



POLICY BRIEF



# ENSURING SAFE AND REGULAR MIGRATION FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Photo: UN Women/Joe Saade

## Summary

Climate change is a global emergency which puts the achievement of gender equality at great risk. As climate change intensifies around the world, many women and girls, especially those in situations of vulnerability, migrate in search of safety, livelihoods and employment opportunities. Gender considerations shape the decision to migrate and the migration experience,<sup>1</sup> and greater collection and analysis of data is needed to ensure migration policies are responsive to the needs of women and girls migrating in the context of climate change. Existing international frameworks and mechanisms to manage safe and regular migration in relation to climate change are limited, and those that do exist have not fully mainstreamed gender equality considerations. This policy brief explores the linkages among gender, migration and climate change and provides recommendations to policymakers and practitioners to ensure safe and regular migration for women\* and girls in the context of climate change.

## Gender, climate change and migration: ensuring that no one is left behind

As floods, droughts and storms become more intense and frequent, and temperature and precipitation patterns shift,<sup>2</sup> these changes lead some individuals, families and communities to migrate to prevent or reduce harm and find safety, employment, livelihoods and other opportunities.<sup>3</sup> Climate hazards exacerbate poverty and situations of vulnerability for women and girls,<sup>4</sup> because of gender-based discrimination

in accessing livelihoods, land and other natural resources, financial services, social capital and technology.<sup>5</sup> Women also tend to have limited means and assets to cope with natural hazards or disasters.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, women play a critical role in sustaining households and communities, using their knowledge and experience to help reduce the severity of impacts of climate change for their families and communities.<sup>7</sup>

\* In this policy brief, the term “migrant women” refers to international migrant women in all their diversity, inclusive of age, class, race, ethnicity, migration status, HIV status, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, among others.

## BOX 1

### Defining human mobility in the context of climate change

Understanding and addressing key terms and themes around human mobility in the context of climate change is fundamental for facilitating human rights–based and gender-responsive migration that contributes to promoting climate adaptation and resilience and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

No internationally accepted legal definition exists to describe people who move due to environmental factors. The International Organization for Migration’s (IOM), [Glossary on Migration](#) defines **environmental migrant(s)** as “a person or group(s) of persons who, predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are forced to leave their places of habitual residence, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move within or outside their country of origin or habitual residence.”

IOM defines **climate migration** as “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.” Climate migration is a subcategory of environmental migration; this type of migration can be associated with people in situations of vulnerability, particularly when people are forced to move, or it can be a form of adaptation that helps to build resilience for individuals and communities.

These two definitions are related to all forms of migration, temporary and permanent, internal and international, near and far, individual and collective human mobility, and are driven by both sudden-onset and slow-onset hazards. “Climate refugee” or “environmental refugee” are terms that are not currently recognized within international refugee law. The [Cancun Agreements on Climate Change Adaptation](#), adopted by the States parties to the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC) in 2010, identified three forms of mobility related to climate change: displacement, migration and planned relocation. The [2022 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC), uses the term “climate-related migration” to refer to all forms of migration, displacement and immobility that occur in response to or as a result of climate hazards.



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, disasters led to some 32.6 million people becoming displaced in 2022, affecting all inhabited continents.<sup>8</sup> The estimated number of people displaced by the impacts of climate change vary greatly, ranging from 100 million to 1 billion people by 2050.<sup>9</sup> The number of people in Central and South America, sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia projected to be displaced as a result of climate change ranges from 31 million to 143 million by 2050.<sup>10</sup>

Slow-onset climate change impacts, specifically those related to high temperatures and drying conditions, may be more likely to increase migration than sudden-onset events (see Table 1).<sup>11</sup> The poorest people may be more likely to migrate when faced with slow-onset climate change impacts, such as decreasing crop productivity, water shortages and rising sea levels.<sup>12</sup> This would have disproportionate impacts on women and girls since globally, they are more likely to live in extreme poverty than men and boys.<sup>13</sup>

**TABLE 1****Sudden and slow-onset hazards**

Sudden-onset hazards	Slow-onset hazards
Localized events that lead to major damages	Gradually impact larger geographical areas over time
Usually single and discrete, manifesting between hours and months	Usually gradual and not distinguishable, manifesting over years or decades
Often difficult to predict frequency, intensity and timing of occurrence	Often easier to predict and tend to be visible
Examples: Storm surges, earthquakes, flash floods, mudslides and landslides	Examples: Sea level rise, drought, coastal erosion, desertification and water salinization

### Lack of data to guide decision-making

The lack of gender statistics and sex-disaggregated data on international migration in relation to climate change poses a serious challenge to the development and implementation of gender-responsive policies, including increasing the availability of regular migration pathways. This dearth of information paints an incomplete picture of the situation of migrant women and girls in relation to climate change and limits understanding of their needs, capacities and resilience. Case studies and qualitative data gathered by academics and civil society organizations provide a window into the migration patterns and experiences of women, but they are limited in scope and applicability. Gender statistics and sex-disaggregated data in the context of migration and climate change are critical for informing policies and programmes to provide effective, tailored support and assistance to migrants in all their diversity.

