



Invisible Costs: Gender-based Violence and the Environment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Environmental issues, among which climate change, are not universal or neutral experiences: the impacts are differentiated along with dynamics of inequalities.
- Women are disproportionately affected by the impacts of environmental-related issues because of pre-existing systemic gender inequalities.
- There is a deep interlinkage between gender-based violence and climate change.
- Weather-related disasters result in higher rates of gender-based violence, such as sexual assault, intimate partner violence, or trafficking, both during and after disasters.
- Because of entrenched gender inequalities, women lack access and control over natural resources but are dependent on those resources to survive.
- The growing pressure exerted over natural resources, induced by environmental disasters or higher temperatures, increases gender-based violence by exposing women and girls to higher risks of being assaulted or forcing them to resort to sexual relations in exchange for food.
- Women environmental defenders experience gender-specific risks in addition to the dangers faced by male defenders.
- The violence against women environmental defenders is rooted in pre-existing gender inequalities and is used to silence them.
- Silencing ranges from domestic violence to psychological, cyber, political, and community-based violence.



Introduction: Climate Change Is Not Neutral

In times of crisis, social inequalities tend to be exacerbated and become more entrenched. The most striking example today is the Covid-19 pandemic, which was a catastrophe for gender equality. For instance, according to the UN, gender-based violence significantly increased due to the economic and social stress on top of the social isolation measures.

The phenomenon is the same with climate change: women, particularly women of colour situated in the Global South, are already experiencing the dramatic effects of climate change. The deep interlinkages between climate change and social inequalities, and precisely gender inequality, might be hard to grasp for those of us whose day-to-day lives have not been strongly affected by the climate crisis. However, to prevent a deeper entrenchment of disparities, understanding climate change through its intersections with power structures is crucial.

The social dimensions of climate change are complex and multi-faceted. Still, there is one glaring observation: women and girls are disproportionately affected and experience more significant risks, burdens, and impacts. Make no mistake: women's vulnerability is not natural or innate. It is the product of the intersection between gendered social roles, discrimination, and poverty. Pre-existing systemic gender inequalities determine women's rights, responsibilities, and roles. In turn, this impacts women's ability to access and utilise resources and their ability to protect themselves. Climate change then exacerbates and deepens the existing disparities.

How exactly do the gendered impacts of climate change play out? The most striking dimension is the interlinkage of environmental questions with gender-based violence. The latter is present in all societies and works as a means of control, subjugation, and exploitation that further deepens gender inequality. Across societies and social contexts, the different expressions of gender-based violence maintain inequalities and norms to the detriment of livelihoods, rights, conservation, and sustainable development. Three aspects will be addressed here: environmental pressure and threats, access to and control over natural resources, and environmental action.

1. Gender-Based Violence in the Context of Environmental Pressures and Threats

Weather-related disasters induced by climate change have dire impacts on all aspects of life: they disrupt food production, degrade natural resources, damage infrastructure, and undermine progress on the realisation of human rights. Around the world, women are less able to recover from climate change and weather-related disasters because of the coupling of discriminatory norms, their dependence on natural resources and agriculture, and their lack of involvement in decision-making related to the environment.

In natural disasters, the levels of mortality and morbidity are higher for women and girls. Indeed, because of gendered economic inequalities, women and female-headed households are often at higher risk of poverty. This means that they are more likely to live in inadequate housing of low value, whether in urban or rural areas, which are more vulnerable to climate disasters such as earthquakes, floods, storms, or landslides. In recent cases such as the Cyclone Gorky, which hit Bangladesh in 1991, the disparity between genders in survival rates was alarming: women made up 91% of the victims. Considering the projections that people dying from climate-driven temperatures and disasters will exceed deaths from infectious diseases, these numbers are particularly worrying. In addition, disaster planning and implementation are often not gender-responsive. This means that necessary facilities in natural disasters, including early warning mechanisms, shelters, or relief programs, often exclude the specific accessibility needs of diverse groups of women, such as women with disabilities, older women, or indigenous women. In an emergency or temporary shelter for displaced populations, which are high social and economic stress situations, numerous cases highlight the increase of gender-based violence. This is the case in both developing and developed countries. For example, in the year following Hurricane Katrina in the USA, the rates of gender-based violence experienced by women tripled, with most cases in emergency shelters. In 2012, Fiji was hit with two cyclones. Again, the rates of women living in relief centres and reporting being sexually abused by their partners skyrocketed.



