

Migration Climate Change and Gender



About IWWAGE

The Institute for What Works to Advance Gender Equality (IWWAGE) was established in 2018 with an aim to build and deepen evidence around the low participation of women in the economy to find solutions to support the development of gender inclusive policies and programmes

IWWAGE is an initiative of LEAD at KREA University, an action-oriented research centre housed at the Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR), a not-for-profit society which is also the Sponsoring Body of KREA University.



Facilitating people-centric public policy

About PDAG

Policy and Development Advisory Group (PDAG Consulting LLP) is a social impact advisory organisation based in New Delhi. Since its inception, PDAG has been engaged in evidence-based policy research and programmatic initiatives in governance, migration, climate change and sustainability, and digital futures across India, working closely with policymakers, academic and research organisations, multilateral bodies, and civil society organisations.

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Series Introduction

Gender, Climate Change, and Care: A Policy Imperative

Climate change is reshaping lives and livelihoods across India, with deeply gendered consequences. Women — particularly those from marginalized and low-income communities — face disproportionate burdens from climate-induced migration, livelihood disruptions, and extreme weather events. These impacts often intersect with existing social and economic inequalities, highlighting the need for integrated responses.

Climate change has profound impact on women's labour in the care economy and exacerbates their marginalization, vulnerabilities and their growing needs for support in the labour market as well as for unpaid labour. As scientists predict the increasing frequencies of climate disasters across the world, their demand for labour also rises, especially that for precarious labour including care work performed largely by women. While climate induces migration, displacement and other forms of forced movements, the role of women assumes a central importance in organizing care labour amidst such events.

It is within this broader gender–climate landscape that the care economy emerges as a critical lens for analysis and policy action. Care work — both formal and informal — plays a central role in how households and communities cope with and respond to climate risks. Yet it remains poorly recognized and undervalued in climate policy frameworks. This makes it imperative to explore how care and climate intersect — both in terms of the impact of climate change on care responsibilities and the role of care systems in fostering resilience and adaptation.

Climate change presents two underlying processes: the impacts of climate risks on care and the influence of organisation of care on climate effects and outcomes. Both the processes are indicative of urgent recognition and action for integrating care into climate policy and vice-versa. Adopting a care lens into climate policies to value care in our interactions with environment, recognizing the immense contribution of care for the environment using women's unpaid labour and promoting equitable distribution of resources and effective governance mechanisms for mitigating responses to climate disasters should form the core of such policies. This series of technical policy briefs — developed jointly by IWWAGE and PDAG — aims to examine the climate–care nexus in depth. It will explore how care work shapes and is shaped by climate-related vulnerabilities, labour transitions, and adaptation strategies, with a particular focus on gendered outcomes. Similarly, there is a need to build a holistic approach to care policies for enabling women in their daily interactions with the market and society. Within such care framing, it is also necessary to include the lens of

climate change, women's work in environmental care as well as ensuring long term sustainable investments in care infrastructures keeping in mind climate risks and women's needs that would eventually drive the quality-of-care services, create jobs, and support indigenous communities and population cohorts in remote geographies.

While this series places care at the centre, it is situated within the broader climate–gender agenda articulated in the IWWAGE–PDAG joint knowledge initiative — encompassing work, migration, governance, energy transitions, and the future of women's labour.

In India with rising frequencies of climate extremities, the impact is felt through rapidly altering migration patterns in both rural and urban areas, frequent displacements affecting lives and livelihoods of the vulnerable sections and a consequent increased role of women in reorganization of care work. While there have been reactive measures to climate disasters, sustained adaptation mechanisms are rare and lacks the care component.

This series will highlight the interconnections between climate change and the organisation of care labour, particularly as they relate to forced mobilities, precarious work, and resilience strategies. It will provide analytical frameworks and policy pathways that bring care into the centre of climate debates — while ensuring that the broader gendered dimensions of climate change remain visible and integrated.

The technical knowledge cum policy briefs would capture the intersections of climate change on organization of care induced by several forced mobilities, and move the needle on gender analyses beyond the narratives of global North, to highlight the concerns of the most vulnerable cohorts of populations residing in the global South. The series thus attempts to add to the existing knowledge and evidence pool while creating a space for such discussions.

We hope to make meaningful interventions into the existing discourse through this initiative.

