I ISSUE BRIEF

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Climate-Induced Internal Migration for Domestic Work in India:

Gendered Pathways, Regional Dynamics, and Policy Responses

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Issue Brief

Climate-Induced Internal Migration for Domestic Work in India:

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II ABSTRACT

In India, internal migration for domestic work has emerged as a major form of feminised labour mobility, closely linked to the burgeoning impacts of climate change in affected areas, social marginalisation, and rural agrarian crises. The evidence from cyclone-affected coasts of West Bengal, floodplains of Assam, tribal tracts of Jharkhand, drought-affected Bundelkhand, and climate-affected Himalayan districts indicates that environmental changes are contributing to a tightening of push factors that are compelling women and teenage girls into informal work as domestic workers in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bengaluru. However, this is addressed piecemeal under India's existing policies on labour, migration, and climate change.

This paper argues that climate change now functions as a threat multiplier within the already existing unequal structures of caste, tribe, class, and gender, amplifying distress migration into domestic work and deepening precarity at both origin and destination. It also proposes a policy agenda that explicitly recognises climate as a structural driver of internal migration, regulates and formalises domestic work with gender and migrant-sensitive protections, and connects climate adaptation, rural livelihood programmes and urban labour/housing policies into a coherent framework.

Keywords: Climate-induced migration, Domestic work, Feminisation of labour, Internal migration, Urbanisation

II INTRODUCTION

Climate change has started to alter daily life and movement in India during the past few decades. India's average temperature increased by roughly 0.89°C between 2015 and 2024 compared to 1901-30 due to systematic changes brought on by climate change. According to scientific models, there will be an extra 1.2–1.3 °C of warming by 2050 compared to 1995–2014. These climatic changes are impacting some of India's most ecologically fragile regions, including the Sundarbans and Indo-Gangetic plains, the drought-affected plateau of Bundelkhand, tribal districts of Jharkhand and central India, and the Hindu-Kush Himalayan (Dhara et al., 2025).

In the Indian Sundarbans, recurrent cyclones such as Aila, Amphan and Yaas, compounded by sea-level rise and saline intrusion, have undermined smallholder agriculture and fisheries, pushing households towards migration as a coping strategy (Banerjee & Bose, 2025). Along Assam's Chars and Chaporis, intensified monsoon floods and riverbank erosion have repeatedly displaced communities, with 2024 marking 2.5 million internal displacements due to floods in the state alone (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2024).

In Bundelkhand, repeated droughts and failed monsoons have generated large-scale out-migration from rainfed farming households (Niazi, 2018), while fact-finding reports highlight a 'man-made drought crisis' rooted in structural agrarian inequalities and neglect of traditional water systems (Perspectives, 2010). Mountain districts of Uttarakhand similarly experience erratic rainfall, glacial retreat and landslides, contributing to male out-migration and the feminisation of both agriculture and vulnerability (Goodrich et al., 2019). Taken together, these studies illustrate that climate change is not a distant threat but a present, spatially uneven driver of livelihood insecurity across India's rural and tribal geographies.

Contemporary climate–mobility scholarship stresses that environmental change rarely operates as an isolated 'push' factor; rather, it interacts with agrarian crises, indebtedness, social marginalisation and gendered labour markets to shape who moves, when, and into what kinds of work (The Impact of Climate Change on Human Mobility: Preventive Action, Humanitarian Action and Development, 2024). In India, this interaction is increasingly visible in the expanding flows of women and adolescent girls from climate-stressed rural regions into informal domestic work in cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Bengaluru, where they join a large but poorly regulated care workforce (Rahman, 2022).

National and city-level estimates suggest that domestic work has become a central sector of women's internal labour migration, with women comprising the majority of domestic workers and around half of internal female migrants in Delhi and Mumbai employed in domestic service (Saraswati et al., 2015). Region-specific research shows, for instance, that tribal girls from Jharkhand increasingly migrate, often via informal placement agencies that blur the line between employment and trafficking-like control (Tribal Study, 2025).

Dasgupta et al (2020) assessment on the Sundarbans and coastal Odisha indicates that climate-induced degradation of natural-resource–based livelihoods, particularly through salinisation and declining agricultural viability, has increasingly channelled women into urban domestic work, which often has significant risks of exploitation.

These climate-induced migration into Indian cities has caused slum populations to rise from 42.5 million in 2001 to 65.5 million in 2011, alongside growing socio-spatial segregation and 'degenerated peripheralisation' of low-value activities and habitats (Yadav et al., 2021) . Within this

urban political economy, domestic work remains structurally informal, socially devalued as 'unskilled' women's work, and weakly covered by labour regulation, leaving migrant women, especially from Dalit, Adivasi and other marginalised communities, exposed to low wages, abuse and exclusion from social protection (International Labour Organisation, 2015).

