



Towards Gender-Responsive Climate Policies in India: Addressing the Impacts of Climate Change on Women

by

Bushra Ali Khan

Research Fellow at The Asia Foundation (US)
and IMPRI (India)

India's Climate-Induced Migration Landscape

- **Diverse Ecosystems at Risk:** India's extensive coastlines, river basins, deserts, and deltas make it particularly vulnerable to climate change.
- **Major Climate Risks:** Rising sea levels, desertification, severe droughts, flooding, and unpredictable weather patterns increasingly force people from their homes.
- **1980s Onwards:** Increased climate-related displacement due to major floods in Assam, Odisha, and Bihar; cyclones affecting coastal regions like Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.
- **21st Century Trends:** Accelerated displacement in coastal regions (West Bengal, Gujarat) and Himalayan states due to rising sea levels, glacial melting, and frequent extreme weather events.

Gendered Impacts of Climate Change

- **Heightened Vulnerability for Women:** Climate migration places a disproportionate burden on women especially from low-income families, amplifying existing social inequities.
- **Increased Responsibilities as Primary Caregivers:** Women's caregiving roles add an extra layer of responsibility during displacement, as they manage family needs amid limited resources.
- **Threats to Economic Stability:** With limited access to resources like credit, land rights, and training in alternative skills, women have fewer options to adapt economically.
- **Natural disasters lower the life expectancy of women:** Women and children have been at higher risks and 14 times more likely to die than men during natural disasters.

Legal Framework and Gender Bias

- **Absence of Legal Category for Climate Migrants:** India's legal framework does not formally recognise climate migrants, leaving them without a distinct legal category or protections.
- **Reliance on Outdated Laws:** Existing regulations, such as the 1946 Foreigners Act and the 1955 Citizenship Act, lack provisions to address modern migration issues, treating all migrants under a single, undifferentiated framework.
- **Climate Migrants (Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2022:** This proposed bill seeks to establish protections and rehabilitation measures for those displaced by climate impacts, yet lacks specific gendered considerations needed to address women's unique challenges in migration.
- **Asylum Bill, 2015:** Intended to provide more comprehensive asylum rights, this bill includes refugees but does not specifically address climate migrants, overlooking the unique vulnerabilities of climate-displaced women and marginalised groups.

Case Study: The Sundarbans

- ❑ **Location:** At the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, straddling the India-Bangladesh border.
- ❑ **Ecosystem:** Home to one of the world's largest mangrove forests, exceptionally biodiverse yet highly vulnerable to climate change, with women in these communities often bearing the brunt of environmental degradation due to their dependence on local resources.
- ❑ **Key Environmental Challenges:**
 - **Decline in Landmass:** Shrinking land leaves families displaced, and women are often tasked with navigating new, unstable living situations without adequate support.
 - **Rising Sea Levels:** Flooded areas and forced relocations disproportionately affect women's access to clean water, healthcare, and safe housing.
 - **Increasing Cyclones:** Frequent cyclones disrupt community structures, amplifying women's roles as caregivers and further limiting their access to economic opportunities.
 - **Soil Salinization:** Saltwater intrusion impacts agriculture and freshwater sources, pushing women—who are primary gatherers of water and food—into increasingly labor-intensive survival roles.
- **Women of Sundarbans are sensitive towards these short term and long-term impacts of the climatic uncertainties.**

What is the way forward?

By keeping these in mind:

- Recognise that women are more vulnerable in climate change driven scenarios.
- Understand and address gender-specific natural resource use pattern.
- Identify women's particular skills and capacities that lend themselves to mitigation and adaptation.

Policymakers could follow these steps:

1. Recognition, assessment, and attribution
2. Cooperation and collaboration
3. Plan of action
4. Implementation