

# Gender, Displacement and Climate Change

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Climate change impacts people differently according to their gender roles and responsibilities. Combined with other characteristics such as age, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and geographical location, it contributes to differing vulnerabilities and displacement dynamics.

Gender inequalities can render women particularly vulnerable to climate hazards. Women's and girl's participation and empowerment is key to addressing disaster displacement and its harmful outcomes, such as increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence among other risks.

Adopting a "gender" lens allows us to understand the power imbalances, discrimination and inequality exacerbated by climate change and how to redress them. It helps highlight women's important role in leading sustainable transformations.

## GENDER INEQUALITY IN THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

The impacts of climate change deepen existing gender inequalities. Due to socio-cultural norms, women may have less opportunity to influence household decision-making to mitigate and cope with the impacts of climate change, including on whether to leave home or stay.

In rural regions where subsistence farming is common, women and girls are the primary providers of food, water and fuel. Climate change directly impacts resource scarcity, making these tasks increasingly difficult and dangerous. Women and girls are often prevented from pursuing education and economic opportunities.

Men are also exposed to structural vulnerabilities. For example, in Chad, farmers and pastoralists cannot easily find alternative livelihoods during times of drought, exposing them to recruitment by armed groups. Often, as the first in the family to be displaced, they face insecurity while seeking work and safety<sup>[1]</sup>.

1. *Gender, Climate and Security*, UNEP, UN Women, UNDP, DPPA, June 2020. See also *Gender-based violence and environment linkages: The violence of inequality*, IUCN in partnership with USAID, January 2020

## GENDER-SPECIFIC RISKS IN DISASTER DISPLACEMENT CONTEXTS

Women displaced by disaster often face increased protection risks such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), exploitation and trafficking. Limited access to healthcare can also impede women's access to life-saving health services, including reproductive and mental health services.

Displaced women's adaptive capacities are often limited due to socio-cultural norms, restricted livelihood options, lack of access to formalized safety nets and fewer possibilities to benefit from technologies and information. Other impacts may include increased hardship due to their lack of financial assets and limited rights to land and property. When women lack the resources and freedom to move, they may become trapped in areas where climate and disaster risk is high.

Transgender, intersex and non-binary people may also be particularly exposed to adverse displacement outcomes, particularly regarding access to adequate healthcare and protection.

For more on gender and climate change, see <https://unfccc.int/gender>



*"We suffered a lot that day. It caught us by surprise, we were eating and then the wind came. Some of the children were swept away by water. The trees were coming down, the houses were being destroyed." Internally displaced Mozambican, Isabella, 60, relocated to Savane settlement.*

## Cyclone Idai, Mozambique: One year on, people work hard to recover

More than 600 people died when Cyclone Idai struck Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe in mid-March 2019, followed only a few weeks later by cyclone Kenneth in the north of Mozambique, both affecting overall 2.2 million people. Thousands lost their homes and jobs and were relocated to safer sites further inland. UNHCR provided protection services, shelter and other relief items to those affected and continues to offer counseling and assessment for people still at risk – especially women, children, older persons and persons with disabilities. Climate change is increasing risk related to weather hazards and the need for greater investment in prevention and preparedness for people living along the country's long coastline. See video [here](#).

## Women at the centre of solutions for addressing climate-related displacement

While progress on gender equality has been made, policies on planned relocation and displacement in the context of climate change and disaster risk, are often insufficiently gender responsive. To reduce structural vulnerabilities and ensure displaced women's protection and wellbeing in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters, efforts are necessary to redress unequal access to resources across and within communities. At both the household and community levels, women's actions and capacities are instrumental in mitigating the adverse effects of climate change <sup>[2]</sup>. Against this backdrop, four related aspects should be at the core of gender-responsive approaches in the context of climate change and displacement.

**Inclusion and leadership** - Women are best placed to devise and drive responses that promote, inter alia, economic security and health in the context of disaster displacement. Women can play a central role to address inequalities in terms of both policies and day-to-day practices and thus contribute to resilient communities. The inclusion, meaningful participation and leadership of women's voices in climate research, adaptation and mitigation efforts is pivotal. Women's leadership and decision-making can strengthen preparedness and response in the context of disaster displacement. <sup>[3]</sup>

**Economic empowerment** - Only 0.2% of all philanthropic giving is provided to women-led environmental programs. <sup>[4]</sup> The promotion of women's economic empowerment is an effective way to promote gender equality, reduce vulnerabilities and improve the adaptive capacities of communities to climate impacts and in displacement situations.