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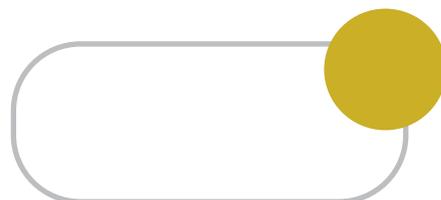


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Migration Climate Change and Gender

Climate-induced migration is emerging as a significant challenge in India, driven by rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, sea-level rise, and the depletion of natural resources (Indian Council for World Affairs, 2022). In 2020, an estimated 3.86 million people in India were forced to migrate due to extreme weather events, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), India.¹ The Climate Action Network South Asia (CANSAs) projects that approximately 45 million people in India alone could be compelled to migrate by 2050 due to climate disasters.² While the economic and environmental aspects of migration have received much attention, its gendered dimensions remain inadequately addressed. Women experience climate-induced migration differently than men, whether as migrants themselves or as those left behind in increasingly fragile rural contexts. Their mobility is shaped by social norms, caregiving responsibilities, unequal access to resources, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation, particularly in informal labour markets and urban settlements. These gendered inequalities not only deepen existing socio-economic marginalisation but also undermine women's capacity to adapt to climate stressors.

This policy brief highlights the need to integrate a gender lens into the discourse and policymaking on climate-induced migration in India. Based on a comprehensive desk review of academic research, field studies, and policy frameworks, it examines how climate change impacts women's migration patterns, agency, and resilience. The brief underscores the urgent need for sex-disaggregated data, gender-responsive social protection systems, and inclusive policy frameworks that recognize women's roles in both climate adaptation and migration. Targeted policy action is essential to ensure that responses to climate migration are equitable, inclusive, and sustainable, particularly for India's most vulnerable women.

In 2020, an estimated 3.86 million people in India were forced to migrate due to extreme weather events

45 million people in India could be compelled to migrate by 2050 due to climate disasters



¹ https://researchinginternaldisplacement.org/short_pieces/disaster-induced-internal-displacement-in-india-in-2020-a-review/?utm_source

² <https://www.dw.com/en/cop29-will-india-finally-address-climate-migration/a-70736648>



Introduction

Climate-induced migration refers to the movement of people compelled to relocate due to slow-onset or sudden climate events such as floods, droughts, sea-level rise, and shifting rainfall patterns.³ The IOM defines climate migrants as “persons or groups of persons who, predominantly for 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, 2007:33)⁴.

In the second working group of its sixth Assessment Report (AR6), the IPCC states that “climate hazards are a growing driver of involuntary migration and displacement”. It further adds that “climate-related migration originates most often in climate risk-prone rural areas in low- and middle-income countries, with migrant destinations usually being other rural areas or urban centres within their home countries.”

In India, increasing instances of extreme events and climate variability is disrupting traditional livelihoods, especially in agriculture-dependent regions, prompting large-scale internal migration. Such distress migration is increasingly becoming a coping strategy for communities facing climate stress in response to environmental degradation, especially in regions like the Sundarbans, Odisha, Bundelkhand, Assam, and Bihar.

However, migration is not a gender-neutral process.

Gender plays a critical role in shaping how individuals experience climate risks and make migration decisions. While men often migrate to urban areas for wage labour, women are frequently left behind to manage households under worsening ecological conditions. In some cases, women themselves are forced to migrate due to economic and agricultural distress, often entering informal and exploitative work settings. These experiences are further compounded by factors such as caste, class, and age, which further constrain women’s access to resources and decision-making power. Despite these realities, the gendered dimensions of migration are often overlooked in national and international policy discussions.

Traditional frameworks largely fail to account for how social and gender norms, economic dependency, and limited mobility restrict women’s ability to respond effectively to climate risks. Moreover, women’s contributions to household adaptation strategies—whether as migrants or as those who stay behind—are largely invisible in planning processes. Recognising the interplay between gender and climate-induced migration is critical to designing inclusive adaptation and mitigation responses.

This policy brief seeks to fill that gap by highlighting the specific challenges faced by women in climate migration contexts and advocating for policy frameworks that centre equity and resilience.

