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An Assessment of Climate Refugees: With Special Attention to Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons, who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or chose to do so, either provisionally or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad. It is said that by the end of 2050, this constant exhaustion and volatility towards climate migrants, there will be 200 million climate refugees with no protection from the harsh circumstances they will have to face. There is a major culture lag in the acceptance of these refugees owing to nationalist and anti-immigrant sentiments. One of the major stakeholders in this tussle between survival and displacement are women. Due to the patriarchal nature of the society, women are forced to circumvent and mitigate the consequences of climate induced displacement. In this attempt, there is a large-scale violation of their rights such as sanitation, health and educational rights which further restricts movement in societal structure. This paper aims to highlight the feminist perspective of the struggles of climate refugees and attempts to highlight the unanswered questions that are put forth time and again. It also seeks to provide suggestions and answers to aid in safeguarding the rights of these people to uphold the morals and ethics which we as a society have vowed to uphold.

Keywords: *Climate Refugees, Climate Change, Feminism, Displacement, Global Warming.*

I. INTRODUCTION

“No one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land.”

— **Warsan Shire**

It is a well-known fact that people migrate from one place to another when the area they are living in seems to be unliveable for various reasons. We have seen a lot of people migrating from rural to urban areas. We have heard that people migrate from different countries due to religious persecution or governmental laws, etc. and in the time of COVID-19, the terms

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"migrants" or "migration" are surely not novel. However, the refugees that most individuals are not aware of are 'climate migrants', 'climate refugees' or 'environmental refugees'.¹² This is because of the fact that the term 'climate refugee' is very vague in itself and hence, there is no mention of the term 'climate refugee' in International Law.

The most agreed upon definition of 'climate refugees' as proposed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) states that, "Environmental migrants are persons or groups of persons, who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or chose to do so, either provisionally or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad."³

There will be around 200 Million migrants by the end of 2050,⁴ which means that a sole country made of all the refugees in the world would be the 4th largest in terms of the population. That is how grave and serious this problem really is. It is a common notion that the War is the biggest threat to humanity but is that really true? Statistics show that climate change has displaced more people than war ever did.⁵ Meanwhile, the wave of nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiments across the globe has made things really difficult for the countries and international bodies to follow prevailing refugee protocols.

(A) Objectives

This research paper aims to focus on the concept of climate change, the ways through which we humans contribute to climate change, who are impacted the most and are facing its dire consequences. This research paper will also provide a feminist perspective of the climate refugee theory.

(B) Research Problems

This paper deals with the following research problems:

1. What are the causes of the rise in the number of climate refugees?
2. What are the impacts on women amidst a climate refugee crisis?
3. Who should take the responsibility?

² Architesh Panda, *Climate Refugees: Implications for India*, 20 ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY 74, 76-79 (2010) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27807029>.

³ Discussion note: *Migration and the Environment*, IOM, (2007)

⁴ Norman Myers, *Environmental Refugees*, 19 POPULATION AND ENVIRONMENT 165, 167-82 (1997)

⁵ WORLD MIGRATION REPORT, (2020)

(C) Hypothesis

The hypothesis of this research paper is: “Climate refugees is the biggest humanitarian crisis of the 21st century.”

(D) Literature Review

Through the course of this research, I referred to several websites, books, and many research papers. The authors of the book titled “*Climate Refugees: The science, The People, The Jurisdiction and The Future*” have done a commendable job. The book aims to highlight the juridical dilemmas and urge to define “climate refugees” in juridical terms. It examines the triggers of climate migration and the international and European frameworks and policy responses, e.g., cross-border movements and the Paris Agreement. The report also tends to the human, societal, national, and international consequences of climate-driven migration.

The work of Architesh Panda is very enlightening as it gives a clear understanding of how climate change affects the human population. Norman Myers has written a couple of beautiful Papers in which he has comprehensively discussed climate change, its impacts on humans, the need for international recognition and legislation, etc.

In her work, Nidhi Adhlaka, has discussed the hypocrisy of developed countries that how developed countries are taking the advantage of the misery of poor undeveloped countries.

A study of websites like ‘womanwatch.org’ and various documentaries by BBC are done in order to understand the plight of women in this whole climate refugee crisis.

