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BETWEEN FLOOD AND CHAINS: REIMAGINING VICTIM-CENTRED JUSTICE AND REHABILITATION FOR CLIMATE-INDUCED TRAFFICKING SURVIVORS

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Abstract:

Climate change is quietly rewriting the geography of human vulnerability. As rising seas swallow coastlines, cyclones flatten livelihoods, and agrarian collapse displaces millions, an invisible human consequence is unfolding: The victim of human trafficking always find themselves in the triple- way junction of climate displacement, human trafficking and the much-awaited queue for victim centred rehabilitation recourse. While looking at the staggering figures of the climate displaced sufferers, the traceability of this fact leads us to some adjoined continuing effects as they are not mere the victims of conventional border crossing deception instead, they are men, women and children driven from unliveable homeland into refugee camps, brothel, domestic servitude, fishing vessels, forced slavery etc.

This research article interrogates a profound ruptured legal and social space where the climate displaced human trafficking survivors entangled amongst three bodies of law which are refugee law, anti-trafficking law and climate law, none of which has extensively been designed to address the ordeal of hardship that they are compelled to walk through.

The article argues that the existing legal frameworks only compound the pith and plight of the victims where the need of 'Rehabilitation' seems apparently unaddressed. For survivors whose homes have literally got disappeared and now falls beneath the water or destroyed by the calamities. How the rehabilitation without a homeland is itself a contradictory mechanics Tracing the supportive substance for this research article by drawing onto the available doctrinal analysis of international instruments, comparative study of domestic regimes in climate vulnerable jurisdictions and advocating for the survivors narratives from the coastal displacement zones or climate sensitive regions, this research article is intended to highlight the protection gap as not merely a technical but conceptual issue of the century. The article's central contribution is a proposed *victim-centred rehabilitation model* for climate-induced trafficking survivors one grounded in dignity, durable solutions, psychosocial restoration, and the survivor's participatory voice, rather than bureaucratic rescue.

Keywords: Climate Change, Human Trafficking, Rehabilitation, Psychosocial Restoration, Climate Displacement.

Introduction: The sordid story of a climate-displaced trafficking survivor

The apparent cause of concern and the obvious factors that formulate the vulnerability to human trafficking has received wide spread academic attentions and policy reconfiguration over the years but hardly any detailed conversation or research has been done on the fundamental issue which is beneath all of these factors such as poverty, lack of access to resources etc. When it comes to the debate and discussion on the vulnerability to trafficking. The plenty of evidence is present which in every possible ways highlight the surmounting lacunae in the number of trafficking cases registered and number of persons who has been actually trafficked but none of these have given a considerate attention over the core issue of climate change an inception point from where these factors usually emerged and ultimately having the cascading effect in form of trafficking.¹ The nature and scope of human trafficking the response of criminal justice system and the perpetuation in the failed attempt and initiation of ineffective anti-trafficking interventions have been given a due limelight over the period of time.

Based on the research on environmental migration it can be figure out that by the year 2050, the number of world's population will increase roughly by 16.4% and it will create a widespread dearth of resources especially in least developed countries or regions around the world and due to the effect of it there will be around 1.2 billion people will end up leaving their countries out of climatic disruption led to environmental migration altogether and majority of them would be from the middle east and African regions only. According to the official data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring centre (IDMC), around 24.9 million people have internally displaced in the year 2019 alone.²

These situations will intensify at elevated rate in the future that will create a snowball effect in the number of trafficking crime in those hotspot or climate change prone areas specifically. The consequential occurrence of crime of trafficking starts with the environmental migration forced by sudden or prolonged natural calamities triggered by climatic change, then the refugees or displaced population easily becomes the target or victims of human trafficking racket. This emerging phenomenon is now becoming a grave concern for the social and

¹ Nicole Molinari, *Intensifying Insecurities: The Impact of Climate Change on Vulnerability to Human Trafficking in the Indian Sundarbans*, ATR (2017), <https://antitraffickingreview.org/index.php/atrjournal/article/view/226>.

² IDMC | *Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019*, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2019/> (last visited Sept. 23, 2026).

geopolitical arenas.