Recent developments indicate that reverse migration in India is once again being triggered by industrial slowdown and closures, particularly in labour-intensive sectors. Ongoing geopolitical disruptions, especially the West Asia conflict, have led to rising energy costs, supply-chain breakdowns, and reduced exports, forcing many small and medium industries, such as textiles, foundries, and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), to cut production or temporarily shut down.

This has directly affected migrant workers' livelihoods, prompting a gradual return to rural areas. Reports suggest that energy shortages (especially LPG) and rising living costs in cities are making urban survival increasingly difficult for informal workers, leading to a slow but noticeable exodus reminiscent of the COVID-19 period (Bhushan, 2026). Additionally, industry bodies have warned that continued stress on MSMEs could accelerate job losses and further intensify this reverse migration trend.

Building on empirical and policy-oriented work, the paper first outlines a conceptual framing of climate-linked gendered migration into domestic work within broader processes of agrarian change and exclusionary urbanisation. It further traces regional dynamics and migration corridors from climate-affected rural areas into domestic work in major cities, highlighting the role of caste, tribe and gender in shaping these pathways.

The subsequent sections examine India's fragmented policy and legal architecture, covering domestic work regulation, internal migration and social protection portability, and climate and disaster policy, showing how these domains currently treat climate change, migration and domestic work in silos.

Finally, the paper proposes an integrated policy agenda that: (a) formally recognises climate as a structural driver of internal migration; (b) regulates and formalises domestic work through gender- and migrant-sensitive protections; and (c) connects climate adaptation, rural livelihood programmes and urban labour/housing policies in ways that centre the rights and agency of migrant domestic workers.

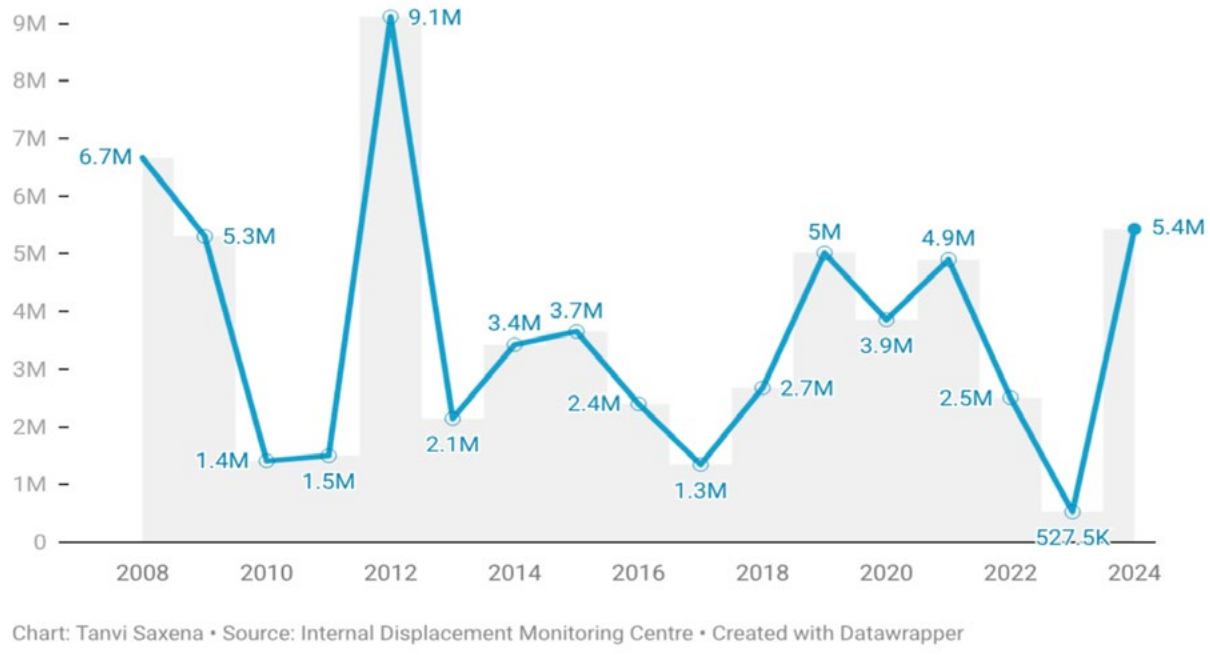
II CONCEPTUAL FRAMING:
GENDERED MIGRATION, DOMESTIC WORK AND CLIMATE DRIVERS

I CLIMATE CHANGE AS A THREAT MULTIPLIER

Environmental change rarely acts as a standalone cause of movement; instead, it interacts with economic, social, and political drivers within particular regional contexts, according to contemporary climate-mobility scholarship (McAdams, J, 2020). Agrarian and forest-based livelihoods are gradually undermined by slow-onset processes like salinisation, desertification, and rainfall variability, while sudden-onset disasters like cyclones and floods cause loss of assets and displacement; both forcing households to migrate as a coping or, less frequently, adaptive strategy (Priyadarshini, 2015).

