

Gender Based Violence and its intersection with Climate Change



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Introduction

This paper looks at how Climate Change and Gender Based Violence (GBV) coincide in humanitarian and development work. Addressed is the impact of Slow Onset Climate Change, the effects of Natural Disasters, Environmental Human Rights Defenders experiences with violence, with a particular focus on Women Human Rights Defenders, as well as a brief section on what we can do when addressing Gender Based Violence and Climate Change. Members of the Irish Consortium on Gender Based Violence have provided key case studies demonstrating how programming on GBV and Climate Change is ongoing. Further, key recommendations and advocacy points are provided.

The Gender Based Violence and its intersection with Climate Change paper will be beneficial for INGOs and Governmental bodies with particular interest to those combating Gender Based Violence and Climate Change issues.

What is Climate Change and how does it intersect with GBV?

Climate change has severe impacts across the globe. It can affect food systems, eco-systems, natural resources, socio-economic systems, human health and welfare, and is increasingly a driver of conflict and displacement. Climate change also has grave consequences to GBV, as it increases the drivers for violence, particularly in conflict, displacement, food insecurity, socio-economic impacts and the disruption of protective systems.

Women and girls are at the highest risk of GBV from Climate related issues and disasters, for example women and girls are primarily responsible for food production and water collection globally. As these key resources are becoming scarcer and unaffordable, violence against women and girls increases. Socio-economic pressures drive sexual exploitation and abuse, early and forced marriage and intimate partner and domestic violence, among other forms of GBV. (1)

The slow onset of climate change refers to the long-term increasing temperatures across the globe. These rising temperatures have major impacts such as temperature increase of the ocean, decreasing biodiversity, increased saline levels in the soils making it more difficult to grow plants, trees and vegetables, and the lowering levels of usable and safe water on land.

GBV Definition

Any act of violence that arises from or is driven by inequalities, discrimination, roles, disparities or expectations based on gender. It includes any act that results in, or is likely to cause physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering for an individual or group of people, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

Acute climate disasters range from mudslides, floods, hurricanes, typhoons, droughts, tornados, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc. In recent decades, the significant change in the climate can be related to human activity such as the burning of fossil fuels, modern agriculture/farming practices, and mining for minerals.

The root cause of Gender Based Violence (GBV) is gender inequality and unequal power dynamics; however, climate change contributes to drivers and mediating factors which exacerbate GBV.

Natural disasters, climate-related conflict and displacement lead to increases in all forms of GBV, particularly intimate partner violence, sexual violence, early and forced marriage and sexual exploitation and abuse, and disrupt GBV response services. Rural communities in the Global South are having the least effect on the climate, however, due to rates of pollution from the Global North and their economic interests, the Global South is the most impacted by slow onset change and acute climate disasters. (2)

Both climate disasters and slow on-set climate change, similar to other types of humanitarian emergencies (e.g., conflict, displacement, etc.), negatively impact on living conditions, access to clean and safe water, livelihoods, and socio-economic stability and increase risks of GBV, as they heighten pre-existing inequalities which exacerbates women and girls' risk of GBV.

Currently there is programming, research, and advocacy work in the cross-cutting issues of Climate Change and Gender. This paper will explain the interaction between Climate Change and GBV, provide key case studies, as well as give key messaging and policy recommendations.

Climate Change Definition

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) define Climate Change as a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods. (3)

Slow onset Climate Change impacts on GBV

Due to slow onset climate change, healthcare, education, agricultural, humanitarian, development and governmental systems are increasingly becoming strained. The effects of slow-onset climate change have caused particular pressures with regards to access to water and food resources, and increasing temperatures.

These issues impact women and girls differently to their male counterparts and are associated with the patriarchal and traditional systems they are subjected to. Women and girls are the primary caregivers across the globe and do the majority of unpaid work. Part of this role as caregiver includes the provision of food and water for their households.

Slow onset climate change means there is less access to affordable food and water, further, livelihoods are becoming more unsustainable – with droughts and saline levels affecting growth. This has a knock-on effect for women and girls, in particular from the Global South, with less food being grown, there is both less for the family to consume as well as less produce to sell at market. With less to sell, income is reduced while the cost of food increases due to its limited availability. (4) This limited availability to food as well as income can lead to increased domestic violence and abuse.

