

CLIMATE CHANGE AND MIGRATION FROM CENTRAL AMERICA

Insights from Migrants in Mexico



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Human Rights Clinic

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The Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI)

The Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI) is Mexican organization that promotes and defends the rights of women in migration and their families in Mexico and the region by addressing systemic barriers through a multidisciplinary approach. IMUMI combines strategic litigation, research, advocacy, and communication to drive policy changes. This work is carried out by a specialized team of over 20 professionals across its different areas, including advocacy, communication, and the legal clinic that provides essential support to women migrants and their families.

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Human Rights Clinic

University of California, Berkeley School of Law

The Human Rights Clinic designs and implements innovative human rights projects to advance the struggle for justice on behalf of individuals and marginalized communities through advocacy, research, and policy development. The clinic employs an interdisciplinary model that leverages the intellectual capital of the university to provide innovative solutions to emerging human rights issues. The clinic develops collaborative partnerships with researchers, scholars, and human rights activists worldwide. Students are integral to all phases of the clinic's work and acquire unparalleled experience generating knowledge and employing strategies to address the most urgent human rights issues of our day.

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Executive Summary

After failing harvests led a Salvadoran woman to abandon farming and set up a corner store to support her family, she became a target for gang extortion, ultimately forcing her to flee her country. Death threats from organized crime against an Afro-Miskito man defending his home in an environmentally protected area forced him to flee northern Honduras. Rising food prices following hurricanes squeezed the ability of an indigenous Guatemalan woman to earn a living selling produce. A Nicaraguan man left his country due to political persecution by the Sandinista party—but the destruction of the family home in a hurricane was also a factor. All of these stories related by survey respondents in this study demonstrate how the growing impacts of climate change contribute to force people to leave their homes.

This report, *Climate Change and Migration from Central America: Insights from Migrants in Mexico*, examines how climate-related harms intersect with and exacerbate violence, exclusion, discrimination, and weak state protection to drive migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. Drawing on interviews, desk research, and surveys with people on the move in Mexico, the study shows that climate change rarely operates as a single cause of displacement. Instead, migrants consistently describe how environmental shocks—such as droughts that destroy crops, storms that damage homes and livelihoods, and deforestation and extreme heat that undermine health and economic stability—exacerbate existing insecurity and hardship.

These environmental pressures deepen poverty, disrupt access to food and water, and erode already fragile living conditions. In many cases, climate impacts interact with violence, persecution, and lack of economic opportunity, making migration necessary. Migrants' experiences reveal how climate harms contribute to a broader chain of risks that threaten subsistence, personal safety, and family stability.

This study centers Mexico as both a transit and destination country for Central American migrants impacted by these dynamics. The findings demonstrate that better understanding how climate change intensifies vulnerabilities to violence, insecurity, and loss of livelihood—and integrating that analysis into refugee and immigration representation and adjudication— can improve access to protection and to regular migration status under Mexico's existing legal framework. The report also offers specific recommendations to strengthen institutional responses to climate migration by the Mexican government and civil society actors.

Key Survey Findings

Conducted by the Berkeley Law Human Rights Clinic in partnership with the Institute for Women in Migration (IMUMI), the study draws on a 2024 survey of 87 migrants in transit in Mexico; key informant interviews with civil society, international experts, and Mexican officials; and desk research. Although the population surveyed is small and not representative, responses provide a snapshot of the lived experiences of people on the move and illuminate how climate harms compound other drivers of forced migration.

The responses indicate that:

- **Climate exposure is pervasive and multi-hazard.** More than 80% of respondents experienced at least one climate event in the five years before leaving; 55% faced four or more. The most reported events included hurricanes (64%), heatwaves (56%), and flooding (55%); landslides (45%), droughts (41%), changes to growing seasons (38%), and forest fires (37%) were also common. Exposure was highest among Honduran and Nicaraguan respondents.
- **Material impacts are severe—and translate into protection-relevant harms.** Among those affected by climate events, more than half reported lost jobs, lost crops, property damage, lost access to water or electricity, and infectious disease. Large majorities also reported lacking access to clean water (74%) and food (67%) as a result of climate impacts. All of these impacts increase risks to life and safety.
- **Climate impacts often coexist with persecution and violence.** When asked directly, more than half of respondents who had experienced climate events said environmental factors influenced their decision to leave their homes. However, a clear majority of all respondents said insecurity (66%), violence (62%), and unemployment (54%) were reasons for their migration. The data and narratives show climate harms deepening vulnerability to persecution and exploitation. In some cases, climate-related shocks precipitated loss of livelihood or displacement that, in turn, increased exposure to harm at the hands of gangs, state authorities, or others.
- **Gendered and intersectional impacts are pronounced.** Women reported higher rates of lost work, food and water disruptions, crop loss, and communication outages than men following climate events. Female heads of household also disproportionately assumed additional caregiving burdens and faced heightened risks of gender-based violence, which is directly relevant to persecution analysis. Indeed, fully 22% of all female respondents reported they were fleeing gender-based

