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RISING TIDES, RISING NEEDS: THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE- INDUCED MIGRATION ON WOMEN & CHILDREN IN MUMBAI'S CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

ITAC REPORT 2024 | YASHREE SHARMA, SAMANTHA MISNER, MAYA GANDHI



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Abstract

India's second most populous city, Mumbai, is one of the world's best examples of a city that experiences dual stresses due to climate change. Not only is it coastal, making it especially susceptible to climate change-induced rising sea levels, heatwaves, and flooding, it also experiences the largest influx of climate change-induced migrants from rural regions across India. "Rising Tides, Rising Needs: The Impacts of Climate Change-induced Migration on Women & Children in Mumbai's Construction Industry" examines the unique challenges faced by women and children migrating to Mumbai due to climate change, using the construction industry as a case study to highlight broader issues affecting this population.

The report highlights how Mumbai's construction industry is ill-prepared to accommodate the growing influx of climate change-induced migrants, many of whom face gender-specific vulnerabilities. Based on interviews with local NGOs and a review of current policies, this report identifies key gaps in addressing the needs of women and child migrants in the construction sector. It concludes with policy recommendations for both the NGO and government sectors.

Acknowledgements

Funded by the University of Toronto Asian Institute's Richard Charles Lee Insights Through Asia Challenge (ITAC), Maya Gandhi, Samantha Misner, and Yashree Sharma travelled to Mumbai, India in May 2024. This opportunity would not have been possible without the dedicated and thoughtful support of professors Darius Ornston, Joe Wong, and Jayeeta Sharma.



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Introduction

India's second most populous city, Mumbai, is one of the world's best examples of a community that experiences dual stresses due to climate change.

Not only is Mumbai coastal, making it especially susceptible to climate change-induced rising sea levels, heatwaves, and flooding, it also experiences the largest influx of climate change-induced migrants (climate migrants) from rural regions across India.^[1] These rural migrants, often pushed out by unstable agricultural conditions linked to erratic monsoons, find themselves in search of livelihood opportunities in large cities like Mumbai. This influx of migrants places enormous pressure on multiple industries operating in Mumbai.

To accommodate the growing population, the city has seen a significant increase in construction projects. With Mumbai boasting over 10,000 new projects at the beginning of 2024, many migrants find themselves employed in the construction industry.^[2] However, the industry's infrastructure and policies are ill-prepared to accommodate the increasing numbers of migrants looking for work. Specifically, women and children, groups often overlooked in India's policy landscape, face unique and extremely difficult challenges pertaining to health and education on and as a result of these construction sites.

To gain a deeper understanding of these challenges, we traveled to Mumbai in May 2024 to visit eight local NGOs. We visited the suburbs of Goregaon, East Andheri, and Bandra to conduct 30-60-minute interviews with organizations that have a long history of improving access to healthcare and education for women and children migrants. The following sections set the context of increased migration to Mumbai due to climate change, provide an overview of the challenges faced by the aforementioned groups, analyse the measures that Mumbai's government and local NGOs have put in place to combat such challenges, and make policy recommendations for the NGO and government sector.

Climate Change-induced Migration to Mumbai

India's vulnerability to climate change has been evidenced by its loss of 235 square kilometers of land to coastal erosion between 1990 and 2016, displacing millions of people annually.[3] Mumbai, in particular, faces the largest influx of climate migrants from rural areas across the country.[4] These migrants, driven from their homes by unstable agricultural conditions—marked by erratic monsoons, extreme rainfall, and prolonged dry spells—arrive in cities like Mumbai in search of new sources of income.

As climate change destabilizes traditional agrarian livelihoods, especially in India's central belt from Maharashtra to the Bay of Bengal [5], the construction industry in major urban areas like Mumbai becomes the focal point for displaced populations. This is likely due to the ever-increasing demand for housing and low barriers to entry into the construction industry in India. However, the city's infrastructure and policies are unprepared to accommodate these new arrivals. While climate adaptation measures, such as seawalls and flood barriers, have been built by the Mumbai Public Works Department to protect the city's infrastructure from climate change-induced weather changes, policy measures that strengthen Mumbai's capacity to accept climate migrants and help them to thrive are severely lacking.[6]

Climate migrants arriving in Mumbai encounter a myriad of challenges stemming from inadequate migration policies, scarce and low-paying employment opportunities, high living expenses, and limited access to essential services.[7] Overcrowded living conditions, coupled with strained public services, intensify these hardships. Aadhaar cards allow citizens to avail healthcare, education, food and nutrition, and social security benefits that they are eligible for. These cards use biometric information to generate a unique 12-digit identification number for Indian residents. However, obtaining an Aadhaar card can be challenging for migrant workers as they often lack access to a smartphone or computer for online registration.