The increasing temperatures and effects of mining, deforestation and burning of fossil fuels is severely impacting access to safe water. As part of women and girls' responsibility to the household, they are usually the family members who travel to retrieve water. This results in having to travel further distances as water is increasingly becoming inaccessible. (5)

This distance means women and girls are being pulled from education and work, travelling long distances and leaving them vulnerable to sexual violence and harassment as well as injury from travelling in unsafe areas. Further, the roads and paths they are travelling on are usually away from their communities and are unlit, increasing their vulnerability to GBV.

The above examples are commonplace and are leaving women exposed to GBV. With less and less access to food, water, livelihoods and education, women and girls are at higher risk of intimate partner violence, early and forced child marriage, sexual violence, harmful traditional practices including FGM/C, and physical harm.

GBV and the risk of travel for safe water

Concern Bangladesh

The Southwest coastal region in Bangladesh is home to 14 million people who live in one of the most disaster-prone and vulnerable regions in the country. Communities are extremely exposed and vulnerable to major natural and climate-related shocks, including: cyclones, storm surges, floods, riverbank erosion, water-logging, saline water intrusion, and droughts. In response, Concern has implemented numerous medium to long-term projects in the coastal region dating back to 2011. Concern has concentrated on addressing three key dimensions of extreme poverty: the lack of and/or low return on assets, inequalities and exposure to risks and vulnerabilities.

Limited access to safe water, paired with poor hygiene and sanitation (WASH) services, is a core problem in the south-western coastal communities of Bangladesh. Families struggle to find safe drinking water and the burden of seeking out water almost always falls on women and girls. Women and girls in Bangladesh bear the responsibility for water collection in over 90% of households (UN Women, 2020).

This becomes even more complicated when there is a resource scarcity. Women travel up to 10km daily on foot just to seek out water for their families creating additional risks for women and girls of sexual and physical violence, harassment, incidences or threats of rape. Their role to collect water for the family and the livestock and the long distance to these water points means an enormous workload for them on top of the family chores and childcare.



It is well documented that the lack of WASH facilities in or in proximity to homes, coupled with social norms that allow for GBV, exposes females to higher risk of GBV while walking long distances to secure water and using remote and unsafe sanitation facilities. Women are exposed to GBV while they make this walk especially as they often leave as the sun rises and again in the late afternoon, returning as the sun sets in the evening. When this type of responsibility falls on girls, it means they often have to leave or miss school.

In the southwest coastal region, water is not safe for human consumption due to the high levels of salinity, which cause a range of severe health impacts. Concern, has been working with families in the sub-districts of Sarankhola and Mongla in Bagerhat in the coastal area of Bangladesh, to install Rain Water Harvesting Tanks. Rain water harvesting tanks collect 1500 litres of water during the rainy season, providing a means through which families can store water throughout the year, and have access to safe drinking water throughout the dry season. This collected water can also be used for WASH purposes the grey water was used to irrigate the newly formed homestead gardens, which were provided through our Coastal Community Resilience.

Concern programming encompasses addressing gender inequalities and changing attitudes to mitigate risk of GBV, ensuring participation of men, women and youths in different groups and in decision making processes. Our community members reported that they were no longer required to walk long distances to collect drinking water during the majority of the dry season, which allows them to focus on other activities including income generating activities introduced through the broader Coastal Community Resilience Project whilst simultaneously mitigating risks of GBV. Community members also reported a reduction in water borne diseases.

