

Opinion: Do Women Really Make Up 80 Percent of All Climate Migrants?

The figure is frequently cited by activists, policymakers, and the media, but it is a dubious statistic of murky origin.

Left: A crowd of climate migrant workers hurries cross the Poshur river to attend to their office in time by boat at Mongla city in Bagerhat, Bangladesh on August 28, 2022. Visual: Zakir Hossain Chowdhury/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

BY DISHA SHETTY ([HTTPS://UNDARK.ORG/UNDARK-AUTHOR/DISHA-SHETTY/](https://undark.org/undark-author/disha-shetty/)) 06.14.2023

IT IS AN alarming and evocative statistic: An estimated 80 percent of climate migrants are women. The figure has been used by the United Nations (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/07/climate-change-exacerbates-violence-against-women-and-girls#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%2080,women%2C%20a>) in its official communication. It has been repeated in the media (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/26/climate-change-crisis-women-feminism-pakistan->

floods) and by human rights groups (<https://www.wecaninternational.org/why-women>). But it stands on shaky scientific ground — and most likely is wildly off the mark.

To begin with, the 80 percent figure fails the basic smell test. As someone who has reported on climate change and migration across India, it is clear to me that men are typically the first to move (<https://fullerproject.org/story/on-women-run-himalayan-farms-climate-resilient-crops-are-failing/>) in the face of environmental pressures, often in search of seasonal income or jobs in cities. Women and children tend to be the last to go, if they leave at all.

Perhaps more importantly, there are currently no comprehensive datasets that can tell us how climate migrant populations break down along gender lines. In fact, experts say there isn't even a consensus on the definition of who counts as a climate migrant. When people migrate, it is often due to a combination of factors. Environment, when it comes into play, is just one of them.

Where, then, does the 80 percent figure come from?

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(<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/about/staff/lawrence-huang>), an analyst at Washington, D.C.-based Migration Policy Institute, has fielded questions from the media on this number, and he says the earliest reference he can find to it is in a 2010 report

(<https://genderclimatetracker.org/sites/default/files/Resources/Gender-and-the-climate-change-agenda-212.pdf>) by a nonprofit called Women’s Environmental Network. The report — which has been cited by the World Trade Organization

(https://www.wto.org/library/events/women_05122022/gender_dyr) the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

([https://one.oecd.org/document/ENV/EPOC\(2020\)11/En/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/ENV/EPOC(2020)11/En/pdf)), and numerous other groups (<https://climate-diplomacy.org/magazine/cooperation/women-constitute-80-cent-climate-change-refugees-20-million>) — states that “it has been estimated that women constitute up to 80% of global refugee and displaced populations.” It then infers, based in part on that figure, “that of the current 26 million climate refugees, up to 20 million are female.”

But the estimate seems to contain two big mistakes. First, it assumes that the gender breakdown of climate migrants mirrors that of

populations displaced for other reasons, such as political unrest, economic collapse, and other disasters. In actuality, the demographics of a migrant group can depend on what's driving their displacement. Studies suggest ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00131-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00131-8/fulltext)), for example, that refugees fleeing from armed conflict are especially likely (https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0798_wo) to be women and children, with men often staying behind as combatants. By contrast, women made up the vast majority of people who remained in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, mainly because they didn't have the means to flee.

That brings us to the report's second big mistake. Its claim that women constitute up to 80 percent of refugee and displaced populations is attributed to a 2004 fact sheet (<https://gfmc.online/wp-content/uploads/DRR-Climate-Change-Gender-IUCN-2009.pdf>) on climate change and disaster mitigation, produced by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. That fact sheet doesn't clearly specify a source, but its phrasing of the statistic bears resemblance to an often-repeated assertion, published in a 1999 report (<https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2021->

03/IASC%20Policy%20Statement%20for%20the%20Integration%20
by the U.N.'s Inter-Agency Standing
Committee, that “up to eighty percent of the
internally displaced persons and refugees
around the world are women and children.”

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Crucially, the 2004 fact sheet omitted “and
children” from its phrasing of the statistic — as
did the Women’s Environmental Network
report that first applied the number in the
context of climate change. It’s unclear whether
the omission was intentional. (I was unable to
reach the fact sheet’s author, Lorena Aguilar,
despite multiple email attempts.) But what is
clear, according to Huang, at least, is that the
80 percent figure “does not have a scientific
basis” — especially not in the context of climate
change.

“People just ran with the number,” Huang told
me, noting that the statistic is used by some
but not all U.N. organizations. On its website,
UNHCR, the U.N. refugee agency, says
(<https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/how-we->

work/safeguarding-individuals/women) that “[w]omen and girls make up around 50 per cent of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population,” a classification that includes people migrating for reasons other than climate. Likewise, data (<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2023/demo/hhp/hhp53.html>) from the U.S. Census Bureau indicate that women represent around 51 percent of people displaced by natural disasters. And yet the 80 percent figure has gained traction in the media and among policymakers and activists.

The potential consequences of this misinformation are many. First, by steering attention and resources toward women climate migrants, it could distract from the needs of women who haven’t been displaced but are impacted by climate change nonetheless. These women are affected in small and big ways. They often must take over agricultural and head-of-household duties from men who have moved in search of work, which places increased demand on their time and labor (<https://fullerproject.org/story/climate-change-means-women-are-having-to-work-harder/>). Understanding the needs of these women is critical to crafting an effective response to climate change, but their narratives are often missing (<https://fullerproject.org/story/reporters->

notebook-womens-invisibility-in-climate-stories-erase-their-narratives-the-result-is-bad-policy/) from media coverage.

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Then there are the governments, policymakers, and financial institutions grappling to adapt to the climate crisis. For them, a scenario in which 80 percent of climate migrants are women will call for different funding allocation than one in which only half of them are — particularly as it concerns projects addressing gender-based vulnerability.

The notion that most climate migrants are women also perpetuates a common trope of women as victims. As Huang described it, it promotes a stereotype that women don't have any agency and are super vulnerable.

But the biggest harm of a dubious climate statistic like this one may be more insidious: It could erode trust. The climate denial movement remains strong

(<https://undark.org/2022/11/22/renewed-climate-disinformation-campaigns-threaten-cop27-progress/>), and some detractors have scoffed

(<https://twitter.com/washingtonpost/status/1610811846390317057?lang=en>) at the notion that women are uniquely impacted by the climate crisis, despite, for example, mounting evidence ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(22\)00088-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(22)00088-2/fulltext)) linking climate change to a rise in gender-based violence. That the 80 percent figure has been repeated by the U.N., the same body tasked with developing a consensus on climate science through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, adds to its potential to sow broad distrust.

Data and numbers matter. Used carelessly, they can backfire. The threat of a global climate crisis is grave enough as it is. If a claim about climate change lacks merit, no matter how eye-catching it may be, we must be wise enough to let it go.

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