Take the illustration of sub-Saharan African region where the climate change derives the human trafficking channels by destroying the local livelihoods, causing food shortages, financial crisis and due to which the basis sustenance of the family becomes challenging and severely hard to manage and therefore it is forcing families to step out of their region for the sake of their survival. These migrations are often voluntary and desperate but out of underlying involuntary compulsion which forced them to take risky journey where the return to normal life becomes somewhat impossible and attempts becomes redundant.

In 2023 a noble research article themed *Climate change, mobility and human trafficking in Ethiopia* by Ninna Nyberg Sorenson highlighted the gloomy situation of Ethiopian women who were trafficked to gulf/middle east region and forced them into domestic servitude, slavery, prostitution, organ sell etc. Although the Ethiopia's current migration rate is only half of the sub-Saharan region's average of 2% but the chunks of women trafficked populations makes it half of the total trafficked population.³

The climate change may not be termed as a direct causing migration but it certainly acts as an amplifier of already existing drivers. In one of the latest reports of the UN Office on drugs and Crime (UNODC) have mentioned that the number of victims of human trafficking detected globally is rising again in post COVID-19 pandemic era covering around 156 countries in its ambit.⁴

The substantial point of etiological disconnect exposes the research gap in this topic where the current academic works are treating human trafficking issues as purely a socio-economic or criminal justice issue, while the vitally instigating factor which is a climate change and climate migration studies focus merely on displacement and adaption issues thus ignoring the subtle aspect that how these two intersecting concerns are integral to each other also for one step further the matter of rehabilitation and the victim's reintegration back into the society will remain inefficacious until the recognition of the problem cannot be addressed to its core.

The Climate Displacement & Trafficking Nexus: A Socio-Legal Mapping

There is a direct correlation between the slow onset of disasters whether in form of sea level rise, salination, inundation, draught etc. set as structural preconditions of trafficking and

³ *Climate Change, Mobility and Human Trafficking in Ethiopia* | DIIS, (May 26, 2023), <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/climate-change-mobility-and-human-trafficking-in-ethiopia>.

⁴ *Poverty, Conflict and Climate Fuel Spike in Trafficking Victims: UN Report* | UN News, (Dec. 11, 2024), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/12/1158036>.

trafficking hotspot in form of relief camps, labour camp etc. The description of this statement can be projected as in climate change does not traffic people; it manufactures the conditions in which trafficking becomes most prone and possibly happening. Understanding this conceptual nexus is the core theme of this article. The relation between climate change and trafficking doesn't operate through direct causation but through "*Vulnerability Multiplication*" Climate shocks often erode the basics of livelihoods, displace populations into the grave situation of precarity, where the trafficking *Mafias* or trafficker gangs plays a proactive role and the available legal protection are very blur in this regard.

The magnitude of displacement. The numbers tell the story of the scale of the threat. Last year alone, 23.7 million people were internally displaced by weather-related disasters - a figure much higher than conflict-driven forced displacement. The World Bank estimates that 216 million people will be internally displaced by climate change by 2050.⁵ In the same timeframe, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2024 Global Report identified a 25% growth in reported victims of trafficking in contrast to 2019; UNODC Executive Director, Ghada Wali, simply reflected that this was mainly due to "conflicts, climate-induced disasters and global crises".⁶

Interestingly, UNODC data demonstrated a strong correlation between internally displaced persons (IDPs) caused by climate change and the detection of a country's nationals as trafficking victims in Europe, clearly illustrating that the nexus is not merely theoretical.

Three channels of risk: The report's evidence maps to three different causal channels. One, rapid onset disasters: post research cyclone *Sidr* in Bangladesh (2007) detailed how criminal networks exploit widowhood, men desperate for work across borders and entire families driven into prostitution and sweatshops.⁷

Disaster zones provide both supply (displaced, unemployed, and unprotected) and demand (a surge of male workers and aid workers), and cell phones now facilitate recruitment in ways early disaster settings could never have.

Second, slow onset degradation: rising salinity, shrinking farmland and desertification function as a 'stress multiplier', rob households of their coping capacity and pressure them into the 'lesser evil' of precarious migration facilitated by mafias with frequent links to human traffickers.