Young women use smart agriculture to tackle climate change and challenge GBV in Uganda

GOAL Uganda

Uganda, a landlocked country in East Africa, it has a population of 45.74 million people. Uganda also has one of the youngest populations in the world, with more than 75% of people under the age of 30. Uganda remains amongst the poorest nations in the world. At the end of 2021, the Ugandan Government announced that 25% of its citizens were back to living below the poverty line representing an increase from 21% at the beginning of the year. (1)

Uganda is experiencing significant impacts of climate change, which include changing weather patterns, drop in water levels, and increased frequency of extreme weather events like floods and droughts. The resulting social economic impacts make communities very vulnerable to damaged infrastructure, scarcity of food and water and illness. Reports of violence against women are on the increase in Uganda despite the presence of more advanced laws and policies to protect victims and survivor. (2)

GOAL's mission is to work with the most vulnerable communities, to help them respond to and recover from humanitarian crises, and to assist them in building solutions to mitigate poverty and vulnerability. GOAL has been working in Uganda since 1979 with more than 90 staff working across six office locations. In Uganda, GOAL is focused on delivering humanitarian and sustainable development programmes that build community resilience and support socio-economic growth. Within this, there is an active focus on health, WASH and agricultural livelihoods.

GOAL engages local private sector partners to help modernise agro-techniques and make agriculture systems climate change resilient. This is done through provision of training on climate-smart seed selection, crop scheduling, cultivation techniques, water usage, fertilizer use, marketing, pest and disease control and management. The young farmers are also subsidized to buy irrigation equipment for dry season crop production.

Ugandan women are working with a local agricultural company and harvesting more produce. As a result of this, they are earning an average of \$60 per harvest. This allows them to feed their family, invest and expand their farming business using the same piece of land that was barely feeding themselves and their families before they started working with the company. 50% of women in Uganda depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Agriculture is a key sector that can lift young women out of poverty as agriculture contributes 40 percent to Uganda's economy.

GOAL is using this 'markets systems' approach through a project called Young Africa Works, to combat the impact of climate change on rural young women's farms in Uganda. The Markets for Youth project is climate proofing farming to guarantee food security and create sustainable incomes for the participants who are drawn from different groups including refugees and Persons with Disabilities. Conscious of the need to have men as allies, the Young Africa Works programme also has male participants at a 30% to 70% ratio with women for its five-year target of supporting 300, 0000 participants.

Facilitating smart agriculture and sustainable sources of income is one of the effective ways that GOAL is using to reduce the impact of climate change on women, deliver sustainable development and fight GBV by recognising and becoming conscious of household dynamics and potential household tensions linked to earning an income and decision making on the use of cash. Through the Young Africa Works programme, participants say they have been empowered to feed their families with nutritious food, improve their incomes, expand their businesses, and build healthy relationships.

1) 1.8m fall back into Poverty as Uganda launches 2020-21 Budget Strategy

2) UNFPA Uganda | GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND HARMFUL PRACTICES, UGANDA - 2021

Natural disasters impacts on GBV

Woman, children and the elderly are those who are most negatively impacted by natural disasters. Women and girls who have disabilities, elderly women and women and girls who are caregivers, experience more limited mobility and find it difficult to quickly seek safety. (6)

Following acute climate disaster events, food stores, safe shelter, access to services such as GBV services, sexual and reproductive healthcare, education, social protection, and/or access to economic resources are severely limited. Women and girls experience increased risk when attempting to access humanitarian assistance or other basic services, including sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian actors, or other forms of violence when travelling to, queuing for or receiving assistance.

After natural disasters, women and girls experience increased GBV risks, particularly intimate partner violence, early and forced marriage, sexual violence, and limited access to GBV response services.

Natural disasters are considered emergency contexts, especially those that cause large scale destruction. The chances of displacement due to climate related disaster is 60% higher compared to the 1980s. (7)

Responding to such emergencies and the displacement caused requires long-term preparations. Internally displaced people require access to safe shelter, WASH facilities, and easily accessible services such as legal and medical services, inclusive of GBV services. Further, technical and on-the-ground expertise should be part of this long-term preparations for at-risk communities.

