

Climate change and violence against women and girls

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) and climate change are two of the most pressing global emergencies of our time.

Globally, VAWG affects

1 in 3 women
in their lifetime.

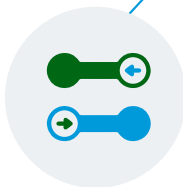


Climate change and slow environmental degradation exacerbate the risks of violence against women and girls due to displacement, resource scarcity and food insecurity and disruption to service provision to survivors.

In Vanuatu, after two tropical cyclones in 2011 there was a **300% increase in domestic violence cases** reported to the Tanna Women's Counselling Centre.



Following Hurricane Katrina, the rate of **rape** among women displaced to trailer parks **rose 53.6 times** the baseline rate in Mississippi for that year.³⁶



In Ethiopia there was an increase in girls **sold into early marriage** in exchange for livestock to help families cope with the impacts of prolonged droughts.³⁵



Nepal witnessed an **increase in trafficking** from an estimated 3,000–5,000 annually in 1990 to 12,000–20,000 per year after the earthquake.³⁷



Women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs) experience threats and violence as they strive to defend natural resources and their territories. Indigenous women are at greater risk because of the intersection of sexism, discrimination, and racism.

Between 2016 & 2019,

1,698 acts of violence

were recorded in Mexico and Central America against women environmental human rights defenders.

VAWG limits women's participation, leadership and agency which is critical for effective climate change mitigation, adaptation and resilience-building efforts.



Recommendations:



Create an enabling policy environment for the elimination of VAWG in the context of climate change.



Promote strategic cross-sectoral partnerships across the climate change and ERAW sectors.



Generate data to understand the impact of climate change on VAWG and risk factors.



Increase investment in flexible and adaptive approaches to VAWG prevention and response, prioritizing funding for women's rights and civil society organizations.



Prevent violence against women environmental human rights defenders and ensure perpetrators are held to account.

THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION ON VAWG

While data is still limited, emerging evidence suggests that climate change and environmental degradation may be increasing the incidence of VAWG both in contexts of acute climate-related disasters as well as during slow-onset climate events.⁷

VAWG IN THE WAKE OF CRISES AND DISASTERS IS MAGNIFIED BY VARIOUS STRESSORS⁸.

The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified how during times of crisis or disasters violence against women and girls (VAWG) usually increases as they create challenging conditions that exacerbate the risk factors that drive VAWG, which already takes place at alarming rates. UN Women's Rapid Gender Assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on VAWG confirmed an intensification of VAWG since the start of the pandemic. One in four women felt less safe in their homes as conflicts became more frequent, 6 out of 10 women felt sexual harassment has worsened and 7 out of 10 felt that physical or verbal abuse from their partner has become more common.⁹ The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has also collated information on how the concurrent climate crisis and weather disasters further negatively impact rising rates of violence and conditions of vulnerability faced by women and girls. Disasters, such as flooding, cyclones and other events, during pandemic lockdowns have also led to situations of isolation and risk for VAWG.¹⁰

In the aftermath of climate-induced disasters such as tropical storms, severe flooding and landslides, women and girls face a heightened risk of the whole spectrum of violence including rape, sexual assault and harassment, intimate partner violence, child marriage, trafficking and sexual exploitation. For instance, in Puerto Rico, following hurricane Maria in 2017, there was a 62 per cent increase in requests for survivor-related services.¹¹ In Vanuatu, following two tropical cyclones in 2011 there was a 300 per cent increase in domestic violence cases reported to the Tanna Women's Counselling Centre.¹² Field research conducted in Bangladesh after Cyclone Sidr in 2007 demonstrated an increased rate of trafficking in affected districts.¹³

Displacement can exacerbate violence as women staying in shelters, camps or temporary settlements are at increased risk of rape, sexual harassment, and other forms of violence due to the lack of physical security, as well as the lack of safe and accessible infrastructure and services.¹⁴ VAWG is further intensified because women and girls face greater barriers in reporting violence and in accessing essential services such as health and social services. In many cases there is a breakdown of law enforcement and resources that were used on violence prevention interventions may be diverted. Women and girls' limited access to public services and social protection, resource scarcity and restrictions in the capacity to generate incomes and livelihoods can lead to an increase in tensions and stressors, heightening the risk of violence at home, at school, at work, and in public spaces. Family structures may also be destabilized, and the resulting social isolation may provide an environment where violence can occur undetected.



Photo: UN Women/Joë Saade

“The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified how during times of crisis or disasters violence against women and girls is exacerbated”

DIFFERENT FACTORS EXACERBATE VAWG IN THE CONTEXT OF SLOW-ONSET CLIMATE CHANGE

In 8 out of 10

households women and girls are responsible for fetching water, exposing them to the risk of harassment, sexual assault and rape en route



Data from: WHO (2017).

