



Living with Water: Climate Induced Migration, Displacement, and Identity Reconstruction in Multan's Riverine Belt

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ABSTRACT

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Climate induced migration is gaining momentum in South Asia and the riverine belts of Pakistan are increasingly experiencing displacement of people caused by unpredictable monsoons and the increasing floods. This paper examines how communities in the flood-prone areas of the city of Multan are coping with the constant risk of seasonal flooding and the socio-cultural change that ensues after displacement. The study concentrates on the riverine communities located around the Chenab and Sutlej rivers, and examines how the environmental uncertainty is forcing rural households to migrate either temporarily or permanently, and how the so-called internal migration is undermining the traditional ways of livelihood, social relationships and group identities. The research is based on a qualitative research design, which includes interviews, focus groups and field observations, and addresses the interaction between ecological vulnerability, forced mobility and identity renegotiation. It stresses that climate displacement is not just a material loss, but an existential rupture that re-writes local histories, gender roles, and intergenerational memory. The results provide valuable implications on how to design locally-based, equity-sensitive climate adaptation policy, which focuses on physical relocation and social reintegration. Finally, the study aims at reconsidering displacement as a humanitarian issue but as a place of resiliency, resistance, and a reconstruction of identity.

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1.0 Introduction

During the era of climate volatility, human mobility and environmental change have become one of the central issues of the twenty-first century (Naser, 2020). In the Global South, populations that inhabit ecologically sensitive areas are more and more finding themselves displaced not due to war or economic deprivation alone, but to the gradual violence of environmental degradation (Bisht, 2024). The meeting of hydrological extremes, unpredictable monsoons, and poor water management in Pakistan has meant that the riverine territories have been particularly susceptible (Ansari et al., 2024). Amongst them, the outskirts of Multan, on the banks of the Chenab and Sutlej rivers, have also turned symbolic of the everyday experience of the climate refugees within national boundaries.

This paper discusses the climate-related migration and displacement phenomenon in the riverine belt of Multan, and specifically on the socio-cultural implications of such migration. These are not just logistical nuisances, they break lives, disrupt traditions and strain community unity. With roots torn out of the ground, seasonally or permanently, the relationship of families with land, memory, and identity is altered drastically. Migration here does not necessarily constitute a clean break, it can be temporary, periodic or partial (Long, 2004). But the constant process of displacement tends to result in a gradual erosion of social and cultural fabric.

The study also questions the relationship of displacement and issues of gender, land rights and informal urbanization. Women, small-scale farmers, and landless tenants do not only have to bear the physical burden of floods but also be ignored and rendered invisible by the system (Hasan, 2003). In the meantime, the development of informal settlements on urban fringe brings the new dynamics of vulnerability and adaptation.

This paper will explore the lived experiences of displaced households in order to move the focus away and beyond abstract policy frameworks to lived realities where voices that are otherwise left without representation in official accounts will take center stage. By this, it is adding a relatively new (though not yet well represented) area of study at the nexus of climate change, mobility, and cultural identity.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The communities of Multan riverine belt are no longer facing the threat of climate change in the future, but it is a current, repetitive disturbance that questions their right to stay in the location (Ajani et al., 2021). Displacement has become a recurring phenomenon in thousands of households due to frequent floods that are compounded by monsoonal vagaries and poor infrastructure. Nonetheless, although most of the discourse talks about infrastructure destruction or the need to provide humanitarian assistance not much is said about the ways in which displacement transforms the intangible aspects of life: identity, belonging, and memory (Berghs, 2017). This has created a serious vacuum in the academic literature and policy response and makes the climate migrants invisible in the national and regional development discourse.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The research paper presents a multidimensional analysis of climate-induced migration in one of the most flood-affected areas in Pakistan. In contrast to the conventional research which

focuses on either the loss of infrastructure or the migration patterns, the current study will focus on the emotional, cultural, and identity-related outcomes of displacement. It targets a little-studied geography of the riverine belt of Multan where local experiences can illustrate more general trends of environmental precarity worldwide. The paper also introduces information on the active role of displaced communities in the reconstruction of identity and social adaptation, which is essential in developing more human and inclusive climate resilience policies. It also helps to decolonize environmental discourses by prioritizing the voices and experience of the Global South.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How does climate-induced displacement affect the sense of identity and belonging among residents of Multan's riverine belt?
2. What strategies do displaced communities use to reconstruct social and cultural continuity in new or transitional spaces?
3. How do gender, land tenure, and informal settlement dynamics shape the experience and aftermath of displacement?