Examples from the GBV Area of Responsibility (GBV AoR) Helpdesk

- In Pakistan following the 2011 floods, 52% of surveyed communities reported that privacy and safety of women and girls was a key concern. In a 2012 Protection rapid assessment with conflict-affected IPDs, interviewed communities reported that a number of women and girls were facing aggravated domestic violence, forced marriage, early marriages and exchange marriages, in addition to other cases of gender-based violence (de la Puente, 2014)
- Domestic violence was widely reported to have increased in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. One NGO reported a three-fold increase in cases brought to them (UNFPA, 2011). Studies from the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia also suggest a significant increase in intimate partner violence related to natural disasters. (8)

Emergency Response by Women Led Safe Spaces

ActionAid Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a low-lying flood plain, it is susceptible to hydro-metrological hazards such as floods, cyclones, and tornados. As of 2018, the population stands at 164.6 Million with women constituting half the population.

Climate change has impacted and challenged women to a greater extent in Bangladesh comparatively to men. During crises, women have reported increased maternal mortality rate, sexual harassment and exploitation, school dropouts and child marriage. They face the burden of unpaid care work, displacement, and migration due to climate change impacts and have faced higher rates of stigmatism and social exclusion due to high salinity induced skin problem in southern Bangladesh. Moreover, they lose access to health services such as family planning, prenatal care, postpartum care etc. which makes them more vulnerable to disease, violence, and death. Study conducted by ActionAid Bangladesh shows 71% of women faced more torture during the flood than what they were facing before, and among them 52.3% of women faced physical violence (2007).



ActionAid Bangladesh adopted an anticipatory action methodology to support communities at risk of Climate Change and GBV. Interventions focused on mitigating the impacts of GBV, menstrual health, maternal deaths of adolescent girls and women of reproductive age (10 –49 years).

The intervention also supports the people living in poverty in flood prone areas, women and girls of reproductive age, pregnant women, adolescents, youth who are at risk of gender-based violence, the 'left behind communities' such as the hijra community, sex workers and women with disability. This involved giving access to lifesaving services such as Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), Gender-Based Violence and Psychosocial Support (PSS) services for women and girls (adolescent and young women).

As part of the anticipatory action, ActionAid has supported Women led Emergency response to Recovery by involving women in rescue and evacuation operation. In this process, women lead the response by affected participants selection, chalking down their demands, preparing budget and implementation plan for emergency response, budget and implementation plan for emergency response, purchasing and distribution of relief materials, repair and rebuilding of shelters etc.

This also involves developing the capacity of local women in vulnerable communities to climate change. With these skills women have also demonstrated their capacity to tackle disasters which ultimately fostered women's empowerment and decision making in society. Furthermore, this capacity also ensured women's mobility is accepted throughout society.

Further, the facilitation of Women Friendly spaces were created in eight of the most affected districts of flooding and cyclone. These spaces provide services for GBV survivors as well as midwifery support for pregnant mothers. ActionAid Bangladesh also works to activate and make accessible multisectoral services for GBV survivors and women of reproductive ages. To do this, we ensure coordination and collaboration with service providers and develop referral pathways for respective districts. ActionAid also coordinate with local government, actors, and stakeholders for timely and effective preparedness, response, and recovery along with women empowerment to ensure their safety.

GBV perpetrated against Environmental Human Rights Defenders

Environmental Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) are advocating for land rights, environmental protection and for those affected by harm done to the environment. They face many forms of violence inclusive of physical violence, arbitrary detention, threats, destruction of land and property, and harassment.

In 2020, at least 331 human rights defenders promoting social, environmental, racial and gender justice in 25 countries were murdered, with many more beaten, detained and criminalised because of their work, 227 of these HRDs had a primary focus on land and environmental rights. (9)

Environmental HRDs typically protest the human practices that harm the environment such as the drilling of oil, the destruction of indigenous land, deforestation, and mining. They face public criticism from those pushing for these practices to continue and/or expand due to economic interests. HRDs bring forward key social change and advocate for essential passage of policies and laws locally, nationally and internationally.

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are faced with an added layer of violence with threats of rape and sexual violence as well as communities or countries silencing women due to their gender. WHRDs need support maintaining their livelihoods, securing their land and property, their medical and psychological needs met, and to ensure they can live a life free of violence. Further, impartial investigations into the violence are required as is securing protection measures.

