



TACKLING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE CHANGE

SUMMARY

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) and climate change are two of the most pressing global emergencies and sustainable development challenges of our time. VAWG is the most widespread and pervasive human rights violation worldwide, affecting more than an estimated 1 in 3 women throughout their lifetime.¹ Globally 81,000 women and girls were killed in 2020 alone, and a woman or girl was killed in their home every 11 minutes.² Climate change is threatening our planet’s sustainability with devastating social, cultural, economic, health and human rights impacts, affecting women and girls disproportionately, especially the most marginalized groups. It is also a serious aggravator of the different forms of VAWG. The shadow pandemic of VAWG during COVID-19 exemplified the surge of violence that occurs during crises and disasters.³ Women Environmental Human Rights Defenders are at particular risk of threats, violence and even femicide as they take action to protect their territories, ecosystems and communities from the impacts of human-led habitat loss, degradation, pollution and climate change.⁴ A failure to eliminate VAWG poses a serious risk to mitigation, adaptation, and resilience-building efforts to combat the climate crisis.⁵ At the same time, as climate change worsens the incidence of VAWG, the failure to address gender-based violence (GBV) risks and challenges in climate action can compound risks for women and girls’ safety and right to a life free from violence.⁶ While there has been increased international attention over the last decade in understanding and addressing gender-climate issues in policies and programmes, the intersections between climate change and VAWG have received much less focus. Cross-sectoral action is urgently required to ensure comprehensive, integrated approaches to address VAWG across the humanitarian-development-peace-and climate continuum. This paper provides a brief overview of the evidence of the impact of climate change on VAWG and makes recommendations to be considered by all sectors of society, from governments to international organizations and to civil society organizations across both the climate change and ending VAWG sectors.



Climate change and violence against women and girls

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Globally, VAWG affects

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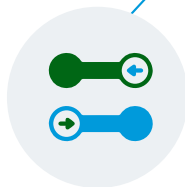


Climate change and slow environmental degradation exacerbate the risks of violence against women and girls due to displacement, resource scarcity and food insecurity and disruption to service provision to survivors.

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 Seade

“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



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

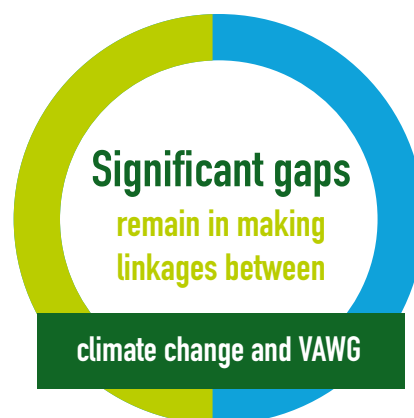
While there has been increased international attention over the last decade in understanding and addressing gender-climate issues in policies and programmes, the impact of climate change on VAWG has received much less focus.³¹



[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: ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Since 2021, the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Trust Fund) has collaborated with nearly 100 grantees and researchers for the "Learning from Practice" Prevention Series focusing on preventing violence against women. The [Adaptive programming](#) brief in this series references UN Trust Fund grantees' adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic, and other emerging crises, including climate-related challenges, political tensions and insecurity. The paper highlights how crises such as natural disasters and humanitarian emergencies can pose significant challenges to and require the adaptation of violence against women prevention programming.

For instance, operating in the country with the highest femicide rate in the Latin American region, grantee Centro de Estudios de la Mujer in Honduras (CEM-H) must respond to the impact of natural disasters on top of COVID-19's and the surge of violence against women human rights defenders. CEM-H ensures access to food is maintained during crises by transmitting ancestral knowledge and agro-ecological knowledge for food production in the domestic environment of women and girls. The activity generates an exchange of experiences and virtual meetings with women in the territories, peasant women and defenders of life.

THE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ENVIRONMENT LINKAGES CENTER (GBV-ENV CENTER)

In 2020, IUCN published a [landmark global review](#) on how GBV and the environment are linked across sectors and regions. The publication sparked global attention on the nexus and led to the creation of the [GBV-ENV Center](#). Housed by IUCN under a partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the GBV-ENV Center works to close the knowledge gap on GBV-environment issues while mobilizing learning and forging collaborative action towards ending GBV and securing environmental sustainability. To date, the GBV-ENV Center has fielded over 200 requests from governments, policy makers, environmental organizations and implementers, media and academia for tailored tools, information and support. For example, the GBV-ENV Center has supported women's advocacy groups in bringing GBV to gender action plans of global environment policy spaces as well as supporting climate disaster risk security agencies in understanding and including GBV considerations into response planning. The GBV-ENV Center also hosts a Community Roundtable, drawing partners from 40 global environment and development organizations together to discuss and collaborate on priority areas for action. Together, Community members have collaborated and supported one another in producing new practitioner tools on identifying and address GBV and environment links in environmental programming and policies. The work of the GBV-ENV Center has also inspired USAID in designing and incubating a global grant challenge on Resilient, Inclusive and Sustainable Environments (RISE) to support environment programmes in identifying and addressing GBV and environment links. To date, RISE is funding nine projects in eight countries, working on GBV in relation to forestry, land rights, wildlife conservation and more. In 2022, the GBV-ENV Center will run the next phase of new calls for RISE grants and global learning.



