

POLICY BRIEF

Addressing Gender Inequality and Climate-Induced Displacement in Kerkennah, Tunisia

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Photo by Pierre Gassin

Introduction

In recent years, the escalating global crisis of climate-induced displacement has left an indelible mark, affecting regions worldwide. The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region bears a significant part of the burden. Climate change, which manifests in rising sea levels, soil degradation, and extreme weather events, has rapidly become an urgent and pervasive challenge. As of 2022, weather-related events have triggered an annual average of 32.6 million new displacements, surpassing those caused by conflict and violence.¹

Notably, the MENA region stands out as one of the areas most vulnerable to climate change globally, with 60% of its population exposed to severe water stress.² In Tunisia, climate-related factors contribute significantly to internal migration patterns. Over the past decade, regions like Greater Tunis have witnessed an increase in migration. Approximately 46,000 citizens have sought better economic opportunities, primarily driven by climate-induced events such as droughts and rising sea levels. These environmental displacements not only impact individual lives but have broader geopolitical implications, shaping the movement of people due to climate change in the region.

The islands of Kerkennah in Tunisia emerge as a microcosm of these challenges. Approximately 9 kilometers from the Tunisian coast, northeast of the governorate of Sfax, are the islands of Kerkennah, which form an archipelago in the Mediterranean Sea with a perimeter of 160 kilometers. The archipelago is made up of two main islands: Gharbi and Chergui, or Grande Kerkennah, in addition to 12 islets.³ Currently, the archipelago faces a perilous future, with a projected rise in sea levels that will threaten the lives of thousands of residents by 2050. In addition, Kerkennah grapples with environmental degradation, which has resulted in a decline in agricultural productivity and fishing yields.⁴

Caught between the dual threats of climate change and Tunisia's worsening economic conditions, the islands' vulnerability is starkly evident. As of now, their inhabitants and government representatives have yet to mount a substantial response in the face of these impacts. The economic repercussions are sizeable, with a notable rise in unemployment rates and an overall decrease in the archipelago's gross domestic product (GDP).

Methodology and Approach

This brief employs a mixed-method approach to explore the intersection of climate-induced displacement, gender inequality, and women's empowerment in Kerkennah, Tunisia. The research methodology combines qualitative interviews with a gendered and intersectional analysis to provide an initial understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

We conducted in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including 40 local community members, 20 women living in Kerkennah who are affected by climate change, 15 national policymakers, 10 representatives from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and five experts in the fields of climate change, water management, and gender. This purposeful sampling approach ensured diverse representation across age groups, socioeconomic statuses, and geographical locations within Kerkennah. We employed thematic coding during qualitative data analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns within the narratives, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted realities shaping the impact of climate change on the island. This approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of the challenges faced by Kerkennah's residents, paving the way for evidence-based interventions tailored to address their specific needs and vulnerabilities.

Additionally, we applied a feminist-informed gender analysis framework to this study to examine how climate-induced displacement impacts women and men differently. This involved exploring gender-based distinctions between roles, responsibilities, vulnerabilities, power dynamics, decision-making processes, and access to resources.

Finally, an intersectional analysis was employed to understand how various intersecting factors, including age, socioeconomic status, and educational level, contribute to differential experiences of climate-induced displacement and empowerment among women in Kerkennah. This approach allowed for a nuanced exploration of the multiple dimensions of vulnerability and resilience within the population.

Climate-Related Impacts, Migration Decisions, and Gender in Kerkennah

In North Africa, an estimated 19 million people will be displaced due to climate-related reasons by 2050.⁵ Tunisia's vulnerability to coastal erosion and the impacts of disasters will unfortunately put its people and infrastructure at risk.⁶ These challenges loom large over Kerkennah, where climate change may exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and threaten the livelihoods of residents.

According to Mehdi Ben Haj, vice president of the Blue Season Association, “Several parts of the Kerkennah archipelago will disappear within a few years; the rise in sea level represents a real danger for the islands and the local population.”⁷ Nour Mansour, a member of TunSea association, explained the threat that flooding poses to coastal Tunisian areas: “Sea level rise can cause increased coastal erosion, leading to shoreline retreat and increasing the risk of coastal flooding and salt intrusion. This will lead to habitat loss and disruption of ecological balances in these sensitive areas, which will cause a displacement of inhabitants.”

As a whole, Tunisia also faces other climate-related threats. Ichrak Klai, an activist and environmental lawyer, explained that extreme heat is also a problem. “The implications of climate change for our country are particularly concerning. In this month of January, the number of hot days clearly exceeds that of cold days with a general increase in the area affected by drought in Tunisia, in all its forms.” For Kerkennah specifically, the most worrying threat is the accentuation of climate variability, which would result in a greater frequency of extreme climate phenomena such as floods.

In the face of these environmental challenges, the prospect of climate-induced displacement looms large. Rising sea levels and environmental degradation raise concerns about the long-term viability of remaining in ancestral lands. Climate change-induced shifts further compound challenges, particularly in the agricultural sector. Unpredictable weather patterns and changing growing conditions disrupt traditional farming practices, undermining agricultural productivity and economic stability. This disruption not only jeopardizes local livelihoods but also exacerbates food insecurity, deepening vulnerabilities within the community.

