



**BRIEF**

# Women and Girls at the Intersection of Climate Change and Economic Empowerment

Kenya WEE CoP is convened by International Center for Research on Women

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## Introduction

Climate change is a complex global issue with detrimental effects on the physical environment, ecosystems, and societies — threatening at least 85% of the global population.<sup>1,2</sup> The effects of climate change can be felt in the short-term, through natural disasters such as drought, floods, landslides, and earthquakes, and in the long-term through environmental and ecosystem degradation.<sup>3</sup> Climate change affects health, reduces access to livelihood opportunities, water, food, and healthcare services, and triggers migration and conflict over resources, which in turn threatens individual and community security.

The impacts of climate change are far from uniform. Women and girls experience climate change and its effects differently than men and boys.<sup>4</sup> Women's experiences related to climate change further intersect with geography, race, political context, socioeconomic status, access to opportunity, and right to own assets or capital.<sup>5</sup>

In this brief, we unpack existing knowledge about the interlinkages between climate change and women's economic opportunities and gender-based violence (GBV), outline relevant initiatives, and present recommendations and guidance for programs and policies.

We draw on global evidence and from examples presented by the [Women's Economic Empowerment Community of Practice](#) (WEE CoP) in Kenya. The WEE CoP, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, connects 72 partners (as of publication date), coordinates learning, amplifies findings, builds capacity, and enhances collaboration between key stakeholders to share evidence and best practices related to women's economic empowerment in Kenya and the wider region. The community's primary goal is to strengthen the effectiveness and longevity of

research and advocacy in Kenya to increase women's access to opportunity and the means to build sustainable livelihoods.

## The Impact Of Climate Change On Women's Outcomes

Climate change exacerbates pre-existing gender inequities for women and girls in striking ways. While they are not inherently more vulnerable, the intersections of gender, power dynamics, socio-economic structures, and socio-cultural norms and expectations result in different climate impacts, often more severely experienced by women and girls.<sup>6,7</sup> Climate change creates both acute and chronic stressors that amplify pre-existing risk factors such as injurious gender norms, conflict, and poverty. Women and girls are both more likely to be killed, injured, and displaced by severe climate-related disasters, and are more likely to face detrimental economic, educational, and security consequences as a result of long-term climate change.

During a disaster, women are less likely to survive and more likely to be injured due to longstanding gender inequalities that create disparities in access to early warning, decision-making power, and mobility.<sup>8,9</sup> Women disproportionately lack access to information and resources necessary to prepare for disasters in advance. Due to ingrained gender norms and expectations, women are less likely to be able or allowed to make timely decisions to respond. For instance, many women face mobility constraints that prevent them from relocating. For the same reasons in the wake of such an event, women are also less able to access vital humanitarian relief, which further undermines their livelihoods, wellbeing, and recovery.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, four out of five people forced to relocate during disasters, including floods, droughts, wildfires, and other climate events, are

women.<sup>11</sup> Displacement reduces the opportunity for livelihood development, income generation and increases risk of GBV at refugee camps or transit centres. For example, in Chad, climate change events have acted like a “threat multiplier” in a context of terrorism and communal conflicts, causing widespread insecurity, migration, and increasing levels of interpersonal violence, sexual violence, and child marriage.<sup>12</sup> Evidence from Uganda, Kenya, and Ethiopia also suggest that during times of drought and scarcity, rape, harmful practices like child marriage, intimate partner violence, and other violence are heightened as couples and communities face heavy economic hardships, including displacement. In addition, access to essential GBV-related services such as post rape care, family planning, and maternal and child healthcare are limited in crisis situations.<sup>13</sup> These patterns of exclusion or disenfranchisement further transmit and entrench disparities in wealth, health, educational attainment, and labor participation among women.<sup>14</sup>

Women are also disproportionately represented in poor communities that are dependent on local natural resources.. Within those communities, more women are employed in agriculture, particularly in subsistence farming, a sector that has been and will continue to be profoundly impacted by drought, erratic rainfall, and other effects of climate change. Rural women face more challenges in securing income and resources for their families during periods of drought and erratic rainfall.