Additionally, since the Aadhaar card must be linked to an active phone number, and many families share a single number, it becomes difficult for individuals to register separately.[8] This is further compounded by language barriers that hinder the ability of some migrants to navigate bureaucratic processes and access critical services, especially for those from rural areas.[9] For women and girls, these challenges are further intensified by gender-specific vulnerabilities, from heightened exposure to gender-based violence to limited access to sanitation and sexual and reproductive health services.[10]

Migration exacerbates pre-existing gender divides and exposes women to new vulnerabilities as they are often left behind in deteriorating environments or face increased unpaid care responsibilities that limit their economic opportunities. Those who do migrate risk exploitation and abuse, while also confronting barriers to essential services. Using the construction industry as a case study, the following sections illustrate the disproportionate impacts climate induced migration has on the women and children migrant population.

Mumbai's Construction Industry

Industry Overview

Employing approximately 71 million workers in 2023, the construction industry is the second largest employer in India.[11] 30-50 million of these workers are internal migrants who travel from rural areas all over India to large cities such as Mumbai and Delhi to earn income, especially during agricultural off-seasons. Despite the industry providing the opportunity for millions to feed themselves and their families as mechanization and climate change destabilizes the agricultural industry, those working in construction face significant risks in their daily activities.

The industry is highly informal and complex, fostering an environment full of labour exploitation and workplace hazards. A study of approximately 17,000 migrant construction workers led by the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS) found that 30% of respondents had experienced forced labour risks, including restrictions on movement and threats to themselves or loved ones. Additionally, most workers are paid below minimum wage and not well informed regarding their rights to welfare benefits such as health insurance, education or child care support, and compensation for workplace injury or death. As migrant workers are highly transient and dependent on daily wages, there is little opportunity for wage negotiations and little time to familiarize oneself with and engage the welfare system.[12]

The Unique On-Site Experiences of Women & Children

One estimate by India's Ministry of Labour and Employment approximated the share of female employees in construction as high as 49%, highlighting a significant need for the industry to adapt to accommodate their specific needs. [13] Additionally, the term "jodi kamgar" is commonly used to describe couples who travel together to work on construction sites, underscoring the unique dynamics of this labour market.

Women face significant challenges in this industry. For example, interviews in the GFEMS study found that although the average monthly earnings of a construction worker is Rs 11,200, female workers only reported an average of Rs 8,000. Additionally, as seen in Table 1 below, a greater proportion of male workers than female workers reported access to safety equipment, safe drinking water, and on-site toilet facilities.[14] For women, these poor working conditions have resulted in negative reproductive health outcomes, including disrupted menstruation cycles, pregnancy complications, and increased incidence of neonatal death.[15] Compounding these issues is women's exposure to sexual harassment, misogynistic bias regarding their on-site work, and the lack of childcare facilities.[16] This contributes to the triple burden of work that many women carry as they manage domestic chores, engage in childcare, and complete their tasks as wage labourers.

Table 1: Access to basic amenities, by gender [17]

	Safety equipment	Drinking water	A toilet facility	Support from employer in cases of occupational health problems
Male	93%	99%	97%	73%
Female	73%	86%	62%	28%

Women also experience negative symptoms from the significant air pollution they encounter from both their construction work and the solid fuel they use to cook meals, which is often made from wood, charcoal, and cowdung cakes. [18] Additionally, women tend to migrate with their children, often bringing along older children for support with domestic chores.[19] With over 50,000 children living on construction sites in Mumbai and childcare centres rarely present, children are especially vulnerable to the air pollution, falling objects, heavy machinery, and ditches.[20]

A majority of the children are malnourished and unable to obtain a formal education due to constant migratory movement.[21] For example, over 90% of the workers surveyed in the GFEMS study had moved more than once for work and 20% had moved more than six times. [22] This lack of stability negatively affects the development of children, especially when combined with poor nutrition.