Assessment of internal displacements in India reveal that over 61.9 million people (see figure 1) have been internally displaced since 2008, of which 74 per cent are due to floods. Displacement peaked nearly to 9.1 million in 2012 and again surged to between 3 and 5 million in the late 2010s and early 2020s. These spikes appear closely linked to intense cyclones, floods, and similar climate-related catastrophes.

Figure 1: Internal Displacement in India due to Disasters



Source: Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Global Internal Displacement Database -Disasters. IDMC (2023)
https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data/

In 2024, India recorded its highest number of disaster displacements since 2012, at 5.4 million, including 2.4 million triggered by the worst monsoon floods in more than a decade in the state of Assam. About 40 per cent of the state's territory is susceptible to flooding, and its frequency and intensity have shifted in recent years, forcing an increasing number of people to move, sometimes repeatedly and for extended periods. Furthermore, in 2024, floods in Tripura, one of the worst in state history, led to 3,15,000 people migrating due to landslides, with many forced to live in relief camps, causing a loss to 1.60 lakh hectares of agricultural land and causing damage to public-private infrastructure (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2024).

Climate induced natural disasters led to several villages being left abandoned (see Table 1), due to the severity of the disaster causing people to migrate to other villages or cities. In 2024, Chooralmala and Mundakkai village in Wayanad district of Kerala had a severe landslide due to deforestation and increased construction (Moharaj et al., 2025). Experts had already warned about Mundakkai village being at risk of natural disaster, causing the death of 300 people (Shaji, 2025).

Table 1: Abandoned Villages across India due to Climate Induced Natural Disasters

Year	State	District	Abandoned village	Reason
1819	Gujarat	Kachchh	Lakhpat	Earthquake
1825	Rajasthan	Jaisalmer	Kuldhara	Water stress, Drought
1980	West Bengal	South 24 Parganas	Ghoramara	Coastal inundation
1990	Uttarakhand	Pauri Garhwal	Thailisain	Land slides
1990	Uttarakhand	Pithoragarh	Guhal	Landslides & Agri loss
1999	Odisha	Puri	Chhenua	Cyclone
1999	Odisha	Puri	Udayakani	Cyclone, Flood
2000	Uttarakhand	Pauri Garhwal	Rawat Gaon	Land slides
2000	Kerala	Pathanamthitta	Kumbanad	Coastal inundation, Flood
2000	Kerala	Idukki	Uputhara	Erratic Rainfall, Landslide
2001	Odisha	Kendrapara	Barahipur	Coastal inundation, Flood
2010	Chhatisgarh	Sukma	Sukma	Water stress, Drought
2024	Tamil Nadu	Thootukodi	Meenakshipuram	Water stress, Drought
2018	Odisha	Kendrapara	Satabhaya	Coastal inundation
2023	Odisha	Ganjam	Rameyapatna	Coastal inundation
2024	Kerala	Wayanad	Chooralmala& Mundakkai	Land slides

Source: Moharaj, P., Muduli, D. K., & Sahoo, D. (2025). Climate induced migration and internal displacement in rural India. Discover Environment, 3(1). https://doi.org/10.1007/s44274-025-00312-9 (adapted from multiple studies).

I CHANGE STATE OF AGRICULTURE EMPLOYMENT IN INDIA

Over the last two decades, India experienced a shift in the employment sector with an increasing movement out of agriculture towards other forms of employment. Studies have estimated a shift of 15 million people employed in the agriculture sector between 2004 and 2016. As of 2025, 42 per cent of the total population is employed in the agriculture sector, down from 63 percent in 1991 (International Labour Organization, 2026). The main drivers for this change stems from widespread agricultural distress due to erraticity of climate , crop failures, less productivity and indebtedness (Suri, 2006; Abraham V., 2009; P. Sainath, 2011; Bhoi & Dadhich, 2019).

Sarkar et al (2024) investigating the links between climate stress and migration in India revealed how worsening environmental events like cyclones, floods, droughts, and coastal erosion are reshaping daily life and forcing communities to migrate especially in farming and coastal areas of Odisha, West Bengal's Sundarbans, Bihar, and Maharashtra. This has displaced communities and pushed migrants into urban centres, where many face precarious work, social discrimination, and exploitation, particularly women employed in informal sectors

Migration in India, has not always been equal in gender sense, with male migration outpacing female migration especially in rural India, has serious implications on women left behind to tend to agriculture (Deshingkar & Farrington, 2009; Srivastava, 2011; Tumbe, 2015; Mueller et al. 2015; Chandrasekhar et al. 2017; Nayyar & Kim, 2018; Vepa, 2005).

Gendered vulnerability is central to these dynamics. Women, especially from poor rural and tribal communities, often depend more heavily on climate-sensitive sectors, have weaker land and asset rights, and face gender norms that restrict local labour market entry (Mohapatra, 2012).

