

Gender, Migration and Environment in the MENA: Vulnerabilities, Frameworks and Ways Forward

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Abstract

Environmental migration is inherently gendered. Migrants across the gender spectrum have varied needs and priorities and continue to be exposed to a multitude of risks and challenges throughout their journeys. In many parts of the world, climate change disproportionately burdens women in particular, who have historically had limited access to information, resources, and employment opportunities in their own countries, and in host countries as well. This paper intends to explore the intersection between migration, gender and the environment to highlight the importance of adopting a gender lens whilst addressing this migratory phenomenon. It sheds light on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region where this intersection remains unexplored and frames this discussion alongside broader narratives of protection, displacement, refugeehood and long-term solutions.

Keywords: Gender, Migration, Displacement, Environment, Climate, MENA

Introduction

Gender is one of the most critical factors in shaping the migratory experience. In fact, migration is inherently gendered – and people across the gender spectrum tend to have very different journeys at every stage of the migration cycle. Also varied by gender are risk perception, prioritisation, movement strategies, choices of destination/routes, prospects of employment, and access to integration and durable solutions. Along these lines, migration may exacerbate pre-existing inequalities between women and men, expose them to new

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vulnerabilities, and intensify gendered experiences of marginalisation, poverty, discrimination and socio-economic inequality.

Like other migration, environmental migration is also inherently gendered. Migrants across the gender spectrum have varied needs and priorities and continue to be exposed to a multitude of risks and challenges throughout their journeys. In many parts of the world, climate change disproportionately burdens women in particular, who have historically had limited access to information, resources, and employment opportunities in their own countries, and in host countries as well. As climate change threatens to impact existing livelihoods and customary restrictions hinder women's ability to move without the consent of a male figure, women's ability to adapt to climate change strongly depends on socio-cultural gender norms. This paper intends to explore the intersection between migration, gender and the environment to highlight the importance of adopting a gender lens whilst addressing this migratory phenomenon. It additionally aims to shed light on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region – a region where this intersection remains unexplored.

Migration, Environment and Gender: Why is This Intersection Important?

Gender is pivotal whilst exploring the relationship between migration and the environment. As discussed, environmental migration is just as much of a gendered process as other forms of migration and displacement, with gender-specific vulnerabilities, experiences, priorities, and needs varying between women's and men's different perceived social roles, access to information and resources, levels of education, physical security, and economic status.¹ While this intersection between migration and the environment is being increasingly discussed among migration and environment scholars and experts alike, it is missing in policy discussions and, most importantly, treated as gender-neutral² in the rare cases where it is discussed.

While the Environment Threat Report 2020/2 projects 1.2 billion environmental migrants by 2050 and 1.4 billion by 2060, globally restrictive migration policies continue to limit women's and men's ability to migrate due to climate change or environmental disasters.³ Migration may constitute a common coping or adaptation strategy in the event of a large-scale or acute natural disaster, as well as over time, as environmental degradation increases in severity across specific regions.⁴ Along these lines, the integration of gender dimensions as well as a gender analysis into environmental migration assists in understanding how gender impacts not only the decisions of women and men affected by natural hazards or environmental degradation to move but also leads to a more nuanced and accurate understanding of this process. Furthermore, this analysis ensures that as policies, programs, and initiatives develop at this intersection, they can inclusively and comprehensively respond to gender-specific objectives. 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 inequalities or create new ones. More specifically, gender-

blind policies risk proposing inappropriate responses to climatic and environmental problems, are less likely to succeed, and also bear the risk of excluding or harming other social groups across the gender spectrum.⁵

Implications and Intersectional Vulnerabilities

Environmental migration continues to be determined by individuals' exposure to environmental and climatic risks and their abilities to “anticipate, cope with, adapt, and recover” from the consequences of climate emergencies and more long-term/slower environmental degradation.⁶ Consequently, the economically, politically and socially marginalised are impacted most acutely. Marginalised groups additionally possess the fewest opportunities to access information on climate/the environment, as well as to adequately prepare for the impacts of climate change and voluntarily migrate.⁷ As migration requires economic and social resources that are not available to everyone, this brings forth additional conversations on opportunities and capabilities — as marginalised groups are left behind, particularly the poor, the elderly, women, children, and/or minorities that face cultural or religious restrictions on their mobility.⁸