Third, displacement architecture itself: camps and informal settlements concentrate

⁵ UNITED NATIONS: OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, *GLOBAL REPORT ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS 2022* (2023).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Mikaila V Smith, *Applying the United Nations Trafficking Protocol in the Context of Climate Change*, CHICAGO JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL LAW.

vulnerability, and a 2016 Kenyan study found 37 per cent of climate-displaced respondents had witnessed or experienced trafficking, with displaced persons accepting hosting arrangements amounting to forced labour.⁸

The gendered and consent aspect: IOM's comparative investigation of Ethiopia and the Philippines affirms that women face greater vulnerability throughout the chain, filtered through socially constructed gender norms. In Ethiopia, women depend on men for migration and migration decisions (dependence); whereas in the Philippines, the post-shock migration depends on women as strategic household reinforcements.⁹ Importantly, the nexus is consistently victimising compliant migrants, both by and between them, forcing us to problematise the Centre of Grievance & Coercion paradigm that we explore in Chapter III of this article.

The socio-legal significance: In short, the nexus is best read not as a new crime but a new face for an old crime. But in the end, the trade persists as between humans in the criminal justice space, not a harm produced by the system. Tracing the socio-legal linkage does two things simultaneously: first, it roots the upcoming legal challenge empirically, and second, it reconstitutes the climate displaced trafficked survivor not as a natural incident but as a predicted governance failure.

The Legal Vacuum: Refugee Law, Anti-Trafficking Law, and the Climate Migrant Nobody Sees

The survivor at the centre of this article flees two catastrophes: a flood that took her home, and chains that took her liberty. Yet when she reaches for the law, she finds three doors, and each is closed for a different reason. This chapter examines those doors doctrinally, to demonstrate that her invisibility is not accidental but *structural*: each regime fails her at the precise point where her reality begins.

The first failure: the 1951 Refugee Convention; A persecuted person is defined as one fleeing their own country because of reasons of race, religion, nationality, a social group or political opinion.¹⁰ A cyclone is no persecutor; its stratospheric rule does not discriminate on the grounds of religious preference. The climate-displaced survivor, then, cannot clear the

⁸ https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2024/GLOTIP2024_Chapter_2.pdf

⁹ *Climate Change and Human Trafficking: What Does the Latest Evidence Tell Us?* <https://unitedkingdom.iom.int/news/climate-change-and-human-trafficking-what-does-latest-evidence-tell-us> (last visited Sept. 24, 2026).

¹⁰ *The 1951 Refugee Convention*, UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention> (last visited Sept. 24, 2026).

definitional threshold specified in article 1A (2), no matter how damaging her situation.

Even UNHCR's 2020 legal considerations on climate change and refugee claims only provide a footing for jurisprudence in cases in which climate impacts layer into the perspective of a pre-existing persecution, a close strip of land with an uninhabitable climate that none of the climate displaced survivors may ever occupy.¹¹

The UN Secretary General has acknowledged the 'legal gap' created in this scenario by calling the notable circumvention of the Convention's protections a "legal void," and the recent Teitiota jurisprudence before the UN Human Rights Committee confirmed that deportation of persons to climate-threatened homelands necessarily activates the right to life but does not establish the person as a refugee.¹² The Convention speaks for the person persecuted by her government, not the person cast out from her environment.

The second failure: the Palermo Protocol; The Protocol's celebrated three-element definition act, means, and purpose requires proof that the victim was recruited or moved by means of force, fraud, coercion, or abuse of vulnerability.¹³ This element, designed to distinguish trafficking from smuggling, becomes a trap in the context of climate change. The climate-displaced migrant frequently consents to the recruiter's offer: she signs the labour contract, boards the bus, and hands over her documents because starvation and a drowning village leave no real choice. Yet adjudicators, trained to look for locked doors and physical restraint, see voluntary migration and look away. What the Protocol fails to recognise is that the means element is satisfied not by the recruiter's overt coercion but by the climate itself, the ultimate abuse of a position of vulnerability, rendering consent meaningless in substance while appearing free in form. The one doctrinal opening Article 3(b), which renders consent irrelevant where any listed means is used, remains underutilised precisely because "abuse of a position of vulnerability" has been interpreted narrowly, as interpersonal exploitation rather than structural, climate-produced desperation.¹⁴