In the aftermath of weather-related disasters such as floods, earthquakes or typhoons, food scarcity, loss of property or post-traumatic stress disorder all lead to powerlessness and societal stresses, with pressure on heads of households to provide for their families. Often, this results in increased forms of violent behaviours among men, including intimate-partner violence or domestic violence. For example, during droughts impacting the Murray-Darling Basin in Australia, financial pressures resulted in higher rates of alcohol and drugs consumptions by men, who used it as coping mechanisms. In turn, this led to higher rates of violence against women, such as emotional abuse, financial control, physical abuse, and isolation of women. Similarly, in Uganda, due to the failure of income crops caused by droughts, men resorted to selling crops grown by women, usually meant for household consumption. This led to tensions within households and increased rates of men beating their wives to exert control over the land. Another consequence of natural disasters is the need among affected families to resort to survival strategies. Among these strategies is child marriage: minors, usually girls, are married or sold off against their will in exchange for food, cattle, or income. According to Juliane Schmucker, regional director for Asia at Plan International, a humanitarian organisation fighting for the rights of women and children: “It’s simply a survival strategy: to get rid of a daughter to relieve the pressure on the family, or it’s the only way to generate income.”

Furthermore, the insecurity of vulnerable groups after disasters, especially women and children, represent a golden opportunity for human traffickers. While this particular form of violence and coercion can affect all members of society, over 80% of sex trafficking victims are women and girls. If more gendered data and systematic analysis are needed to understand the gendered impact of climate change related to trafficking, it is estimated that trafficking increases by 20-30% during disasters. According to UNHCR and Save the Children assessments, there are cases in which sex trafficking and sexual exploitation are perpetrated by the people responsible for recovery efforts, such as humanitarian staff, security forces, or men in a position of power and influence. Thus, weather-related disasters result in higher rates of gender-based violence in many forms, both during and after disasters.

2. Gender-based Violence & Access to and Control over Natural Resources

Gender inequalities are rooted in legal and social standards and influence one’s access to education, economic opportunities, or decision-making, as well as land and natural resources. According to Oxfam and the UN reports, women represent the majority of the world’s poor, landless, illiterate, and informal and unpaid workforces. Many women across the globe, specifically in rural areas, are still discriminated against socially and economically because of their lack of access and control over land and natural resources, economic opportunities, education, technology and financial and extension services. As environmental degradation and natural resource scarcity increase, they represent alarming threats to the ecosystems upon which women are particularly dependent. The depletion of resources then impacts biodiversity and can result in food insecurity, poverty, or forced displacement. In turn, tension and competition over the scarce resources in communities, households, or industries rise, fuelling discriminatory and exploitative gender inequalities.

When it comes to vital livelihood activities, such as fetching water or firewood, it is often understood as a women’s and girls’ role. Since climate change intensifies the depletion of natural resources such as freshwater, forest resources, or arable land, the work of women increases, consequently forcing women and girls to switch from paid employment or school to support their families. Furthermore, water scarcity means that women might have to walk longer distances, increasing the risks of being sexually assaulted, harassed or attacked. In regions with active armed groups, it is incredibly worrying. The trouble is the same with the gathering of firewood or other essential natural resources.

Another example of gender-based violence due to women’s lack of access and control over natural resources is the growing “sex-for-fish,” when male fishers expect sexual relationships from women fish buyers, on top of money, as payment. Having a ‘boyfriend’ in fishing camps enables women to secure access to fish, often at lower prices. This leads women to increasingly engage in transactional sex to provide food for their families. In western Kenya, the phenomenon has become so normalised that it even has its name: the Jaboya system. While this phenomenon could be understood as a longstanding socio-economic-



cultural arrangement, the growing fish scarcity worsens it, substantially impacting women.

Finally, there is a strong connection between land use and tenure, the benefits derived from the production of natural resources upon the land, and women's poverty and exclusion. In several countries, specific laws thwart the possibilities of women owning, managing, or even inheriting land and property. A study executed by the World Bank revealed that among 189 countries, 40% have at least one legal mechanism limiting women's rights to property. As such, women's weak land rights render them in insecure situations, vulnerable to suffer land and property grabbing. Often, the latter is accompanied by gender-based violence, whether intrafamilial or from external actors, such as the private sector or the government. In other cases, women are subjected to sexual extortion to access agricultural land and land titles from authority figures. The physical and mental health impacts are high for survivors, primarily due to the social exclusion following married or widowed women and the exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and infections. Thus, gender-based violence is used as a tool to exert control and force and thereby reinforce specific socio-cultural status, in which women's land and property rights are not considered.