2.0 Literature Review

Climate-based migration is an issue that has been growing in the academic literature of the last 20 years, especially as the effects of climate change are being more evident in at-risk areas (Smirnov et al., 2023). Most of the initial literature was devoted to measurable consequences-economic loss, infrastructural damage, and patterns of population displacement. These works, which mostly rested on the development and disaster management theories, focused on the logistic issues like relocation, distribution of aid, and reconstruction (Ahmad, 2022). Nonetheless, this practice tends to relegate climate-induced movement to issues of spatial mobility and material deprivation, neglecting the underlying social, emotional and cultural changes which come with forced migration.

Newer scholarship, particularly that of the Global South, has started to dispute these limited interpretations. Researchers claim that displacement is no longer a temporary or reactive reaction to environmental shocks but a dynamic, protracted process that is influenced by past marginalization, government negligence and historical socio-economic disparities (Asif et al., 2025). Here, climate migration can be thought in multi-scalar terms, which is a conflation of the environmental, political, economic, and cultural. Displacement is not a vacuum; it is evidence of underlying weaknesses that are exacerbated by ecological threats especially in areas where already poor infrastructure, informal land rights and weak institutional capacity existed (Ahmad, 2022)

In the riverine regions like southern Punjab, the effect of displacement is not just on physical dislocation. In this case, symbolic and emotional aspects of forced movement are particularly acute. Land is not just productive property it is also spiritual, ancestral and communal. Displacement caused by floods in these areas destroys whole lifestyles breaking the connection with land-based identities, social structures, and rituals (Ullah et al., 2025). The break is not merely geographic but existential, as it touches the way people perceive themselves, their past and their position in the world.

The complexity of the issue is also shed on by literature on identity reconstruction in

displacement situations. The uprooted persons and groups have to renegotiate their roles, relations, and group identities in new or liminal places (Piazza, 2019). This is usually accompanied by gender roles changing because the women have to assume new roles in the absence of the male members of the family or due to the disintegration of the old social order. The patterns of community leadership can also be transformed, and the new types of authority and kinship can be established in the resettled or temporary settings (Sharma, 2023). The process of intergenerational transmission of knowledge is interrupted, and younger generations fail to preserve cultural continuity in the environment that does not offer the spatial and symbolic references to the ancestral life.

Studies of resilience have tried to bring to the fore an agency of the community, how displaced communities establish informal coping processes like mutual aid networks, informal economies, and grassroots organizing. Although useful, this literature can be romanticizing resilience without discussing the structural limitations on recovery and adaptation. In most scenarios, community-led responses are the result of the lack of institutional responses or their slowness or inadequacy rather than their desirability. This increases the cost of adaptation to the already vulnerable groups especially women, the landless and those residing in informal settlements (Giri et al., 2021)

Although the field has grown in academic popularity, substantial gaps in the knowledge base of climate migrants live experiences exist-particularly in regionally isolated, culturally specific contexts such as the riverine belt of Multan (Del Bo et al., 2014). The majority of the available literature on internal displacement in Pakistan is more inclined to disaster response than adaptation to the long-term and socio-cultural change. Furthermore, research on displacement is inclined to consider the process as homogenous without taking into consideration the variability of the experiences, depending on class, caste, gender, and geography. The narrative voices of the displaced people themselves, how they explain, live in, and construct meaning of displacement, are still poorly represented in the academic literature (Ali, 2019).

This paper aims to help bridge this gap by examining climate-induced displacement not only as a logistical and ecological issue but as a crisis of social and cultural rupture. It places the displaced in a key role in the rebuilding of both their identities and social worlds, but it also studies critically the structural circumstances that spell out their potentials of adjustment and dignity.

2.1 Theory Theoretical Framework

The paper is based on the synthesis of environmental displacement theory and identity reconstruction approaches in the overall scope of climate change and mobility. Instead of simply being a physical movement, environmental displacement theory implies that climate-induced migration is a multilateral process dependent on socio-political, ecological, and institutional factors (Draper, 2020). It acknowledges that displacement is frequently non-consensual, repetitive, and rooted in protracted backgrounds of discrimination and weakness.

Simultaneously, the research includes the view of constructivism identity theory, which holds that identities are constructed, negotiated, and redefined in relation to changing situations. Displacement particularly when it is recurrent causes renegotiation of self and community. People

and families have to rebuild a sense of belonging and cultural continuity in foreign or disjointed spaces (Dossa et al., 2019). It is informed by individual recall as well as popular histories, and in many cases, amid structural forgetting.

Combining these frameworks, the study highlights that climate-related migration in the riverine belt of Multan is not just a spatial displacement issue but a cultural reconfiguration and renewal problem. It puts the dynamic interface between environmental stress and identity formation at the forefront and states that policies should take into consideration both material losses and immaterial perturbations.