Infographic source: Estudio Relativo for IUCN.

Gradual environmental degradation or slow-onset climate events such as heavier rainfall and prolonged droughts leading to increased crop failure, livestock loss and food insecurity are also exacerbating VAWG.¹⁵ Women and girls are more dependent on natural resources and climate sensitive work to sustain their livelihoods and hold primary responsibility for collecting natural resources including water, firewood or food.¹⁶

Climate change is impacting disproportionately the lives of women and girls, impacting on their ability to safely secure resources and generate income, exacerbating harmful social norms and structural inequalities, creating tensions and stressors in the home and community. When women and girls make more frequent and longer journeys to obtain food or water, they may be exposed to greater risks of sexual violence whilst in public and/or isolated spaces and this can also lead to greater tensions within the home as they have less time to complete other household responsibilities.¹⁷ At the same time, men may feel that their traditional role as “provider” is threatened due to poor harvest, livestock loss and ensuing food insecurity, they may attempt to reassert harmful notions of masculinity through violence, often drinking more alcohol which can also perpetuate the severity of VAWG.¹⁸

IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON CHILD MARRIAGE AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

There is also growing concern of the impact of climate change on child marriage and sexual exploitation. When families are struggling to cope with food scarcity, girls may have to drop out of school to help secure food or water and child marriage may be used as a survival strategy.¹⁹ In some cases, where men have to leave home to seek income generating activities elsewhere, women and girls may be more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, particularly as food becomes scarcer. Some studies have highlighted that male food vendors, farmers and landowners have exploited resource scarcity and demanded sex from women in exchange for food.²⁰



Around the world, as climate change worsens conditions, struggling families turn to **child marriage as a coping mechanism.**



Data from: IUCN (2020); UN Women (2017); Human Rights Watch (2015).

Infographic source: Estudio Relativo for IUCN.

VAWG IS A SERIOUS BARRIER TO WOMEN AND GIRLS' PARTICIPATION, AGENCY AND LEADERSHIP IN CLIMATE ACTION



Young women leaders in Tavua showcase their banner highlighting the various ways COVID-19 and TC Harold had affected their human security priorities.
Photo credit: FemLINKpacific/Carolyn Kitione

Women and girls have a crucial role to play as agents of change in climate and environment action at all levels and their knowledge of community needs and priorities are key to combating climate change and environmental degradation, reducing disaster risk and building resilience at all levels, including ensuring effective action is taken to mitigate the impact of climate change on VAWG.

Around the world, women's rights organizations and women environmental human rights defenders have taken action to protect nature, land, communities and their human rights from environmental harms and climate impacts. However, women's rights organizations and women environmental human rights defenders face multiple barriers to participating in climate action, their voice and agency is under-resourced and under-valued in a context of shrinking democratic space. Women environmental human rights defenders, including indigenous women, are particularly vulnerable to rising threats and acts of gender-based violence, including stigmatization and even femicide, as they seek to protect precious land and ocean resources from unsustainable exploitation by State and corporate interests.²¹ Risks are acute for indigenous women, Afro-descendent women, older women, LGBTIQ+ people, women with disabilities, migrant women and those living in rural, remote, conflict and disaster-prone areas.²²

In 2020, for example, at least 331 human rights defenders were killed, including 44 women, 69 per cent defending land, indigenous peoples' and environmental rights and 28 per cent women's rights.²³ Between 2016 and 2019, 1,698 attacks against women environmental human rights defenders were recorded in Mexico and Central America.²⁴ Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders are not only exposed to the same risks and types of violence as male human rights defenders for their work to protect the environment and natural resources, they also face gender-specific risks and manifestations of violence rooted in misogyny, harmful social norms, gender discrimination and inequality. This includes rape and other forms of sexual violence, targeted psychological and online violence to undermine their credibility and to intimidate them.²⁵

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INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND THE INTERSECTION OF VIOLENCE, SEXISM, DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM



Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown

Indigenous women’s traditional knowledge and livelihoods based on the sustainable use of natural resources are key in the conservation of ecosystems from the impacts of climate change. Indigenous women are also targeted because of their value and their critical role in defending the environment, as well as its stewardship and care. Indigenous women are often on the frontlines defending the environment, their territories, resources and rights from extractive projects and corporate interests and face intersecting and reinforcing forms of gender-based and other violence, due to a long history of discrimination associated with racism, socioeconomic and political marginalization.²⁶

Furthermore, indigenous women are at greater risk of violence and extortion as a means to enforce land and property grabbing for large-scale use, due to greater land rights insecurity and intersecting forms of discrimination and violence.²⁷ Illegal logging camps exploit local communities and indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to trafficking for sexual exploitation by illegal loggers.²⁸ In many instances, indigenous women are also more exposed to increased gender-based violence during social unrest inflicted by land conflict and competition over resources.²⁹

As highlighted in CEDAW general recommendation 37, on the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change,³⁰ the risks, burdens and impacts related to climate change and disasters are compounded for marginalized groups affected by intersecting forms of discrimination, such as indigenous women, women living in poverty, women belonging to ethnic, racial, religious, and sexual minority groups, women with disabilities, refugee and asylum-seeking women, among others.