Deeply held norms that dictate roles for women, men, and girls and boys disproportionately place responsibility for climate-sensitive domestic obligations such as fetching household water, providing fuel for cooking and heating, and securing food for their families on women and girls. These tasks are becoming infinitely more challenging, time consuming, and dangerous as

sources become degraded, scarce, and further afield.<sup>15,16</sup> The additional care burden diminishes women’s access to economic resources and opportunities.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, girls leave school at a higher rate than boys, often to help manage this increased burden and end up with little to no time to play, learn, develop skills, and eventually generate income.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, inequitable social-cultural and gender norms create gendered power dynamics that perpetuate violence.<sup>19</sup> In times of resource scarcity, such as those brought on during slow-onset climate change events like drought or in acute disasters like floods, community and household conflict over resources is exacerbated. In such situations, GBV and threats of GBV are often used to reinforce social and economic privileges and control resources. For instance, in the wake of a changing climate, more girls enter early and forced marriages and women face exploitation through transactional sex.

## Gender-Smart Climate Interventions And Commitments

The connection between climate change and gender outcomes indicate that interventions to address and mitigate the impacts of climate change can and must be designed around the specific needs of women and girls. Efforts to build climate resiliency stand to improve economic and social gender outcomes, including supporting women’s economic empowerment and reducing GBV.

Several existing frameworks on climate change address gender and recognize climate change’s disproportionate effects on women and girls. The [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC) is charged with leading the global response to climate change, primarily through stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations. Some of UNFCCC’s most relevant frameworks and programs

relate to gender and climate change. The [Lima Work Programme \(2014\)](#) and [Enhanced Lima Work Program](#) seek to advance gender balance and integrate gender considerations into the implementation of the Climate Convention and the Paris Agreement. Decision three of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement invites relevant public and private entities to increase the gender-responsiveness of climate finance and strengthen the capacity of women.

Other international and global frameworks on women's rights likewise acknowledge how climate change detrimentally impacts women and girls. For example, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) highlights the gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change and emphasizes their greater risks, burdens, and impacts.<sup>20</sup>

Realizing these commitments at the local level will drive nations closer to adapting or mitigating the impacts of climate change on gender outcomes. At a national level, governments must adopt and integrate global frameworks and strategies into their institutions and systems, including their National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) that specifically focus on short, medium, and long-term climate resilience strategies. Many countries have successfully embedded a gender component, within their NAPs, such as responsible affordable water harvesting, livelihood resilience building, and promoting gender-responsive climate technologies and innovations.<sup>21</sup> However, few substantially address GBV. One notable exception is in Kenya, where the government recently developed policy and legal frameworks for GBV prevention, response, and accountability related to climate change vulnerabilities.<sup>22,23,24</sup> Commitments in Kenya include a GBV survivors' fund for economic empowerment and the establishment of GBV

prevention and response mechanisms in crisis situations.

## Developing Climate-Resilient WEE Interventions And Commitments

Just as climate interventions should include a focus on gender outcomes, interventions focused on women's economic empowerment- can build climate resiliency. Investment in women's skills and increasing access to resources is an opportunity to include climate-responsive and climate-adaptive measures that can reduce the impacts of climate change. Several ongoing efforts identified below aim to build women's economic empowerment and opportunity alongside climate resilience, especially in rural areas.

From 2017 – 2021, UN Women worked in West and Central Africa to improve climate resilience and expand women's economic empowerment through a flagship program: [Women's Empowerment through Climate Resilient Agriculture Value Chain](#). Specific activities included strengthening women's rights through knowledge-building and gender-responsive land governance processes with traditional leaders and investing in women agri-entrepreneurs through credit lines and digital micro-insurance services.

The [Gender Transformative Mechanisms in the context of Climate Adaptation](#) program, supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and implemented by IFAD, supports and incentivizes partner governments to increase investment, capacities, and activities to achieve gender-transformative results at scale in rural areas. For example, in Burkina Faso, the [Agriculture Value Chains Support Project](#) aims to improve farmers' food security and incomes by putting women in leadership positions and increasing women's participation in higher-return value chains.<sup>25</sup>

In Northern Ghana, [Saha Global](#) supported almost 250 small water enterprises (SWE) — entities that collect, treat, and sell potable water — to create entrepreneurship opportunities for female staff. Women were nominated by local leaders to become “water entrepreneurs” and were provided with key resources, skills, and training to transform SWE in local communities.<sup>26</sup> By building skills, providing resources, and building opportunities for women involved in local businesses, these projects improve the resiliency of women during climate change events and related disasters.