II. GLOBAL WARMING AND CLIMATE REFUGEES

It is a common notion that climate change is a natural phenomenon. Some consider it an Act of God, but one wonders if this could possibly be true. Humans are involved in many processes by which we intentionally or unintentionally contribute to climate change. We shall discuss this in brief but let us first understand- what is climate change?

“Climate change is defined as a considerable change in weather conditions, whether in the form of earth becoming warmer, wetter or drier over numerous decades or more.”⁶ Many people often use the term ‘global warming’ and ‘climate change’ interchangeably and though this is a sign of terminological insufficiency, it is evident that global warming is a major type of climate change.

Climate change can extensively affect human migration in three distinct ways. First, the

⁶ Melissa Denchak, *Global Warming Change*, NRDC, (2017)

warming of the atmosphere in some regions can affect the agriculture, as the land would become infertile due to the lack of water. Second, rising severe weather events would facilitate mass displacement. Third, the rise in sea level would permanently displace people living in the low-lying coastal areas.⁷

Both, the rise in temperature and the rise in sea level are results of global warming. Chloro Fluoro Carbons (CFCs) are considered to be the major reason behind global warming and humans emit CFCs in many ways while using air conditioners in their homes, by using refrigerators, etc. Carbon footprints will be discussed briefly in the last chapter.

The temperature of earth increases due to global warming. Glaciers melt due to these rising temperatures, leading to a rise in sea levels. A rise in temperature is also responsible for the thermal expansion of ocean waters which is also a major cause for the sea level rise. It is estimated that with the rise of every 1-degree temperature, the moisture carrying capacity of air increases by 7 percent. This can cause intensive rainfalls in several terrestrial regions. All of these can lead to a sea level rise by 3 meters which will prove to be fatal for the coastal areas.⁸

Various treaties have been signed by the International Bodies to avoid these problems. One of them is 'The Paris Agreement.' "The fundamental goal of the Paris Agreement is to improve the global response to the challenge of climate change by keeping the global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to seek measures to further minimize the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius."⁹

Furthermore, it is evident from cases like the Assam floods, Sundarbans, etc. that climate change is displacing people in large numbers. In the year 2017, 2.6 million people were affected in a small state of Assam, India.¹⁰ It is estimated that 36 American cities will soon be submerged into the water by the end of 2060.¹¹

Research shows that the Earth's climate is varying at a rate that has exceeded most scientific forecasts¹² and many families and communities have already suffered its consequences. It would not be wrong if we were to say that climate refugees are in the biggest humanitarian

⁷ Architesh Panda, *Climate Refugees: Implications for India*, 20 *ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY* 74, 76-79 (2010), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27807029>.

⁸ Gulrez Shah Azhar, *Climate Change will displace millions in coming decades*, *THE CONVERSATION*, (Dec. 19, 2017)

⁹ *The Paris Agreement*, UNFCCC

¹⁰ *Assam floods: 26 lakh people affected*, *INDIA TODAY*, (July 15, 2019)

¹¹ *These American cities will soon be under water*, *USA TODAY*, (June 18, 2019)

¹² *Climate change and disaster displacement*, UNHCR

crisis that we could face in the 21st century.

III. THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

We are all affected as ocean levels rise, when harvests collapse, when natural catastrophes threaten ecosystems and claim lives. However, there is one strata of society that is affected the most by all these climatic changes, and they are the women. A 2015 report by Georgetown University found that "climate change is a global challenge that burdens all humanity, but not equally." Women are disproportionately affected by environmental changes for many reasons.¹³ Climate change has significant impacts on freshwater resources and all over the developing world, girls and women bear the burden to bring fresh water to their families for different household chores. Water is rarely sufficient to fulfill the needs of the family and when this happens, she needs to face the anger of her frustrated husband. Often, she is the one who needs to cut down her basic requirements as a member of the family which results in poor sanitation, and hence, she has to face different health-related problems.

