



# A GREEN SOCIAL WORK EXAMINING CLIMATE CHANGE AND CLIMATE REFUGEES <sup>1</sup>

İklim Değişikliği Ve İklim Mültecileri Ekseninde Yeşil Sosyal Çalışma

Assoc. Prof. Seda TOPGUL

Akdeniz University, Department of Social Work, Antalya/TURKEY

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1649-1732>

Asst. Prof. Emre KOL

Anadolu University, Department of Labour Economics and Industrial Relations, Eskişehir/TURKEY

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3242-6925>

Graduate Student. Okan BEYTAS

Akdeniz University, Department of Social Work, Antalya/TURKEY

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9996-2370>

**Cite As:** Topgul, S., Kol, E. & Beytaş, O.(2021). “A Green Social Work Examining Climate Change And Climate Refugees”, International Social Mentality and Researcher Thinkers Journal, (Issn:2630-631X) 7(50): 2312-2317

## ABSTRACT

Climate change is one of the universal issues that should be voiced loudly and drawn attention all over the world. In addition; environmental problems, which were perceived in different ways over time, were considered as local problems before the 1950s, however they have evolved into global problems since then. For this reason, sensitivity/awareness towards environmental issues has also been increasing. Increasing environmental problems and natural events have deeply affected the societies. These phenomena further caused people who are worried about the safety of their life and property have found the solution to migrate to safer places. From past to present, people have been leaving their places either willingly or compulsorily. In this context; climate changes and natural events constitute the compulsory reasons underlying migration whereas people who have been migrating due to these reasons are defined by different terms in the literature such as “climate refugees”, “disaster refugees”, “ecological refugees” and “environmental refugees”. This study focuses on the problem of climate change and climate refugees, nominated as one of the major problems facing our planet today and which has started to climb to the top of the professional agenda of the social work profession, from a social work perspective. In this context, the role and responsibilities of the social workers in minimizing the adverse effects of ecological crises on humanity and social life as well as deepening structural problems, protecting the rights of environmental refugees and ensuring environmental justice will be discussed. The methods used are literature review, quantitative and qualitative data, technical and analytical reports published by institutions and organizations.

**Keywords:** Environment, environmental justice, social work, climate refugees, migration

## ÖZET

İklim değişikliği tüm Dünya’da dile getirilmesi ve dikkat çekilmesi gereken evrensel konulardan biridir. Ayrıca, dönemsel olarak farklı şekillerde algılanan çevre sorunları, 1950’lerden önce yerel bir sorunken daha sonra küresel bir boyuta doğru dönüşüm yaşamıştır. Bu sebepten dolayı çevresel konulara karşı duyarlılık artış göstermiştir. Artan çevre sorunları ve doğa olayları toplumları derinden etkilemiş ve yaşanan bu doğa olayları neticesinde can ve mal güvenliklerinden endişe eden insanlar, çareyi daha güvenli gördükleri yerlere göç etmekte bulmuşlardır. Geçmişten bugüne insanlar isteyerek veya zorunlu olarak buldukları yerleri terk etmişlerdir. Bu bağlamda iklim değişiklikleri ve yaşanan doğa olayları göçün zorunlu kısmını oluşturmakta ve bu göç eden kişiler literatürde “iklim mültecileri”, “felaket mültecileri”, “ekolojik mülteciler”, “çevre mültecileri” gibi farklı isimlerle tanımlanmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, gezegenimizin günümüzde karşı karşıya olduğu en önemli sorunlardan biri olarak gösterilen ve sosyal çalışma mesleğinin de mesleki gündem maddeleri içerisinde en üst sıralarda yer almaya başlayan iklim değişikliği ve iklim mültecileri sorunu sosyal çalışma bakış açısıyla ele alınacaktır. Bu bağlamda, ekolojik krizlerin insan ve toplum yaşamı üstünde oluşturduğu negatif etkiler ile derinleştirdiği yapısal sorunların en aza indirgenmesi, çevre mültecilerinin haklarının korunması ve çevresel adaletin sağlanması hususlarında sosyal çalışma mesleği üzerine düşen rol ve sorumlulukları değerlendirilecektir. Yöntem olarak literatür taramasından, kantitatif ve kalitatif verilerden, kurum ve kuruluşların yayınladığı teknik ve analitik raporlardan faydalanılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çevre, çevresel adalet, sosyal çalışma, iklim mültecileri, göç