Studies have shown that the Indian agricultural system does not replace lost labour due to migration with capital, rather they downsize farms and reduce crop output (Madhok et al., 2025). At the same time, these norms also mean that many women are compelled to remain in climate-vulnerable areas, taking on increased burdens of care, subsistence work, and post-disaster recovery. Climate stress, therefore, intensifies pre-existing patterns of distress migration while also reshaping intra-household decisions about which members move, when, and into what kinds of work.

I URBANISATION, RESOURCE CONCENTRATION, AND MIGRATION CLUSTERS

Rapid urbanisation in India has not only expanded cities spatially, creating a way for Census Towns (CTs)[1]. For the first time, these towns satisfy the three criteria for being classified as 'urban' according to the Indian Census: a population of at least 5,000 people; a population density of more than 400 persons per square kilometer; and more than 75 per cent of the male labor force working outside of agriculture. The census data on CTs shows unprecedented changes from a few hundred between 1961 and 2001, to over 2500 new CTs between 2001 and 2011.(Pradhan, 2017; Shaw I, 2019).

As per the 2011 Census, urban population in India increased by 91 million people of which one third of that urban growth was accounted for by CTs, yet the urban growth rate has been slow despite economic expansions (Census of India., 2011; Nijman, 2015). The increased inward migration has

1 Census Towns in India are semi-urban settlements that meet specific statistical criteria, population over 5,000, 75%+ male non-agricultural workers, and density per km², but are still governed by rural authorities (gram panchayats) rather than municipal bodies.

led to a highly uneven concentration of economic opportunities, infrastructure, and essential services within urban centres, with recent evidence showing that urban areas generate over 60 per cent of national Gross Domestic Product while remaining dense but poorly serviced. Studies of Indian slums show that around 65 million urban residents live in settlements with severe deficits in basic services such as piped water, sanitation, and secure housing (Chandran, 2018).

Analyses of urban land markets in Delhi, for instance, show how low-value activities and slum settlements are repeatedly pushed to peripheral locations through planning and judicial interventions, reinforcing 'degenerated peripheralisation' and marginalisation of the urban poor (Ratra et al., 2025; Kundu, 2006). Limited affordable housing and exclusionary urban planning has pushed incoming migrants into informal settlements, peri-urban areas, and slum clusters, where access to water, sanitation, and secure tenure remains precarious.

Research on Delhi's unauthorised colonies and squatter settlements highlights how regularisation policies, resettlement drives, and court-mandated demolitions have repeatedly relocated low-income populations to poorly serviced peripheries, thereby, externalising the costs of urban growth onto migrant and informal workers (Swati Kulashri, 2013).

These spaces often become migration clusters shaped by kinship networks, labour contractors, and region-specific recruitment channels; for instance, recent work on Jharkhand documents how tribal women and girls increasingly move to cities to work as live-in domestic workers, with caste/tribe status and gendered stereotypes shaping their insertion into domestic service. Such clustering reduces initial migration costs and risks, but it also reinforces occupational segmentation, with entire communities becoming concentrated in low-wage sectors such as domestic work (Rajan et al., 2025).

Research on women domestic workers emphasises that many live in overcrowded slums or employer-provided living spaces, lack formal contracts, and are excluded from social protection systems, leaving them particularly vulnerable despite residing in resource-rich cities (Thakkar, 2023).

I FEMINISATION OF INTERNAL MIGRATION INTO DOMESTIC WORK

Analyses of Indian Census (Census of India, 2011) and NSS data continue to show that marriage remains the primary driver of female migration; however, a growing body of research points to a gradual shift towards labour-linked migration, with increasing numbers of women entering paid domestic work and other personal services in urban areas (NCAER–National Data Innovation Centre, 2024; N, 2017).

National dataset on unorganised workers indicates 316.23 million people have registered themselves on the e-Shram portal[2] of which 54 per cent are women. Although the actual number of people engaged in unorganised work might be much higher, the data further reveals high registration of people from agricultural dominant states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh (Ministry of Labour & Employment Government of India, 2025) .

2... e-Shram portal is a first-ever national database of unorganised workers including migrant workers, construction workers, gig and platform workers, etc. It is made for optimum realisation of employability of unorganized workers, and to extend social security benefit schemes to them.

A national-level analysis of women domestic workers notes that declining household agrarian livelihoods in rural areas, and the spread of nuclear households resulting due to marriages and increased potential for income in the urban area, has increased demand for paid domestic labour and drawn rural women into urban domestic service (Chandramouli, 2018). Complementary survey evidence from Delhi and Mumbai finds that about half of internal female migrants in these cities are employed as domestic workers (Saraswati et al., 2015).

