

# Gender and Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change: Insights from the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States

The Member States of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) are highly vulnerable to climate change, which is already causing the movement of people. Tropical storms, hurricanes, sea level rise and other climate hazards all pose significant risks to people's livelihoods, safety and wellbeing. People in OECS Member States have been forced to leave their homes as a result of extreme weather events and relocate within their country or move to neighbouring islands.

While the movement of people can create new opportunities, it can also undermine the welfare and wellbeing of those forced to move due to climate impacts; people are uprooted from their homes, families get separated and assets, livelihoods and networks are lost. The loss of assets and livelihoods puts women and children in a situation of economic and social dependency which can widen the gender equality gap.

Gender refers to complex systems of personal and social relations through which women and men are socially created and maintained and through which they experience status, power and material resources. Gender interfaces with age, disability, socio-economic status and ethnicity, highlighting that challenges are also experienced by vulnerable groups, such as older people, people living with disabilities and unaccompanied minors.

*Gender determines who stays and who leaves when natural hazards occur. In OECS countries, the overall trend is that women and children move because of climate impacts, while men stay behind to protect the family's assets, including homes, crops and livestock. This is consistent with overall migration trends for the*

*region where there are more female than male migrants, with the proportion of female migrants ranging from 52% in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines to 58% in Dominica.*



Human mobility in the context of climate change (HMCCC) can be permanent or temporary and can be classified as displacement, migration or planned relocation, as detailed in Figure 1. In addition to these movements, realities on the ground also reveal that there are people who either choose not to move or are trapped and cannot move.

Figure 1: Types of human mobility in the context of climate change

Human Mobility		
Displacement	Migration	Planned relocation
Situations where people are forced to leave their home or place of habitual residence. Displacement is usually associated with intensive risk, where the occurrence of a disaster event is the primary driver of movement. It can take place within or across national borders.	Movements which are, to some degree, voluntary. This is usually associated with extensive risk, and can take place within or across national borders. The decision to move is complex and often linked to multiple drivers, including but not limited to climate risk.	An organized relocation, typically instigated, supervised and carried out by the state with the aim of reducing (usually extensive) weather and climate risks. Ideally, planned relocation should be undertaken transparently and with the informed consent of, or upon the request of the community. It should also be accompanied by resettlement (the restoration of communities and socio-economic conditions) (McAdam and Ferris, 2015)

Source (Advisory Group on Climate Change and Human Mobility, 2014; ODI, 2016)

Migration, forced displacement and planned relocation are all influenced by gender and manifest gender-based differences. Gender is a factor in people's ability to move, the rate at which they move and their ability to adapt and recover. Climate-induced mobility can reinforce gender inequalities and power differentials and increase vulnerabilities and risks among vulnerable groups by placing them in volatile and unsafe environments. However, climate-induced mobility can also lead to greater opportunities, for instance, the empowerment of women as they take on leadership roles. The following examples from OECS countries highlight how HMCCC interfaces with gender in multiple ways.

## Saint Lucia

Saint Lucia coordinates regional disaster response in the OECS. The island has received displaced people from OECS Member States on several occasions in the aftermath of disasters. The following example of HMCCC features Shakira, a single mother of two children living in Saint Lucia and experiencing displacement within her country.

In 2021, heavy rains, strong winds and land slippage caused by Hurricane Elsa devastated Shakira's home, ripping off the roof and damaging almost everything inside. Shakira knew this might happen because the roof had been leaking and in need of repairs for over two years, but her salary did not extend to home repairs and maintenance with two children to send to school. During the hurricane, Shakira and her children evacuated in time and found shelter at the designated community centre. Conditions at the shelter were not ideal. According to Shakira, *'The shelter was a community centre with everyone in one big open space. At one point there was flooding in the shelter. We got food and water, but other things, like privacy for bathing or sleeping, well, that was poor. It was mainly women and children in the shelters as far as I could see. Men were outdoors.'*

After the hurricane, the process of trying to salvage items from their home, rebuilding and getting government assistance began. While Shakira received considerable assistance from her place of employment in the form of food, clothing and toiletries, her greatest hurdle was getting support to fix her roof and carry out other house repairs. She left the shelter and stayed with a work colleague for almost two months while seeking assistance. In Shakira's words, *'Being in a shelter is bad, very bad ... just your loss of privacy and feelings of helplessness. It gets worse when you try to get help to rebuild. Can you imagine after suffering and losing almost everything, you don't know where to turn to for help in your own country? At the same time, as a mother, you have to try and figure out what to do with your children, getting them back into school and to a regular routine.'*

Shakira's experience highlights the clear differences between female-headed and two-parent households when they are displaced. Even when a single female is employed, her income is often lower due to gender pay disparities. This means that female-headed households with dependent family members

are more than likely to be in the lower socio-economic category and have less or no resources for disaster preparedness and recovery. They make up the largest percentage of the poorest cohort and often have lower incomes, fewer resources and less capacity for disaster preparedness, as compared to male-headed or two-parent households.



Saint Lucia recorded 223 disasters and emergencies between 1960 and 2014, which indirectly affected 775,450 people (Photo credit: Vernesa St Marie, Saint Lucia)

## Antigua and Barbuda

Antigua and Barbuda has been impacted by many hurricanes that have resulted in HMCCC. In September 2017, Hurricane Irma was closely followed by Hurricane Maria, requiring the complete evacuation of all the residents of Barbuda. Antigua has also received people from Dominica who were affected and displaced by devastating tropical storms and hurricanes. The following example is the story of Maria, a mother, wife and seamstress from Dominica who reflects on the impact that Hurricane Maria has had on her family and their subsequent move to Antigua.

