

Uncovering Nuances With Intersectionality

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*The relationship between climate change and migration is intricate. The [first article](#) in our ‘**Under the Weather, On the Move**’ series talked about the context and conditions within which people move or do not move. Establishing migration as a layered phenomenon, it further discussed how climate change impacts are diverse and closely linked to experiences of identity and sociocultural norms.*

This second article explains why an intersectional lens is needed to comprehend the underlying factors that lead to these widely differing impacts.

Every individual has a complex identity. Gender, social class, religion, caste, sexuality, age, and other social markers of differentiation intersect with each other, creating varied experiences of inclusion and exclusion. As a result, lived experiences are not uniform even for a seemingly similar group of people.

For instance, women from marginalised communities or minority religions may face the double disadvantage of being a woman as well as a person of a certain ethnicity or background. On the other hand, marginalised communities (like refugees) may be excluded as a whole, irrespective of the differences in gender, age, ability, and may have limited voice and representation socially and politically. Disparities in physical abilities and economic classes can also add to the variation in experiences. For example, men who are differently abled might experience greater vulnerability and fear for personal safety in public spaces, as compared to their able-bodied counterparts.

Thus, for understanding the varied experiences in a context, it is important to consider the norms and processes that define socioeconomic hierarchies and the uneven power relationships between people. Intersectionality can shed light on how multiple social categories converge and influence each other to create unique everyday lived experiences and vulnerabilities for different people.

Climate migration with an intersectional lens

In India, the sociocultural and patriarchal expectations determine the division of roles and responsibilities, access to resources and information, and ability to participate in decision-making, and thus shape the context-specific socioeconomic vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities further intersect with those emerging from climate-related risks and hazards, thereby multiplying the overall risks, and giving rise to diverse responses.

But if studies focus only on one or two aspects of vulnerability, the findings can be limiting. For instance, when gender disparities in climate migration are considered, women can be seen as more vulnerable than men (especially if the material differences and their limited capacity to contribute to decision-making are taken into account) and other factors that create variation in experiences may be missed. For example, disabled elderly men may be more vulnerable than some women, or widowed, estranged, or single women may face greater challenges and social stigma compared to married women from the same community.

An intersectional lens may be more apt for understanding the nuanced vulnerabilities and risks experienced, as it can help see the wide variations in adaptation strategies and migration experiences, besides allowing us to understand who moves or stays behind — by force or by choice — and why.

For instance, when migration is an adaptation strategy in the face of climate risks (as opposed to a compulsion imposed by an extreme event), often only able-bodied and young men are expected to

relocate for work, while women, children, the elderly, and the differently abled stay behind, continuing to experience climate risks. In cases where men migrate to urban areas, they often end up living in precarious circumstances, with unfair employment terms and unsafe working conditions. They may also live frugally to send more money home.

For families engaged in agriculture, when men relocate for work, women are often double-burdened as they have to take up farming duties in addition to their original caregiving responsibilities. Sometimes, women take on new roles and become temporary heads of their households, but with little power to make decisions as they are less likely to have financial control, own assets, or have good access to social protection. In instances where whole families migrate, women, while continuing with their caregiving responsibilities, try to find informal work or undertake menial tasks due to poor skills and often end up with a meagre pay.

Then again, children of migrant families face challenges in continuing their education in new locations. At times, they are forced to live away from parents (with relatives in their hometowns), as there may be little or no childcare support or due to the high cost of living in cities. At the hometown too, young girls may be forced to discontinue their education or marry, when families cannot cope with repeated cycles of climatic extremities and have limited resources to migrate.

Not a level playing field

People's abilities to respond to climate change impacts vary widely. Our recent report on [climate migration](#) analyses case studies from India to understand how multiple contextual processes shape adaptive capacities, giving rise to different adaptation strategies, including migration.

We find that while interest in understanding the impact of migration on restructuring household compositions and roles is growing, there is limited work that highlights the risks of gender-based violence, abuse, human trafficking, and issues of access to sexual, reproductive, and mental health services for all genders (at both origin and destination). Also, participation in decision-making is not a given for all, although every individual has a unique role to play in the processes of climate migration. For example, women — despite being key contributors to adaptation processes and holding valuable traditional knowledge and practices — have limited participation in local affairs usually.

This multitude of factors warrants an intersectional approach for understanding the pluralities of climate migration. Such an approach would entail inclusive and gender-responsive processes that incorporate insights from all individuals and also ensure their participation in policy formulation, making way for a conducive policy environment in the climate migration space.

Our next and final article in the series discusses how the current policies in India understand and address climate migration.

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