### Gendered factors influencing migration in the context of climate change

The decision to migrate in the context of climate change and the means to do so are inherently gendered. They are dependent on overlapping and intersecting economic, political, social, demographic and cultural factors.<sup>14</sup> Deeply entrenched gender inequalities and discriminatory social and cultural norms may limit women's opportunities to migrate and increase their risks at all stages of migration, especially to gender-based violence and other human rights violations.

Migration may serve as an adaptation strategy to respond to climate change and a means to build resilience for women and girls,<sup>15</sup> and in turn reduce exposure to hazards.<sup>16</sup> The extent to which migration can be a positive adaptation experience will be influenced by gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability status and other relevant factors.<sup>17</sup> Countries and communities of destination may also benefit from migrants' skills and knowledge,<sup>18</sup> and the experiences of migrant women can also create positive social change across households and communities, including by promoting women's agency and challenging gender stereotypes, particularly as they relate to work and care roles and responsibilities.<sup>19</sup>

For many women around the world, the decision to migrate in the context of climate change is often related to scarcity of natural resources, as women are often the primary resource gatherers for their families.<sup>20</sup> A study conducted in Nepal on resource scarcity related to environmental change found that the additional time required to collect fodder led to a greater likelihood of women migrating, but not men. Conversely, the additional time required to gather firewood increased the chance that men would migrate, but not women.<sup>21</sup> While these findings focus on environmental change, it is likely that scarcity related to climate change would have a similar effect. Research conducted in Ethiopia found that drought nearly doubled labour-related movement and migration of men, particularly those from land-poor households, while women's short-distance and marriage-related mobility reduced, due to their decreased ability to finance weddings and establish of new households.<sup>22</sup>

The length of the journey and the experience of migration may also differ by gender, as various studies have indicated. In Ghana, while women preferred temporary migration as an adaptive strategy, men preferred permanent migration.<sup>23</sup> In Burkina Faso, the volume of longer-term migration, especially for men, tended to fall in drought years, yet the short-term mobility of women and children increased.<sup>24</sup>

An increase in migration in Central America, particularly in the Dry Corridor, can be linked to climate change impacts. Gender may affect decision-making, including the choice of country and the length of stay. It can also shape care responsibilities and household decision-making for those who stay behind. While men's migration can lead to increased unpaid labour for the women left behind, it can also lead to greater economic freedoms and decision-making capacity, which may enhance women's agency and also help reduce household vulnerability to extreme climate events.<sup>25</sup>

In Bangladesh, short-term migration is common in areas affected by climate change, with 68 per cent of people migrating internally and 32 per cent migrating internationally. Most migrant workers who moved internationally were men; this generally improved their socioeconomic standing. Women who migrated internationally to participate in short-term contracts in the Gulf States and other countries in the region generally had lower socioeconomic status and were poorer than women migrant workers who moved internally.<sup>26</sup>



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

## Gaps in protection for women and girls migrating in the context of climate change

While migration is an opportunity for increased autonomy and independence for some women, it also exposes them to risks, particularly in the context of climate change. Specifically, poor and marginalized women tend to have less adaptive capacity due to limited resources and restricted access to legal, policy and decision-making processes.<sup>27</sup>

### GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

As climate change intensifies around the world, more women and girls, especially those in situations of vulnerability, are migrating to find safety and livelihood and employment opportunities. However, migration and displacement as a result of climate change may also exacerbate the risks of violence, with well-documented increases in gender-based violence in the aftermath of disasters, particularly for women and girls who are displaced or live in camps or other places without privacy.<sup>28</sup> Domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, and child, early and forced marriage also increase significantly during climate crises.<sup>29</sup> In Ethiopia, for example, the number of girls sold into early marriage in exchange for livestock increased after drought-induced migration, as families struggled to cope with these extreme conditions.<sup>30</sup> In Malawi, girls may be forced to get married due to food shortages connected to climate change.<sup>31</sup> An estimated 1.5 million girls in Malawi are at risk of forced marriage as a result of food shortages and increased poverty due to climate change. Increasing global conflicts, lingering pandemic impacts, extreme weather and climate shocks have created the perfect storm, leading to unprecedented levels of violence against women and girls, as well as trafficking and sexual exploitation.<sup>32</sup>

### TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

In communities affected by ongoing climate change, migration may be a strategy to secure employment opportunities and escape poverty.<sup>33</sup> However, both slow and sudden-onset hazards associated with climate change are linked to increases in trafficking in persons.<sup>34</sup> A lack of safe and regular migration pathways—including specific migration pathways related to climate change—may lead women and girls to turn to more dangerous irregular channels, where they face a greater likelihood of experiencing violence and exploitation by smugglers, human traffickers, police and border officials, intimate partners and other migrants. This may also take the form of men colluding with traffickers by selling their wives or female relatives, including children, in order to cope with the losses associated with changing climate.<sup>35</sup>

In a 2022 submission to the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, the Vanuatu Human Rights Coalition recognized the link between climate change and a rise in trafficking in persons of young girls, who are promised land or employment but are instead sexually exploited.<sup>36</sup> Trafficking of women and girls from areas affected by climate change has also been identified in India and Nepal.<sup>37</sup> The Children’s Climate Risk Index highlights that the impacts of climate change disrupt institutional and protective systems and may lead to increased displacement and migration, putting millions of children at risk of exploitation, forced labour and abuse. Children, particularly girls, migrating alone or separated from their parents are at a high risk of emotional, physical and sexual violence.<sup>38</sup>

### DISCRIMINATION AGAINST LGBTIQ+ PERSONS

While lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) migrants in the context of climate change have not been a focus of research and data collection,<sup>39</sup> the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination they face make them more vulnerable to climate impacts. LGBTIQ+ people face significant discrimination in labour markets and are often denied access to services such as healthcare and housing in countries of origin, transit and destination; as a result, they may be less able to protect themselves against climate-related shocks and disasters. Moreover, disaster risk reduction and recovery strategies usually prioritize support and assistance for heteronormative couples or single-parent families, even though research has shown that LGBTIQ+ people are at heightened risk of experiencing discrimination and violence in temporary or emergency accommodation.<sup>40</sup> For example, following Hurricane Dorian in the Bahamas in 2019, displaced members of the LGBTIQ+ community reported having sought private accommodation due to fear of violence in collective shelters.<sup>41</sup>

For some LGBTIQ+ people, migrating becomes the best—and sometimes only—option to find safety and opportunities. However, to migrate safely, people need access to the necessary legal documentation and this can be especially difficult for transgender and gender-diverse people, whose gender identity or expression may not align with the sex assigned to them at birth. This can lead to discriminatory treatment by border authorities, police officers, social services, or other officials, and individuals may be denied the right to pass through a border or checkpoint, heightening the likelihood of needing to turn to unsafe irregular channels.<sup>42</sup>

## International frameworks related to the gender, climate and migration nexus

Addressing the nexus of gender, climate change and migration requires an integrated multisector approach that brings together global, regional, national and local efforts to ensure that political commitments are translated into actions, and that the implementation of existing policy frameworks are gender-responsive. Few existing frameworks comprehensively address these linkages, with the notable exception of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women’s [General Recommendation No. 37 \(2018\) on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change](#) (Box 2).<sup>\*\*</sup>

### BOX 2

#### CEDAW General Recommendation No. 37: The gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change

The general recommendation recognizes that: “Women migrants face a heightened risk of gender-based violence, including human trafficking, and other forms of discrimination in transit, in camps, at borders and in destination countries. Women may also face specific human rights violations during migration and at their destination due to a lack of adequate sexual, reproductive and mental health services as well as discrimination in accessing employment, social security, education, housing, legal documents such as birth or marriage certificates, and justice. Migrant women and girls are frequently subject to intersectional forms of discrimination. Women who migrate may also be vulnerable to the impacts of climate change in destination areas, in particular in urban centres in developing countries”.

The general recommendation mandates that States parties should: “Ensure that migration and development policies are gender responsive and that they include sound disaster risk considerations and recognize disasters and climate change as important push factors for internal displacement and migration. This information should be incorporated into national and local plans to monitor and support the rights of women and girls during migration and displacement”.

<sup>\*\*</sup> General recommendations are non-binding on States parties and reflect the issues that the Committee believes the States parties should prioritize.

By strengthening migration policies to be gender-responsive while also responding to the climate crisis, countries can expand existing migration pathways or add additional ones—whether seasonally, temporarily or permanently—in order to increase options for safe and regular migration. Some international bodies and intergovernmentally negotiated agreements have identified and emphasized the linkages between gender, climate change and migration, raising the profile of the issue on the global stage. The [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) includes goals and targets related to gender equality and migration in the context of climate change, and provides an overarching framework. The [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) includes gender-responsiveness as one of its guiding principles and Objective 2 clearly outlines concrete actions for States to address natural disasters, the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation in the context of migration. Implementing the Global Compact in a gender-responsive manner is one way to ensure that migrant women and girls can enjoy their full human rights as they negotiate a changing climate and environmental risks.