³ *Environmental factors drive migration through two distinct patterns. The first pattern occurs immediately following a natural disaster, when widespread destruction prompts people to leave the affected area. The second pattern emerges gradually as environmental changes undermine local livelihoods, compelling individuals to migrate to other regions in search of stable income sources.*

⁴ <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/environmental-migration>



Gendered Impacts of Climate-Induced Migration

Men and women experience climate risks and migration differently, often shaped by entrenched gender roles and responsibilities. Women, in particular, face disproportionate impacts as they navigate the consequences of environmental degradation and subsequent migration.⁵

While men typically migrate proactively in search of employment opportunities, women's migration is often reactive, triggered by distress, displacement, or the need to reunite with families. The IPCC (Sixth Assessment Report) notes that, usually, "women wait longer to migrate because of higher social costs and risks and barriers such as social structures, cultural practices, lack of education and skills and reproductive roles".⁶ Women are frequently excluded from local governance and community decision-making processes, limiting their ability to influence migration decisions, resource distribution and climate adaptation strategies.

In many rural areas, adverse climate events such as floods, droughts, or soil salinisation disrupt agriculture-based livelihoods, prompting men to migrate to urban centres. Women, on the other hand, may be left behind to manage the household under strained conditions. They manage agricultural tasks, care responsibilities, and household needs under increasingly precarious environmental⁷ and economic conditions. This "feminisation of responsibility" at the household level is rarely matched by adequate institutional support in the form of land rights, access to credit, education, labour, or agricultural inputs, leaving women overburdened and vulnerable. Climate-induced resource scarcity means women spend more time fetching water and fuel and preparing food, leaving little room for income-generating activities. All these factors result in women facing deepening poverty, food insecurity, and social isolation, compounded by limited access to healthcare and government schemes.

These patterns are further influenced by gender norms that restrict women's mobility, decision-making power, and access to adaptation resources, information, and early warning systems, making it harder for them to respond to climate stress in a timely and autonomous manner. Intersectional factors—such as caste, ethnicity, age, disability, and marital status—further exacerbate these vulnerabilities, creating layers of exclusion that affect not only their mobility but also their ability to negotiate rights and entitlements. Additionally, young girls are exposed to disruptions in education as they may be required to leave school to assist with household and agricultural duties, impacting their long-term educational and economic prospects.⁸ Climate-induced displacement may also expose young girls to increased risks of child marriage. Displaced families may resort to early marriages as a coping mechanism against economic instability and threats to family honour.⁹

Women pressured to migrate in search of healthier and safer living conditions face unique and heightened risks in their migration journeys. These include abuse, discrimination, and gender-based violence (GBV), and trafficking. Adolescent girls, in particular, are especially vulnerable to trafficking. Many women migrants are either forced to return to their place of origin or become stranded without protection, and face numerous barriers in accessing essential services such as sanitation, sexual and reproductive healthcare, and mental health support. Traditional gender norms often restrict women from migrating independently, limiting their access to taking advantage of economic opportunities in urban, non-agricultural sectors. In some cases,

5 <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/gender-migration-environment-and-climate-change>

6 <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wq2/chapter/chapter-7/>

7 *Women and girls who are left behind often take a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work in the household and communities, with the burden likely to increase in the aftermath of disaster. This escalation can be attributed to the increased need for care of injured family members, the greater demand for emotional support during times of crisis, and the challenges posed by disrupted household systems and services.*

8 https://feminisminindia.com/2023/06/02/women-climate-change-gendered-vulnerabilities/?utm_source

9 https://esaro.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/child_marriage_and_environmental_crises_an_evidence_brief_final.pdf

women may resort to marital migration to circumvent these restrictions, but this strategy can still leave them vulnerable to exploitation¹⁰ and abuse.

In cases where women do migrate (often under distress) - either alone or with their families - they often face heightened risks, including informal and exploitative employment, lack of access to basic services, insecure housing, and gender-based violence. Many migrant women workers work in unregulated and informal sectors such as domestic work, brick kilns, construction, and agriculture, where they have limited legal protection and virtually no access to social security. These sectors are characterized by exploitative conditions, including wage theft, sexual harassment, exploitation, and the absence of maternity protections (Agarwal, 2020). These challenges are strikingly similar to those experienced by non-migrant women from low-income households working in informal sectors in urban centres across the country. They also lack opportunities for skill development. Gender wage disparity is a significant issue for migrant women workers in various industries, with earnings 20-50 per cent lower than men for similar hours (ILO, 2022). Additionally, caste identity also impacts migration and job opportunities, with migrant women from socially marginalised communities often relegated to hazardous jobs due to entrenched societal hierarchies, often resulting in their disproportionate representation in roles like waste picking and manual labour (Guru, 2019; Kapadia, 2021).