“Indigenous women are often on the frontlines defending the environment, their territories, resources and rights”

STRENGTHENING THE LINKAGES BETWEEN THE CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENDING VAWG SECTORS

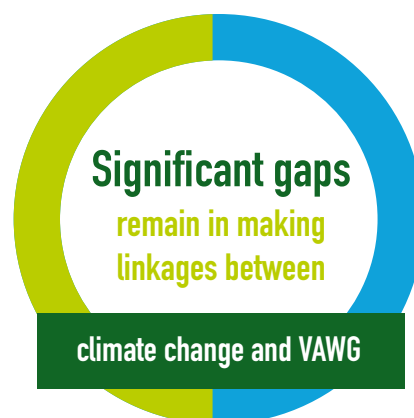
While there has been increased international attention over the last decade in understanding and addressing gender-climate issues in policies and programmes, the impact of climate change on VAWG has received much less focus.³¹



The Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Glasgow Climate Pact recognize the centrality of gender equality and women's empowerment but they do not specifically address VAWG.³² Significant gaps remain in making linkages between climate change and VAWG in research, policies, programmes and in establishing cross-sectoral partnerships across the climate change and ending VAWG sectors.³³ The situation is exacerbated by the scarcity of data and research to better understand the severity and the scope of the issue, the risk and protective factors and how VAWG interferes with resilience and recovery efforts.³⁴ Such data is key to inform the development of effective solutions.

Several policies and guidelines highlight the importance of disaster risk reduction, preparedness, contingency planning and response in addressing VAWG in the context of climate change. However, much more needs to be done to ensure greater integration of prevention and response to VAWG in climate mitigation and adaptation policies and interventions to adequately address the realities and needs of women and girls, not only in the context of disaster risk reduction but also in contexts of slow onset climate events.

While there are some emerging promising practices linking VAW and climate change, access to climate finance for ending violence against women and girls is extremely limited, restricting the potential to invest in climate solutions that would prevent and mitigate the immediate and long-term impacts of climate change on violence against women and girls, particularly those facing multiple, intersecting forms of violence and discrimination.



EXAMPLES OF PROMISING PRACTICES/INITIATIVES TO PREVENT AND RESPOND TO VAWG IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION.

INTEGRATING CLIMATE CHANGE IN COMPREHENSIVE EVAWG PROGRAMMING: THE EU-UN SPOTLIGHT INITIATIVE

The European Union (EU) - UN Spotlight Initiative, through its comprehensive and multi stakeholder approach, supports the integration of the prevention of GBV into climate initiatives, from adaptation to resilience to emergency responses and has worked to address the effects of climate change globally. For example, in Vanuatu, the Initiative has strengthened institutional capacities to ensure that VAWG is systematically addressed following weather-related disasters. In Mozambique, it provided mobile data, remote working equipment and psychosocial assistance for at-risk women and girls during Cyclone Chalane. In Liberia, the Initiative engaged the National Traditional Council of Chiefs and Elders to identify key economic interventions, such as climate smart agriculture, as an alternate source of income for practitioners of female genital mutilation (FGM).

SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS TO ADAPT TO CLIMATE CHANGE

WOMEN'S PEACE AND HUMANITARIAN FUND (WPHF)

The United Nations Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund is the only multi partner trust fund dedicated to accelerating programmatic and institutional support for local women's organizations working in fragile settings to respond to crises and build lasting peace. In the Solomon Islands, the WPHF has supported the implementation of a Protection and Gender in Emergency Response Project, which addresses SGBV in humanitarian and climate-related disasters and enables the rapid localization of gender inclusive humanitarian response and disaster risk reduction across the island. In Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu, the WPHF has supported FemLINKpacific to implement its Pacific women's weather watch project entitled "Innovating and Leading as First Responders," which focuses on communications and capacity building of local rural women leaders to make well informed decisions – including on GBV prevention and response – before, during and after disasters. The project situates women as key decision makers and stakeholders at all stages of crises, as advocates for local and national policy change.

UN TRUST FUND TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN LEARNING FROM PRACTICE

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