**Protection of rights** - Protection of women's and girls' rights against systemic discrimination, gender inequality and gender-based violence is fundamental at all times and particularly in displacement situations, including those in the context of the adverse effects of climate change and disasters, which exacerbate pre-existing risks of rights violations.

**Well-being** – As a multi-dimensional measure of human potential, well-being is part and parcel of gender equality. Well-being involves, among other things, the promotion of mental health, a sense of purpose and the capacity to manage social and environmental stressors. In situations of climate- and disaster-related displacement, the well-being of women contributes directly to life quality and dignity.

### Lessons from the IPCC on gender, displacement and climate change <sup>[5]</sup>

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), gender inequality increases as a result of climate-related disasters. Overall, people who are socially, economically, culturally, politically or otherwise marginalized in society, such as women, are vulnerable to both climate change and to adaptation and mitigation responses that fail to respect their rights. At the same time, the IPCC notes that the social "construction of economically poor women as victims denies women's agency and emphasizes their vulnerability as their intrinsic problem".

Concrete examples of gender-sensitive measures considered by the IPCC include the following:

- (1) adaptation policies related to agriculture, water, forestry, and biodiversity that promote women's empowerment and increase their decision-making power;
- (2) insurance programs and social protection measures that enhance long-term livelihood resilience among marginalised populations, including women;
- (3) the expansion of migration pathways that may increase opportunities and reduce vulnerabilities for women and their households, and also bring benefits for both departing and receiving communities.

**Safe from the Start** - Since 2014, and with the support of the US Government, UNHCR has implemented 37 multi-sectoral and gender-based violence risk mitigation mainstreaming projects in 27 countries. Projects include improving gender-responsive measures for safe and sustainable energy solutions, targeted livelihoods inclusion as well as increasing women's access to technology in a wide range of displacement contexts, including in areas most vulnerable to climate change, like the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and Asia. For more information, click [here](#).

2. *Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change*, Arora-Jonsson, 2011

3. *Evicted by Climate Change: Confronting the Gendered Impacts of Climate-Induced Displacement*, CARE, July 2020

4. *Our Voices, Our Environment: The State of Funding for Women's Environmental Action*, Global Greengrants Fund and Prospera International Network of Women's Funds, in partnership with the Wallace Global Fund and the Global Alliance for Green and Gender Action (GAGGA), March 2018.

5. *IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report: AR5 Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*

## Leading Change: Beyond powering refugee homes and camps, gender-responsive climate projects empowering women



*"With electricity in the camp, I would buy an electrical sewing machine and my business would grow. That would mean better opportunities for me and my son. I would be able to pay for him to get a good education and have a brighter future."* Chantal, Gihembe refugee camp, Rwanda

In partnership with [Practical Action](#) and funded by [Ikea Foundation](#), the [Renewable Energy for Refugees \(RE4R\) project](#) not only provides refugees with sustainable means of energy for household, communal and entrepreneurial use but also decreases the gendered time burden of cooking on women and their access gap to electricity. Energy is critical as a basic household service and is a key facilitator of economic growth and productive livelihood. In Gihembe, Kigeme, and Nyabiheke camps hosting some 50,000 Congolese refugees in Rwanda, RE4R partners designed, in an inclusive way with refugees, four renewable energy interventions to meaningfully improve their energy access, protection, wellbeing, and livelihoods in line with SDG5, SDG7 and [UNHCR's Global Strategy for Sustainable Energy](#) and its [Age, Gender and Diversity \(AGD\) policy](#):

- 1) delivery of solar home systems among households and small businesses;
- 2) provision of improved cooking solutions and transitioning the camps into sustainable, renewable fuels;
- 3) solar streetlights for public-space lighting and notably improving sense of security for women;
- 4) solar electricity to camp communal facilities to reduce the usage of diesel generators and gas emissions.

Economic empowerment of refugee women has been an important outcome. So far, 141 businesses have been supported which, in turn, have created 153 permanent jobs for women and 149 for men as of May 2020. The project has another component in Irbid, Jordan increasing access to renewable energy for 10,000 Syrian urban refugees. For more information on the RE4R project, click [here](#).

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