violence. Indigenous and Afro-descendant respondents also described heightened exposure to hurricanes and flooding, land dispossession, and threats as environmental defenders.

- **Structural gaps in state response are common.** Only 25% of climate-affected respondents reported receiving any government aid; assistance was typically one-off food distributions, with little support for evacuation, rebuilding, or medical needs. Respondents frequently spontaneously cited corruption, favoritism, or discriminatory non-delivery of aid—state protection failures that increase displacement risk.

Findings Regarding Legal Protections Available in Mexico

Mexico's refugee law incorporates both the 1951 Convention definition of refugee—protecting individuals with a well-founded fear of persecution— and the broader Cartagena Declaration definition, which extends refugee status to people fleeing generalized violence, conflict, massive human rights violations, or serious disruptions to public order. It also provides complementary protection for those who face threats to life or risk of torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment if returned. However, the following gaps between law, policy, and practice constrain access to protection:

- An overarching policy environment that prioritizes detention, deportation, and militarization of migration enforcement limits physical and legal access to protection;
- Chronic under-resourcing of Mexico's asylum agency (COMAR) amid rising caseloads limits the institutional capacity to process cases quickly and issue careful, well-reasoned decisions;
- Humanitarian pathways managed by Mexico's migration agency (INM), such as the Humanitarian Visitor Card and short-term visas for people affected by disasters, are rarely granted in practice, even though they are clearly intended to protect migrants, including those affected by climate impacts.

Given these challenges, the study examines how better integrating analysis of climate's role in heightening exposure to persecution, massive violations of human rights, disturbances of public order, and risks to life and integrity can promote access to protection. Survey findings showed how climate shocks repeatedly pushed respondents into conditions that increase precarity, expose families to violence and insecurity, and threaten subsistence. Where the state contributes to these threats, or cannot or will not provide effective protection from these dangers, these may form the basis of a protection claim. Annex II examines relevant law and jurisprudence in greater detail.

Both survey respondents and key informants showed how a single case might demonstrate eligibility for multiple forms of protection, for example, under the Cartagena definition and, subsidiarily, Complementary Protection. In these cases, Mexico must evaluate eligibility for, and grant, refugee status where warranted, before evaluating Complementary Protection.

Climate factors are often under-reported by migrants unless directly elicited by interviewers, a common challenge noted by key informants. Survey responses showed that migrants' narratives may emphasize economic or family reunification motives, even as they describe suffering significant climate harms. The study also examines how short intake interviews are likely insufficient to fully evaluate the role of climate-related drivers, particularly for the purpose of immigration representation and adjudication.

In response, advocates and adjudicators can use targeted questioning to surface climate-related drivers. The study also recommends ensuring that Country-of-Origin Information (COI) systematically includes climate-related data—particularly impacts on subsistence, public infrastructure, disease outbreaks, and government response capacity—to complement case evaluation. Annex I contains country snapshots that discuss how climate impacts intersect with conditions in each of the study countries.

Priority Recommendations

To ensure Mexico's protection system fully accounts for cross-border climate-related displacement:

Strengthen Legal Analysis

- COMAR should create clear institutional guidance to help ensure that climate-related harms are meaningfully considered in refugee and protection decisions.
- Internal guidelines, adjudicator training, and quality control of decisions should guarantee that refugee eligibility under the Cartagena definition is always analyzed before Complementary Protection and granted where warranted.
- Recognize climate-related impacts as relevant to analysis of “massive violations of human rights,” “serious disturbance of public order,” and Complementary Protection in internal guidelines and other policy documents.
- Integrate information about current climate impacts and consider including or seeking information about climate risks that are scientifically reasonably foreseeable into Country-of-Origin Information.

