Climate Change, Human Mobility and Feminist Political Economy

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BETTY BARKHA, SEP 30 2021

As thousands fled from their homes across Afghanistan, the world watched in horror and despair, again! People have been forced from their homes, cities and countries because of violent conflict, extremist groups and increasing insecurities. Yet, another crisis looms close and global leaders continue to ignore its severity. The climate crisis, through both sudden and slow-onset environmental impacts like cyclones, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, droughts, floods and wildfires has caused over 30.7 million new displacements in 2020. Climate change-induced human mobilities, such as migration, forced displacement or planned retreat/ relocation, are almost always projected as an issue of the future, but the climate crisis is no longer a futuristic threat. As in most crises, the impacts and experiences vary by individual characteristics and intersecting circumstances such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic class, geographical location, disability and gender. However, if global leaders and the international community act proactively and with urgency, there is opportunity to not only prevent another humanitarian crisis but use it as an opportunity to transform social and gender injustices.

Changes in the climate and environmental degradation are pushing people to consider mobility as a form of adaptation, inherently posing risks to all dimensions of human security: personal, environmental, economic, health, food, community and political security. Despite evolving research, there is a gap in directly connecting human mobility to impacts of climate change and natural disasters. Evidence shows that areas of the world are becoming less habitable due to sudden and slow-onset climate related hazards, however directly attributing human mobility to impacts of climate change remain difficult. While people move for numerous reasons, even in the face of a climate crisis there are underlying socioeconomic, cultural, political and environmental processes that either enable or hinder people's ability to cope where they are or result in them moving (See: Gemenne *et al.*, 2014; Warner, 2018; Bower and Weerasinghe, 2021). However, the degree to which people are affected by climate change and their decisions on climate induced mobility are heavily linked to gender, age, socio-economic status, power over and access to resources.

Across all cases of climate change-induced movements of people, whether forced or voluntary, there are significant challenges posed to human security, self-determination, identity, culture, loss of home and adaptation to the ways of host communities. Currently, there is opportunity to holistically address existing insecurities, protect homes, communities and livelihoods while also using it as a prospect to transform existing social and gender inequalities. At a global level, initial mention of climate change-induced human mobility was at the UNFCCC Conference of Parties in 2010 through the Cancun Adaptation Framework and has since been recognised in the Paris Agreement, Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage and more broadly within the Women, Peace and Security agenda and Sustainable Development Goals. This means that any action in response to climate change induced human mobility is already a part of pre-agreed outcomes that requires localisation. Many developing countries, who are on the frontlines of the climate crises have actively started planning for relocations if the need arises. For example, countries like Jamaica and Zambia have launched Resettlement Strategies and plans targeted at disaster risk management and climate adaptation efforts. Countries like Myanmar and Vietnam have also been progressively undertaking planned relocation in the Delta region for flood affected populations. The situation worsens for Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) because of its geographical remoteness, vulnerability to climate impacts and the land size of the islands. All Pacific SIDs are considering human mobility options within and across borders, such as migration

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pathways and planned relocation.

Studies on climate-induced planned relocation, forced displacement and climate migration continue to demonstrate how disruptive they can be to various aspects of human security and the social fabric of communities (Pill 2020; Piggott-McKellar, McNamara, and Nunn 2019). The costs of climate change adaptation and induced mobilities are much higher than just economic and financial losses. Pacific SIDS communities' challenges and complexities include, but are not limited to, changes in the ecosystems such as increasing salinity, sea-level rise, coral bleaching, freshwater contamination, increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters. The World Bank estimates that adaptation initiatives will cost Pacific SIDS significantly, for example coastal protection efforts alone might cost the Marshall Islands USD $58 million (13 percent of GDP) and Fiji USD $329 million (3 percent of GDP) per year (World Bank 2017). These projections were based on the best-case scenario and did not account for other adaption efforts or disaster recovery and response initiatives. The non-economic losses of climate change induced mobility have been identified in literature as impacting physical and psychological wellbeing, sense of belonging, cultural heritage, disruptions to social cohesion, family structures and changed labour conditions.

Undertakings like planned relocations require dedicated finances, experts and extensive consultations with the affected community. Past experiences of planned relocation show an increase in landlessness, unemployment, socio-economic inequalities, food scarcity, conflict and an overall deterioration in well-being (McLeman and Gemenne 2018; Adger et al. 2014; McAdam 2010). Currently, most planned relocation efforts are largely state-led protection interventions undertaken to safeguard people from impacts of climate change and natural disasters, ideally thorough transparent participatory consultations with the community.

