiences of poverty, discrimination and socioeconomic inequality.² Gender is therefore critically relevant to most, if not all, aspects of migration and is a crucial factor in understanding the causes and consequences of migration.³

Decoding the nexus between migration, environment and gender

The gender dimension must be taken into account when considering the relationship between migration, environment and climate change. Environmental migration, like other types of migration, is indeed a gendered process:

1 Piper, N., 2005.

2 Jolly, S. and H. Reeves, 2005.

3 International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2009a.

vulnerabilities, experiences, needs and priorities of environmental migrants vary according to women's and men's different roles, responsibilities, access to information and resources, education, physical security, and employment opportunities.

While the linkages between migration, environment and climate change are now widely studied, discussions within public, policy and academic realms regarding environmental migration are often gender-neutral⁴ and few studies make the link between migration, environment and gender.

Why is it important to analyse environmental migration through the gender prism?

Cultural norms, gender roles and unequal migration policies may limit women's and men's ability to migrate: in some regions, women household members are more likely to migrate; in other regions, it is men who typically move.⁵ Migration can be a strategy in the event of imminent or acute natural disasters and can also represent a common coping or adaptation strategy where environmental degradation is not yet too severe.

Integrating considerations of gender into environmental migration analysis can help understand how the gender dimension influences the decisions of women and men affected by natural hazards or environmental degradation. Applying a gender analysis to environmental migration may lead to a more accurate understanding of this process and is also necessary to address the particular vulnerabilities, experiences, and needs of women and men migrants so that policies, programmes and projects can respond to gender-specific objectives.

Taking into account gender considerations in environmental migration management policies and programmes can help:

- Reduce vulnerability of populations exposed to environmental risk factors;

- Prevent forced migration due to environmental factors to the extent possible;
- Facilitate migration as an adaptation strategy to climate change;
- Tailor assistance to populations on the move as a result of environmental causes;
- Identify durable solutions adapted to differentiated gender needs.

Gender-blind policies run the risk of proposing inappropriate responses to climatic and environmental problems and are less likely to succeed. A gendered analysis is therefore crucial to developing and deploying responsive strategies that are effective and fair to both female and male environmental migrants, and that do not exacerbate existing gender inequalities or create new ones. Furthermore, comprehensive gender-sensitive considerations help assess the different impacts of policies and legislation on women and men, as part of different social groups, to ensure that actions do not exclude or harm other social groups.⁶

What are the gender differences in vulnerability to climate change?

Environmental migration is largely determined by people's exposure to environmental and climatic risks and their capacity to anticipate, cope with, adapt, and recover from the consequences of natural hazards and environmental degradation.

Overall, those who are economically, politically and socially marginalized within the communities affected by natural hazards and environmental degradation experience the impacts of climate change most acutely. They are also those who have the fewest opportunities to access information, to prepare for the impacts of climate change and to wilfully migrate, as migration requires economic capacities and social resources that are not available to everyone. Due to issues pertaining to opportunities and capabilities, the marginalized groups left behind in the face of natural disasters

4 Women's Environment and Development Organization, 2008.

5 The Philippines represents the largest exporter of female labour migrants throughout the world: in 2005, nearly 70 per cent of Filipino international migrants were females (IOM, 2004). In Mexico, the majority of the migrants are males and leave to work particularly in the United States (IOM, 2004).

6 Warner, K. et al., 2012.

and environmental crisis usually include the poor, the elderly, women, children, and/or minorities that face cultural or religious restrictions on their mobility.⁷

Gender is a crucial element in shaping vulnerability to climate change and influencing the subsequent probability of migration. If the link between poverty and vulnerability can be easily understood, the relationship between gender, vulnerability and probability of migration is more difficult to explain since it is shaped by other social, cultural, economic, ecological and political factors. A number of empirical studies investigating vulnerabilities to climate change from a gender perspective have shown that women are generally more exposed to environmental and climatic risks and more affected by their impacts due to specific gender roles and responsibilities that have been historically and socially assigned to them.⁸

Unequal gender distribution of roles and responsibilities and unequal access to resources may, indeed, make women more vulnerable than men to the impacts of climate change and natural disasters in both developed and developing countries.⁹ Data and experiences of current exposure to climate-related hazards suggest that, in most developing countries, because of a deeper economic and social gender divide, women often experience larger negative impacts of climate variability and change than men do¹⁰ as they tend to be poorer and less educated than men, to rely more on natural resources for their livelihood and to face social, economic, and political barriers that limit their coping and adaptive capacities.¹¹

Gendered power relations, cultural norms and values, together with the gendered division of labour, deeply affect and differentiate the adaptive capacity of women and men. For example, in some communities, cultural norms can restrict the freedom and/or movement of women, especially in the absence of an adult male relative, making it more difficult for women to seek help or shelter when disasters occur. This limited mobility also often means that women are less aware of the

information available during times of crisis or leading up to it.