Migrant women also struggle with legal and systemic hurdles that limit their ability to seek support or assert their rights. They often face difficulties in accessing identity documents, ration cards, or health services, especially in destination cities. Their experiences are further compounded by cultural and socio-economic barriers that can isolate them from their communities, making it difficult for them to form support networks. Overall, both migrant and non-migrant women (from low-income households) in these settings face systemic inequalities that impede their economic empowerment and compromise their overall well-being. These vulnerabilities are only magnified in the context of an already precarious work environment.

Migrants, including those from climate-risk areas, often find themselves without any form of reliable housing, forced to make do with whatever shelter they can find. Many are forced to seek refuge beneath busy flyovers, grappling with the constant threat of displacement and exposure while struggling to create makeshift living spaces amidst the noise and chaos of passing traffic. As they attempt to search for work opportunities, their lives are marked by instability in an unfamiliar and often hostile transient environment. Urban areas face significant climate impacts that exacerbate challenges for the migrant population.

Additionally, extreme heat, exacerbated by the effects of urban heat islands, poses serious health risks, particularly for vulnerable groups among migrants without access to adequate cooling resources or healthcare. These climate-related issues not only make daily life more challenging but also limit migrants' ability to secure stable employment and build social capital, ultimately affecting their overall quality of life. This is exacerbated by the fact that they have inadequate access to healthcare and social services, further marginalizing them in already strained city systems.

Kinship-based migration networks, critical in securing jobs for migrant women, tend to reinforce occupational stagnation. For example, women from the tea plantations of Assam often migrate to cities like Bengaluru and Chennai for domestic work, often due to existing community ties, but remain trapped in low-wage caregiving roles with limited upward mobility (Mishra 2022).

Moreover, whether migrating or staying behind, women often have little say in migration decisions and remain excluded from community-level planning and resource allocation processes. The burden of unpaid care work – already substantial for most women, including migrant women - becomes increasingly time-consuming.

¹⁰ https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/225327/1/GLO-DP-0692.pdf?utm_source

This leaves them with even less time for education, upskilling, paid or recognised work, participation in community decision-making processes, or learning about adaptation strategies and sustainable, resilient livelihoods.

Despite these critical challenges, women's voices remain underrepresented in both climate adaptation and migration governance, underscoring the urgent need for gender-inclusive policy frameworks. Women's migration continues to be underreported and poorly represented in official data sets, obscuring their specific needs and vulnerabilities in both source and destination areas. Recognising these differentiated migration trajectories is critical for designing inclusive and equitable policies responses that reflect the lived realities of both women migrants and those who remain behind.

The international policy discourse on climate-induced migration remains fragmented, lacking a cohesive legal framework for defining the rights of climate-displaced individuals. The *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and*





National and International Migration and Labour Policy Frameworks

*Regular Migration*¹¹ acknowledges climate change as a driver of migration; the *Cancun Adaptation Framework* (2010) calls on nations to address displacement due to climate change; and the *Nansen Initiative* provides guidelines for protecting disaster-displaced individuals. Organisations like the UN-IOM (UN-International Organisation for Migration) and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) work on a global scale to promote safe, orderly, and regular migration, including internal migration¹².

In India, while the National Action Plans on Climate Change (NAPCCs) and State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs) acknowledge the impacts of climate change, they do not explicitly address climate-induced human migration as a distinct issue. For example, the SAPCC in Kerala, which addresses migration and its economic impact, does not explicitly acknowledge it as a form of adaptation to climate change or a key focus area. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) acknowledges the reality of climate-induced mobility, yet it falls short of establishing comprehensive financial support mechanisms for those affected.

This gap in policy leaves many climate migrants, especially vulnerable groups, without the necessary resources or assistance to adapt to their new circumstances or return to their original homes. In 2022, Pradyut Bordoloi, Member of Parliament, raised the concern by introducing the Climate Migrants (Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill¹³ to create a structured policy framework alongside a dedicated climate migration fund to support affected populations. Unfortunately, despite its relevance, the bill was not passed, reflecting a broader lack of urgency in India's response to the multifaceted issues around climate migration.