Moreover, decisions on planned relocation (when, where, why and how) involve the exercise of power by the various stakeholders involved, for this thesis it is primarily the state and the community. Power in this context refers to the ability of individuals and institutions to influence decisions that are critical to the process of relocations, for example, control and allocation of resources or access to training and outreach initiatives (Bertana 2020; Tanyag and True 2019). Studies from Fiji's relocation of the Vunidogoloa village show that despite improved infrastructure and living conditions, the women felt burdened in the social reproductive roles. Research also shows how local and traditional structures continued to limit women's input from decision making spaces. 'You are not told that you cannot attend, but if you are not specifically asked to attend then you do not go' (Bertana 2020, 12). My current research further examines how gender disparities are (and can be) addressed based on the premise of safeguarding human security and how it impacts the wider political economy.

Feminist Political Economy of Climate Change-Induced Human Mobility in Fiji

Within Politics and International Relations scholarship, the study of political economy is targeted at understanding who benefits, who holds power and who makes the decisions. In the case of climate change-induced human mobility, particularly for populations most impacted such as those in Pacific SIDs communities, this involves examining the role of the state, international partners and context of the affected community. For example, Fiji's state-led efforts and responses to planned relocation need to consider social, cultural and traditional aspects that are strongly linked to individual and communal identity for the *iTaukei* community (indigenous Fijians). For non-indigenous Fijians, such as Indo-Fijians the complexities are linked to their sense of belonging to the land they call home. In taking a feminist approach, this includes recognising gender inequality and high rates of sexual and gender-based violence for Pacific women, girls and gender non-binary individuals who remain vulnerable in face of climate change. For example, post tropical cyclone Winston in Fiji, in addition to a bill of USD $900 million in losses and damages, there were significant impacts on women led households which led to economic, health and personal security concerns. This included loss of income for households dependent on primary industries like farming and fisheries and a notable increase in sexual and gender-based violence post-disasters.

Additionally, the burden of care for family members also fell on the women and girls, mostly because of social norms that dictate gendered behaviour. Women are primary care providers in Fiji, disruptions such as forced displacements, planned relocations and ad-hoc community consultations have a significant impact on mothers as they face increased pressure to meet domestic responsibilities, especially in terms of food security and accessing

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necessary childcare. Social reproduction and care are a crucial element of gendered norms and practices that are accepted. The time spent on paid work and unpaid work in households and communities is a crucial element in understanding value, through an expanded lens of money, labour and time.

Across intersections of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic communities in Fiji, the impact of climate change-induced displacement and planned relocation has major psycho-social impacts. State-led responses, such as Planned Relocation and Displacement Guidelines need to holistically account for the complex relationships between the land and people. There is also potential for efforts directed at planned relocation and displacement to transform social practices, for instance, in reducing gender inequality. Aligning global and regional climate policy instruments with national level action plans that centre human security and gender justice are crucial pathway forward. Pacific SIDS like Fiji require financial, technical, and capacity support to address loss and damage, enhance implementation of adaptation plans, integrate focus areas of the Paris Agreement Gender Action Plan (GAP) and the Warsaw Mechanism. We can respond to the plea of Pacific Islanders fighting to save their homes, but we can also use it as an opportunity to change so much more.

Conclusion

There is much that remains unexamined, but we have sufficient evidence that clarifies the gendered impacts of climate change. The responses to climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts need to be targeted at not only addressing climate change impacts but also reducing gender and social inequalities. Science alone is insufficient, planning and implementation efforts need to prioritise a human security centred, human rights-based approach that recognises the intersectional gendered impacts of climate-induced human mobility. Climate change is a global security threat and must be addressed as such through dedicated resources and intersectional analysis which recognises situated knowledge of those most affected. Global leaders have seen first-hand the devastation of people being displaced within the last decade, there is currently time to proactively accelerate action to avoid another crisis. Immediate global action on climate change needs be based on basis of collaboration, solidarity and co-responsibility of a crisis that will be devastating for us all.

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Betty Barkha is currently a PhD Candidate at Monash University and her PhD research is focused on examining the gendered impacts of climate change induced mobilities in the Pacific, specifically looking at the political economy of planned relocation and displacement in Fiji. Betty has been involved with various development organisations in Asia and the Pacific region since 2009. She is currently on the board of directors for International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), the CIVICUS alliance and the Association of Women in Development (AWID). Betty is also an advisor to FRIDA Young Feminist Fund and the Global Resilience Fund for Women and Girls (in response to COVID-19). Betty was the Monash GPS Visiting Youth Fellow in Women's Rights in Asia and the Pacific in 2017 and holds a Master of Arts in Sociology and a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Psychology.