As these challenges illustrate, the construction industry in Mumbai, particularly for women and children, is fraught with risks and lacks adequate protections. This situation highlights the significant gaps in government policy and support systems intended to safeguard these vulnerable populations. The next section explores these gaps, evaluating the effectiveness of the existing government initiatives.



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Government Initiatives

The Government of India enacted the Inter State Migrant Workmen Act in 1979 to safeguard the rights of migrant workers.[23] It sets out provisions for minimum wage payment, proper housing, free healthcare, and equal employment opportunities alongside local workers. However, while the Act was designed to ensure protections, it has not fully achieved its objectives. For example, contractors are required to obtain paid licenses to hire migrant labor, with a fee attached, but have been known to bypass this process and employ migrant workers illegally. This leaves workers unable to claim the Act's benefits and vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, including lower wages and mistreatment. Many migrant workers lack a formal education and are unaware of their rights, making them more susceptible to exploitation as migration continues to rise.

Additionally, in 1996, the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act was established, mandating each state to form a BOCW Board and a welfare fund.[24] Employers and contractors in the construction industry must contribute to this fund, which provides social security benefits to workers who have been employed for at least 90 days.[25] However, the 90 day employment regulation often excludes migrant workers who are employed on a daily wage basis and frequently switch jobs. Further, in 2021, the Government of India launched the E-Shram portal to link registered workers with various welfare schemes, including the BOCW welfare fund, and allow for self-registration.[26] Registration on the portal currently requires entering bank account information and phone numbers that are linked with the Aadhaar card - two things that many migrant workers lack, which prevents them from registering and receiving the benefits.

According to a survey conducted by NGO Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action, only 3% of daily wage workers were registered compared to 25% of those living and working at construction sites.[27] Migrant workers also face challenges related to documentation, as many schemes require proof of address, which is difficult for those who frequently move and switch jobs. The Aadhaar card serves as proof of address for workers, but it typically reflects their hometown or village rather than their current host city, rendering them ineligible to receive benefits in the city where they reside.

Further, a 2020 study conducted by the Self-Employed Women's Association and Initiative of What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy revealed that many female construction workers were not registered for BOCW welfare cards, preventing them from accessing any benefits.[28]

More recently, the government has mandated the availability of basic amenities such as toilets on construction sites.[29] Road construction employers have also been ordered to grant paid maternity leaves and paid leaves for miscarriage bereavement and recovery.[30] Despite the existence of these regulations, only 17% of female construction workers are aware of them, compared to 32% of men, and only 5% of total construction workers have registered for benefits.

The issues that migrant women and children face in the construction sector are complex and interconnected, requiring support from both the government and NGOs to effectively tackle. Ideally, the government should create effective policies that are able to reach all those who would benefit; however, as evidenced above, this is not often the case. There are several NGOs in Mumbai that work to fill these shortcomings regarding the accessibility to and existence of government welfare benefits. The best practices of these organizations are outlined in more detail in the section below.



Photo by Samantha Misner

Programs & Interventions Implemented by NGOs

Through our interviews with eight local NGOs in Mumbai, we found that the NGO programming that is most effective is programming that aims to design and implement programs that empower migrants to transform their environment, rather than simply helping them cope with the current, inadequate conditions. This is programming offering pathways for systemic change across communities in India.

Amongst the NGOs interviewed, Mumbai Mobile Crèches (MMC), Smile Foundation (Smile), and Apnalaya stood out for their impactful work with women and children involved in or affected by the construction industry. The best practices of these organizations are outlined in more detail below.

