

Climate disasters 'block access to women's healthcare'

September 6 2021



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Climate change-related disasters are worsening the vulnerabilities of women and girls as essential health services including family planning get overlooked during such times, a [report](#) says.

The report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) says that events such as extreme storms make it difficult to access sexual and reproductive health services, leading to increases in child marriage, gender-based violence, unintended pregnancies and risk of maternal death.

"During climate emergencies, we often witness a disruption of service deliveries," says Angela Baschieri, population dynamics adviser at the UNFPA East and Southern Africa regional office.

"This includes access to [health facilities](#) for childbirth, access to [family planning](#) and other lifesaving interventions. These impacts are particularly important to the less fortunate and the vulnerable."

The report reviewed key climate change documents known as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), and evaluated how gender and [health issues](#), including sexual and reproductive health and rights, were considered in national climate action frameworks, plans and strategies.

The review reveals critical gaps in countries' national climate policies and proposes adaptation measures to respond to the impact of climate change on [women](#) and girls, offering hopes of achieving good health and gender equality.

Researchers assessed 50 NDCs from five UNFPA regions: the Arab States, Asia and Pacific, Western and Central Africa, East and Southern Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

According to Baschieri, [domestic violence](#), rape, trafficking, early and forced marriages, [sexual harassment](#), [sexual exploitation](#) and abuse are some of the types of gender-based violence common in humanitarian emergencies.

She adds that increasing drought means women and girls travel longer distances to collect water and firewood, exposing them to sexual and gender-based violence.

In Zimbabwe, which has suffered years of successive drought, women account for 65 percent of people involved in fetching water, compared to 35 percent men, according to its Nationally Determined Contributions for 2021.

Women and girls in African countries such as Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and Uganda, already hit hard by climate change, often suffer devastating impacts from cyclones and severe drought, says Baschieri.

In Mozambique, following Cyclones Idai and Kenneth in 2019, UNFPA-led assessments showed increased risks for women and girls, including gender-based violence.

"Many women were separated from family and community networks and had lost their livelihoods and support systems," Baschieri says. "Girls, who are unable to attend school if they are displaced, for instance, risk being married off early by parents who can no longer afford to look after them if they have lost their livelihoods."

Baschieri urges governments across Africa to integrate sexual and reproductive health and rights into climate-resilient health systems and disaster risk reduction plans, and provide opportunities for young people.

"Climate policymakers must take targeted and bold actions to ensure that the foundation of climate policies is based on some of these key elements," she explains.

Tijani Salami, a Nigeria-based sexual and reproductive health rights

advocate, agrees that climate change disasters have affected health services, and sexual and reproductive health rights.

"This is an age-long problem that has been overlooked, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa," says Salami, a principal medical officer at the Nigeria-based Federal University of Technology Minna.

"In any disaster, health services of people in such communities are affected generally...but unfortunately the practice has always been that when responses commence, sexual and reproductive health for women and girls are neglected."

African governments, he says, need to increase investment in sexual and [reproductive health](#) and create platforms that address the needs of women and girls affected by disasters.

"In the long term, we should build resilient communities that can mitigate [health](#) impact when [climate](#)-induced disaster happens," he adds.

Provided by SciDev.Net

Citation: Climate disasters 'block access to women's healthcare' (2021, September 6) retrieved 21 March 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-09-climate-disasters-block-access-women.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--