<sup>1</sup> This study is the revised and expanded version of the “Environmental Justice and Social Work” presented at the Taras Shevchenko 6th International Congress on Social Sciences held in Kiev, Ukraine on 4-5 April 2021.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social work is a practice-based profession and discipline that has a mission to contribute to the empowerment and liberation of individuals, families, groups and communities. The contribution desired to be provided to individual and social welfare is built on principles such as human rights, social justice, respect for differences and collective responsibility (IFSW, 2014). Social work focuses on the problems experienced by individuals and groups from the “person and environment” perspective, which means dealing with existing problems in a broader context (Gitterman & Germain, 1980). Stating that social workers intervene at the points where people interact with their environment by making use of human behavior and social system theories, International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2004) pointed out that human behavior and social problems should be handled with a holistic approach. “Person and environment” approach, emphasizing a holistic assessment of human behavior and social problems within a biological, physical, cultural, social, economic, political and spiritual framework, has been reflected in practice in a limited way, mostly in the context of the individual's relations with the social and cultural environment. For this reason, the fact that the human-built physical environment and the biological world can have an impact on individual and social problems has been ignored for many years. This ignorance has left its place to an increased sensitivity and awareness towards the environment and environmental problems, as environmental degradation and problems began to appear concretely in practice.

Environmental movements, which developed in parallel with this situation, brought a new dimension to the environment-social work relationship. The physical environment – human interaction is both multi-dimensional and interdependent. A clearer understanding of this relationship has made the environment one of the focal points of social work assessments and interventions. It is known, today, that the living spaces of people or communities and nature itself may extremely affect individual and collective well-being and prosperity. This point of view is also important in terms of the agenda of the relevant study.

Climate crises and climate injustices destroy the living spaces of a group of people and drive the individuals affected by this problem to forced migration. Industrialization and urbanization have caused our planet to warm much above its natural course. The problem caused by the warming of our planet far above its normal course, which is expressed with the concept of global warming, has led to climate change and resulting ecological crises. This situation has particularly affected poor and/or developing countries and has revealed problems in these countries directly related to the right to life such as access to safe food and clean water. Subsequently, groups of people have emerged who are directly affected by the problems caused by climate change, who have had difficulties in accessing food and water, who have experienced loss of life due to air and water-borne diseases and whose natural habitats and production resources are damaged. Aforementioned group, which is referred as environment/climate refugees, has sought asylum in countries they consider as safer, with the motivation to meet their basic life needs and continue their lives. Social work, which is structured on the principles of human rights and social justice and aims to contribute to human and social welfare by solving social problems, has naturally been affected by all these negative processes caused by climate change. In this context, environmental/green social work has started to take place in the social work profession as a new field of practice. This study will address the problem of climate change, one of the most important agenda items in the 21st century social work agenda, from the social work perspective, and will examine the current position of social work in alleviating the problems of ecological crises and climate refugees. The study will be concluded by opening a parenthesis to the close relationship between environmental justice and the social work and by discussing the roles of social workers in the elimination of environmental injustices.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Climate Change and Climate Injustice