In places where the arsenic contamination of groundwater is prominent, increased flood levels intensify the exposure of arsenic and this leads to various health complications.¹⁴ "Arsenic exposure also manifests itself in the form of skin lesions that usually has negative social repercussions for arsenic-poisoning (arsenicosis) victims—the situation is particularly worse for women, who can be shunned, excluded, and stigmatized, based on physical appearance. This also impairs the eligibility of single women to get married, and in many cases, unmarried women are more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion."¹⁵

Drylands or desertification has also stricken women very badly. As we live in a patriarchal society, the husband is considered the major decision maker regarding the farm, and the role of the woman is to support her husband and cook food and collect fodder, etc. Due to desertification, the land loses its fertility and as a result production comes down because of this, the man needs to migrate to different urban places in search of jobs, temporarily and in many cases permanently.

When the husband is not around to help her, she needs to do all the work by herself as she needs to perform the job of her husband too and has to look after her children. In most of the cases, the migrating husband is contributing less and less to the family income and she needs to put every bit of hers for the survival of her children and herself. In many cases, she also has

¹³ Sarah Lux Lee, *why climate change is a feminist issue... and what you can do about it*, TREE SISTERS

¹⁴ Khan, MMH, and Et al., *Magnitude of Arsenic Toxicity in Tube-Well Drinking Water in Bangladesh*, *ASIAN PACIFIC JOURNAL OF CANCER PREVENTION* (2003)

¹⁵ *Arsenic Migration in Bangladesh*, UNICEF

to face harassment as her husband is not there to “protect” her.¹⁶

For one thing, women make up to the majority of the world’s poor, in many countries they are assigned for most of the food production and agricultural work which increase their chances of vulnerability due to change in temperature, floods and droughts. Primary care and responsibilities of families are also on the shoulder of the women, and when the resources become scarce their work load increases. Since women also have fewer access to money, when a natural tragedy happens, they are more likely to be the last to flee – “a 2007 study by the London School of Economics found that natural disasters are more likely to kill women than men.”¹⁷

As “the woman is the one who is in the lowest economic and social position, she is the one who is often the most vulnerable to climate change.”

IV. WHO SHOULD BE HELD LIABLE FOR CLIMATE REFUGEES?

In the first chapter, we have already discussed how individuals contribute to global warming. In this chapter, we will look at how carbon footprints contribute to climate change but first let us understand- what is a carbon footprint? A carbon footprint is defined as the amount of greenhouse gases emitted into the environment by a single human activity — primarily carbon dioxide.

There are both man-made and natural ways by which carbon dioxide is emitted in the atmosphere. Natural sources include decomposition, ocean release and respiration while man-made sources come from practices like cement generation, deforestation as well as the burning of fossil fuels like oil, coal, and natural gas.¹⁸ All individuals, in some way or another, emit carbon dioxide and hence contribute to global warming. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), carbon dioxide has been identified as one of the most dominant factors global warming and hence for climate change.¹⁹ CO₂ emissions from cities are known to be in particular, the single greatest human contribution to climate change.²⁰ Interestingly, according to the 2014 World Bank database, 69 percent of the world's total CO₂ has been emitted by top 10 countries, while 82% of the world's overall CO₂ emissions are made

¹⁶ *Gender and Desertification*, IFAD

¹⁷ Eric Neumayer and Thomas Plumper, *The Gendered Nature of Natural Disasters: The Impact of Catastrophic Events on the Gender Gap in Life Expectancy*, LSE RESEARCH, (2002)

¹⁸ *Main sources of carbon di oxide emissions*, CO₂ HUMAN EMISSIONS, (Dec. 13, 2017)

¹⁹ Thomas C. Frohlich and Liz Blossom, *these countries produce the most CO₂ emissions*, USA TODAY, (July 14, 2019)

²⁰ GLOBAL RESOURCE OUTLOOK, (2019)

by 20 countries.²¹

The richer, developed countries are the ones that have contributed the most to the global carbon footprint.²² “Resource extraction has more than tripled since 1970, and continues to grow, although population has only doubled in that period,” according to the 2019 Global Resources Outlook of the United Nations.²³ It comes as no surprise that the countries that emit the most CO₂ are also among the countries that regulate the world's oil.

After all, the rich countries are the ones that are contributing the most to the CO₂ emissions, and the poor-developing countries are facing its consequences. It only seems fair that they be held more responsible to bear the load of climate refugees, in a concept akin to the polluter pays principle.