Maria and her three young children lived near a river in Dominica. When the hurricane hit, Maria and her children evacuated to a location that they thought would be less exposed. Maria recounts what happened: *'My house was built on flat ground, so when the river came it took everything. The house and everything in it was swept away. We left two days before the hurricane and went to my eldest daughter who lived in a concrete house, but during the hurricane her roof blew off. The wind was trying to burst open the door, and we had to stay in the bathroom for cover. My daughter was crying and saying "Mommy, if we stay here, we will die." I started to pray, asking God to make a way for us. We all held on to each other and prayed. We lost everything.'*

In the aftermath of the hurricane, Maria and her family moved to Antigua where she was assisted by the Dominica/Antigua Relief Fund and family members. Maria said about their move, *'I believe that if we had stayed in Dominica, we would have gotten sick. When we were leaving and the plane was flying over Dominica, I cried because I couldn't believe that was*

*my country. After the hurricane, I lost my sewing workshop and everything in it, and this is how I made a living. I used to sew everything – clothes, curtains, anything and everything. So right now, I have nothing. My son is the only one in the house working now, so things are hard for us. I am still grieving about it. I am not in my country, I cannot pay my bills and I am living in somebody else's house.'*

Maria's story illustrates the gendered nature of migration, decisions to move and implications for livelihoods. Women, children, older people and indigenous people made up a significant portion of those on the move between Dominica and Antigua due to disasters. This has important implications for the receiving countries and support services for displaced migrants. It means that there must be a greater focus on education, health, employment opportunities and special services for indigenous people.



Antigua and Barbuda experienced 503 disasters between 1950 and 2014, which affected over two million residents. It is estimated that approximately 3,366 people are at risk of being displaced yearly due to sudden climate events. Antigua has also received many people from Dominica who were impacted and displaced by devastating tropical storms and hurricanes (Photo credit: Yuri A. Jones, Dominica)

### **Saint Vincent and the Grenadines**

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is highly exposed to floods, hurricanes, rising sea levels and volcanic eruptions. The islands were hit by Hurricane Tomas in October 2017, which affected 5,000 residents and caused USD 49.2 million in damages. The 2021 volcanic event directly affected an estimated 20,000 people. The following example is the experience of Rachel, a wife and mother of three children living in Saint Vincent.

Rachel, her husband and their children moved well before the volcanic eruptions and made arrangements to relocate temporarily and stay with her parents in town. Rachel also volunteered with the Ministry of Transformation, coordinating relief efforts for the Over the River area. This included the delivery of food and provisions (love boxes) for people displaced and living in temporary shelters and accommoda-

*tion. She covered the communities from Georgetown to Fancy (behind the volcano). Rachel reflects on the experiences of indigenous people, including her husband: "We have Garifuna and Kalinago indigenous groups, and they live in these areas, which are considered "red zones". So, these are my husband's people. Saint Vincent is a funny place because country people and indigenous people are looked down on and seen as silly, stupid, dependent. Many of them are farmers. They get discriminated against because of being both rural and indigenous. Many of them refuse to leave their lands, and that area is very vulnerable to disasters, including flooding, etc. They seem to always get hit by hurricanes and disasters.'*

Rachel's story highlights how women are active agents and leaders in their families and communities and often play a leading role in ensuring better outcomes for displaced people in disaster situations. Her story also illustrates that marginalised and at-risk groups, such as indigenous people, face discrimination and are therefore more reluctant to move.



Saint Vincent and the Grenadines is highly exposed to both climatic and volcanic hazards. The island was hit by Hurricane Tomas in October 2017, which affected 5,000 residents. The 2021 volcanic event directly affected an estimated 20,000 people (Photo credit: Stephan Hornsey, Saint Vincent)

## Recommendations

The above examples illustrate how HMCCC is experienced differently by different groups of people in OECS countries and show that gender is a major factor in shaping those experiences. The global programme Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change, funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH in cooperation with the OECS Commission, has conducted a number of activities aimed at better understanding HMCCC and developing recommendations to address the gendered aspects of human mobility.

First, a gender-responsive approach should be taken to manage HMCCC in the OECS, recognising that disasters affect men and women in all their diversity and vulnerable groups differently because of unequal access to resources, benefits, opportunities and structures of power. Mechanisms must therefore be put in place to address these differences so that no one gets left behind. Decision-makers and development partners at all levels and in all sectors should integrate gender perspectives into the planning, financing and implementation of adaptation and mitigation efforts. Risk assessment and information dissemination measures should explicitly consider how risks will affect vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and propose plans to avoid and mitigate them.

Second, a regional approach to migration policy and planning is needed within the OECS. It is predicted that climate change impacts will mainly lead to the movement of people within their own countries or regionally. OECS Member States have a shared colonial history and common socio-cultural institutions as well as a free movement regime. However, the lack of comprehensive empirical migration data, especially gender-disaggregated data, coupled with emerging migration flows, presents a challenge for OECS leaders and policy-makers. A coordinated and integrated approach and greater harmonisation of procedures and data sharing is needed for improved management of HMCCC in the OECS.

Last, the perspectives and needs of marginalised people should be prioritised at every step of a natural disaster response to avoid reproducing discrimination patterns and vulnerabilities. It is important to engage diverse groups, including women, youth, people with disabilities, indigenous people and older people. A key factor is to work directly with the people affected rather than just coordinate the efforts of government institutions or community leaders. Inclusive policies and strategies should be designed and implemented to cater to the diverse and evolving needs of all.

*Further information on the case studies and recommendations can be found in the full study *Gender and Human Mobility in the Context of Climate Change: Case Studies from Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines*.*

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