In the contemporary period, female migration had limited diversification with social and class differentiation (Gothoskar, 2013). Although there is no official data on internal migration, studies have estimated that around half of female migrants in major cities like Delhi and Mumbai are employed as domestic workers. Data from the e-Shram portal also further validates the same, with over 29.4 million people engaged in domestic and household work, of which 96 per cent are women, although there is no division between urban and rural (Saraswati et al., 2015; Ministry of Labour & Employment, Government of India, 2025).

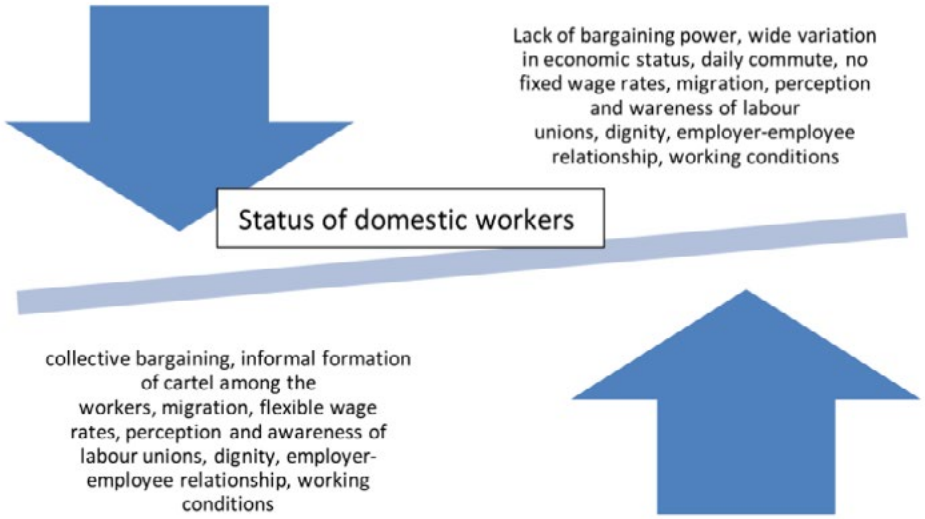
Domestic work is widely assumed by many households to be an unskilled job as women are assumed to have an inherent ability to perform caring roles through their social development as children, learning these skills primarily from other women in their families (Ghatak & Sarkar, 2019). Domestic work in India remains structurally informal and sees a large number of rural migrants being poorly educated and belonging from economically marginalised groups taking up these jobs. These jobs are performed in private homes, often without contracts, minimum wages, working-hour regulation, or social security (Neetha, 2019).

Research on Delhi and Mumbai documents that large numbers of these female migrants come from rural and tribal districts of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and other central-eastern states and are first-generation migrants (Kumari., 2015). For these migrants coming from ethnically minority backgrounds, their transition from adolescence to adulthood is a complicated and frequently paradoxical process, which often goes unnoticed Rao (2011).

The absence of formal recognition and legislative provisions does not necessarily imply that domestic workers have no structure or regulatory oversight; indeed, many domestic workers function under non-state or nonformal regulations that differ dramatically depending on where one is located or what culture/region one is in. Non-institutional factors can help shape how domestic work is regulated. When looking at those institutions and cultures, they both play an extremely important role in establishing the workplace(s) for domestic workers and also help marginalise domestic workers.

The monetary and non-monetary aspects of the workplace for domestic workers affect the level of marginalisation of those domestic workers; the monetary aspects include salary, commission and similar forms of compensation, while non-monetary aspects including; the conditions under which they work, their occupational safety and health, the respect for the dignity of the workers and the relationship between the employer and the employee (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Factors Influencing the Status of Domestic Workers in India



Source: Ghatak, A., & Sarkar, K. (2019). Status of domestic workers in India: A tale of two cities. Gujarat Institute of Development Research.

II REGIONAL CLIMATE MIGRATION DYNAMIC

I SUNDARBANS AND COASTAL WEST BENGAL

The Indian Sundarbans, a low-lying deltaic region of West Bengal, has experienced intensified cyclonic activity, sea-level rise and saline intrusion into soil and freshwater, undermining agriculture and fisheries that have historically sustained local livelihoods. Household surveys in the region indicate that at least 30 per cent of households have a member migrating out for work, with an estimated majority of working-age men seasonally or permanently absent; many move to construction, brick kilns and informal service jobs in other states (Paul & Rai, 2025; (Bandyopadhyay, 2025).

Dutta et al. (2026) assessment indicated that recurrent cyclones such as Aila, Amphan, and Yaas, along with slow-onset processes like salinisation and declining agricultural productivity, have undermined the viability of smallholder farming and other traditional livelihoods. These pressures have led to rising male outward-migration in search of work. Instances of both the genders migrating after marriage from rural to urban areas has altered the socio-economic roles of women within affected households.