The third failure: climate law; The climate regime's *locus classicus* the Paris Agreement says

¹¹ *Legal Considerations Regarding Claims for International Protection Made in the Context of the Adverse Effects of Climate Change and Disasters*, RESEARCHGATE (2026), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355792299_Legal_Considerations_Regarding_Claims_for_International_Protection_Made_in_the_context_of_the_Adverse_Effects_of_Climate_Change_and_Disasters.

¹² *Ioane Teitiota v. New Zealand*, CCPR/C/127/D/2728/2016, UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), 7 January 2020, <https://www.refworld.org/jurisprudence/caselaw/hrc/2020/123128> [accessed 24 September 2026]

¹³ *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons> (last visited Sept. 24, 2026).

¹⁴ (2) *Human Trafficking and Kesha: A Case Study*, https://www.academia.edu/22265863/Human_Trafficking_and_Kesha_A_Case_Study (last visited Sept. 24, 2026).

nothing about people moving or trafficking. Its sole nod towards the "human dimension" of the climate crisis is the Warsaw International Mechanism's Task Force on Displacement, which is non-binding and advisory and supposed to avoid, reduce, and address displacement, but not "to provide for the comprehensive, context-specific and gender-responsive protection" for the survivors it may have consigned to the kiln or the fishing boat because the regime that induced their precarity disavows any culpability for its byproduct.¹⁵

Three regimes, three rational failures and a woman for none of them. The law has bottled her pain into categories that it can fathom, and her reality refuses every one of the bottles. The next chapter is about what happens when her unlikely rescue is indeed already underway: the rehabilitationist projects designed for her, and the unspoken presumption at their heart that will betray her again.

THE REHABILITATION DEFICIT: WHY “RETURN-AND-REINTEGRATE” FAILS THE CLIMATE-DISPLACED SURVIVOR

The failure of the existing response does not end with the absence of legal recognition; it continues into the very meaning of rehabilitation. Conventional anti-trafficking responses generally proceed on a linear assumption: rescue the victim, provide temporary protection, restore livelihood, and eventually return and reintegrate her into her community of origin. For a climate-displaced survivor, however, the final step may return her not to a home, but to the same conditions that produced her vulnerability.

The scale of climate-related displacement demonstrates why this assumption can no longer remain unquestioned. In 2024, disasters triggered approximately 45.8 million internal displacements across 163 countries and territories - the highest annual figure recorded by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.¹⁶ The World Bank has further projected that, under a pessimistic reference scenario, as many as 216.1 million people could become internal climate migrants by 2050, including approximately 40.5 million in South Asia alone.¹⁷ These figures do not represent trafficking victims; rather, they illustrate the rapidly expanding population for whom displacement, livelihood disruption and the loss of a viable place of return may become enduring realities.

¹⁵ *Evaluating Progress on Loss and Damage: An Assessment of the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism under the UNFCCC*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14693062.2022.2112935?needAccess=true> (last visited Sept. 24, 2026).

¹⁶ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2025 Global Report on Internal Displacement (IDMC 2025)

¹⁷ Viviane Clement et al, Groundswell Part II: Acting on Internal Climate Migration (World Bank 2021)

The first deficit is therefore physical and environmental. Return presupposes that the place of origin remains capable of supporting a safe and dignified life. Climate-induced displacement can undermine that premise through recurrent flooding, drought, salinisation, desertification, sea-level rise or the permanent destruction of livelihoods. UNHCR has cautioned that severe climate impacts can render areas of return or local integration too dangerous to inhabit or too fragile to sustain large populations.¹⁸ A return policy that ignores this reality risks converting rehabilitation into a second displacement.