The Union government has implemented various policies and schemes to support workers, including migrant workers. Key initiatives include the *Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana* (PMJJBY), the *Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana* (PMSBY), the *PM SVANidhi Scheme*, and the *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana*. The *e-Shram* portal has established a National Database of Unorganised Workers (NDUW) with over 300 million registered workers¹⁴ to facilitate access to social security benefits, including migrants. At the same time, the *One Nation One Ration Card* (ONORC) initiative enables migrants to access food from any Public Distribution System (PDS) shop across India. The *Affordable Rental Housing Complexes* (ARHC) scheme offers affordable housing for migrants and the urban poor. Yet, women migrants continue to face challenges, including a lack of documentation, exclusion from state schemes due to inter-state mobility, and insufficient childcare facilities.¹⁵ In sum, current national and international policy frameworks on climate-induced migration inadequately address the unique experiences and vulnerabilities that women face due to climate-induced migrations. As a result, these issues are often overlooked in policy discussions, undermining women's ability to receive adequate support and protection. The national and international migration and labour policy frameworks are not aligned with climate adaptation planning, and they do not recognise the unique challenges faced by women migrants or those left behind in vulnerable ecologies.

11 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/migration/global-compact-safe-orderly-and-regular-migration-gcm>

12 <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/environmental-migration>

13 <https://www.dw.com/en/cop29-will-india-finally-address-climate-migration/a-70736648#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20for%20the%20first,as%20a%20private%20member's%20bill>

14 <https://eshram.gov.in//dashboard>

15 Research by Desai et al. (2023) indicates that over 60 per cent migrant women workers in informal employment are unaware of available social security benefits like maternity leave and housing support.



Limitations of Data on Climate-Induced Migration

The Government of India does not currently maintain a centralised database specifically tracking climate-induced migration. While internal migration data is collected through instruments like the Census and National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), these sources do not distinctly categorise migration driven by climate-related factors¹⁶. This absence of dedicated data hampers the ability to fully understand or respond to the nuances of climate-induced displacement within the country. Additionally, since norms and social expectations may prevent women from migrating or force them to migrate under precarious conditions, their experiences are more challenging to document. Their migration often takes on temporary, circular, or internal forms, making it difficult to track effectively. This difficulty is particularly pronounced for women who migrate but engage in domestic work or caregiving roles, making it nearly impossible to assess the true scale and character of women's migration in response to climate stress.

Furthermore, individuals with intersectional identities—such as women from Indigenous communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, women with disabilities, and elderly women—face unique challenges that are seldom captured in mainstream research. The sensitive nature of collecting data on gendered experiences of migration, especially concerning gender-based violence, adds another layer of complexity. Without this data, it becomes difficult to design responsive policies, effectively target social protection schemes, or monitor the impact of climate change on different gender groups. Additionally, policies do not recognise or respond to the compounded vulnerabilities experienced by women due to intersecting factors like caste, class, age, and disability. Bridging these policy and data gaps is essential for creating inclusive, evidence-based solutions that support women as both migrants and key actors in climate resilience.



¹⁶ https://www.cdpp.co.in/articles/gender-migration-and-integration-policy-opportunities-for-northeastern-women-in-mainland-india?utm_source



Examples of Gendered Impacts of Climate-Induced Migration

In the Sundarbans region of West Bengal, recurrent cyclones, rising sea levels, and saltwater intrusion have severely impacted agriculture and fisheries, traditional livelihoods for many families.¹⁷ As a result, men frequently migrate to nearby towns and cities for construction and informal work, leaving women behind to manage households in increasingly fragile ecological and economic conditions. These women face the dual burden of climate stress and social isolation, with limited access to public services or institutional support. According to the Action Aid study *Invisible Women: A Gender Analysis of Climate-Induced Migration in South Asia* many women in the region, particularly widows and female-headed households, were unable to access government relief and rehabilitation schemes due to a lack of documentation and patriarchal gatekeeping at the village level.¹⁸ Those women who do migrate to urban areas often end up in insecure, low-paying jobs like domestic work, where they faced exploitation, lack of social protection, and poor access to healthcare.

Similarly, in western Odisha and parts of Bihar and Jharkhand, prolonged droughts and declining soil productivity have triggered distress migration among tribal and Dalit communities.

