

Gender, Displacement and Climate Change

NOVEMBER 2022

The climate crisis is an unequivocal threat to human wellbeing. However, not all human beings are equally affected. With pre-existing gender inequalities compounding their vulnerabilities, women and girls are among the worst impacted.

Climate change is contributing to humanitarian crises and will continue to increase displacement across regions. Those already displaced are disproportionately exposed to climate and environmental risks, ¹ and often lack the means for sustainable, climate risk-informed solutions to their displacement. As women and children make up the overwhelming majority of displaced population due to conflict, they often experience ruinous impacts brought on by climate change.

It is crucial to prioritize women's and girl's empowerment when addressing protection risks, including gender-based violence, in the context of displacement and climate change. Adopting a gender lens helps to identify and respond to specific risks and needs, and it highlights the essential roles women can take on in leading sustainable transformations.

Gender inequality in the climate emergency

Climate change exacerbates gender inequalities, rendering women particularly vulnerable to climate induced hazards. Due to socio-cultural norms, women may be less able to influence household decision-making on how to mitigate and cope with the impacts of climate change, including the decision to leave home.

In many low and middle-income countries, women are heavily reliant on agriculture, one of the most impacted sectors by the climate crisis. Women often assume most of the responsibility to sustain their households, the impact of climate change on agriculture leaves them unable to care for their families. In this context, intense and recurrent weather events have pushed millions into food insecurity, with [pregnant women](#) being among the most impacted by malnutrition. Climate change has also increased the occurrence of vector-borne diseases such as malaria which are associated with [worse maternal and neonatal health](#).

Moreover, women and girls in rural areas are often the primary providers of food, water and fuel. Climate change has worsened resource scarcity,

rendering these tasks increasingly difficult and dangerous. For instance, during droughts, women and girls often walk long distances to collect water, [increasing their exposure to gender-based violence](#). Increased pressure to provide for their families also [forces girls to drop out of school](#).

Women and girls disproportionately bear the brunt of the climate emergency, but have limited capacity to adapt due to multiple barriers. [Globally, less than 53% of women aged 15-64 are in the labor force compared to nearly 80% of men and boys](#) in the same age group. The limited participation of women in economic activities substantially reduces their ability to adapt, including by finding alternative livelihood opportunities less impacted by climate change. Women also have limited access to formalized safety nets, technologies and information.

Climate change also exposes men to structural vulnerabilities. [Loss of livelihood during crises increases the risk of dying by suicide](#) and heightens the likelihood of resorting to harmful coping measures. For instance, in Chad, farmers and pastoralists struggle to find alternative livelihoods during times of drought, [heightening the risk of recruitment by armed groups](#).

¹ An estimated 70 percent of conflict-related internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 40 percent of refugees live in highly climate vulnerable countries.



Cameroon. Minawao, the green refugee camp

© UNHCR/Xavier Bourgois

Gender Specific Risks in Displacement Contexts

Compared to men, [women and children are over 14 times more likely to be killed by climate fueled disasters](#). In addition to posing a direct threat to their lives, disasters expose women to other protection risks, acute in displacement contexts. Women displaced due to disasters often have to reside in congested evacuation centers and informal settlements, leaving them at heightened risk of gender-based and sexual violence. In some cases, [women who stayed behind to avoid socially unacceptable living arrangements in displacement sites](#) such as living in the same room as men, were killed during disasters.

Women displaced due to conflict and violence are also heavily impacted. According to UNHCR data, there are over 25 million women internally displaced due to conflict and violence. Uprooted

from their homes without significant resources, internally displaced persons (IDPs), often reside in sub-standard shelters which are among the first to be hit when disasters strike, significantly eroding their resilience. Reduced resilience can lead to the adoption of harmful coping measures such as child marriage and sale and exchange of sex. Susceptibility to trafficking and organized crime can increase.

While disasters elevate the exposure of women and girls to gender-based violence and other protection risks, the disruption of critical services including sexual and reproductive health care and social protection during disasters, particularly sudden-onset disasters, can leave them more vulnerable and unable to access life-saving assistance. Already facing various forms of

Findings from the Working Group II contribution to the [IPCC Sixth Assessment Report on Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability](#)

In its Assessment Report from 2022, the IPCC highlights how climate change impacts people in vulnerable situations differently and that the losses and damage from climate change impacts, such as displacement, are “felt heavily by women, children and elderly given the intersectionality with socio-economic and gender inequalities” (IPCC; 2022; 62). Moreover, the IPCC found that because women and girls belong to groups that are often most heavily burdened by the effects of climate change, gender-sensitive and responsive support should be provided to ensure that women and girls’ “knowledge, capacities and skills can be harnessed, in such a way that does not feminise responsibility and add to their burden” (IPCC; 2022; 80).



