

## Human Trafficking and Environmental Refugees

### Awareness

In June 2014, the number of refugees worldwide exceeded 50 million children, women and men. Half of these refugees are children, many travelling alone or in groups. Millions of these refugees are people displaced because of environmental disasters. Moreover the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change notes that in the coming years millions of people will be forced to relocate due to effects of climate change, including shoreline erosion, coastal flooding or disruption of normal farming practices. Today analysts predict that this crisis in the making will affect 150-200 million men, women and children by 2050, or roughly one in every 45 persons on earth.

What makes this situation even worse from a moral perspective is that it is the poorest countries, those least responsible for greenhouse emissions causing climate change, that are bearing the greatest burden and are the first to deal with forced migration. Moreover, as is the case in most of the poorest countries, those living in rural areas who depend on climate-sensitive resources such as local water supplies and farming for their basic livelihoods are particularly vulnerable to climate change. (Environmental Protection Agency)

When an environmental disaster occurs, people are forced to flee without legal authorization or documents. Desperate to survive and unfamiliar with the culture of the refugee community, these people are extremely vulnerable to human trafficking. It is virtually impossible to estimate the number of people displaced by environmental disasters who become victims of

trafficking. However data suggests that human trafficking increases by around 20 to 30 per cent during disasters. (UNEP) The International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) has also warned that as families are separated during environmental disasters the risk of women and children to trafficking increases.

While all refugees, because of the losses they have experienced and the instability in their lives, are at risk for human trafficking, environmental refugees are at particular risk because under current international refugee agreements, people displaced by environmental disasters do not qualify as refugees and thus do not qualify for international aid or protection.

### Why is this happening?

Many forces drive environmental migration. Two of these forces are climate processes and climate events. Climate processes take place over a period of time and include desertification of land, sea-level rise, glacier melting and growing water scarcity. Climate events, on the other hand, are sudden and dramatic occurrences such as floods, storms, hurricanes and typhoons, which force people to leave their land quickly. An example of this in the United States was the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which forced an estimated 1.2 million people to leave their homes.

Future changes in precipitation and



Families displaced due to Climate Change from the documentary *Climate Refugees*

temperature will make certain areas of the world less viable places to live due to unreliable supplies of food and water. An increase in the frequency and severity of floods and storms, drought, and the resulting land degradation will force migration of the world's most vulnerable people.

People who have experienced the trauma of being forced to flee their homes and to live as migrants or displaced persons suffer from physical insecurity, lack of supportive social networks, marginalization, severe disruptions to family structure, lack of legal protection and poverty. These factors may dispose them to be less self-protective and enable them to be easily coerced as victims of trafficking. (UNHCR)

Women, particularly those living in mountain regions in developing countries, are facing disproportionately high risks from climate change, as well as associated risks such as human trafficking. In many parts of the world the majority of the agricultural workforce is female. These women are more likely than men to lose their

lives during natural disasters, due to poor access to basic lifesaving skills or cultural factors that restrict the mobility of women. (UNEP)

Women and children are especially vulnerable during any forced displacement, and they are at risk for gender-based violence and human trafficking. Many children are separated from their families

during an environmental disaster. According to the UNHCR, children alone represent more than half of the people of concern. These children, unaccompanied by any adult or caregiver, are targets for traffickers. Two months after Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, aid agencies warned that up to two million children were at risk of abuse or trafficking.

After Superstorm Sandy, the state of New Jersey allotted more than \$1.5 million to bolster human trafficking prevention and treatment services for homeless youth. Unfortunately the areas of the world that are most affected by disasters related to climate change are the least likely to have the resources to protect their citizens.

## Reflection

We recognize that as consumers living in the developed world we are complicit in causing climate change. What changes can we make on a personal basis to help sustain God's creation for future generations?

✂ “It is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need...” —2 Corinthians 8:13-15

✂ “Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them.” —Ecclesiastes 4:1

✂ “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” —Isaiah 61:1

*Catholic Social Teaching: Life and Dignity of the Human Person.*  
The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society.

*Catholic Social Teaching: Solidarity.*

We are one human family whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences. We are our brothers' and sisters' keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions in a shrinking world.

*Catholic Social Teaching: Care for God's Creation.*

We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions.

## Action

- Advocate for international refugee agreements that will offer refugee status to people displaced by environmental factors and climate change and encourage improvements in legal protections for these people.
- Advocate for and support agencies working with refugees, especially those offering legal protections to refugees and victims of human trafficking. (CLINIC)
- Advocate for faith-based principles and priorities in climate change discussions and decisions, especially as they affect those who are poor and vulnerable.
- Advocate for National Supply Chain Transparency Legislation that will promote the dignity of workers, sustainability, and deter child and trafficked labor.
- Advocate for and promote low carbon, resource-efficient green technologies, water harvesting and fuel wood alternatives which can improve the quality of life and increase the productivity of female farm workers, while also benefiting the environment.
- Purchase products through Fair Trade markets, especially those that empower women and expand economic opportunities for refugee women and men.
- Call attention to the intersection between human trafficking and climate change and engage in prayer services, remembrances and offering intercessions during liturgies and on occasions such as Human Trafficking Day, Refugee Day and Earth Day.

## Resources

### United Nations Woman Watch

[www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate\\_change/downloads/Women\\_and\\_Climate\\_Change\\_Factsheet.pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf)

### United Nations Environmental Program Handbook for Protection on Internally Displaced Persons

[www.unhcr.org/4c2355229.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/4c2355229.pdf)

### United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Trafficking Risks for Refugees

[digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=humtraffconf3](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=humtraffconf3)

**U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking** is a collaborative, faith-based network that offers educational programs and materials, supports access to survivor services, and engages in legislative advocacy to eradicate modern-day slavery.