Climate change is taking away people’s homes, communities, and lifestyles. According to a report from the International Office on Migration, since 2008 an average of 26.4 million people per year have been displaced from their homes by disasters — the equivalent to one person being displaced every second. Displacement risk is increasing as more vulnerable people are living in disaster-prone areas, largely due to inequalities faced by people of varying genders, races, sexualities, and ages. In many places around the globe, communities are no longer able to adapt to the threats of more intense and frequent storms, while others are seeing their homes lose land to encroaching shorelines or losing the ability to grow food with the slow-onset impacts of climate change.

The United Nations Development Program’s 2016 Human Development Report cites that demographic shifts create new forms of advantage and disadvantage throughout transitions from peace to insecurity and other compounding threats including epidemics, financial crises, natural disasters, and climate change. With forced displacement reaching a record high in 2016, the world must understand and prepare to protect the dignity and rights of migrants.

**HUMAN MOBILITY 101**

As climate change progresses, we are seeing increasing impacts that make adaptation impossible and migration necessary. The Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility defines three primary ways that human mobility interacts with climate change:

- **Migration:** Movements that are predominantly voluntary
- **Displacement:** Situations where people are forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence

**How is this different from “Climate Refugees”?**

Displacement and forced migration as created by climate change rarely falls within the legal boundaries of the definition of a refugee, whose primary motives for seeking asylum is conflict or repression. Because it is often hard to definitively attribute impacts solely to climate change, current refugee law, as established by the Geneva Convention of 1951, does not protect people seeking who have crossed country borders seeking refuge from climate induced losses or conflicts. This means that the term “climate refugee” is by and large a misnomer and holds no legal standing.

In addition, many communities reject the label and find it offensive. In fact, most people who leave their homes are known as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), or people who have fled from their homes as a result of armed conflicts, widespread violence, human rights violations, or natural disasters, but who have not gone outside the borders of their country.

To learn more about terminology used to talk about climate change and migration, you can refer to the UN Refugee Agency’s terminology guide.
Planed Relocation: An organized relocation, ordinarily instigated, supervised, and carried out by the state with content or upon the request of the community

Climate Induced Human Mobility Further Social Marginalization

Climate change is not gender neutral; nor are existing inequalities such as access to goods, services, and capital. Social norms also further limit agency and mobility for women and other marginalized populations. According to the Hague Institute for Global Justice, climate change is a known threat multiplier, meaning that climate change disrupts and puts additional strains on livelihoods including food, health, economic, environmental, personal, and political security. The threat becomes even greater for women and people across the gender spectrum in LGBTQ communities due to existing systemic hardships. Deprivations disproportionately facing women include a lack of education, lower incomes, lack of political positions and influence, and limited access to health care. The UNDP cites the deprivations facing women as “the most extreme barrier to global progress in human development.”

Climate change impacts are more deeply entrenching identity-based inequalities through increased vulnerability to violence, loss of community and support systems, and more in the wake of human mobility. The following examples shed a light as to how and to what extent:

- Globally, women face many forms of violence during disasters, migration, and when seeking asylum.
- According to a report by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security, women and children make up the majority of current displaced persons globally. This comes with many hazards, such as violence at the hands of the smugglers whom they depend upon to shepherd them to countries where they are seeking asylum or grueling and dangerous evacuation routes. In addition to these perilous journeys, women and adolescent girls are more at risk for sex trafficking or other forms of bonded labor and may be forced into trading sex with border guards and others for access.
- In the United States, race can amplify negative impacts felt by people, especially women and LGBTQ individuals, displaced by climate change.
- In reference to displacement after Hurricane Katrina, Roberts (2009: 40) states, “...households headed by low-income single mothers in New Orleans has [sic] dropped from 18,000 in 2005 to 3,000, indicating a significant displacement of these women and their children.” We know that following Hurricane Katrina, a disproportionate amount of black communities were condemned and redeveloped. According to research by the Public Policy Research lab, African-American women were both most impacted and faced the most obstacles in their attempts to return home in the months and years after the storm.

More Research is Needed to Support Communities

While we know that climate-fueled migration and displacement are problems that must be addressed differently based on identities within each community, there are few guidelines and bodies of research devoted to understanding the many forms of climate impacts that call for human mobility from a lens of social justice and human rights.

- More information is needed about the specific dynamics of gender-differentiated impacts in the face of climate change
- Better data is needed, such as gender and sex disaggregated—before and after impacts—to best design appropriate response strategies

You Can Take Action in Your Community

- Advocate for gender-responsive local disaster response planning in your community, such as the integration of safeguards to protect women and LGBTQ survivors from gender based violence in post disaster and temporary living situations or systems to check in on the elderly in the event of an emergency. Request that all data gathered post disaster be disaggregated by sex, gender, sexuality, race, class, etc.
- Donate time to your local community resettlement group doing integration services or refugee agency.