It is also widely documented that gender powerfully shapes human responses to disaster, both directly and indirectly. Women are especially hard hit by the social impacts of natural disasters. Post-disaster mortality, injury and illness rates tend to be higher for women due to their limited and reduced mobility and their role in taking care of and looking after the health of family members.¹²

Although women are likely to be unequally at risk of loss and harm, disproportionately affected and less able to recover, experiences of powerlessness can leave men, like women, particularly vulnerable to climate change. Some evidence suggests that, in specific and particular situations, men can be more exposed to natural hazards, including secondary hazards related to emergency assistance, and that they might be less aware of risks and less ready to mobilize social capital to initiate a migratory movement.¹³

While in most cases addressing vulnerabilities based on gender involves promoting women's equality, it is important to adequately consider also men's vulnerabilities and integrate the gender dimension in disaster risk assessment, reduction and management.¹⁴ Indeed, both women and men have particular economic and social disadvantages that make them vulnerable to climate change, although their vulnerabilities are not always the same as they often interact with their physical environment in different ways.¹⁵

THEMATIC BOX: Looking at environmental migration from a gender perspective in Nepal and the Upper Indus Basin

The impacts of climate change vary widely across the world according to different environmental, economic, political, social and cultural contexts. People living in rural areas and relying on local natural resources and environment for subsistence and income will certainly feel these effects most intensely. In those regions, gender relations will shape differently the impacts of climate change and the varying responses of women and men to them.

7 Chindarkar, N., 2012.

8 Women's Environmental Network, 2010.

9 Masika, R., 2002.

10 Chindarkar, N., 2012.

11 Masika, R., 2002.

12 Fothergill, A., 1996.

13 IOM, 2013.

14 Ibid.

15 Chindarkar, N., 2012.

- In rural Nepal, the effects of climate variability vary by gender, with women being more affected by changes. In the Chitwan Valley, nearly all households rely on firewood for heating and cooking and depend on the local environment to create market goods such as reed baskets. The collection of these resources in this region is a highly gendered activity, with women primarily responsible for fetching firewood. Due to climate change and environmental degradation, local forests are gradually declining in this area. Recent studies have shown that an increase in the collection time for firewood and a decline in agricultural productivity increase the probability of local female migration.¹
- The Upper Indus Basin, within the Karakoram and Hindu Kush Mountains, is one of the recognized hot spots of climate change. The entire area is very sensitive to potential shifts as the Indian monsoon patterns and melting glaciers increase the risk of flooding during the winter season and of drought in the summer season. Local communities are adapting in various ways to climate change; labour migration is one of the adaptive strategies most resorted to. It has been proven that migration as adaptation to climate change in the Upper Indus Basin is a highly gendered phenomenon: due to gendered relations, cultural norms and the gendered division of labour, virtually only men are allowed to move to seek employment elsewhere. Women are left behind to take care of the agricultural work and the household and to manage natural resources.²

¹ Massey, D., W. Axinn and D. Ghimire, 2010.

² Gioli, G., 2012.

The gender–migration–environment nexus: What can be done?

Effectively integrating gender concerns in responses to environmental migration means promoting a range of good practices, such as:

- Promoting awareness about gender roles, relations and inequalities in environmental migration;

- Supporting research projects, programme formulations, and case studies designed and conducted with a focus on gender issues;
- Developing gender-sensitive environmental migration materials to be used in training by women’s, environmental or migration organizations;
- Collecting, analysing and disseminating regularly sex- and age-disaggregated data in order to better understand migration patterns and formulate more effective policies;
- Addressing barriers to equal participation and engagement in community and household decision-making processes;
- Enlisting both women and men as key environmental actors in natural disaster management.

IOM is committed to [mainstreaming the Organization’s gender policy](#) throughout IOM activities and programmes, and supports the development of initiatives to address the specific gender-related needs of migrants.

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