3.0 Methodology

The proposed study will take a qualitative approach to case study research to understand the lived experience of climate-displaced communities within the riverine belt of Multan. Three localities (Shujabad, Jalalpur Pirwala and Basti Malook) which were highly prone to flooding were identified on the basis of geographical vulnerability and variability in socio-economic attributes. Primary data was collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews of 30 displaced households, focus group discussions with community elders and women, and participant observation in the post-monsoon recovery phases. The purposive and snowball sampling techniques were employed in order to select participants who had a lot of experience in the areas of displacement and adaptation. Qualitative approach allowed the contextual, in-depth knowledge on the impact of displacement on identity, social cohesion, and daily life. Thematic analysis of data was carried out to discover common patterns, contrasts, and stories regarding migration, belonging, and resilience.

4.0 Findings and Results

The qualitative research carried out in the riverine belt of Multan in flood prone settlements brought out a multi-dimensional and layered experience of displacement. Instead of being a homogenised phenomenon that is characterised by the loss of shelter only, displacement in these communities has become a long-term situation that intertwines with history, culture, gender and economic survival. Testimonies of displaced people reveal not only material destruction by frequent floods but also the unobvious, gradual, destruction of community and individual identities. The findings are analyzed in this section under four related themes, namely, (1) cyclicity and inevitability of displacement, (2) transformation of identity and belonging, (3) gendered vulnerability and agency, and (4) disruptions to education and intergenerational futures.

4.1 Cycles of Displacement and the Normalization of Risk

Displacement is not an isolated catastrophic experience in the sense that many families interviewed in Shujabad, Jalalpur Pirwala, and Basti Malook undergo this trauma every monsoon season. The inhabitants talked of the constant cycle of evacuation, temporary shelter and re-settlement, frequently to the same unprotected, low-lying lands that had just been flooded. This trend has led to what can be termed normalization of risk in which rebuilding on unstable land is not only prevalent but in most instances the only available choice because of established landlessness and economic insecurity.

The statement that we always come back was repeated in several interviews that indicated an emotional and cultural connection of the land despite the fact that nature repeatedly betrayed

people. This repatriation is not often posed as a decision. Instead, it is a product of limited mobility: many families, being unable to officially own land, cannot receive compensation packages or relocation packages that are provided publicly (Cernea, 2008). They are mostly sharecroppers, smallholder farmers, or informal tenants who have no money to buy land, nor are they accepted in more stable urban areas where services are already overstretched.

The participants also explained how the displacement does not only affect the physical settlement but also the seasonal agricultural cycle. Inundation of seedbeds and livestock pens by floodwaters occurring at the time of planting not only wipes out immediate food security, but also future income (Ejaz et al., 2023). Families that previously subsisted on farming now go in and out of debt to reestablish houses and re-plant crops, only to lose it all again to the flood. This feedback loop has in the long run resulted in what some call a poverty trap in water with each flood hardening the vulnerability and weakening recovery.

4.2 Fragmentation and Reconstruction of Identity

The effects of displacement are psychologically significant although there is no loud lamentation about it, rather the manner in which people and communities see themselves in the world. One of the key findings in this study is that uprooting repeatedly has initiated a gradual loss of cultural memory and individual identity. To most people, particularly the old, ancestral lands are associated not just with livelihood but also with lineage, tradition and history. The loss of these territories implies the loss of the narratives, traditions, and common rites, which are anchored in that land (Ahmed, 2024).

Other respondents expressed a feeling of displacement that was not only physical. In the temporary shelters and makeshift urban resettlements, individuals tend to be alienated to themselves. One of the participants put it this way, saying, we once belonged to a village. Now we are shadows.” This feeling of emotional and cultural exile is more specifically experienced by the groups who had to move to the outskirts of the city, and who lost their traditional kinship ties, language connections and spiritual places.

However, in this destruction, there is also the rebuilding of new identities. In most of the situations, the displaced individuals have been able to reconstruct informal settlements along tribal lines or families and recreate social unity in new territories. The local religious leaders, teachers and older women tend to be on the front line to restore communal rituals and make sure that the traditional values are not lost altogether (Mumtaz, et al, 2003). Nevertheless, these initiatives are weak, and they are usually limited by institutional failure or outside opposition by host communities.

4.3 Gendered Dimensions of Displacement: Risk, Resistance, and Responsibility

Displacement does not equally hit both genders. Women, especially women who lead female headed households are exposed to special and increased vulnerabilities during and after displacement (Shah et al., 2025). The temporary shelters are usually poorly equipped in terms of sanitation, privacy and security, leaving women at a higher risk of harassment and gender-based violence. Some women mentioned that they are afraid to visit common toilets or bathing facilities, and most of them spoke of sleepless nights when they had to stay alert to prevent intrusions or

robberies of children.