Moreover, environmental migration exacerbates pre-existing gender divides and exposes women (and gender minorities) to new sets of intersectional and layered vulnerabilities.⁹ Due to discrimination on the grounds of country/community of origin, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic standing, level of education, marital status, and ability, women face a multitude of oppressive factors that are often the direct result of a general lack of social and legal protection. Due to the aforementioned, this generates other factors of exclusion such as wage gaps, access to information, as well as access to shelter and physical safety.¹⁰ Women from some of the poorest communities, and who depend on natural resources for their livelihoods, are known to have the least capacity to respond to climate-related or climate-induced disasters such as droughts, landslides, floods, storms and hurricanes.¹¹

Multiple empirical studies investigating vulnerabilities to climate change through a gender lens have highlighted that women are more likely to be exposed to environmental and climate risks and more affected by their impacts due to specific gender roles and responsibilities that have been historically, socially and culturally assigned to them.¹² According to a brief published by IOM in 2009, the “[...] 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.”¹³ Moreover, gendered power relations and socio-cultural norms and values, together with the gendered division across the labour force and rates of economic empowerment, deeply impact the adaptive capacity of women and men differently. In many communities, cultural norms continue to restrict women's freedom and/or movement, particularly in the absence of an adult male relative or caretaker, making it increasingly challenging for women to seek assistance or shelter when emergencies of any nature occur.¹⁴ This limited mobility has often been coupled with limited access to information during times of crisis or leading up to them.¹⁵

Furthermore, it is widely documented that gender largely shapes human responses to disaster on multiple fronts.¹⁶ Women are hit hard by the social impacts of natural disasters especially.¹⁷ Postdisaster mortality, injury and illness rates additionally tend to be higher for women in large part due to their restricted, controlled, and reduced mobility and their role as caregivers rather than recipients of care as a priority.¹⁸ Indeed, though it is widely recognised that women are likely to be unequally at risk of loss and harm, disproportionately affected, and less able to recover, experiences of powerlessness also leave men and gender minorities, similar to women, particularly vulnerable to climate change. In many cases, men are more exposed to natural hazards, including secondary hazards related to emergency assistance.¹⁹

Environmental Migration in International Frameworks

The 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees is a product of its time, whereby armed conflicts and persecution for religious, ethnic and political reasons were the key drivers of the forced movements which tore through the European continent throughout the twentieth century. Today, causes of forced migration increasingly encompass combinations of extreme poverty, discrimination, violence and exploitation, climate change, environmental degradation and natural disasters, and lack of access to core human rights, such as education, decent work and healthcare. Despite the fact that individuals fleeing from locations where they face risks arising from the impacts of climate change are often referred to as “climate refugees,” they still do not fall within the scope of the refugee definition under Article 1 of the Refugee Convention.²⁰ This is mainly due to the limited scope of the Refugee Convention’s definition of persecution as well as the lack of political will surrounding the possibility of revisiting the convention or expanding its mandate and scope.

While neither the 1951 Refugee Convention nor any other international treaty explicitly addresses displacement due to direct or indirect impacts of climate change, international protection remains mainly embodied in human rights law (HRL). Under HRL, governments bear positive obligations that require them to carry out measures to prevent displacement and protect those adversely affected by climate change and environmentally-related disasters. Moving from this point, scholars in the migration space have long argued that HRL is the primary source of protection for climate refugees – regardless of whether or not the expansion of the refugee definition under the 1951 Convention materialises.

A UN Human Rights Committee decision in January 2020 noted that, under international human rights law, people displaced across borders in the context of climate change and disasters have the right “not to be returned to a country where they would face a serious risk of irreparable harm to their right to life.”²¹ Though not legally binding, the Committee’s ruling is the first to address an individual’s attempt to be granted refugee status due to the impacts of climate change, insisting that “without national and international efforts, the effects of climate change in receiving states may expose individuals to a violation of their rights.”²² Not

only does it recognise that environmental degradation and climate risks curtail human rights, but it also serves as a first step towards establishing an international legal obligation to provide protection due to threats to human security not covered by the 1951 Convention.²³ The ruling relates to the case of Ioane Teitiota from Kiribati, a small island state in the Pacific at risk of becoming the first country to disappear due to rising sea levels.²⁴