“I fled pregnant and in labor, as materials flew around us, to safety. From pain I passed out in this flooded sewer. I woke up next day, alive, this miracle next to me.”

Eloise’s mother (the baby was named after Cyclone Eloise in the midst of which he was born)

discrimination, LGBTQI+ people may also be particularly exposed to adverse displacement outcomes including exclusion from humanitarian assistance and ostracization which forces them to settle in informal shelters, heightening their exposure to violence.

Some 85% of displaced populations in camps use unsustainably harvested biomass, such as firewood, for cooking. This presents a variety of risks to human life and health including indoor air pollution and conflict with local communities, while women and children are exposed to the risk of GBV when out gathering wood.

Women at the centre of solutions for addressing climate-related displacements

While progress on gender equality has been made, policies on planned relocation, displacement and migration are often insufficiently gender responsive. To reduce structural vulnerabilities and ensure displaced women’s 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 household, community and policy levels, women’s actions and capacities are instrumental in mitigating the adverse effects of climate change (Arora-Jonsson, 2011). Against this backdrop, five related aspects should be at the core of gender-responsive approaches in the context of climate change and displacement.

Inclusion and leadership – Women are experts in managing the decisions that affect their own situations, and they are best placed to devise and drive responses that promote, inter alia, economic security and health in the context of 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 and societies. The inclusion, meaningful participation and leadership of women’s voices in climate research, adaptation and mitigation efforts is pivotal. [Women’s accountability and decision-making](#) can strengthen preparedness and response in the context of disaster displacement.

Economic empowerment - The promotion of women’s economic empowerment is an effective way to reduce vulnerabilities and improve the adaptive capacities of communities to climate impacts and in displacement situations. It is also about addressing structural barriers, enhancing access to education and training, and improving access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning.

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

Sustainable and clean energy access in displacement settings is empowering, enabling women in particular to gain greater control over their lives and futures. It provides benefits associated with protection, gender equality, food security, water, sanitation, health, education, livelihoods, connectivity and environmental protection. It reduces risks of gender-based violence (GBV) and tensions between refugees and host communities. Immediate protection gains can be achieved through energy provision upon arrival at the hosting site.

Protection of rights - Protection of women's and girls' rights against discrimination is fundamental at all times. This can be particularly important in displacement situations, including those in the context of climate change and disasters, where tensions and conflict over limited resources can exacerbate pre-existing risks of rights violations, or where mechanisms for law and order can break down. UN human rights mechanisms have recognized that the [rights of people who are already in situations of vulnerability](#), which in some contexts may include some groups of women, may be particularly at risk of violation. This is also the case for marginalized groups, which may include LGTIQ+ people in some social contexts.

Moreover, [in the context of disasters and climate change, a well-founded fear of persecution may arise, which could provide the basis for a claim to refugee status or other needs for international protection](#). This can be particularly the case for persons with specific needs, including women with such specific needs. The willingness or ability of a State to prevent the adverse effects of climate change and disasters, as well as to respond adequately to them if they occur, may vary for particular groups, reflecting differences in race, ethnicity, religion, politics, gender or social groups. This may include situations where social pressures result in violence against - or exploitation of - persons with specific needs or in situations of pre-existing vulnerabilities, which can include women and LGTIQ+ people in some circumstances. Hence, their specific risks and needs should be given due regard when assessing their claims for international protection.



Costa Rica. Cacao collective provides a living for Costa Rican and Nicaraguan women

Leading Change: Displaced Women Tackling the Impacts of Climate Change

In Costa Rica, local and asylum-seeking women joined hands to save a [cacao plantation](#) which had been flooded. Together, they created an all-women's cacao cooperative called Cacaotica. The idea came up while the women were attending a training course on preventing domestic violence run by Fundación Mujer, a UNHCR partner. Through this initiative, the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan women sell their products in markets throughout Costa Rica and generate much-needed, dignifying income. Most members are survivors of GBV. Working and making decisions contribute to rebuilding confidence, self-worth and aids the recovery from trauma.

In Algeria, Sahrawi refugee women including chemical engineers, [recycle plastic and other waste](#) available in the camps. They process them and produce useful products including tables and chairs. They also raise awareness about the importance of collecting waste in the area.

Contact us

Andrew Harper
Special Advisor on Climate Action
UNHCR, United Nations High
Commissioner for Refugees
harper@unhcr.org

Dr. Kira Vinke
Head of Center for Climate and Foreign
Policy
German Council on Foreign Relations
vinke@dgap.org

Julia M. Blocher
Project lead (HABITABLE)
Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact
Research
blocher@pik-potsdam.de