



Gender

Climate change and gender inequalities

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Africa has contributed very little to the climate crisis but is most vulnerable to its consequences. As weather events become more frequent and severe, gender inequalities in Africa have the potential to persist and even escalate. African women often face greater vulnerability to climate change due to their social roles, economic circumstances and limited access to resources. They are more likely to rely on climate-sensitive sectors like agriculture, which makes their livelihoods susceptible to changing weather patterns, droughts, floods and other climate-related risks.

Evidence shows that climate change affects women's and men's assets and well-being differently in six impact areas: 1. impacts related to agricultural production; 2. food security; 3. health; 4. water and energy resources; 5. climate-induced migration and conflict; and 6. climate-related natural disasters.[1]

Research indicates that higher temperatures are increasing the spread of diseases like malaria, dengue fever, cholera and Zika virus, which are linked to adverse pregnancy and birth outcomes, and extreme heat appears to increase stillbirth.[2] Another study shows that shocks, such as food insecurity, due to climate-related crop failures lead some women working in the agriculture sector to engage in transactional sex to survive, contributing to increased HIV infections.[3]

Climate change can also fuel gender-based violence. According to UNDP, rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse grew during extended periods of drought in Uganda.[4] Similarly, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reports that intimate partner violence rose during drought in East Africa.[5] In some Sahel countries with a combination of climate change impacts, environmental degradation and conflict, women and girls are particularly at risk of experiencing gender-based violence. At the same time, climate disasters often drive resources away from women's health services and services to support survivors of gender-based violence.

Child marriage, which is also considered a form of gender-based violence, has been observed in various communities as a survival strategy in the event of disaster. In Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, the DR Congo and Mozambique, for example, child marriage is often used to secure funds or recover assets losses caused by climate-related disasters, such as drought, repeated flooding and more intense storms.[6] For example, in the regions of Ethiopia worst affected by the drought, child marriage has, on average, more than doubled in the space of one year, according to UNICEF analysis.[7]

Women and girls are traditionally responsible for collecting firewood and water in many African countries, especially in rural areas. The adverse impact of climate change forces women and girls to walk longer distances from their homes and join long queues to perform these tasks. A study conducted in Uganda revealed that the time dedicated to fetching water increased following a drought, with women and girls disproportionately affected by this burden.[8] According to the study, under normal weather conditions in Uganda, people typically travel an average distance of approximately half a kilometre to fetch water, spending around 14 hours per week on this task. However, the distance doubles during drought conditions, requiring an increased time commitment of about 16 hours per week. The longer journeys increase women and girls' exposure to gender-based violence outside the home and limit their time for income-generating work or attending classes. Furthermore, the physical strain of carrying water over a long distance can result in adverse health consequences, such as chronic pain. Boys may also drop out of school and work as labourers to support their families in such situations.

In addition, crop failure due to sporadic rainfall increases food insecurity. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, women represent 60–80% of smallholder farmers, and only 4% of farms are irrigated.[9] The implication is that women farmers overwhelmingly rely on rainfed subsistence agriculture, which makes them more vulnerable to drier conditions and increasingly erratic rain patterns on the continent.

Women also often face the most negative economic implications of crop failure as they usually have fewer economic resources to fall back on in times of crisis. This also has health implications for many women and girls, as malnourishment

increases the risk of contracting infections. Furthermore, women and girls' lower socio-economic status makes it more difficult for them to access and pay for treatment. A study based on 141 countries shows that in societies where the socio-economic status of women is low, such as in many communities in Africa, natural disasters kill more women than men, both directly and indirectly, via related post-disaster events.[10]

Endnotes

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