The reality of women's position of inequality is a solid obstacle to the realisation of human rights and linked environmental goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals. As the gender gaps persist, they offer fruitful spaces for the proliferation of gender-based violence.

3. Gender-Based Violence in Environmental Action

Before the term 'environmental human rights defenders' was conceptualised, women's grassroots organisations and indigenous peoples have historically been actors in defence of the environment. As their efforts become even more critical in the fight against climate change, patterns of violence against environmental human rights defenders are on the rise all around the globe. According to Global Witness, a leading organisation in climate justice and civic freedoms, 212 environmental defenders were killed in 2019, with most cases in agribusiness and extractive industries such as mining. While women face the same obstacles as male defenders, they also experience

gender-specific risks, including various forms of gender-based violence, ranging from domestic violence to psychological, cyber, political, and community-based violence. This is partly because their actions challenge existing gender norms and expectations within their communities, households, and societies. Indeed, there are many cultures around the world where women are not expected to directly speak out and challenge the status quo, a traditional masculine behaviour. When it happens, they experience stigmatisation, social ostracism, and criminalisation.

Like the cases of gender-based violence described above, violence against women's environmental defenders is rooted in social, economic, and political power relations, such as discrimination, labour division, or pre-existing dynamics of violence. As such, women environmental defenders, whether managers of natural resources, journalists, lawyers, indigenous leaders, or everyday citizens, experience a particular form of gendered violence by state or non-state actors. Thus, gender-based violence is used to silence and control women's environmental defenders and discourage others from coming forward.

For indigenous women, gender-based and other violence they face is exacerbated by the long history of racial and ethnic discrimination against their communities. The lack of data and national recognition of indigenous people heighten the barriers indigenous women face when they seek to enter public services and participate in decision-making, resulting in a lack of awareness of their rights. In turn, this makes them more vulnerable to gender-based violence defence their environment. One of the most recent high-profile cases was the murder of Berta Isabel Caceres. This leading Indigenous figure stood up against constructing a hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River (the area was considered sacred for the indigenous Lenca people). Her assassination came after years of gender-based harassment, threats, and other forms of violence. While her assassination sent shock waves worldwide, it is vital to understand that it is part of broader patterns of violence against women environmental defenders.



Policy Recommendations

- **The EU is a leader in gender equality and sustainability: it should thus implement environmental policies which recognise the interlinkage between environmental issues and gender-based violence.**

Acknowledging the gendered impacts of environmental issues will produce much more effective environmental policies and a more visionary approach to ensure climate resilience and achieve gender equality. As scientific experts have demonstrated, the pressure on environmental resources and environmental disasters will only be increased, fuelled by climate change. It is thus urgent to consider the social dynamics behind environmental issues.

- **The EU should focus on equity-focused and gender-disaggregated data to better understand the differentiated impacts of environmental issues and the interlinkage with structures of inequalities.**

Gender-disaggregated data will enable the EU to develop adapted environmental policies, both in preventing and recovering from environmental issues, such as in natural disasters management.

- **The EU should develop gender-based violence and environment indicators to collect data and the development of statistics, including factors such as sex, ethnicity, age, etc. To achieve this, the EU should work together with the environment and gender experts.**

Using data collection, statistics and indicators will strengthen the policy process and develop climate resilience. Furthermore, they will prove crucial in monitoring and accounting mechanisms.

- **Specifically, the EU should include gender-based violence induced by environmental issues within relevant international policies, strategies, planning instruments and international funding mechanisms.**

Without considering the gender-differentiated impacts of environmental issues, environmental policies are bound to entrench social inequalities, among which gender-based violence.

- **To achieve this, gender and gender-based violence experts should be engaged and supported at every stage of the policymaking cycle.**

Involving experts from both disciplines is crucial, as the effects of environmental issues, as demonstrated above, are not neutral or universal.

- **The EU should also take the necessary measures to include more women in decision-making.**

Up to this day, gender in climate change policy is mainly absent, and policymakers still overlook women's experience with climate change. The under-representation of women and the lack of consideration of the gendered impacts of environmental issues (such as the interlinkage with gender-based violence) seriously undermines the effectiveness of environmental strategies and goal.



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