It is possible to define climate change as the overheating of our world as a result of human activities and the changes in the cycle, incidence and severity of climate events caused by this temperature increase. The reason why climate change has been the subject of the relevant study is that it reinforces environmental injustices, creates a refugee population forced to migrate due to climate-related reasons and emerges as one of the major dangers awaiting humanity in the future. Climate change is included on the world agenda as the major health threat of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2016). Global warming and climate change problems are known to be caused by humans. According to a study conducted in 2020, scientists think that human activities underlie in the background of the climate change problem. The study in question exhibited human effect in the emergence of climate change as 97% (National Academy of Sciences, 2020). The conclusion to be drawn here is clear. Behind all the problems that we experience as a result of climate change, there is the influence of man himself. Industrialization process, which brought about comprehensive changes in the economic and social structure, has been the starting point of the deterioration in the ecological level. Factors such as urbanization and overpopulation accelerated this bad course. It is possible to mention that the main motivation behind the aforementioned situation is the cutthroat competition between states in terms of economy and the race to grab the biggest share of the resource and welfare pie. This life design, where the ambition of economic growth and pure development is the sole purpose, has perceived nature and natural life as tools that should serve human welfare (Boynudelik, 2011 as cited in Güzel & Buz, 2019); an attempt was made to dominate nature, however harmful consequences of such a domination were not taken into account. Ultimately, all the negativities involved in this process, which brings global warming, climate change and environmental disasters into our lives, have directly targeted people living in underdeveloped and developing countries due to their geographical location. For sure, we cannot talk about a conscious targeting here. Instead, it is emphasized that the developed countries, which are the main actors of ecological problems, are located on the borders where they can be highly protected from the problems caused by climate change, however remaining countries are not as lucky as developed countries (Demirbilek, 2016).

It is, for sure, an expected situation that the crises caused by climate change impose a cost on human life and our planet. The answer to the question of who should bear this ecological cost that arises as a result of the surplus value created by production activities and human activities around the world is still very controversial (Kılıç & Tok, 2014). Unfortunately, people living in underdeveloped and developing countries have already had to pay this price. The ironic thing here is that the countries that do not have any role and/or have the least responsibility in the background that caused the ecological crises due to climate change are the countries that are adversely affected by the current problems. These countries, in fact, had been the first to be knocked on their doors by the negative outputs of the said production processes even though they did not receive a share of the wealth and prosperity cake that emerged as a result of production activities that upset the balance in nature. This is exactly what has been described as climate injustice. The responsibility to cope with the negative consequences of ecological crises, which are a result of the economic, social and political policies pursued by developed countries in the world, where resources, wealth and welfare are not distributed fairly has been left to the people living in poor and developing countries, which are also referred to as 3rd world countries (Artan & Uzun, 2017). Factors such as inadequacy of natural resources and/or lack of technology to transform these resources into value, inadequate infrastructure services, underdeveloped human resources and lack of economic capital has completely eliminated the option of these countries, already dying in the grip of poverty and are witnessing humanitarian dramas, to resist this human-induced ecological deterioration (Dominelli, 2018).

## 2.2. The Concept of Environmental Justice

Environmental justice, according to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, is the process of fair and meaningful participation by all, regardless of race, color, national/ethnic origin or income, for the development and implementation of environmental laws, regulations and policies. The 'fair participation' principle referred to in this definition emphasizes that no group of people should be disproportionately affected by environmental problems that shall emerge as a result of industrial, environmental and commercial activities or policies (EPA, 2018). This definition which is criticized for not mentioning the structural inequalities that cause environmental problems (Dominelli, 2018) is important for drawing attention to the fact that no group should be disproportionately exposed to the negative effects of environmental crises. The burden of environmental problems caused by climate change should not be placed on the shoulders of the groups that have the least share in the development of this problem. Therefore, it is important to combat climate injustices.

Social injustice is a phenomenon that brings in environmental disasters and climate crises to our agenda and introduces new inequalities for people who experience the subsequent negative effects of these problems. Climate or environmental injustices reinforce existing social injustices. In this context, it would not be misleading to mention that there is a strong connection between climate/environmental injustice and social injustice. Therefore, it seems impossible to achieve the goal of social justice without considering climate/environmental justice. It is therefore essential that environmental justice should be included within the scope of the principle of social justice. It is the idea of ensuring climate/environmental justice that intersects the roadmap of social work with environmental-oriented practices. In this context, it is crucial to resolve climate/environmental injustices located against social justice, which is the ultimate goal of social work. For this reason, social work that strives to make social justice dominant and that carries the ideal of fairly reflecting resources and welfare to the whole society has based its environment-oriented practices on the principle of environmental justice (Yanardağ, 2019).