One WEE CoP Kenya member, the [Harvard Humanitarian Initiative](#), implemented a program in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that addressed gender and economic inequity and violence in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic, while promoting environmental practices and human rights. As part of the intervention, the Initiative piloted two training curricula on gender equity and environmental and human rights advocacy. The goal was to reduce sexual harassment and increase gender equitable attitudes and climate mitigation knowledge. Findings showed that by the end of the program, more men and women helped each other at work, advocated for equal pay, supported female leadership, and felt strongly linked to the environment.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion And Recommendations

To address gender inequity and climate change — including reducing GBV and fostering women’s economic empowerment — there are several approaches to consider.

### Recommendations for programs:

1. Apply an intersectional lens to programming that includes consideration of women and girls who are young, living in rural areas, differently abled, ethnic minorities, at risk for child

marriage or forced migration, and/or at the brink of climate change-related disasters and conflict. Lessons from global and national COVID-19 recovery show that gender and youth-inclusive decision-making is essential to meet differing needs and will be critical to meaningfully improve GBV and women’s economic empowerment outcomes in the context of climate change.

2. Improve collection, analysis, and presentation of gender- and sex-disaggregated data to refine, monitor, and measure both climate and women’s economic empowerment interventions. With better data, the global community stands to strengthen the critical evidence base around what works at the intersection of women’s economic empowerment and climate change, including how best to support women and girls in a changing climate, and how to design gender-sensitive climate adaptations.
3. Increase and improve financial investments, such as cash transfers, credit lines, and digital micro-insurance services can mitigate the short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of climate change, including economic disadvantage and GBV. Governments and funders should make gender-sensitive investments, considering the circumstances faced by women and girls and their priorities and needs, and remove economic, social, and cultural barriers that constrain women from benefiting from such investment. More research is also needed to better understand which specific financial investment mechanisms are most successful for ameliorating violence and enhancing economic empowerment, while also supporting women with the resources and enabling environment to be adaptive and resilient to climate change.

### Recommendations for international and national actors:

1. Fully recognize and articulate the connections between climate change and women’s economic empowerment in international frameworks, global guidelines, and national action plans. Climate change commitments must provide guidance on GBV and women’s economic empowerment, and women’s groups need to continue highlighting the role that climate change plays in women’s rights.
2. Invest in implementing and operationalizing local, regional, and global policies that address the roots of gender inequities such as GBV during and after different climate events. Investments are needed for further research on effective policies and programs to address gendered constraints during and after climate events.
  - a) Promote women’s leadership in climate-related activities, such as climate adaptation planning and peace/security agenda setting, as well as investing in women-led grassroots organizations seeking to build climate resilience.
  - b) Invest in girls’ education and support the most marginalized girls to adapt to and mitigate effects of climate change, such as school dropout and early marriage. Supporting girls to achieve “green skills” through vocational and STEM-related education and training initiatives will prepare an important workforce for careers in renewable energy, waste recycling, and agroforestry.<sup>28</sup>

environmental law, policies, strategies, and accountability mechanisms there is need to consider factors such as access to and control of resources, decision-making power, gender roles, climate adaptation, and the safety and rights of women and girls. Women and girls must be on the forefront of climate interventions and the design and implementation of adaptation measures, and an environmental sustainability lens must similarly be applied to women’s economic empowerment interventions. Such investments in women’s economic empowerment can influence, shape, and drive collective climate and human development efforts and support the wellbeing of all women and girls. Coupled with global, regional, and national action plans, these interventions are critical to ensure that funding, research, legal protections, and programming address the needs, and elevate the voices of women and girls.

Women and girls are uniquely vulnerable in the context of a changing global climate. Limited data exist to show the interconnections of climate change and women’s economic empowerment, and more research is needed to fill this gap. Existing policies are linear and assume homogeneity in the redress of climate change issues, failing to consider differential impacts and experiences by gender and intersecting identities. To close the gender gaps in

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## Endnotes

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