This dilemma prompts discussions within communities about the necessity of seeking safer environments, reflecting the profound impact of climate change on the very fabric of livelihoods and community cohesion. In contemplating migration, one interviewee reflected, “The thought of leaving our ancestral lands is heartbreaking, but the changing climate makes staying here increasingly untenable. Our discussions at home often revolve around the idea of seeking a safer place for our families.” The use of the term “heartbreaking” to convey the emotional turmoil of considering leaving ancestral lands due to climate-induced displacement underscores the deep emotional attachment to the land, while the acknowledgment of the “changing climate” emphasizes the pragmatic need to prioritize safety.

Family discussions reflect a collective recognition of the urgency to ensure loved ones' well-being. On the one hand, these discussions revolve around emotional attachment to land and ancestral homes, but on the other, families must consider pragmatic concerns and familial responsibilities. This emotional dimension is crucial in understanding the reluctance and internal conflict experienced by individuals and communities grappling with the prospect of relocation.

Particularly concerning is the disproportionate impact on women in the islands of Kerkennah, who find themselves contending with intensified responsibilities and diminished resources.⁸ As women typically oversee household tasks such as food preparation and water collection, these duties become increasingly arduous amid shifting environmental conditions. Compounded by the lack of access to water and sanitation facilities, women and girls face heightened health risks, negatively impacting their well-being.

The increasing salinity of water sources presents a pressing concern, as it directly affects agriculture and household consumption. This phenomenon not only reduces crop yields but also undermines food security, a critical aspect of overall well-being. Local women, who bear the brunt of household responsibilities, articulated the profound impact of these changes on their daily lives. They described struggling to secure enough food for their families amid dwindling resources.

In our interviews with Kerkennah's local community members, women shared poignant perspectives on the deep impact of climate change on their daily lives. One respondent expressed, "The increasing salinity of our water sources has made it difficult to sustain our crops and nourish our families. It's a constant struggle to secure enough food for everyone." When discussing household responsibilities, another woman lamented, "Fetching water, once a routine task, has become arduous due to environmental changes. We spend hours seeking clean water sources, affecting our overall well-being."

Moreover, the scarcity of clean water presents a formidable obstacle, especially for women tasked with household water collection. Environmental changes make accessing clean water increasingly difficult, necessitating trying journeys to find suitable sources. This burden falls disproportionately on women, constraining their time and energy while exposing them to health risks associated with inadequate sanitation and waterborne diseases. As Azza Saleh, a waste management consultant, explained, "The economy of the island of Kerkennah is based on maritime activities, in which women of Kerkennah play a vital role through coastal fishing, setting, and hauling fishing nets and other activities. Meanwhile, the effect of rising seawater combined with rising sea temperature is threatening the balance of the marine ecosystem and the social life of women. That's why climate change must be tackled to preserve our human existence and our assets."

The phenomenon of climate-induced displacement has only served to magnify existing gender disparities on the island. With limited decision-making power and resources at their disposal, women bear a disproportionate burden and struggle to adapt to their changing surroundings.⁹ Traditional gender roles entrenched within these communities exacerbate the challenges faced by displaced women and compound the strain on their livelihoods and overall well-being. Thus, the interplay between environmental degradation, gender inequalities, and displacement underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address the multifaceted challenges confronting Kerkennah's population.

Unfortunately, Kerkennah has become highly vulnerable and caught between the threat of climate change and the worsening economic situation in Tunisia. Meanwhile, the state remains silent and incapable in the face of the impacts. Through our synthesis of diverse perspectives on the matter, this study seeks to inform policy formulation, advocacy efforts, and community-driven initiatives aimed at building resilience and fostering sustainable development in Kerkennah and beyond.

Policy Recommendations

The qualitative interviews with women in Kerkennah unveiled a broad spectrum of challenges encompassing economic, social, and psychological dimensions.

To address these challenges, we propose the following recommendations to the Tunisian government as well as all stakeholders working on climate and environmental issues:

1. Develop culturally relevant definitions of empowerment.

- This recommendation stems directly from the interviews we conducted with women, as they emphasized the need for a holistic understanding of empowerment that goes beyond economic factors. Specifically, relevant actors should:
- Establish a collaborative working group involving local women, community leaders, and relevant experts to co-create culturally specific definitions of women's empowerment.
- Develop an index incorporating economic, social, and psychological indicators that accurately measure and monitor women's empowerment in Kerkennah.
- Implement training programs for government officials and service providers on culturally relevant definitions to ensure effective and informed policy implementation.

2. Strengthen social capital.

- Allocate funding for community-led projects that focus on building social capital among women in Kerkennah, such as communal farming initiatives or women-led cooperatives.
- Foster a network of support and knowledge exchange by establishing mentorship programs that connect experienced women to those who face challenges.
- Conduct awareness campaigns that promote community ties and encourage community participation in local development projects.

3. Enhance Tunisian public policies.

- Actively involve women with relevant lived experiences in the design and implementation of policies related to climate-induced displacement.
- Establish diversity and inclusion training programs for government officials to ensure awareness of and sensitivity to the diverse social experiences within the community.
- Collaborate with international organizations to share best practices on decolonizing approaches and implement pilot programs to test their effectiveness in the local context.

Conclusion

By acknowledging the specific needs of women and engaging them as experts in policy design and implementation, we can promote a more inclusive and effective response to climate change that empowers women, ensures their rights, and fosters sustainable adaptation strategies in the face of climate-induced displacement.

Notes

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Authors

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