Displacement also interferes with conventional gender roles, intensifying inequalities as well as creating new paths of agency. As men tend to look for day work in the nearby urban centers, women are abandoned to run households in the state of extreme uncertainty. In the process, a lot of people assume new roles; distribution of food, coordination of informal savings groups, and resolving local conflicts. They tend to provide informal and unofficial leadership, which is critical in the daily survival of displaced families.

The obstacles are even more pronounced in female headed homes. The absence of the male representation deprives many women of access to relief services, or leaves them unnoticed by local authorities. They have no formal land documents and, as a result of gender prejudices in bureaucratic structures, they are not visible to policy processes geared towards the nuclear, male-headed family (Shah et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the resilience of numerous women is amazing as they turn the few resources they have into the tool of reconstruction and frequently rely on the system of trust and reciprocity between other displaced women.

4.4 Educational Disruption and the Loss of Intergenerational Stability

Although the effects of material losses caused by floods are usually direct and evident, the effects that appear later, especially in the education sector, are more difficult to measure but are very far-reaching. The schools in the flooded regions are often used as a place of shelter during the emergency period, and the resulting school closure rates are much higher than normal with disproportionate impact on marginalized families (Ahmed et al., 2022).. After their displacement, many children, particularly girls, never get back to school. They are usually dragged out of the education system by safety issues, domestic duties, and early marriage.

Some parents were complaining that their children were not only losing formal education, but also mobility and aspiration. In other instances, schools were damaged beyond repair and were not rebuilt; in others, families were moved too far away to have their children rejoin schools that were still operating. The lack of continuity in education risks creating a lost-generation one that has grown up in the face of instability, without opportunity, and perhaps facing the same predicament of precarity as their parents.

Girls are especially susceptible to this situation. Displacement also enhances patriarchal domination because the family tries to keep its honor in the unsafe conditions. This leads to high rates of early marriages and in most cases, girls are denied the right to seek education. But here too there is opposition: in the focus groups some women reported with pride of daughters who had carried on with their studies through informal classes organized in the community or through mobile schools run by NGOs (Grindrod, 2016).

Table 1: Major Impacts of Displacement as Reported by Affected Communities

Thematic Area	Impact	Illustrative Quote
Housing & Shelter	Recurrent collapse, rebuilding from scratch with limited materials	“We’ve rebuilt four times. Every time it’s with less hope.”
Land & Livelihood	Loss of crops, livestock, and tools; debts incurred for replanting	“Floods take everything—land, animals, dignity.”
Cultural Practices	Disruption of communal rituals, ancestral worship, burial practices	“We couldn’t even bury our dead where our elders rest.”
Education	Dropout of girls due to school damage or early marriage post-displacement	“She stopped school because it became a shelter.”
Gender & Safety	Lack of privacy, harassment risks, unequal access to aid	“We had no separate toilets. Nights were the worst.”
Identity & Belonging	Loss of community cohesion, emotional disorientation	“I feel like a guest even in my own village now.”

4.5 Summary of Analysis

The results demonstrate that the eviction in the riverine belt of Multan is not simply a logistical, or infrastructural problem, it is a profoundly human crisis, a breakage of livelihoods, cultures, and identities. It is also cyclic, multidimensional and very gendered and these are manifestations of the larger trends of structural inequality and governance failure. Nevertheless, in this instability, communities show resilience, innovation and agency that is overlooked by policy narratives. Climate-induced migration should hence be addressed not only on the level of immediate relief but rather on the level of long-term, inclusive approaches that consider displacement as a transformative, and often traumatic, experience, rather than a change of location.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The study shows that climate displacement is a long-term, multifaceted process in the riverine belt of Multan that uproots much more than physical shelter, it alters identity, ruptures cultural continuity, and remakes social relations. Whereas policy frameworks tend to view displacement as a temporary logistical issue, the results show that it has become a long-term existential crisis to many families who have to rebuild their lives on a continuous basis in vague and frequently hostile conditions (Biondi, 2025).

The cyclical nature of displacement is one of the most important discoveries. Residents find themselves in the cycle of destruction and rebuilding that in many cases lacks secure tenure and access to official resettlement. This repetition normalizes risk and does not allow serious long-term planning (Bertoni et al., 2024). Lack of legal rights to land has been the most important obstacle that continues to expose people to vulnerability and denial of state support.