Environmental Migration in the MENA Region: An Escalating Reality

Long overlooked by governments and state officials in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), climate change is expected to affect the region in dire and impactful ways that amplify long-standing challenges associated with poor governance, corruption and increasing socio-economic inequalities. According to IOM, the MENA continues to be one of the regions most impacted by climate change and environmental degradation.²⁵ Temperatures in the region are increasing at twice the speed of other regions.²⁶ According to a report published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the MENA is one of the most vulnerable regions to rising sea levels caused by climate change.²⁷ As a result of the sea level rise alone, millions of people along the MENA's populated coasts are at risk of displacement.²⁸ In North Africa alone, this could lead to the internal displacement of more than 19.3 million people by 2050.²⁹

According to a World Bank brief, water scarcity has been the most evident effect of climate change in the MENA. It has been described by experts as “the most water-stressed region in the world.”³⁰ Rising temperatures, coupled with their impacts on health and productivity, desertification, food insecurity, and population movements across the region, are some of the climate effects projected to impact MENA residents, particularly in rural areas.³¹ Groups such as migrants and refugees, informal sector labourers, persons living with disabilities, the elderly, women and gender minorities are anticipated to be some of the most vulnerable.³² Alongside water scarcity, extreme weather events are anticipated to increase in quantity and extremity in the region, ultimately posing significant risks to communities, farmers, pastoralists and other mobile populations, including those potentially already displaced by conflict.³³

A 2014 study on climate change and migration in the MENA region, carried out by the World Bank across Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Syria, and Yemen, found that poor climate and extreme weather events led to a higher migration probability.³⁴ The study looked at the impact of three crucial factors on migration – weather shocks, perceptions of recent climate change, and climate variables such as temperature and rainfall (but not directly climate change). The same study found that migration was linked to chronic droughts, ultimately leading to declining agricultural productivity.³⁵ While at the time of the study, few respondents mentioned flooding or being displaced due to natural disasters as the main reason for relocation or migration, they did report resorting to migration as a final resort.³⁶

In countries such as Lebanon, the impact of climate change on its natural resources is already being felt.³⁷ The wildfires the country experienced throughout 2021, particularly in the country's North, have burnt large swathes of pine forests and forced many to flee their homes in search of shelter.³⁸ Amid the country's ongoing economic and financial crisis, Lebanon's Ministry of Environment estimates that climate change will cause a 14% fall in Lebanon's GDP by 2040, falling further to 32% by 2080.³⁹ According to the same estimates, climate change is expected to increase temperatures and make water resources scarcer, ultimately negatively impacting agricultural output and the livelihoods of several rural communities.⁴⁰ Climate change is anticipated to cause higher rates of infectious disease, rises in illness and deaths due to higher temperatures, increased malnutrition from reduced agricultural output and higher frequency of extreme events.⁴¹ At the regional level, as women's participation in society remains hindered by cultural, social and structural barriers,⁴² their role in climate-related decision- and policy-making is also often limited.

Concluding Remarks and Ways Forward

It is essential to include gender considerations in international frameworks and processes related to climate change mitigation and adaptation such as the Paris Agreement and the Sendai Framework of Disaster Risk Reduction.⁴³ Conversations at the level of the Global Compact for Migration must further discuss the achievement of SDG5 on gender equality in order to ensure that policies and interventions are effective, inclusive, implementable, gender-sensitive, and responsive at all levels.⁴⁴ It also remains crucial to address existing gender inequalities in discussions on migration and the environment in order to ensure the rights of people of all genders, including women and girls who experience intersectional forms of discrimination, are met and accounted for at the levels of response, policy and action. There remains a need to recognise that women, and migrant women in particular, are powerful agents and leaders in their families and communities. Not only do they provide resources for their families, facilitate their migration, and assist in adaptation during displacement, but they also play a crucial role in informing intersectional policy responses and comprehensive disaster management plans. Utilising these important inputs and ensuring the adoption of participatory approaches are key to addressing climate change and displacement while ensuring solutions are rooted in the knowledge and perspectives of people of all genders.

Notes

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