Gender and Environmental Migration in the Upper Indus Basin

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The upper Indus basin lies within the Hindu Kush-Karakoram-Himalayan mountains and is one of the recognized hot spots of climate change. The area is very sensitive to potential shifts in the monsoon patterns, and melting glaciers will increase the risk of flooding during the wet season and of drought in the dry season. Local communities are adapting in various ways to climate change and environmental hazards; labour migration is one of the adaptive strategies most resorted to. While migration has always been a part of livelihood strategies, what can be defined as an emerging agenda is the study of migration as an adaptation strategy to environmental change and to the impacts of climate change. Migration-as-adaptation in the upper Indus basin is a highly gendered phenomenon: due to gendered power relations, cultural norms and values, and the gendered division of labour, virtually only men are allowed to move for employment. Women are left behind, to take care of the agricultural work and the household, and to deal with in situ adaptation. In this contribution, we will present some key results of studies conducted in northern Pakistan exploring the gendered dimensions of migration-as-adaptation, and we will propose a gender sensitive framework of analysis. We will try to assess whether migration can be a positive adaptation strategy to environmental pressure, and to what extent it could enhance women’s empowerment and community resilience.