We are of the opinion that the goal of social justice will be achieved only through the redistribution of resources and income over the years. However, considering the reality of the world that we live in today, this assumption has proved to be unhelpful due to the exponential increase in structural problems and inequalities. Social workers also stated that this view, which focuses only on the redistribution of resources and argues that the goal of social justice will be achieved in this way, is insufficient and this situation makes it necessary to redefine the concept of social justice. Fred Besthorn (2012), who is personally a social worker, argues that social workers should not spend their time solely seeking some social justice from a human-centered perspective and further stated that natural world won't care this and the current system on in the world will collapse regardless of whether social workers' efforts to improve human well-being are successful or not. These opinions are thought to be valuable and guiding for the social work profession. We believe that social workers should strive for the benefit of the ecological system of which man is a part, without focusing solely on human well-being.

## 2.3. The Concept of Climate Refugees

Problems stemming from climate change have revealed groups of people who are defined as climate/environmental refugees and are forced to leave their places of residence due to environmental reasons. The only option that appeared before these people, whose survival on their natural habitats has now become impossible, has been to migrate to safer places/countries (Dominelli, 2012). Leaving their lands due to climate crises and environmental disasters has turned into an obligation rather than a choice for climate refugees. Everyone's physical and mental health has the right to live (Kol, 2015: 136). Welfare state; providing individuals and families with a minimum income guarantee, protecting them against social risks, providing them with social

security opportunities, social services such as education, health and housing are available to all citizens regardless of their status (Kol, 2014a: 132). Everyone's right to live in physical and mental health exists. The state is also in the physical and mental health of all its citizens and befits human dignity is in charge of ensuring their survival (Kol, 2014b: 33).

It is defined as a state that provides certain standards in the field ofThe definition of refugee in the 1951 Geneva Convention does not include climate refugees. It has not been taken into account then that climate-related problems and environmental crises may one day force people to migrate to their homeland. However, here we are talking about a group that cannot take refuge in another country with a legal status, although their natural habitats have been destroyed by the policies and actions of developed countries. It will be more easily understood why the definition of refugee should also cover people who have migrated due to climate change when taking into consideration that the instinct for survival and the motivation to cling to life force millions of people today to migrate from their homeland. We believe that the most accurate conceptualization at this point should be climate refugees<sup>2</sup>

The Lancet Report published in the UK in 2016 revealed that 500.000 people will die by 2050 due to the disruption of food production cycle based on climate change and a total of 1.9 million people will die due to the restrictions that may be experienced in access to and consumption of food, if necessary, precautions are not duly taken (cited from Gıdahattı by Artan & Uzun, 2017). Another study revealed that only in 2050, 150 million people will have to migrate due to environmental reasons (as cited by Demirbilek, 2016 from Durkova). These data reveal the importance and urgency of the subject on behalf of the social work profession. In this context, we believe that social workers should immediately turn their attention to environmental problems, environmental injustices and climate refugees.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Most prominent topics of social work as of the 21st century agenda is thought to be climate change and the problem of climate refugees. Social work profession should intensify its efforts to prevent the looming environmental disasters. Studies conducted on ecological problems arising from climate change and incidence, intensity and negative effects of which are worsening day by day should be prioritized; actions aimed at raising awareness of collective responsibility and action in this direction should be encouraged. Social workers are believed to act with an awareness-raising, facilitating, connecting, advocating, mobilizing and policy-making consciousness on all these issues. It is extremely important to include issues such as global warming, climate change, environmental problems, climate refugees, climate justice and environmental sustainability in the global agenda of the concept of social work, as it will contribute to the increase in collective consciousness and awareness. Assuming a purely consciousness-raising, awareness-raising position shall not be considered sufficient considering the magnitude of the current problems. Social work should assume a more active role in developing preventive policies so that environmental problems do not turn into environmental disasters. In addition, we believe that climate/environmental refugees should be included within the scope of the refugee concept; social workers should assume a greater responsibility in the process of building and protecting the rights of the people in this group in a global context and on a legally binding ground and should be at the forefront of the struggle to be made in this regard. In this context, social work should take a proactive position on a macro scale and intensify its pressure on law-making and policy-making institutions in order to solve environmental problems and make climate justice prevail on the earth.