The second deficit is economic. Reintegration cannot be reduced to placing a survivor back into the same occupation, household or locality from which she was displaced. IOM's 2025 *Climate Chains* research identifies an interconnected pathway in which climate events disrupt livelihoods, increase vulnerability and migration intentions, and may consequently heighten exposure to exploitation and trafficking.¹⁹ Thus, restoring a livelihood that has itself become climate-insecure may reproduce the very vulnerability that facilitated exploitation. Economic rehabilitation must instead ask whether the proposed livelihood is viable, safe and resilient in the destination chosen by the survivor.

The third deficit is psychosocial and relational. Trafficking does not merely deprive a person of physical liberty; it can fracture family relationships, identity, social belonging and personal agency. Climate displacement can compound these injuries through the loss of home, community and livelihood. The vulnerability of displaced children illustrates the problem: UNICEF recorded 43.1 million internal displacements of children caused by weather-related disasters across 44 countries between 2016 and 2021, approximately 20,000 displacements each day, and observed that post-disaster separation from caregivers can increase exposure to exploitation and trafficking.²⁰ Rehabilitation must therefore address trauma, stigma, family separation and the loss of social belonging alongside material needs.

The legal implication is significant. Rehabilitation cannot be treated merely as post-rescue assistance; it must be understood as restoration of the conditions necessary for a safe, dignified and autonomous life. This requires a shift from destination-based rehabilitation to rights-based rehabilitation. The relevant question is not simply whether the survivor has been sent somewhere, but whether she has achieved safety, livelihood security, access to services, social inclusion and protection against re-trafficking.

This also requires distinguishing between *return*, *local integration* and *relocation*. Where

¹⁸ UNHCR, *Climate Change and the Future of safe Returns* (2020)

¹⁹ International Organization for Migration, *Climate Chains: Mapping the Relationship between Climate, Trafficking in persons and building Resilience* (IOM 2025)

²⁰ UNICEF, *Children Displaced in a Changing Climate: Preparing for a Future Already Underway* (2023)

return is safe and genuinely sustainable, it may remain appropriate. Where it is not, rehabilitation may require integration at the place of displacement or relocation to another viable community. UNHCR's framework for durable solutions already recognises sustainable return, local integration and settlement elsewhere as possible pathways for internally displaced persons.²¹ For the climate-displaced trafficking survivor, these pathways must additionally be assessed through the lens of trafficking risk and survivor preference.

Consequently, the central deficiency is not that rehabilitation is absent, but that its traditional architecture is place-dependent while climate displacement may make place itself unstable. Once "home" can no longer be assumed to be safe, rehabilitation must become a process of restoring agency rather than merely restoring geography. This creates the foundation for a victim-centred sustainable framework capable of connecting protection, livelihood, psychosocial recovery and durable solutions.

REIMAGINING VICTIM-CENTRED JUSTICE: A PROPOSED REHABILITATION FRAMEWORK

If climate displacement changes the conditions under which trafficking occurs, it must also change the conditions under which rehabilitation is understood. A climate-sensitive anti-trafficking framework cannot stop at rescue or assume that geographical return constitutes restoration. It must instead create the conditions in which a survivor can recover safety, livelihood, dignity and the capacity to make meaningful choices about her future.

The first requirement is recognition. Climate-related displacement should be recorded as a relevant vulnerability factor during identification, assessment and rehabilitation. This does not mean treating climate change as an automatic cause of trafficking. Rather, it requires authorities to identify whether disaster, livelihood loss, environmental degradation or displacement contributed to the circumstances in which exploitation became possible. IOM's recent research demonstrates the importance of examining these interconnected pathways rather than treating trafficking as an isolated event.²² Recognition is therefore the first step because a vulnerability that remains institutionally invisible cannot be effectively rehabilitated.

The second requirement is individualisation. A uniform rehabilitation package cannot adequately respond to survivors whose circumstances differ in age, family structure, economic dependence, location, disability, trauma, documentation and future aspirations. Every survivor

²¹ UNHCR, 'IDP Definition and Durable Solutions' (2025)

²² International Organization for Migration, *Climate Chains: Mapping the Relationship between Climate, Trafficking in Persons and Building Resilience* (IOM 2025)

should therefore receive an individual rehabilitation plan addressing immediate safety, identity documents, healthcare, psychosocial support, education or skills, housing, livelihood opportunities and protection from re-trafficking. Such plans must be periodically reviewed rather than treated as one-time administrative exercises.

