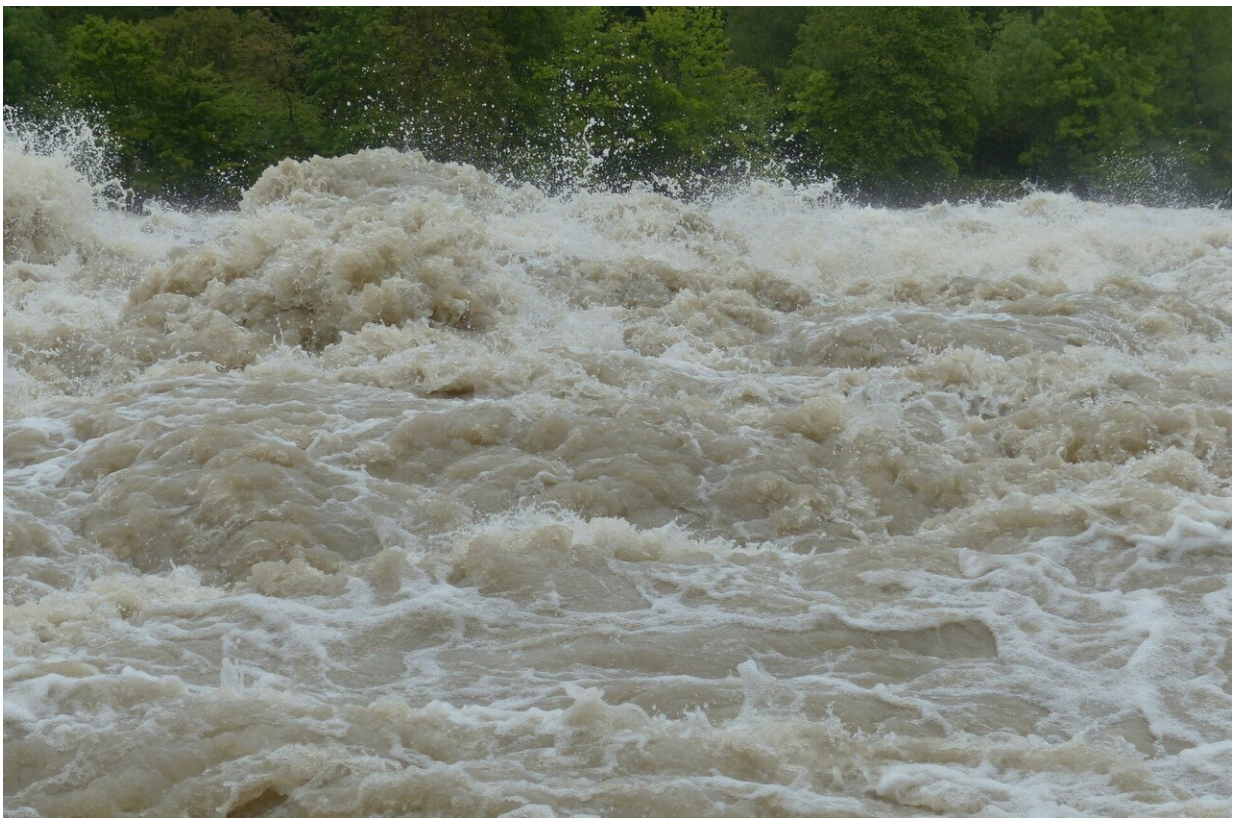


Extreme weather, climate events may lead to increase in violence towards women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities

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As the climate crisis leads to more intense and more frequent extreme weather and climate-related events, this in turn risks increasing the

amount of gender-based violence experienced by women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities, say researchers.

In a study published in *The Lancet Planetary Health*, a team led by a researcher at the University of Cambridge analyzed current scientific literature and found that the evidence paints a bleak picture for the future as extreme events drive economic instability, food insecurity, and mental stress, and disrupt infrastructure and exacerbate gender inequality.

Between 2000 and 2019, floods, droughts, and storms alone affected nearly 4 billion people worldwide, costing over 300,000 lives. The occurrences of these extreme events represent a drastic change, with the frequency of floods increasing by 134%, storms by 40%, and droughts by 29% over the past two decades. These figures are expected to rise further as climate change progresses.

Extreme weather and climate events have been seen to increase gender-based [violence](#), due to socio-economic instability, structural power inequalities, health-care inaccessibility, resource scarcity and breakdowns in safety and law enforcement, among other reasons. This violence can lead to long-term consequences including physical injury, unwanted pregnancy, exposure to HIV or other sexually transmitted infections, fertility problems, internalized stigma, mental health conditions, and ramifications for children.