This migration has led to increased inclination towards domestic work and is often portrayed within communities as one of the few steady income options for women which does not require formal education, even though it exposes them to abuse and urban vulnerabilities, including trafficking and sexual exploitation. Neither state climate adaptation plans nor labour policies in West Bengal explicitly connect coastal climate risk with the surge in women's migration into domestic work, missing an opportunity for integrated policy design.

I SUNDARBANS AND COASTAL WEST BENGAL

Empirical village-level research in Jharkhand has documented a pronounced increase over the past two decades in adolescent girls' and young women's migration as live-in domestic workers to Delhi (Kumari, 2015; Rao, 2011). Most are from Adivasi and other marginalised communities facing chronic agrarian distress, land fragmentation and seasonal hunger; parents often view daughters' migration as a strategy to smooth consumption, finance siblings' education and accumulate some assets like jewellery.

Climate stress, particularly rainfall variability, recurrent droughts and forest degradation, has been compounded in recent years by a sharp rise in extreme weather events and associated agricultural losses in central-eastern India. According to the Pandey & Sengupta (2025) assessment, India experienced extreme weather on 99 per cent of days in 2025, of which Jharkhand experienced 56 days of extreme events between January to September 2025 resulting in crop loss of 2,390 hectares of crop land. Such shocks directly reduce returns from rainfed agriculture and disproportionately increases the dependence on common-property forest resources that tribal households rely on.

I ASSAM AND THE NORTHEASTERN FLOODPLAINS: EROSION AND GENDERED MOBILITY

Assam's Char and Chapori regions along the Brahmaputra and its tributaries faced some of the highest flood and river-erosion risks in India, with households repeatedly displaced from farmland and homesteads (Boruah, 2025). Severe and more frequent floods, intensified by climate change, have destroyed crops on over 42,000 hectares of land and also resulted in death of over 14,000 small and large ruminants, highest in the East and Northeastern region of India in 2025 (Pandey & Sengupta, 2025).

Emerging reportage and micro-studies from Assam and the Northeastern region highlight a dual pattern: 'Left-behind' women bearing the disproportionate burden of floods, reconstruction, and caregiving, alongside a smaller but significant stream of women migrating for domestic work and low-end services in metropolitan cities such as Delhi and Bengaluru when repeated losses make remaining in flood- and erosion-prone villages untenable (Boruah, 2025).

In districts affected by riverbank erosion, particularly along the Brahmaputra, women from displaced households often lack formal land titles, which undermines their ability to access compensation and state support, thereby making migration one of the few viable survival strategies. Despite Assam's explicit recognition of flood and erosion as major development challenges, state-level policies on internal migration, social protection portability and regulation of intermediaries for domestic work remain underdeveloped, leaving climate-affected women migrants largely outside any coherent policy purview.

I UTTARAKHAND AND THE HIMALAYAN BELT: FEMINISATION OF AGRICULTURE

Mountain districts of Uttarakhand have experienced persistent male outmigration driven by low agricultural returns, limited non-farm jobs and aspirations for better education and services. Climate stress manifested in erratic rainfall, glacial retreat, landslides and changing snowfall patterns further undermines rainfed farming and livestock-based livelihoods, increasing the economic rationale for migration (Bandhani & Dutt, 2025).

Studies on Uttarakhand highlight the growing feminisation of agriculture (Maithani, 2025) and unpaid care as women take on increased workloads in the absence of men while also managing community roles (Badoni, 2025); however, there is also evidence that women themselves migrate to urban centres for paid work when local support structures and incomes collapse. For some, domestic work in Delhi, Dehradun or other cities becomes an extension of their gendered skills, yet it is also one of the few accessible entry points into the urban labour market for low-educated mountain women.

Climate adaptation policies in Himalayan states have focused on watershed management, disaster risk reduction and promotion of ecotourism, but have seldom been linked to labour, migration or urban policy instruments that would protect and empower women who respond to climate stress through migration into domestic work. The absence of integrated policy frameworks leaves migrant domestic workers in a grey zone between rural distress and urban informality, where neither climate adaptation nor labour systems adequately account for their realities.

II POLICY AND LEGAL LANDSCAPE

I DOMESTIC WORK REGULATION AND GAPS

India is a founding member of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and has ratified 47 Conventions and 1 Protocol as part of its commitment to ensuring decent work and aligning its labour regulations with international standards (Government of India, 2019). Within this broader framework, however, India has not yet ratified ILO Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, and domestic work remains either excluded from or weakly covered by central labour laws, though the new labour codes open some space for inclusion via social security and wage regulation (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2019).

A draft National Policy on Domestic Workers has circulated for over a decade without adoption; it envisages registration, minimum wages, decent work standards and access to social protection, but implementation has stalled despite periodic assurances that a policy framework is "under consideration" (Press Information Bureau, 2019; Gangwar, 2019).