In 2023 alone, over 1.75 million people migrated out of Odisha, with women disproportionately affected due to landlessness and loss of income generating opportunities.¹⁹ In Odisha, the state government has initiated resettlement projects, such as the model colony in Bagapatia, to support climate migrants. However, challenges persist, including incomplete housing and inadequate access to essential services, which severely impact women²⁰.

Women from Beed district in India's Maharashtra state are being forced to migrate for work in the sugar cane industry elsewhere because climate change is increasing the frequency of droughts and decimating their crops. The sugarcane industry often employs these migrant couples through informal contracts, with women engaging in physically demanding tasks such as tying and stacking cane bundles. Informal contracts impose financial penalties for missed workdays, creating a pervasive fear of wage loss. In this context, some women have opted for hysterectomies to avoid menstruation-related absences and the associated wage losses.²¹ Reports have also documented cases of adolescent girls being withdrawn from school and sent to cities to work in the garment or domestic sectors, increasing their vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation. The situation underscores the intersection of climate change, economic hardship, and gender-specific health risks, highlighting the need for comprehensive policy interventions to protect the rights and well-being of female labourers in vulnerable communities. These case studies highlight how climate-induced migration, compounded by gender not only exacerbates existing inequalities but also puts women at significant risk in both source and destination areas.

Bundelkhand is another example of a region that has witnessed large-scale migration to Delhi, Mumbai,

¹⁷ https://earthjournalism.net/stories/migration-helping-sundarbans-youth-women-adapt-to-climate-uncertainties?utm_source

¹⁸ https://actionaid.org/publications/2021/invisible-women-gender-analysis-climate-induced-migration-south-asia?utm_source

¹⁹ <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-snapshot-of-distress-migration-in-odisha/article68885703.ece>

²⁰ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/climate-change/odisha-s-model-colony-for-climate-refugees-in-kendrapara-should-be-emulated-across-india-89330>

²¹ <https://www.iied.org/climate-change-link-hysterectomy-crisis-among-indian-sugar-workers#:~:text=Exploitative%20conditions%20openise%20workers%20for,the%20'problem'%20of%20menstruation.&text=New%20research%20links%20climate%20change,miss%20work%20and%20lose%20pay>

Lucknow, and other major cities. It is one of India's most climate-vulnerable regions, marked by recurring droughts, erratic rainfall, groundwater depletion, and poor agricultural productivity. These climatic stressors have triggered large-scale out-migration, especially among men, leaving behind women to shoulder disproportionate burdens. As male members migrate to urban areas in search of work, women are left behind to manage agriculture, livestock, and household duties with limited access to land rights, irrigation, inputs, or credit. The burden of unpaid care and productive labour increases significantly, without commensurate increase in support or decision-making power.

Women also face longer hours of work due to the need for collecting water, as nearby sources dry up. Nutritional insecurity and stress-related illnesses have also been reported, especially among women-headed households.

The absence of male members exposes women to social stigma, sexual harassment, and exploitation, particularly in conservative and deeply patriarchal settings. Women face significant barriers to migration due to socio-cultural restrictions, household responsibilities, and safety concerns²². These same norms limit their participation in community-level decisions on climate mitigation, adaptation, and mobility. In drought-prone Bundelkhand, watershed projects²³ aimed at improving drought resilience of farming through groundwater recharge and agroforestry interventions have shown encouraging results. The community benefits accrued from the watershed interventions include increased crop productivity and access to water, as well as diversification of agriculture and livelihoods. However, entrenched patriarchal norms continue to restrict the visibility, mobility, and communication of women in both household and community spaces, dampening their ability to benefit equally from such interventions.

In the coastal regions, too, we are increasingly witnessing environmental degradation and socio-economic pressures driving complex migration patterns, with distinct gendered dimensions and livelihood repercussions. Research led by LEAD at Krea University, along with several other studies around Pulicat Lake highlights this shift. Silting from industrial projects and pollution has reduced fish yields by 30–40 per cent since 2000, directly threatening the primary livelihoods of over 50,000 fishers.²⁴ This has pushed younger generations to pursue jobs in urban sectors, such as construction or hospitality, rather than traditional fishing.²⁵ Increased cyclones and salinity fluctuations disrupt fishing calendars, forcing seasonal migration to cities like Chennai or Nellore for daily wage work. With 70 per cent fisher households living below the poverty line, women disproportionately migrate to nearby factories – particularly in fish processing and pharmaceuticals due to intersecting pressures:²⁶ loss of drying spaces (*karuvaadu* production), infrastructure projects like police stations, caste-based restrictions in Padu systems that exclude them from fishing rights, growing male unemployment as well as alcohol dependency that shifts economic responsibility onto women.²⁷