Childcare & Education Programs

MMC supports the health, education, and safety of children living on construction sites. One of the key ways in which MMC supports women is through its teacher training programs, which provide skills development and create employment opportunities within the community. As discussed in our interview, more than 40% of MMC's current teachers are from the construction workers' community. Despite its successes, MMC expects to face challenges in ensuring sustainability and effectiveness as increasing numbers of women and children rely on their programs due to climate change-induced migration (climate migration). Many private builders are reluctant to invest in daycare facilities due to the perceived risks and costs involved, meaning that MMC's childcare activities will only increase. Compounding this, MMC interviewees highlighted that, "finding 50 women to employ nowadays is difficult, and they're not trained right. Taking care of young children is a very specialized job."^[31] To address this complex issue, MMC's Building Childcare Capacities training program equips women with the skills to open their own crèches or find employment in nearby daycare centers.

Smile operates across 27 states, with its most prominent focus on educating the children of marginalized communities in Mumbai. The organization is particularly committed to promoting education in families where both parents lack a formal education and encouraging primary and secondary education for girls. They have established small centers where volunteers counsel communities on the importance of education and create parent-teacher associations.

Healthcare & Nutrition

Smile also engages in healthcare programming as sanitation issues often contribute to school dropout rates.[32] Climate change may cause an increase in dropout rates as rising temperatures and a lack of clean water combined with pre-existing improper sanitation enables diseases such as malaria and diarrhea to run rampant, preventing larger numbers of children from attending school. Smile has tried to combat this by providing essential resources for both students and teachers in the form of building toilets in schools to eliminate open defecation, including separate washrooms for girls to prevent school absences during menstruation.

Apnalaya was established as a daycare center for the children of laborers working on construction sites. It now operates predominantly in Shivaji Nagar, Mumbai, a community located adjacent to the city's dumping ground. This area is home to migrant communities engaged in construction labour from Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and Gujarat, and the houses are often made of makeshift materials like tin. Excessive rain caused by climate change leads to toxic waste getting washed into the community and flooding the living quarters of many. Apnalaya has found that while low income, proximity to a dumping site, poor waste management, and high disease burden impact everyone, these challenges further marginalize women and children, who often face discrimination and are the last to receive resources. From our interview, we learned that women and children face four main obstacles that limit their access to opportunities: prolonged wait times to collect water, safety issues when using community toilets, an increased burden of caregiving, and inadequate resources for reproductive and menstrual health.

Their daily routines often revolve around water collection schedules, restricting their ability to pursue education and employment. As more women and children migrate to the Shivaji Nagar region and water for collection becomes more unpredictable due to climate change, this population will experience increasingly poor education and employment outcomes.

Community & Advocacy Efforts

MMC places a strong emphasis on community engagement and advocacy. They organize “Chai-pani” meetings with migrant workers to disseminate information and build community relationships. These meetings cover topics ranging from personal hygiene to navigating school admissions and are tailored to the needs of specific communities. Through these interactions, MMC staff can address immediate concerns while also fostering long-term behavioral changes. MMC also uses “Lokdoots,” or street plays, to raise awareness on critical issues such as health, education, and hygiene. This method is particularly effective in communities where literacy rates are low, as it leverages India’s oral traditions to engage audiences in a meaningful way. The street plays serve as conversation starters that encourage deeper dialogue and collective problem-solving within the community. Additionally, with climate migrants coming from varying locations with different native languages, these plays are essential to cross-community communication.

Apnalaya empowers women from the community to get trained as volunteers and work as healthcare advocates in the area. Mother Support Groups formed by the organization provide maternal and child health support throughout a woman’s pregnancy and extend to early childhood including immunization and child nutrition. The intention is to involve the people of the community in tackling the issues they face and increasing their awareness and education. These education initiatives are especially important as climate change in India is expected to increase child malnutrition and exposure to infectious diseases.

Remaining Gaps and Challenges

The programs of organizations like MMC, Smile, and Apnalaya, though commendable, are often localized and limited by resource constraints. This results in a fragmented landscape where some migrants receive support, while many others are left behind, unable to access the critical services they need. The scale and reach of these NGO initiatives do not match the vast and growing needs of the migrant population, particularly as climate change continues to drive more individuals into urban centers like Mumbai. Without broader coordination and support from the government, these initiatives, no matter how effective, cannot fully bridge the gap for all affected migrant workers.