The third requirement is survivor participation. Rehabilitation should not transform the survivor from an object of trafficking into an object of State protection. The same loss of agency cannot be reproduced under the language of rescue. The 2026 decision of the Supreme Court of India in *Prajwala v Union of India* provides an important jurisprudential illustration of this shift. The Court recognised that victims of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation possess a right to rehabilitation arising from Articles 21 and 23 of the Constitution and framed a Victim Protection Plan centred upon dignity, informed consent, non-stigmatisation and individualised protection.²³ Importantly, the Plan contemplates that where a victim does not wish to return to her State of origin, protection should be provided to enable her to establish a meaningful life at the destination.²⁴

Although *Prajwala* concerns the Indian constitutional framework and trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation, its reasoning illustrates a broader principle relevant to the climate-trafficking nexus: rehabilitation cannot be successful where the survivor has no meaningful voice in determining what rehabilitation means for her. It also recognises that livelihood measures must correspond to present socio-economic realities and the victim's choices rather than merely provide nominal vocational training.²⁵

The fourth requirement is therefore durable solutions rather than compulsory return. Three broad pathways may be considered: safe and sustainable return; local integration at the place of displacement; or planned relocation to another viable location. The choice must depend upon objective conditions of safety, housing, livelihood, access to services and protection from re-trafficking, together with the survivor's free and informed preference. UNHCR similarly recognises sustainable return, local integration and settlement elsewhere as possible solutions for internally displaced persons.²⁶ In climate-sensitive rehabilitation, however, these options must also be tested against future environmental vulnerability rather than only present

²³ *Prajwala v Union of India*, Miscellaneous Application No 530 of 2022 in Writ Petition (Civil) No 56 of 2004, 2026 INSC 609, paras 262-263. The Judgment expressly addresses victims' "Right to Rehabilitation" and their relationship between Articles 21 and 23.

²⁴ *Ibid* paras 293, 362. The Victim Protection Plan provides that where a victim is unwilling to return to her State of origin, protection should be provided to enable her to begin a meaningful life at the destination.

²⁵ *Ibid* paras 359-61. The Court emphasized rehabilitation responsive to victims' choices and contemporary socio-economic realities.

²⁶ UNHCR, 'IDP Definition and Durable Solutions' (2025).

conditions.

The fifth requirement is climate-resilient economic restoration. A survivor cannot be considered rehabilitated merely because she has received vocational training or temporary financial assistance. If the occupation to which she is returned has become economically unsustainable because of drought, flooding, declining agricultural productivity or other climate pressures, the intervention may reproduce vulnerability. The World Bank's projection of up to 216 million internal climate migrants by 2050 illustrates the magnitude of livelihood transformation that future rehabilitation systems must anticipate.²⁷ Economic rehabilitation should consequently include climate-resilient livelihoods, access to social protection, financial inclusion and, where necessary, pathways to safe labour mobility.

The sixth requirement is psychosocial restoration. Trauma counselling must not be treated as a short-term service delivered immediately after rescue and then discontinued. Survivors may simultaneously experience trafficking-related trauma and climate-related loss of home, livelihood, family networks and community identity. Rehabilitation should therefore provide sustained mental-health and psychosocial support, family reunification where appropriate, community-based support and mechanisms for reducing stigma.

These requirements can be consolidated into a 5R Victim-Centred Rehabilitation Model:

Recognise → Rescue → Restore → Rebuild → Resilience.

Recognise identifies the climate-displacement factors that intensified vulnerability. *Rescue* ensures immediate protection from exploitation without criminalising or re-traumatising the survivor. *Restore* addresses physical safety, documentation, healthcare, psychosocial recovery and dignity. *Rebuild* provides housing, livelihood, education, social protection and a durable solution selected through informed participation. *Resilience* ensures continued protection against climate shocks and re-trafficking through follow-up, community support and climate-adaptive livelihood systems.