And so indeed, some analysts have suggested that more refugees should be taken in countries that bear significant responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions. Alternatively, the biggest carbon polluters in the world should contribute to a fund that would pay for those temporarily and permanently displaced for refugee treatment and resettlement.²⁴

V. CASE STUDY OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is one of the greatest victims of environmental change as it has been severely struck by disasters related with climate change over the years. Data shows that majority of Bangladesh's population lives than less than five meters above the mean sea level which means that they are at a very high risk. It is predicted that by 2050, 17 percent of its land will be submerged into water due to flooding caused by environmental change, which will give birth to around 20 million more climate refugees.²⁵

The population density of Bangladesh is very high. More than 161 million people lives in the areas where population density is as high as 1240 people per sq. km. and as a result of which it holds 7th position in the climate vulnerability index while it is among the top 3 countries which are most prone to hit by disasters.²⁶

Most notably, Cyclone Bhola in the 1970's caused three hundred thousand casualties while cyclone Sidr takes away the life of more than three thousand people, ransacking the households of more than 2.3 million people. 234 people lost their lives due to Cyclone Aila in 2009, while

²¹ IPCC, (2014)

²² *Main sources of carbon di oxide emissions*, CO₂ HUMAN EMISSIONS, (Dec. 13, 2017)

²³ WORLD BANK, (2014)

²⁴ Thomas C. Frohlich and Liz Blossom, “These countries produce the most CO₂ emissions,” *USA TODAY* (July 14, 2019)

²⁵ National Geographic Society, (2016)

²⁶ *Floods in Bangladesh*, *INDIA TODAY*, (2009)

in 1998 more than 65 percent of Bangladesh was submerged by floods.²⁷

Currently, the bio-capacity per person on earth is 1.7 global hectares, which should be equal to the biological footprint of the planet. The citizens of Bangladesh use less than 50 percent of the resources than planet's average individual. On the other hand, there are countries like Australia which needs 5.5 planets to fulfill their citizens 'wants'. In other words, three additional planets would be required if everyone started living the lifestyle of an average UK citizen.²⁸

According to the World Bank, Bangladesh secures a position of 162 out of 199 countries in the CO₂ emission index but still, the impacts of climate change are catastrophic in Bangladesh. It simply means that someone else is doing the dirty work while poor countries like Bangladesh are facing the consequences of the deeds done by other countries.

VI. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

It is estimated that over two billion people worldwide rely on the vulnerable ecosystems of arid and semi-arid regions, with 90% of them living in developing countries. As a result, the poorest countries bear the brunt of the impacts of global warming, which is mostly produced by developed nations. Droughts and desertification are affecting livelihoods and food in this region, with some crops and animals unlikely to thrive in specific areas if temperatures become too hot and dry, or too cold and rainy. Small-scale farmers have been impacted very hard. Environmental migration has the potential to cause conflicts with neighbouring groups as a result of a rising number of people vying for a limited number of resources.

The climate crisis affects the human population in general but women are the ones who are most badly affected by it as they hold the lowest position on the economic pedestal. Climate events like desertification, soil erosion, droughts affect the females the most as they are the ones who are assigned the task of bringing water and take care of the other household chores. Arsenic exposure manifests to skin lesions in females as a result of which they are ostracised in society. Society expects females to be beautiful and have fair and bright skin but due to those lesions, females are usually mentally harassed by the family members and society, and in many cases, she ends up not getting married.

Data shows that rich and developed countries are the ones who are polluting the environment the most. Hence I firmly believe that the 'polluter pays' principle should be applied and the countries who are the biggest polluters should be held accountable to pay for the resettlement

²⁷ *Floods in Bangladesh*, INDIA TODAY, (2009)

²⁸ GLOBAL FOOTPRINT NETWORK, (2016)

of the climate migrants.

The current environmental crisis is the warning alarm for the forthcoming humanitarian crisis. Climate change has displaced millions of people around the globe and these numbers are only going to rise in the future. The first step is to take mitigation measures to slow down the pace of climate change. For this, the big emitter countries have to take responsibility because they have the access to the technologies which can play a vital role in the betterment of the situation. International recognition needs to be provided to at least address the problems of the refugees. Women should also play a role in the frontier as they are the major sufferers.

Hence, authorities at regional, national, and international levels should deal with the climate refugee problem in a serious fashion, recognising it as a present reality, and not a distant possibility.

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