Less concrete but more visceral is the erosion of individual identity and collective identity. With cultural practices, ties to ancestral lands, and community rituals being interfered with, the residents are left with a sense of dislocation in memory and belonging (Tapsell, 2022). Rebuilding

of a home is usually accompanied by the symbolic work of rebuilding a life narrative that has been disrupted by climate violence.

Another aspect brought out by the research is the strength and flexibility of the affected communities. People form informal support networks, re-awaken cultural expressions in different forms and preserve kinship networks in the face of systemic neglect (Waubanascum et al., 2023). Nevertheless, such resilience cannot be romanticized. It tends to appear when there is no formal backing and it costs a lot to individuals, particularly women and disadvantaged populations.

The theme of the gendered displacement was recurrent. Whereas men were mostly reporting about economic loss, women focused on psychological distress, destruction of safe places, and emotional work of juggling fragmented households. Families led by women were especially vulnerable and also became significant actors of adaptation with many serving as the head of the community organization in post-displacement settings (Mbatta, 2025).

The research is part of the increasing number of literature that supports the redefinition of climate-induced migration. Displacement must not be considered only in the terms of movement but also in the terms of the change of identity (Huhn et al., 2025). Policies should thus not just end at the logistics of relocation but also consider the emotional, cultural and symbolic losses that are suffered by the communities.

In conclusion, addressing climate-induced displacement in regions like Multan requires a holistic, justice-oriented approach that incorporates:

- Legal recognition of displaced communities
- Investment in climate-resilient and culturally sensitive infrastructure
- Inclusion of women and marginalized voices in planning and decision-making
- Integration of local histories and traditions in resettlement processes

It is only through the recognition of the entire dimension of displacement, material, emotional, and symbolic, that the policymakers may be able to develop strategies that are not only efficient but also humane and inclusive. The experiences of the riverine belt of Multan tell us that being resilient to climate does not mean merely being able to survive water, but to live lives of dignity, memory and hope after it.

5.1 Conclusion

Finally, this paper has uncovered that climate-induced displacement in the riverine belt of Multan is much more than a physical relocation problem, it is a social and cultural rupture. The periodicity of floods does not only affect livelihoods but also undermines identities, traditions, and cohesion in communities. Although the communities that have been displaced due to institutional neglect are neglected, they prove to be resilient to create a new social network and to adjust to the new changing environment. But this resilience is usually very expensive especially to women and the most vulnerable. The results highlight the necessity of the rights-based and inclusive policies that focus on material and symbolic aspects of displacement. To develop more human and effective responses to climate-driven displacement, it is important to think of the displaced as not only victims, but also as actors of cultural continuity and adaptation.

5.2 Recommendations

This study makes clear that there is an urgent need to have an integrated and holistic policy to manage the multifaceted impacts of climate-induced displacement in the riverine belt of Multan. To begin with, the environmentally displaced population should be officially acknowledged so that they could be incorporated into planning procedures and receive land compensation, housing assistance, and post-disaster support. A provincial registry on displacement ought to be created to record the number of impacted households and track the rate of displacement, enhancing specific assistance and national climate displacement statistics. Second, the land reforms must focus on the landless tenants and women-headed households; this should be accompanied by low-cost housing and land grants that should provide climate-resilient houses, which are developed with the participation of the community. Embankments, flood-proof sanitation, etc, are part of infrastructure investment that is vital in risk-prone regions such as Jalalpur Pirwala and Basti Malook. These should be backed up by early warning and evacuation practice. Third, there should be increased social protection, including livelihood insurance, micro finance and gender-sensitive planning. This shift in response to climate displacement will change the framing of climate displacement as a development and justice concern by moving to proactive rights-based planning instead of reactive relief.

5.3 Limitations

Despite the valuable information on the socio-cultural aspects of climate-induced displacement provided in the present paper, it possesses a few limitations. To begin with the study was limited to three flood prone localities in the riverine belt of Multan which though representative, do not give a complete picture of the experience in the southern Punjab or other ecologically and politically diverse areas of Pakistan. Secondly, the study relied more on qualitative research techniques that allow to get a very rich contextual information but restrict the possibility to quantify such phenomena as school dropouts or effects on mental health. Third, the ethical safeguards might not have been able to overcome cultural and gender norms that might have stopped participants, especially women, to reveal their sensitive experiences completely. Finally, the research was restricted to a monsoon season and was based on retrospective reports. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies should be undertaken in future to enhance the knowledge of displacement as a social and cultural process.

Muhammad Junaid Iqbal: Problem Identification and Theoretical Framework

S Zohaib Iqbal Zaidi: Data Analysis, Supervision and Drafting

Jamshaid Iqbal: Methodology and Revision

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