



Climate change, migration, and trafficking in persons - a gendered perspective.

It is no secret that gender inequalities are deeply rooted in our global socio-economic and political structures, societies, and systems. Nearly all dimensions of life have been constructed in this way – created to maintain power imbalances and uphold patriarchal ideas. Gender inequality is about history, structural racism, economics and of course, climate change. All huge topics that have hundreds of years of theories, work, data, research, and cultural context to them.

As has been familiar discourse, crises that induce migration, from conflict to climate disproportionately impact women and girls. Women and girls have the odds stacked against them from birth, and therefore, their security is disproportionately compromised.

The impacts of climate change subsequently deepen these gender inequalities, creating what is effectively a vicious cycle.

As climate change destroys livelihoods and women and girls are forced to migrate, they often face specific risks during their migration journey. Notable impacts are that there are increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation, modern slavery, and trafficking in persons. Migration also disrupts access to support, including, but not limited to sexual and reproductive health and rights, mental health, legal, immigration and language services. Financial and economic strains, lack of access to property and land rights, limited resource freedom and legal protections – all propagated by gender inequalities and patriarchal features, are also realities faced by women and girls before, during and after migration.

In fact, upon arrival in destination countries, migrant women, and girls already on the move are often forced to return to their countries of origin or are at risk of becoming trapped and unprotected along their migration routes.

For example, South Sudan has experienced severe flooding because of climate change, with 2 million people being displaced and 60% of people not having enough to eat, their livelihoods lost, and vulnerabilities heightened. Of course, many are women and girls who are and will continue to face severe and disproportionate impacts.

There are many different areas one can talk about when we look at the gender, climate change and migration nexus. However, this document focuses on modern slavery and trafficking in persons, especially of women and children.

For context, modern slavery is an umbrella term for several highly exploitative practices, including trafficking in persons, forced labour, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation, forced marriage and the worst forms of child labour.

Trafficking in persons refers to the act of recruiting, transporting, harbouring, or receiving persons, through legal and/or illegal means, across international borders or within a country, by the means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion or fraud, for the purpose of exploiting them. So, there is the act, the means, and the purpose.

Whereas, migrant smuggling refers to the illegal movement of people across international borders. And the smuggling stops when the person reaches their destination.

It is important to stress these definitions because when it comes to migration and in particular climate or crisis-induced migration, when people are forced to leave their homes and are desperate to find pathways, those who fall into the hands of traffickers, who know exactly how, when, and where to take advantage of these vulnerabilities, are often treated as illegal immigrants and their experiences of exploitation are overlooked.

Yet, despite significant contributions, migrants worldwide suffer from a lack of meaningful protections and experience a wide range of exploitation and abuse, including trafficking in persons, which again, disproportionately impacts women and girls.

The absence of the implementation of these international standards, and the failure to adopt a human-rights-based approach to climate migrants has enabled a rapidly growing political and corporate attitude towards migration – allowing complicit parties, including states and the private sector to enjoy impunity for a wide range of abusive practices.

Moreover, the threat of retaliatory termination of employment, imprisonment or deportation can compel migrants to find illegal or unsafe migration routes or can lead to migrants enduring abusive conditions in silence.

The structural features of cross-border climate migration can enable, if not encourage, exploitation that reaches trafficking in persons or modern slavery extremes.

In essence, we have to see the political will from States to take action to reduce vulnerabilities to sexual and gender-based violence, exploitation, abuse, modern slavery and trafficking in persons, by committing to the full and effective implementation of guiding international, regional and local climate, migration and anti-trafficking in persons frameworks.

There are several ways moving forward that we can address the significant structural contributions to the increased vulnerabilities of women and girls when climate-induced migration occurs. Briefly, several are:

1. The full, effective, and meaningful leadership and inclusion of all women and girls, especially migrant women, and girls at all levels of decision-making in the context of climate change and

migration as well as adaptation, disaster risk reduction and mitigation. The participation of women and girls in these positions is crucial because they are experts in their own lived realities which strengthens efforts and responses.

2. Safer pathways for migration need to be created to reduce vulnerabilities to sexual and gender-based violence as well as other forms of exploitation and abuse. Upon arrival in destination countries, migrants must be treated with dignity and respect, adopting a human-rights-based approach, avoid criminalisation of those who have been smuggled or trafficked and be provided access to adequate support services.
3. Investment in gender-transformative, systematic disaggregation of data to boost research efforts towards achieving a better understanding of the differentiated impacts of climate change and migration on women and girls.
4. States need to advance the implementation of national and international legal and policy frameworks so that they can comprehensively address climate-induced displacement and migration, protecting climate-displaced persons, particularly women, girls, and highly vulnerable groups. This includes the Global Compact on Migration, Global Compact on Refugees, and the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, among several others.
5. Addressing the wider problem of gender inequality and climate change. We must see concrete climate action to address the root causes of climate-induced migration – combined with actions to promote the economic empowerment, education, digital literacy, and rights of all women and girls.

Ultimately, it is the political will we need to see. Realizing the detrimental impacts of climate change on women and girls, and the transformative potential of migrant women and girls in socio-economic, political, and cultural terms is crucial to facilitating concrete progress.

Doing so, in a gender-transformative manner, would allow for the meaningful protection of all migrant rights and will contribute to and facilitate the advance of overdue efforts to prevent sexual and gender-based violence, including abuse, modern slavery and trafficking in persons in the long term in the context of gender, climate change and migration.

Further Resources:

[Climate-induced migration and modern slavery](#) – Anti-Slavery International and IIED.

[Climate change and modern slavery: a vicious circle](#) – Anti-Slavery International.

[Climate change and modern slavery: the nexus that cannot be ignored](#) – International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

[Modern slavery, environmental degradation and climate change: present and future pathways for addressing the nexus](#) – University of Nottingham Rights Lab.