A few states, such as Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala, have notified minimum wages for domestic work and created welfare boards, yet enforcement is patchy and does not specifically address the situation of interstate migrant women workers from climate-affected regions (Parekh, 2025). Placement agencies remain largely unregulated: attempts by Delhi and Jharkhand to introduce registration and oversight have faced political and administrative resistance, and have not been systematically linked to anti-trafficking frameworks or climate-linked distress migration monitoring.

At the state level, State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs) in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh primarily focus on sectoral adaptation strategies such as agriculture, water conservation and forestry, but they largely do not integrate migration as a planned adaptation outcome or address the governance of climate-induced labour mobility.

For instance, Jharkhand's SAPCC emphasises climate-resilient agriculture and watershed management but does not include any dedicated framework for migration-linked vulnerability or labour transitions into urban informal sectors (Jharkhand-Action Plan on Climate Change, 2014). Similarly, Madhya Pradesh's SAPCC focuses on improving agricultural resilience and rural livelihoods but treats migration only indirectly as a consequence of environmental stress rather than a policy domain requiring intervention (Government of Madhya Pradesh, 2018).

Across these plans, there is limited recognition of gendered and climate-linked migration pathways, particularly the movement of women into domestic work in urban centres, leaving a significant governance gap between climate adaptation planning and labour-market realities.

I INTERNAL MIGRATION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION PORTABILITY

Internal migrants in India face significant barriers in accessing Public Distribution System (PDS), health, housing and welfare schemes due to domicile-linked eligibility rules, documentation requirements and the territorial administration of most social protection schemes. A qualitative study on socio-economic rights shows how internal migrants struggle to access ration cards, housing and welfare benefits at their destination and become dependent on informal networks to smooth shocks (Agarwal, 2022). Srivastava (2020) study estimated around 50 million seasonal and circular migrants and documents systematic exclusion from subsidised food, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) , health insurance and pensions when they cross state borders

Recent initiatives such as One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) and the national e-Shram registry have begun to address portability and identification gaps, but implementation is incomplete and not tailored to the profiles of women migrant domestic workers. Evaluative work on ONORC finds that while portability has expanded across many states, it depends on Aadhaar-linked ration cards and biometric authentication, which many migrants, especially young women lack, and it does not by itself resolve barriers to housing or health schemes at destination.

Similarly, early assessments of e-Shram note low registration among domestic workers, limited integration with concrete social security benefits, and no systematic linkage to migration-sensitive programmes or gender-responsive design (Srivastava, 2020). As a result, women migrant domestic workers from climate-affected regions continue to navigate cities with limited or no access to subsidised food, public rental housing, maternity benefits or old-age pensions, despite being central to urban care economies.

Climate policy documents National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs) largely treat migration as a residual outcome of failed adaptation rather than as a mainstream adaptation strategy, and rarely contain concrete measures to protect migrants' rights or design labour-market pathways such as safe domestic work. Disaster management frameworks at national and state levels focus on evacuation and relief, with limited attention to long-term displacement, gendered livelihood reconstruction, or regulation of post-disaster recruitment into informal urban sectors.

II RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED POLICY AGENDA

I REFRAMING CLIMATE-INDUCED MIGRATION FOR DOMESTIC WORK AS A POLICY CONCERN

First, policy discourse needs to move beyond framing climate-related internal migration as either an aberration or merely a 'distress flow' to seeing it as a structural, gendered response to environmental and economic change that must be governed, not suppressed. Recognising that women's migration into domestic work is often a survival strategy under climate stress implies an obligation on the state to ensure that the only accessible labour pathway is not also the most exploitative.

This requires an official acknowledgement within SAPCCs, national climate policy updates and migration policy documents that specific corridors (Sundarbans–Kolkata, coastal Odisha–metros, Jharkhand/ Bundelkhand–Delhi, Assam floodplains–southern and western states, Uttarakhand–north Indian cities) are climate-influenced and strongly feminised in terms of sectoral destination. Such recognition can anchor targeted programme design and resource allocation.

I STRENGTHENING REGULATION AND RECOGNITION OF DOMESTIC WORK

A core pillar is the rapid adoption and operationalisation of a robust National Policy on Domestic Workers, aligned with ILO Convention 189 and explicitly attentive to migrant and climate-affected women.

Table 2: Core Elements for Recognition and Regulation

Legal recognition and inclusion in labour codes	Explicitly defining domestic workers as workers under wage, occupational safety and social security codes, with no exclusions based on part-time status or working in private households.
Minimum Wages and Working Conditions	State-level minimum wages for domestic work in line with living-cost indices of major cities; standards on hours, weekly rest, leave, and limits on live-in workers' on-call time, backed by fines for non-compliance.
Placement Agency Regulation	Mandatory registration, licensing and periodic audit of placement agencies with specific provisions on transparent contracts, wage payment into workers' own accounts, age verification, prohibition of retention of identity documents, and grievance redress systems.
Collective Organisation and Voice	Support for domestic workers' unions and collectives in origin and destination states, with a focus on women migrants from climate-affected regions, including state funding for worker facilitation centres.