To better understand the relationship between extreme events and gender-based violence, researchers carried out a systematic review of existing literature in this area. This approach allows them to bring together existing—and sometimes contradictory or under-powered—studies to provide more robust conclusions.

The team identified 41 studies that explored several types of extreme

events, such as storms, floods, droughts, heatwaves, and wildfires, alongside gender-based violence, such as sexual violence and harassment, physical violence, "witch" killing, early or forced marriage, and emotional violence. The studies covered countries on all six of the major continents and all but one focused on cisgender [women](#) and girls.

The researchers found evidence that gender-based violence appears to be exacerbated by [extreme weather](#) and [climate events](#), driven by factors such as economic shock, social instability, enabling environments, and stress.

According to the studies, perpetrators of violence ranged from partners and family members, through to religious leaders, relief workers and government officials. The relationship between extreme events and gender-based violence can be expected to vary across settings due to differences in social gender norms, tradition, vulnerability, exposure, adaptive capacity, available reporting mechanisms, and legal responses. However, the experience of gender-based violence during and after extreme events seems to be a shared experience in most contexts studied, suggesting that amplification of this type of violence is not constrained geographically.

"Extreme events don't themselves cause gender-based violence, but rather they exacerbate the drivers of violence or create environments that enable this type of behavior," said Kim van Daalen, a Gates Cambridge Scholar at the Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge.

"At the root of this behavior are systematic social and patriarchal structures that enable and normalize such violence. Existing social roles and norms, combined with inequalities leading to marginalization, discrimination, and dispossession make women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities disproportionately vulnerable to the adverse impacts

of extreme events."

Experiencing gender-based violence can also further increase vulnerability. When faced with the likelihood of experiencing harassment or sexual violence in relief camps, for example, some women or sexual and gender minorities choose to stay home or return to their homes even before doing so is safe, placing them in additional danger from extreme events and further restricting their already limited access to relief resources.

Extreme events could both increase new violence and increase reporting, unmasking existing violence. Living through extreme events led some victims to feel they could no longer endure abuse or to feel less inhibited to report the abuse than before the event. However, the researchers also noted that reporting remains plagued by a number of factors, including silencing of victims—particularly in countries where safeguarding a daughter's and family's honor and marriageability is important—as well as fears of coming forward, failures of law enforcement, unwillingness to believe victims, and the normalization of violence.

Van Daalen added, "Disaster management needs to focus on preventing, mitigating, and adapting to drivers of gender-based violence. It's crucial that it's informed by the women, girls, and sexual and gender minority populations affected and takes into account local sexual and gender cultures and local norms, traditions, and social attitudes."

Examples of such interventions include providing post-disaster shelters and relief services—including toilets and bath areas—designed to be exclusively accessed by women, girls, and sexual and gender minorities or providing emergency response teams specifically trained in prevention of gender-based violence.

Likewise, empowerment initiatives for women and sexual and gender

minorities that challenge regressive gender norms to reduce vulnerability could bring opportunities to negotiate their circumstances and bring positive change. For example, women's groups using participatory-learning-action cycles facilitated by local peers have been used to improve reproductive and maternal health by enabling women to identify and prioritize local challenges and solutions. Similar programs could be adapted and applied in extreme event management to empower women as decision makers in local communities.

Case studies

Hurricane Katrina, violence and intimidation

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast of the United States in August 2005, gender-based violence increased, particularly interpersonal violence or intimate partner violence, and physical victimization increased for women. Likewise, a study on internally-displaced people in Mississippi found that sexual violence and rates of intimate partner violence increased in the year following the disaster.

Furthermore, the New Orleans gay community was blamed for Hurricane Katrina, with the disaster being described as being "God's punishment." Same-sex couples were prevented from receiving relief from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, transgender people were threatened in shelters or prohibited access after a natural disaster, and LGBTQI people experienced physical harm and violence in post-disaster shelters.

Flooding and early marriage in Bangladesh

Studies suggest a link between flooding incidence and early marriage,

with spikes in early marriages observed in Bangladesh coinciding with the 1998 and 2004 floods. Next to being viewed as a way to reduce family costs and safeguard marriageability and dignity, these marriages are often less expensive due to [flood](#)-induced impoverishment lowering expectations.

One study included an example of the head of a household explaining that the 2013 cyclone had destroyed most of his belongings, leaving him afraid that he would be unable to support his youngest unmarried daughter, who was under 18. Marrying off his daughters was a way of reducing the financial burden on the family.

More information: Extreme events and gender-based violence: a mixed-methods systematic review, *The Lancet Planetary Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/S2542-5196\(22\)00088-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(22)00088-2)

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