

## Migration, environment and quality of life

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Interest for the environmental aspects of population displacements has recently grown among a number of disciplines, particularly as a response to recent phenomena linked to climate change such as floods, draughts and forest fires.

Environmental migrants and refugees have gained increasing recognition in the scientific debate concerning climate change. Estimates of migratory flows that could be triggered by environmental phenomena in the future have been made, mentioning figures of tens and even hundreds of millions of displaced human beings. These warnings have in turn spread a fear of migratory flows from impoverished, rural regions in developing countries to developed countries. In reality, said migratory flows have been documented to be temporary, over short distances, and within countries.

A more realistic vision of future population flows, concerns migration to and from cities. This year, half of the world's population will be concentrated in urban areas. Most of the expected population growth over the next few decades will be predominantly urban, and basically concentrated in cities of the developing world. One third of these cities' population lives in slums, with precarious housing and limited or non-existent access to basic services. These crowded cities also suffer from severe air pollution, which affects not only the urban poor, but urban populations in general. These cities are also expected to suffer the effects of climate change in the future. It is particularly in these urban contexts that two-way relationships between population and environment can be observed, as pull factors for the rural poor can translate into push factors for other segments of the population whose quality of life has been threatened and who may or may not choose to leave the city in search of less polluted regions, albeit at the cost of marginally lower incomes. In spite of its conspicuousness and relevance, however, this relationship has not been studied thoroughly.

Environmental migration in rural areas is more closely linked to the population's livelihood and economic factors in general; in urban areas, however, that relationship is more diffuse and not necessarily straightforward. Thus, the study of environmental migration from urban areas can offer new insight to other, non-economic causes of environmental migration.

One of the most important dimensions that may explain the relationship between environmental deterioration and out-migration, is that of the population's health. In the early 1990's it was already estimated that over 76 million people inhabiting urban areas were exposed to a concentration of pollutants that exceeded the WHO's recommended standards. In Brazil's two largest cities, Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, air pollution was arguably responsible for 4,000 premature deaths every year. A similar figure was also estimated for Mexico City. In this last city, at beginning of this decade, it was estimated that 25 million workdays were lost due to exposure to excessive air pollution. This loss of productivity can be coupled with increased costs in the health sector, as a reduction of air pollutants could considerably decrease sudden and chronic respiratory diseases and even deaths. Children, elderly people and pregnant women are most vulnerable to ecological deterioration.

While these trends have been detected in the academic community, a considerable portion of the world's urban population may not associate changes in health to increased pollution; generally, the segments of the population that are more sensitive to pollution and thus more prone to migrate as a response to the latter are those with greater human capital. Thus, environmental migration from densely populated cities may not only respond to concrete and tangible tradeoffs, but also to a household's perception of quality of life in general, where gender issues play an important role. According to traditional gender roles, women are directly responsible for the well-being and health of their families. As a result, the extra workload and the emotional and economic burden of having a sick family member affect the household's quality of life.

Other social and economic factors have considerable effect too. The chaotic transit conditions make transportation to and from school, work, and shopping, difficult and stressful, especially for low income families. The exposure to violent crime on public transportation, including rape, is much higher than in private vehicles, although many die defending their cars from thieves. Kidnapping has become a common practice in many developing cities, affecting not just affluent members.

In light of the harsh living conditions in some big cities, women's role in the family has been transformed into a proactive and even reactive one, making some of them protagonists and leaders in designing coping strategies, including the very radical one of leaving the city. Out-migration to smaller cities as a way of guaranteeing the well-being of their

families is increasingly common, especially among middle class families, in spite of coming at the expense of their personal and professional development.

Qualitative research carried out in the mid-90's among out-migrant middle class women from Mexico City (including focus groups and biographic interviews), showed that women react according to their priorities and their perception of their quality of life, as shaped by socialization processes and gender prescriptions.

Different aspects assume varying degrees of importance when it comes to migration processes. For some –especially the poorest and less educated- their priority may be guaranteeing an income to sustain their families, while neglecting environmental deterioration. For more educated women, the goal in life maybe professional development and Mexico City favors highly skilled female labour. Nevertheless, some women fitting the same profile will, in spite of or as a result of the empowerment process, decide to leave the city, but usually return to more traditional roles within the household.

For women involved in the migratory flows to and from Mexico City, there is a contradictory situation: those who arrive in search of better incomes and jobs perceive a better quality of life than in their often pristine places of origin; on the other hand, those who do flee find the better quality of life they were looking for in their less populated and less stressful destinations, even though crime and environmental conditions are often not that much better than in Mexico City.

These arguments are in no way conclusive. They simply illustrate the complexity of the relationship between migration, the environment and quality of life from a gender perspective.

There is an urgent need to include gender constraints in future research, particularly those that make some women more likely to migrate to and from the large urban centers. There is also a great need to design indicators that reflect not only the broader economics and health of a city, but also the way in which women and men from different economic and social backgrounds experience everyday life.

As part of the ongoing effort to improve data availability and incorporating new methodologies in population-environment studies, special attention should be given to improving qualitative information and methodologies that can shed light on the perception that out-migrants may have of their environment and everyday life.

Also there is an urgent need to include in future census and demographic surveys questions on migration causes -especially those related to environmental factors- in order to deepen our understanding of this complex relationship.