Source: Compiled by the Author

The above measures would not only reduce exploitation but also make domestic work a safer adaptation option for women who must migrate.

I EMBEDDING MIGRATION AND GENDER IN CLIMATE AND RURAL POLICY

Climate adaptation and rural development policies should be retooled to reduce forced migration while accepting that some mobility is inevitable and can be made safer.

Table 3: Required Priority Directions

Gender-responsive rural employment and social protection:	Strengthening implementation of the Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (earlier MNREGA), which provides a statutory guarantee of 125 days of wage employment, while expanding provisions for women in climate-stressed regions through childcare support, wage parity, and targeted inclusion to reduce distress migration pressures.
Climate-resilient livelihoods for women:	Investing in women's farmer-producer organisations, forest rights implementation for Adivasi women, saline-resilient agriculture and fisheries in coastal regions, and non-farm enterprises that directly address climate impacts (for example, mangrove restoration, climate-resilient infrastructure maintenance) with fair wages.
Migration-sensitive climate plans:	Requiring SAPCCs to include explicit sections on internal migration, disaggregated by gender and sector, with measures to monitor and regulate post-disaster recruitment into domestic work and other informal urban sectors.

Source: Compiled by the Author

I CROSS-CUTTING: RIGHTS-BASED, PARTICIPATORY AND INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

Finally, policy responses must adopt a rights-based and intersectional lens that centres the experiences and agency of women migrants from climate-affected regions, rather than treating them solely as victims or labour inputs. This implies meaningful participation of domestic workers' collectives from Jharkhand, coastal Odisha, Assam chars, Uttarakhand and the Sundarbans in designing and monitoring policies at both origin and destination.

Such an approach also demands sensitivity to caste, tribe, religion and age, recognising that Adivasi adolescent girls, Muslim women from erosion-prone Assam chars, Dalit women from Bundelkhand and widows from cyclone-affected coasts face distinct constellations of risk and opportunity within the broad category of 'migrant domestic workers'. Embedding these nuances in law, programme design and climate planning is essential for any serious attempt to protect rights and enhance resilience in the era of climate change-driven internal migration.

II CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper traces how climate change, agrarian distress, and gendered labour markets intersect to push women from vulnerable rural regions into urban domestic work in a structural, ongoing pattern. Environmental shocks and slow degradation undermine rural livelihoods, especially for landless, Dalit, and Adivasi women, while cities continue to generate demand for low-paid, flexible care labour. Migration into domestic work thus emerges as a survival strategy that is both necessary and exploitative. Evidence from regions such as the Sundarbans, Bundelkhand, Jharkhand, and coastal Odisha shows that climate stress does not simply push women out of rural areas but channels them into highly segmented urban labour markets. Caste, gender, and origin also determine access to work and conditions of employment. Domestic work is often one of the few socially acceptable and accessible options, yet it remains informal, poorly paid, and lacking in basic protections, reflecting deeper policy failures across both rural development and urban labour systems.

At the same time, emerging patterns of reverse migration linked to global geopolitical disruptions, particularly the ongoing West Asia conflict involving Iran, Israel, and the United States, have added a new layer of complexity to these mobility dynamics. Rising energy costs, supply chain disruptions, and stress on MSMEs have begun to destabilise urban labour markets, especially in labour-intensive sectors that absorb large numbers of migrant workers. As urban livelihoods become more uncertain and expensive, a gradual return of workers to rural areas is underway, echoing, though at a slower pace, the reverse migration witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This trend highlights the fragility of urban employment structures and suggests that migration in India is increasingly cyclical and crisis-driven, shaped not only by environmental stress but also by global economic shocks. For women in domestic work, such reverse flows may not necessarily translate into improved conditions at origin, but rather into renewed cycles of vulnerability, debt, and re-migration.

The policy landscape reinforces this vulnerability. India still lacks a comprehensive national law for domestic workers, has not ratified ILO Convention 189, and continues to treat domestic work as marginal to labour regulation. Existing protections are fragmented and weakly enforced, while social protection schemes, though promising, often fail to reach migrant women due to documentation barriers, lack of awareness, and the realities of circular migration.

At the same time, climate policy frameworks largely overlook migration as a lived and ongoing reality. Rather than planning for it, they frame migration as a symptom of failed adaptation. This results in a policy gap where climate risks are effectively displaced onto migrant women's labour in cities, particularly in informal sectors like domestic work, without adequate safeguards or recognition.

There is a need for a more integrated approach in the form of legal recognition and rights for domestic workers which are inclusive. Climate and rural policies should also support safe migration pathways while strengthening local livelihoods. Without addressing these differences and involving affected groups in policymaking, current approaches risk deepening inequality, where urban resilience continues to depend on the invisible and undervalued labour of migrant women.

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