Improve Data Collection and Analysis

- Include climate-related harms in COMAR statistics on the bases of claims for international protection, both at initial registration and at final decision.
- Publish redacted case decisions involving analysis of climate factors.

Ensure Practical Access to Status

- INM should issue clear internal guidance for granting the TVRH and other humanitarian visas in climate-related cases and ensure regular and foreseeable application of the law.
- Guarantee timely issuance of CURPs (social security numbers) and non-discriminatory access to employment, healthcare, and social services to make local integration viable.

Cross-Cutting

- The Mexican state should resource COMAR adequately relative to caseload and stabilize funding for civil society and UN support.
- Adopt anti-racist, gender-responsive, and Indigenous-rights approaches across case attention and adjudication to address differentiated impacts and risks.
- Improve research on climate-related displacement and ensure structured dialogue between COMAR, civil society, and UNHCR to iterate guidance and tool.

Acknowledgments

Author

Helen Kerwin

Supervising Attorney
Human Rights Clinic

University of California, Berkeley, School of Law

Editors

Roxanna Altholz

Clinical Professor of Law
Director, Human Rights Clinic

University of California, Berkeley, School of Law

Denise Carachure Abarca

Assistant to the Director

Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración, A.C.

Design

Hannah Wittman

Communications & Marketing Specialist
Clinical Program

University of California, Berkeley School of Law

Acknowledgments

I am immensely grateful to the many people who collaborated in the design and research for this study, without whom the report would not be possible. I am grateful to Gretchen Kuhner and Denise Carachure, whose collaboration from the initial idea for this study to the presentation of the report was essential. To Roxanna Altholz, whose sustained and generous engagement with the study design, findings, and report strengthened the results immeasurably, and whose institutional support brought this project to fruition.

Many IMUMI staff members lent their expertise to multiple aspects of the report and recommendations, including Dinorah Arceta, Lorena Cano, and Lizeth García Ríos. Miriam González supported the design and presentation of the report. A large team of IMUMI staff

and volunteers carried out the surveys: Grace Álvarez, Luisa Álvarez-Icaza Pastor, Ximena Escobar, Rowan Gossett, Megan Hauptman, Alexandra MacGuire, Sandra Mejía, Radharani Regalado, Brenda Romero, Ashanti Sánchez, and Marta Villareal. Likewise, gratitude is due to the migrant shelters that permitted our team to carry out surveys: Albergue Monseñor Guillermo Ranzahuer (Veracruz), Albergue Casa Tochán (CDMX), Albergue Casa Fuente (CDMX), Espacio Migrante (Tijuana), and Una Ayuda para ti Mujer Migrante A.C. (Tuxtla Gutiérrez).

Many Berkeley Human Rights Clinic students—Kate Doorley '26, Maya Prakash '26, Marielena Rodas '26, Shahrzad Roshan Zamir '27, Sara Siler '26, Sally Wan '26—worked on this project over multiple semesters, conducting interviews, drafting memos and sections of the report, and providing incisive critical analysis. Special thanks are due to Sally Wan '26, who coded the survey data. Thanks also to Hannah Wittman for her creativity and commitment in the visual translation of the ideas of this report. My colleague Radhika Kapoor, Clinical Supervising Attorney, gave support and helpful comments. Eric Stover and David Hausman also provided helpful feedback about study design, and Kate Jastram and Karen Musalo shared insight and support early in the process.

Many key informants generously shared their time and expertise to speak with me and Berkeley students for this project, including staff from: Asylum Access México (Mexico), Programa Casa Refugiados (Mexico), Grupo de Monitoreo Independiente de El Salvador (El Salvador), Pop Noj' (Guatemala), Centro de Desarrollo Humano (Honduras), Haitian Bridge Alliance (United States), UNHCR México (Mexico), Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR) (Mexico), SARE Research Consultants (Central America), and PhD candidate Ana Sánchez Bachman.

Finally, thanks to the many people who anonymously shared their lived experiences with us through the survey during the difficult experience of transit through Mexico. My hope is that the experiences reflected in these pages contribute to better policy and action for all people on the move who are suffering the growing impacts of climate change.