The model therefore requires institutional convergence. Anti-trafficking authorities cannot independently provide climate-resilient housing; disaster-management institutions cannot independently address trafficking trauma; and livelihood programmes cannot independently guarantee protection from re-trafficking. Rehabilitation must consequently connect anti-trafficking authorities with disaster-management agencies, migration and labour institutions, social-welfare systems, local governments and civil-society organisations.

The principal transformation is conceptual: the question must move from "Where should the

²⁷ Viviane Clement et al, Groundswell Part II: Acting on Internal Climate Migration (World bank 2021)

survivor be returned?” to “What conditions will enable the survivor to live safely and choose where she belongs?” In this framework, rehabilitation is not a destination imposed after rescue. It is the restoration of the survivor’s capacity to determine and sustain a dignified future.

CONCLUSION: FROM RESCUE TO RESTORATION

Climate-induced displacement has exposed a vulnerability that conventional anti-trafficking frameworks were not designed to address. The survivor considered in this paper does not encounter trafficking in isolation. She may first lose a home, livelihood or community to a climate-related disaster, become displaced, enter an unfamiliar and economically insecure environment, and subsequently encounter exploitation. When she is finally rescued, therefore, the question cannot end with where she came from. It must also ask whether that place remains capable of receiving her safely.

The scale of displacement makes this question increasingly urgent. Disaster-related internal displacement reached 45.8 million movements in 2024, while the World Bank projects that climate change could generate up to 216 million internal climate migrants by 2050 under a pessimistic reference scenario.²⁸ At the same time, UNODC recorded a 25 per cent increase in detected trafficking victims in 2022 compared with 2019, although this statistic should not be read as establishing a direct causal relationship between climate change and trafficking.²⁹ Together, these figures demonstrate the growing importance of examining how overlapping crises shape vulnerability rather than treating trafficking as a self-contained phenomenon.

The central argument of this paper is consequently not that climate change creates a new form of trafficking, but that climate-induced displacement can alter the conditions of vulnerability, exploitation and rehabilitation. Once the survivor’s place of origin is environmentally unsafe, economically unviable or incapable of supporting a dignified life, “return” cannot automatically be equated with “reintegration”.

The proposed 5R framework - Recognise, Rescue, Restore, Rebuild and Resilience, responds to this gap by shifting rehabilitation from an administrative endpoint to a continuing process of rights restoration. Its purpose is not to replace existing anti-trafficking mechanisms, but to connect them with climate-sensitive displacement planning, livelihood security, psychosocial recovery, durable solutions and survivor participation.

²⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2025 Global Report on Internal Displacement (IDMC 2025); Viviane Clement et al, Groundswell Part II: Acting on Internal Climate Migration (World Bank 2021).

²⁹ UNODC, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024: Global Overview (2024). The report records a 25 percent rise in detected victims in 2022 compared with 2019, based on data from 129 countries.

The jurisprudential direction illustrated by ‘Prajwala v Union of India’ is significant in this regard. By recognising rehabilitation as connected to dignity, agency and informed choice, and by providing alternatives where a victim does not wish to return to her State of origin, the judgment demonstrates how victim-centred justice can move beyond the narrow logic of rescue and repatriation.³⁰ Its significance for the present argument lies not in making an Indian ruling a universal rule, but in demonstrating that rehabilitation can be legally understood as the restoration of agency rather than merely the restoration of location.

Ultimately, the climate-displaced trafficking survivor should not be asked to choose between returning to vulnerability and remaining displaced. Justice requires a third possibility: the creation of conditions in which she can rebuild a safe and dignified life, wherever that life becomes viable.

Thus, the measure of successful intervention should no longer be simply whether a survivor has been rescued from trafficking. It should be whether, after rescue, she possesses the safety, agency, livelihood, belonging and resilience necessary to avoid being exploited again. The movement from “rescue to restoration” is therefore not merely a change in terminology; it is a necessary reimagining of what justice means when the survivor has lost not only her freedom, but the very place to which the law once expected her to return.

³⁰ Prajwala v Union of India, 2026 INSC 609, paras 293, 359-62