### REFERENCES

Akbaş, İ. (2018). İklim Değişikliği ve İklim Mültecileri Genel Bir Bakış. *Social Sciences Studies Journal*, 24, 5159-5172.

<sup>2</sup> The concept of climate refugees is still included in the literature as a controversial concept. This is because climate change is not accepted as a valid reason for attaining a refugee status. For other opinions in this direction: Akbaş, 2018; Demirdelen & Odman, 2017, Topgül, 2021.

- Artan, T., & Uzun, K. (2017). İklim Mültecileri Bağlamında Yeşil Sosyal Hizmet Üzerine Bir Tartışma. *Journal of Current Researches on Social Sciences*, 7 (4), 171-184.
- Besthorn, F. (2012). Deep Ecology's contribution to social work: A ten-year retrospective. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 21 (3), 248-259.
- Boynudelik, M. (2011). Ekolojik Anayasa. İstanbul: Yeni İnsan Yayınevi.
- Demirbilek, M. (2016). Çevre, Çevre Mültecileri ve Yeşil Sosyal Hizmet. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education Research*, 2 (3), 905-914.
- Demirdelen, Ö. & Odman, M. T. (2017). Küresel Isınmanın Yol Açtığı Sorunlardan Biri: İklim Mültecilerinin Hukuki Statüsü. *Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 13, 470-497.
- Dominelli, L. (2012). *Green Social Work: From Environmental Crises to Environmental Justice* (1st ed.). Cambridge: UK: Polity Press.
- Dominelli, L. (2018). *Yeşil Sosyal Hizmet*. Ankara: Nika Yayınevi.
- Durkova, P., Gromilova, A., Plaku, M., & Kiss, B. (2017). Climate refuges in the 21st century. <https://theowp.org/reports/climate-change-in-the-21st-century-climate-refugees/>
- EPA. (2018). Environmental Justice. <https://www.epa.gov/environmentaljustice>
- Gıdahattı. (2016). “İklim değişikliğinden en çok etkilenen ülkelerden biri Türkiye!”, <https://www.gidahatti.com/iklim-degisikliginden-en-cok-etkilenen-ulkelerden-biri-turkiye-44013/>
- Gitterman, a., & Germain, C. (1980). *The Life Model of Social Work Practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- IFSW. (2014). “Global definition of the social work”.
- ifsw.org: <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work>
- IFSW (2004). Küresel Sosyal Hizmet etik İlkeler Beyanı. <http://www.ifsw.org/>
- Kılıç, S., & Tok, N. (2014). Geleneksel Adalet Anlayışlarından Çevresel Adalet Anlayışına. *Uluslararası Alanya İşletme Fakültesi Dergisi*, 6 (3), 213-228.
- Kol, E. (2015). Türkiye’de Sağlık Reformlarının Sağlık Hakkı Açısından Değerlendirilmesi. *Sosyal Güvenlik Dergisi*, 135-164.
- Kol, E. (2014a). Refah Rejimleri Açısından Sağlık Sistemlerinin Değerlendirilmesi: Güney Avrupa Refah Modeli ve Türkiye. *Gümüşhane Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Elektronik Dergisi*, 5 (10), 119-168.
- Kol, E. (2014b). Sağlık Hizmetlerinde Yaşanan Dönüşüm: Eskişehir Örneği. *İş, Güç Endüstri İlişkileri ve İnsan Kaynakları Dergisi*, 16 (4), 31-57.
- Program, U.S. Global Change Research. (2016). *The Impacts of Climate Change on Human Health in the United States: A Scientific Assesment*. Washington.
- Topgül, S. (2021). Climate Change-Related Migration Movements The Concept Of Migration And Legal Gap In Terms Of Climate Migration. *International Asian Congress On Contemporary Sciences-V, Full Texts Book Azerbaijan Nakhchivan State University*.
- Sciences, N. A. (2020). *Climate Change: Evidence and Causes*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Yanardağ, U. (2019). Türkiye’de Çevre Odaklı Sosyal Çalışma Uygulamalarını Düşünmek, *Toplum ve Sosyal Hizmet*, 30 (1). 309-329.