According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), HRDs reality means they are commonly left without effective, inclusive and gender-responsive protection mechanisms. (10, 11)



Women Human Rights Defenders

Trócaire Honduras

Women Human Rights Defenders face violence across the globe. It varies from facing reprisals, threats to their home, sexual violence, arbitrary detention, torture, and death. Indigenous Communities and low-income farmers in Bajo Aguán Valley, Honduras have experienced hundreds of families forcefully evicted from, or coerced into leaving, their lands to allow for the expansion of industrial scale sugar cane and African palm plantations, provoking a land and food crisis in regions and a major loss of livelihoods in the affected communities. Trócaire and partners work with and support these communities to defend their human rights, including protecting access to land and water.

In Northern Honduras, the land disputes have been an ongoing issue for several decades. The land was classed as “overlooked, supposedly marginal, underutilized or empty land” that could be of economic value to the nation. The land was lived on by low-income farmers who had cultivated the land and celebrated their communities. People in the Bajo Aguán Valley have said they were coerced, bribed and threatened in order to sell their land to large corporations. They are left with little land and limited opportunities to make a livelihood for themselves.

The repeated forced evictions faced by the communities and continued threats and aggressions from security forces have had a profound effect on the women of the communities, their health and well-being, their access to essential services, their security and their role within the family and the community.

Women in these communities reported fear of violence and restrictions in movement, as leaving their homes left them vulnerable. They were refused medical treatment in local hospitals, with reports also of significant problems related to pregnancies and birth which are often attributed directly to incidents of violence and stress they experienced while pregnant.

Women Human Rights Defenders from these communities reported being particular targets, being followed by security forces and threatened.

During the 'El Tumbador' attack of November 2010, private security guards launched an attack on the farming communities who were peacefully occupying the land, five people were murdered, three more were seriously injured and four women were physically and psychologically tortured during the attack.

Women's participation in the struggle for their land became increasingly visible as they assumed more leadership positions within their communities as time went on. In many cases they have begun to take on active roles as human rights observers with the Observatorio Permanente de Derechos Humanos del Aguán (OPDHA or the Aguán Permanent Human Rights Observatory). Sometimes this is a conscious decision they have made, but often the women feel that the circumstances in their communities and the violence their family or communities have suffered left them with no choice but to participate.

Women who participate in the struggle often have the double burden of caring for their families and are often forced to choose between their family life and participating in the struggle. They can face pressure, stigma and guilt for seemingly abandoning their familial duties that men in the struggle rarely, if ever, experience. Trócaire and partners provide supports WHRD's with individual, focused support on safety and security, psychosocial support, access to GBV response services and legal support.

For more information please see 'Economies of Dispossession: Women from Honduras and Guatemala in the Global Scramble for Land.' Available [here](#).

Conclusion

There are many ways that Climate Change and GBV can be addressed. These solutions can range from targeted or increased funding, cross-cutting programming, supporting women led organisations, women's rights organisations and WHRDs, support and implementation of national and international laws/treaties regarding climate change (e.g. The Paris Agreement, 2015) as well as GBV (e.g. CEDAW, 1979, and the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, 2000).

Many local and international organisations are working on climate change and GBV, they have policies to address these topics and strive to Do No Harm and Leave No One Behind. The use of cross-cutting approaches and frameworks, as well as mainstreaming, is essential to eliminating GBV and addressing harms of Climate Change.

Unfortunately, GBV programming receives significantly less than 1% of total humanitarian funding. This means there are severe gaps in resources when addressing GBV. (12) Climate Change and the increasing needs to address its impact is also severely underfunded to meet current needs globally. Humanitarian, development and state committed funding to Climate Change cannot address adequately the global crisis caused by Climate Change. (13).

The GBV AoR helpdesk noted that high and middle income countries, even though they have experienced more climate related disasters in recent years, are more able to mitigate the harm and risks over low income countries who saw as much as three times as many people died per disaster. (3) This demonstrates the need to develop and invest in long-term emergency responses.

Storing adequate resources is necessary in addressing impacts of GBV in Climate Disasters such as food, water and the provision of sexual and reproductive health services, GBV services and ensuring access to humanitarian assistance for all affected is required. Further, ensuring adequate technical knowledge both in prevention and response is necessary in order to best provide services to affected communities.