Implications for Further Research

Recommendations to Test

Increasingly strained by the influx of climate migrants to Mumbai, the construction sector must adapt to meet the needs of this expanding workforce, in addition to expanding services to cater to the unique needs of women and children migrants. Comprehensive solutions that integrate government and NGO efforts, expand access to essential services, and raise awareness of existing programs and policies are needed. The following recommendations were ideated after meeting with our interviewees and aim to address these challenges within the construction industry specifically, but can also be applied more broadly to other sectors in Mumbai facing similar challenges driven by climate migration. In the future, these recommendations could be workshopped with local NGOs and tested through trial initiatives. By implementing these recommendations, the city could better support and protect women and children, while fostering a more resilient and inclusive urban environment.

Recommendations for the NGO Sector

01

Welfare Registration Assistance

Include a brief description, rationale and intended impact. It helps to keep it concise yet concrete!

02

Lobbying Education Programs

Include a brief description, rationale and intended impact. It helps to keep it concise yet concrete!

To increase the welfare benefit registration rates and awareness regarding such benefits, this paper recommends that NGOs located near construction sites create a “Sit & Sign-Up” program. This would involve NGO employees sitting with construction workers near their place of work to explain the welfare schemes and guide them as they sign up on the spot, combating any confusion workers may have regarding how to sign up or to what exactly they are entitled. Hostility from builders is expected as they would be required to increase funding for on-site essential services and other benefits. To ensure that builders do not intervene with the effectiveness of this program, the state should implement fines for construction sites that do not comply.

Much of the current NGO programming aims to change the existing system in local environments. To increase both the effectiveness of such programs and the chance of creating long lasting local change, NGOs should also work to empower migrants to transform their own environment through individually and collectively lobbying for changes within the government. Through the creation of a “Learn to Lobby” program, NGO employees can teach individuals how to structure in-person visits, letters, and phone calls to their local governments. NGOs can create briefings on the relevant legislators, issues, and opposing opinions to ensure that communications are concise and targeted, saving the lobbying individuals time and confusion and increasing the advocacy for issues pertaining to women and children on construction sites.

Recommendations for the Government

01

Diversifying Required Documents

Include a brief description, rationale and intended impact. It helps to keep it concise yet concrete!

02

Contractor Training Sessions

Include a brief description, rationale and intended impact. It helps to keep it concise yet concrete!

To increase the percentage of migrants that individually sign-up for welfare benefits using online government portals, this paper recommends that alternative forms of identification, such as election or ration cards, be permitted for registration. This is because many migrant workers are unable to register for Aadhaar cards due to incomplete information regarding accurate phone numbers, bank account details, and the current address in the city they reside. Free registration camps at Common Service Centres, as well as training Asha and Anganwadi workers (trained community health workers) to assist in registration, could help communicate this change in process and increase registration numbers. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has already begun efforts to improve rural connectivity and digital literacy in rural communities, which will further support migrant workers in this process.

A report from the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery found that when contractors are properly trained and incentivized, they pay male and female workers equally, build facilities like toilets, and provide salary advances when necessary.[33] This paper recommends forming a joint committee between state governments and local NGOs to host contractor training sessions, encouraging the practices stated above. The training sessions will be fully funded by the government.

To incentivize attendance at these sessions, the government should also reduce licensing fees for migrant workers and provide a wage subsidization option to contractors who both complete the training sessions and continuously pass regular inspections at construction sites.

Conclusions & Other Areas of Research

Further research could also explore strategies to strengthen climate resilience in the rural areas from which migrants originate. By identifying and promoting sustainable agricultural practices, water management systems, and alternative livelihoods, further studies could help reduce the push factors that drive migration to urban centers like Mumbai. Contrastingly, while much of the focus lies on mitigating migration, further research could instead investigate the potential of migration as an adaptation strategy itself. This would involve examining how migration can be better managed and supported as a response to climate change, rather than solely as a challenge to be addressed.

Research could explore policy frameworks that facilitate safe, legal, and orderly migration, ensuring that migrants have access to rights, services, and opportunities in their new locations. All further research could benefit from an intersectional approach that examines how factors such as age, disability, socio-economic status, and caste intersect with gender to shape the experiences of climate-induced migrants in Mumbai and other cities.

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From left to right: Maya, Yashree, and Sam standing in front of the Gateway of India.

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