Illustration source: Estudio Relativo for IUCN.



Photo: UN Women/Ruhani Kaur

STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENTAL HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Fondo de Mujeres del Sur

The Strengthening Environmental Women Defenders Programme aims at strengthening grassroots women's groups that struggle for their rights from a gender and socio-environmental justice perspective. The Fund supports groups led by women in the defense of water, lands, their rights and the rights of their communities and families. It weaves together different strategies with indigenous, rural and urban women against environmental violence, which affects these women in a particular way. By strengthening women defenders of a natural, healthy environment, the Fund is defending women's life free from violence. The Fund supports network and alliance building among different groups of women's rights defenders, and monitoring and reporting violence against environmental women defenders. The programme is implemented in Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay.

The Esperanza Protocol: An effective response to threats against human rights defenders

The [Esperanza protocol](#), named after the hometown of the Indigenous Women and Environmental Human Rights Defender, Berta Cáceres, killed in 2016 further to years of uninvestigated threats, provides guidelines based on international human rights law, primarily to governments and justice officials, to promote an adequate response to threats against human rights defenders, and in particular, support the effective investigation, prosecution, and punishment of such threats. Under the Spotlight Initiative, in Latin America, UN Women worked with the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) to ensure that the protocol was gender-responsive by ensuring that women human rights defenders participated in the development of this tool and that the unique and diverse perspectives of women human rights defenders informed the whole process.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTIONS

The elimination of violence against women and girls (VAWG) is critical for achieving a sustainable and green planet. Violence against women and girls must be addressed across the humanitarian, development, peace building and climate change continuum.

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

- Integrate VAWG prevention and response into global, national and local environmental, disaster risk reduction and recovery, adaptation and mitigation policy frameworks, strategies, planning and funding instruments and accountability mechanisms.
- Address climate change through international frameworks for ending VAWG (CEDAW, Beijing Platform, Sustainable Development Goals) and policies such as national and local VAWG action plans and the Emergency Response Plans that the Secretary General has called upon member states to develop in [Our Common Agenda](#).

2 Promote strategic cross-sectoral partnerships and cooperation at global, regional, national and local levels across the climate change and ending VAWG sectors.

- Strengthen awareness raising and capacity building of environment, climate action and disaster risk reduction sectors in VAWG including legal and policy frameworks and strengthen capacities of ending VAWG field in climate change mitigation, adaptation and disaster risk reduction.
- Cultivate partnerships between climate policymakers, programmers and women's ministers or gender equality machineries, ensuring participation, agency and leadership of women's civil society organizations with expertise on ending VAWG in all climate change processes.

3 Generate data, evidence and knowledge to understand the impact of climate change on VAWG and risk factors

- Ensure sex-disaggregated data is collected to understand the impact of climate change and environmental degradation on violence against women and girls, as well as the risk factors, vulnerabilities and adaptive capacities of women and girls in both urban and rural settings.
- Identify promising practices and strengthen knowledge sharing on effective strategies and interventions for tackling violence against women and girls in the context of climate change.

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

- Ensure coordinated, quality, accessible, survivor-centered and trauma-informed essential services for women and girls who experience violence before, during and after environmental crises or disasters.
- Scale up evidence-based prevention interventions that address root causes, drivers and risk factors for violence and adapt to work across the climate change continuum including through integrating women's economic empowerment programming such as livelihoods and social protection with ending VAWG programming.
- Integrate VAWG prevention and response interventions into climate change and environmental adaptation, mitigation and resilience-strengthening policy, programming and finance.

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

- Put in place mechanisms and protocols to prevent and respond to violence faced by women climate activists and women environmental human rights defenders in line with global standards ensuring that protection measures are in place and access to justice and accountability are strengthened.

GENERATION EQUALITY FORUM

ACTION COALITIONS ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND ON FEMINIST ACTION FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE



The Action Coalition on Gender-based Violence and the Action Coalition on Feminist Action for Climate Justice offer a unique and strategic platform for strengthening multi-stakeholder partnerships to advance cross-sectoral efforts in addressing gender-based violence against women and girls in all their diversity in the context of climate change. IUCN, a leader of the Action Coalition on Feminist Action for Climate Justice, and UN Women, a leader of the Action Coalition on gender-based violence, seek to build partnerships to realize commitments and actions across both coalitions to amplify results, accelerating progress towards SDGs. The collective commitment of the Action Coalition on Feminist Action for Climate Justice on Advancing Gender in the Environment Partnership will scale up action on GBV and climate change through funding, capacity building and communities of practice for environment and climate organizations working on the intersections of gender-based violence and gender-responsive climate action at all levels; while UN Women's commitments to the Action Coalition on gender-based violence seek to prevent and respond to all forms of GBV including in the context of climate change related disasters and environmental impacts. For more information, please visit [Action Coalitions](#).



This policy brief was developed by UN Women and IUCN ahead of the sixty-sixth session of the [Commission on the Status of Women \(CSW 66\)](#), taking place between 14 -25 March 2022 under the priority theme: *Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes.*

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ENDNOTES

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