WHRDs lives are severely negatively impacted by the violence they face, by ensuring protection measures are in place as well as the provision of focused support on safety and security, psychosocial support, access to GBV response services and legal support, we can drastically improve their experience as HRDs and in their hopes to create positive change. Further, accessing a fair and equal justice system is essential especially when conveying that the violence is not tolerated.

In humanitarian and development programming, it is essential that sustainable approaches and materials are mainstreamed as well as gender responsive and inclusive methodologies are taken into account. Where possible, strive for sustainable practices and measure aspects of safety and gendered power dynamics.

Overall, the linkages between GBV and Climate change need to be addressed. Globally, these issues are becoming increasingly strained, however, impacts of Slow Onset Climate Change, Natural Disasters and the Violence experienced by WHRDs can be mitigated.

Key recommendations and advocacy points

States and Donors:

Funding

Provide long-term support to Women Led Organisations, Women's Rights Organisations, Women Human Rights Defenders and women's movements working to respond to GBV and the impacts of climate change through flexible multi-year funding, including core and emergency funds, which can be used for staff safety and security measures, strengthening institutional capacity, and building networks and movements.

Progressively increasing funding to the protection of women and girls and GBV specialised programming, including funding the implementation of the Inter-Agency Minimum Standards for GBV in Emergencies Programming (2019) in all emergencies, encompassing preparedness, slow onset, acute, protracted and recovery settings.

Progressively increase funding allocations for gender responsive early warning systems, preparedness, disaster risk reduction and anticipatory action in contexts most impacted by climate change.

Business and Human Rights

Ensure respect for the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and its use as a minimal standard for developing laws, policies and plans related to operations of extractive industries, both in multi-lateral and bi-lateral diplomatic engagement and at national level. Engage in UN Treaty negotiations in October 2022 on the UN Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights, with the aim of achieving a feminist binding treaty.

Women Human Rights Defenders

Condemn violence against WHRDs, specifically those of a gendered nature, including sexual violence, attacks, torture, intimidation and murders. Publicly recognize the important and legitimate work of WHRDs working in defence of territories and natural resources. Such recognition should extend to WHRDs in all their diversity.

Follow Best Practice

Ensure that all funding streams include a requirement that interventions are in line with the IASC GBV Guidelines (2015) and environmental best practices.

Key recommendations and advocacy points

International organisations:

Human Resources

Allocate specific human resource capacity and technical specialist expertise in order to support effective response, mitigation and prevention of GBV in slow onset and acute climate change related emergencies.

Long-term Support to Women Led Organisations

Partner with and provide long term support to Women Led Organisations, Women's Rights Organisations, Women Human Rights Defenders and women's movements working to respond to GBV and the impacts of climate change through flexible multi-year funding, including core and emergency funds, which can be used for staff safety and security measures, strengthening institutional capacity, and building networks and movements.

Engage Women Led Organisations in Emergency Preparedness Planning and directly fund and support their work to respond to slow onset and acute emergencies.

Follow Best Practice

Ensure that all sectoral programming, integrates both GBV risk mitigation (in line with the IASC GBV Guidelines) and environmental best practices.

Inclusive and Equal Decision Making

Ensure equal participation of WHRDs in decision making concerning control and sustainable development of their territories, natural resources and environment in programming interventions.

Ensure women, girls and women led organisations are involved in the design and implementation of early warning systems, preparedness and anticipatory action.

Women Human Rights Defenders

Support WHRD's with individual, focused support including safety and security plan implementation, funding, psychosocial support and GBV response services as needed. Allocate resources to support WHRDs facing criminalization and judicial processes. These resources should not only be designed to cover legal costs, but also other costs related to legal processes such as transport, accommodation and costs related to the care of the family.

Business and Human Rights

Advocate with national and local Governments to ensure respect for the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and its use as a minimal standard for developing laws, policies and plans related to operations of extractive industries.

Advocate with states to engage in UN Treaty negotiations in October 2022 on the UN Binding Treaty on Business and Human Rights, with the aim of achieving a feminist binding treaty.

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Helpful resources

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