With 31.5 per cent female literacy, women lack qualifications for non-farm jobs, pushing them to settle for exploitative informal sector roles in cities²⁸. Women from Dalit communities face restricted mobility compared to dominant caste women, perpetuating cyclical poverty and localised migration. Many women juggle gruelling 12-hour factory shifts along with childcare responsibilities, increasing their health risks and reliance on predatory loans. This interplay of environmental and socio-economic stressors creates a migration trap, where displaced populations face precarious urban livelihoods while losing ancestral ties to coastal ecosystems.

22 https://sustain.org/gender-sensitive-response-to-climate-crisis/?utm_source

23 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339729317_Gender_Transformative_Impacts_from_Watershed_Interventions_Insights_from_a_Mixed-Methods_Study_in_the_Bundelkhand_Region_of_India

24 <https://icsf.net/newss/tamil-nadu-pulicat-lake-needs-chilika-like-intervention-to-save-its-biodiversity/>

25 <https://citizenmatters.in/fishing-community-livelihoods-pulicat-lake-climate-change-environment/>

26 <https://mcc.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Final.pdf>

27 <https://mcc.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Madhana-Rekha-UGC-Care-Journal.pdf>

28 <https://stories.ifmrlead.org/in-the-heart-of-pulicat/>



Policy Recommendations

India must adopt a multi-pronged approach, grounded in inclusivity, resilience, and rights-based governance, to ensure gender-equitable responses to climate-induced migration.

01

Integrate Gender Analysis into Climate Policy Frameworks and Action Plans

Policies such as National Action Plans on Climate Change (NAPCCs) and State Action Plans (SAPCCs) must be informed by gender-disaggregated data, ensure women's participation in climate governance, and allocate resources for gender-responsive adaptation strategies. Internationally, frameworks like the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement must strengthen the implementation of gender action plans, promoting inclusive decision-making and capacity-building.

02

Improve Evidence Generation

There is a critical gap in data and analysis at the intersection of climate change, migration, rapidly evolving labour market dynamics, and the compounding effect of gender, caste and other social identities. Investing in comprehensive primary research is vital to gain insights into the vulnerabilities experienced by women migrants and other marginalised populations to inform the creation of targeted, evidence-based policies and programmes.

03

Strengthen Data Systems to Capture Climate-Induced Migration and its Gendered Impacts

Mandate relevant surveys to document whether climate stressors induce migration. For instance, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2020-21) captured data on migration induced by natural disasters. This practice has since been discontinued, but could potentially help capture climate-induced migration. Similarly, climate-related questions can be included in upcoming Census to address the challenges of climate-induced migration.

04

Expand and Adapt Social Protection Mechanisms for Women Migrants

Make welfare entitlements such as rations under Public Distribution systems (PDS), health insurance, accidental insurance, pension, and rental housing accessible to women migrants, regardless of their location. Simplify documentation requirements and improve outreach bridging information barriers faced by marginalised women. Additionally, governments must ensure full coverage of social protection and livelihood schemes for women who are forced to stay behind or do not have the means to out-migrate.

05

Invest in Resilient Rural Livelihoods and Care Infrastructure

Promote gender-sensitive adaptation strategies to enhance women's access to critical resources like credit, land ownership, and agricultural services. This includes financial assistance programmes that simplify loan applications and enterprise development ventures for women, training in modern farming and climate smart agriculture techniques, and policies that secure land rights and titles for female farmers. Also, support women's self-help groups and micro-enterprises to reduce the pressure to migrate. Local childcare and eldercare infrastructure should be expanded to alleviate the unpaid care burden on women.

06

Build Women's Capacity and Leadership in Governance

Provide targeted training and support to elected women representatives (EWR) and grassroots women's collectives in climate-resilient livelihoods – planning and implementation. Additionally, ensure their meaningful participation in local climate governance, water management bodies, biodiversity committees, and safe migration planning processes.

07

Investing in Education and Skill-Building for Women and Girls

Expand access to quality education, skills and vocational training, and mentorship programmes to empower women and girls with essential skills and knowledge to secure skilled, gainful and sustainable employment towards better economic agency and outcomes.



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