Photo: UN Women/Allison Joyce

Under the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC), Parties adopted in 2017 and renewed in 2019 through 2024 the [Gender Action Plan of the Enhanced Lima Work Programme on Gender](#), which focuses on capacity-building and coordination to support gender-responsive approaches to address the disproportionate impacts of climate change on women and girls; integrate gender perspectives across all national-level climate plans, policies and actions; and promote gender balance and women's full, equal and meaningful participation in UNFCCC processes. While the Gender Action Plan does not cover migration in relation to climate change, the UNFCCC [Paris Agreement](#)

(2015) and [Glasgow Climate Pact](#) (2021) explicitly connect the rights of migrants and others with gender equality and women's empowerment:

*Acknowledging that climate change is a common concern of humankind, Parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health, the rights of indigenous peoples, local communities, migrants, children, persons with disabilities and people in vulnerable situations and the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity.*

The Glasgow Climate Pact also calls for greater support and financing for gender-responsive climate action:

*Encourages Parties to increase the full, meaningful and equal participation of women in climate action and to ensure gender-responsive implementation and means of implementation, which are vital for raising ambition and achieving climate goals.*

Further, it urges strengthening efforts and increasing financing for both adaptation to and mitigation of climate change, that is, building climate resilience and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Parties reaffirmed their Paris Agreement commitment to limit the rise in global average temperature to 1.5 degrees centigrade and to provide US\$100 million annually from developed to developing countries.

Finally, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the principal global intergovernmental body for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, dedicated its sixty-sixth session in 2022 to the priority theme of "Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes". The outcome document of the session—the CSW66 Agreed Conclusions—provides a global framework to reaffirm and enable the development of international norms and standards in this broad area. It underlines the importance of promoting a perspective based on gender and human rights in migration policies and programmes to address the situations of vulnerability faced by women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental degradation and disasters. Additionally, the Commission recognized the need to strengthen the capacity of national statistical offices and government institutions to collect, analyse, disseminate and use data and statistics on climate change, environmental degradation and disasters.

## Recommendations for ensuring safe and regular migration for women and girls in the context of climate change

The following recommendations aim to promote and protect the human rights of migrant women and girls and to identify opportunities for collaboration and action among governments, international organizations, civil society organizations and other relevant stakeholders for ensuring safe and regular migration for women and girls, specifically in the context of climate change. For broader and in-depth discussion and recommendations on gender-responsive migration, please see UN Women's [Policies and Practice: A Guide to Gender-Responsive Implementation of the Global Compact on Migration](#).

### GOVERNMENTS

- Develop and implement gender-responsive migration policies, laws and services that protect and promote the human rights of migrant women and girls, and address their specific situations of vulnerability, including gender-based violence and trafficking in persons, in the context of climate change.
  - Ensure that national mechanisms for gender equality and the empowerment of women play a key role in policymaking and programming on migration and climate change.
  - Invest in the collection, analysis and dissemination of sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics on climate change and migration to support evidence-based policies and programmes.
  - Create gender-responsive regular migration pathways related to climate change that allow for both temporary and permanent migration.
    - Ensure that clear and gender-responsive information on existing visas and migration pathways are available for those migrating in relation to climate change in languages relevant to communities that are most at risk of hazards.
  - Strengthen current migration policies to ensure that migrants in all their diversity have equal rights to family reunification schemes, including in the context of climate change.
  - Provide access to decent work and gender-responsive social protection for all migrants through provisions related to labour migration in the context of climate change.
  - Ensure provision of essential services for migrants who are victims and survivors of gender-based violence related to migration in the context of climate change.
- Ensure that early warning systems provide accessible and understandable information, taking into consideration differing needs and abilities of women and girls to evacuate or migrate.
  - Provide support and financing for gender-responsive mitigation and adaptation efforts, in line with the Glasgow Climate Pact, to developing countries most affected by climate change in order to reduce the need for migration in the context of climate change.

### UN AGENCIES

- Support policymakers and practitioners in the development and implementation of gender-responsive migration governance related to climate change, including by building their technical capacity.
- Support governments and regional organizations to collect, analyse and disseminate sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics on migration in the context of climate change.
- Facilitate regional dialogues on the creation of gender-responsive agreements on migration in relation to climate change or the adjustment of existing regional migration policies to address climate change-related migration.
- Support governments in the gender-responsive implementation of international agreements, especially the Global Compact for Migration, that protect and promote the human rights of migrants who are moving in relation to climate change.
- Provide accessible, gender-responsive information on people's rights in the context of migration as well as on the risks and realities of migrating in the context of climate change, especially via irregular channels.

### CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

- Provide migrants with gender-responsive information about existing regular migration channels in the context of climate change and disasters, the possible risks of migration, and how to access services to help ensure that migration is as safe as possible.
- Provide gender-responsive support to migrant women in all their diversity for integrating into destination communities and finding decent work, education and livelihood opportunities.
- Provide access to essential services to migrant women and girls who are victims and survivors of gender-based violence in the context of climate change.

## Endnotes

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