**Plan International, Inc.**

**R ESPONSE TO CALL FOR INPUTS ON THE REPORT ON HOW CLIMATE CHANGE CAN HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE REALIZATION OF THE EQUAL ENJOYMENT OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION BY EVERY GIRL**

**Geneva, February 2024**

Plan International has developed this submission to inform the High Commissioner’s report to the Human Rights Council, pursuant to resolution 54/19 adopted by the Human Rights Council on 12 October 2023. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is preparing “a report on how climate change can have an impact on the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl, highlighting how the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl can contribute to the climate change agenda and making recommendations”. The report will be submitted to the Human Rights Council at its fifty-seventh session. We have responded to certain questions of the Call for inputs based on our technical report[[1]](#footnote-2).

Plan International, Inc. is an independent non-governmental organisation and is in General Consultative Status with ECOSOC. Founded in 1937, Plan International is one of the oldest and largest children’s rights organisations in the world. We strive to advance children’s rights and equality for girls in both development and humanitarian contexts. Working with children and young people in more than 87 countries around the world, we tackle the root causes of inequality faced by children, especially girls, through our programme and influencing activities.

**Responses to the questionnaire:**

Children are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Globally, approximately one billion children are at extremely high risk of the impacts of the climate crisis[[2]](#footnote-3). Adolescent girls – as well as women and children in general – are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Girls disproportionately experience disruption to their education and access to healthcare, increased risks of violence, increased child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU), reduced economic opportunities[[3]](#footnote-4) and susceptibility to health issues[[4]](#footnote-5). Girls’ vulnerability to climate change is compounded by age and gender inequalities, as well as factors such as “poverty, low access to education and knowledge, food and nutritional insecurity, and barriers to water and natural resource access.”19 Additionally, they face greater barriers to adapting to and coping with these impacts.20 Yet, despite being disproportionately affected by climate change, girls’ voices and perspectives are seldom included or considered in decision-making processes and policies about climate change adaptations.

Plan International has an extensive body of evidence relating to the complex ways in which climate change affects the communities with which it works – and particularly the impact on girls[[5]](#footnote-6). Plan International recognises that addressing and funding mitigation, adaptation, and loss and damage initiatives are crucial for effective climate action. In its work, Plan International highlights the disproportionate impact that climate change has on children – particularly girls – and especially those from the most vulnerable and poorest communities, which have the fewest resources to cope. Climate change is the most significant intergenerational equity issue of our time, with children and future generations bearing the brunt of its impact on the planet. Age and gender make some children more vulnerable to the impact of climate change. Entrenched social and gender norms dictate behaviours, limit mobility and access to rights, and reduce capacity to deal with uncertainty for girls and young people. The particular vulnerability of girls to climate change due to the combined effects of age and gender discrimination has serious implications for their rights. Climate change magnifies existing inequalities and unequal access to health, sexual and reproductive health and rights, education, participation and protection.

Plan International recognises that climate change significantly impacts children’s right to quality education and the need to protect this right before, during and after extreme weather events. Climate change and extreme weather events can destroy or damage school buildings and children’s routes to school, cause widespread internal displacement, increase levels of poverty and food insecurity, affect livelihoods and result in negative coping strategies. All of these factors affect school attendance. Yet these impacts are not felt equally by all children; discriminatory social and gender norms mean that girls are disproportionately affected by climate change and often have the fewest resources to cope with shocks. This can put girls at greater risk of child, early and forced marriage and unions (CEFMU), gender-based violence (GBV), and unequal care work and household responsibilities – all of which can further lead to girls missing school or dropping out entirely[[6]](#footnote-7). Recognising the relationship between climate change and education, Plan International promotes quality, inclusive and gender-transformative education as an essential component of the global response to climate change[[7]](#footnote-8). Not only is girls’ education severely affected by climate change, but it is also a key solution to addressing the climate crisis. Education plays a critical role in imparting the knowledge, skills and competencies that girls need to be innovators, leaders and change-makers to demand, and contribute to, climate justice. Education is also key to girls’ disaster preparedness; a lack of quality education could mean they are less informed about risks or have reduced access to timely and life-saving information, thus further increasing their vulnerability[[8]](#footnote-9). In this way, educational attainment has an impact on girls’ understanding of, and actions against, climate change[[9]](#footnote-10).

There is a growing body of research supporting the importance of education in the context of climate action and resilience. In particular, girls’ education has been identified as key to reducing vulnerability to the impacts of climate change[[10]](#footnote-11): evidence suggests that countries that have focused on girls’ equal access to education have suffered far fewer losses from droughts and floods than those with lower levels of girls’ education[[11]](#footnote-12). In 2014, eleven studies carried out in a diverse range of “geographic, socioeconomic, cultural and hazard contexts,” concluded that long term resilience to the consequences of climate change can be developed through education: by strengthening skills and knowledge, and the understanding of risk, as well as by indirectly reducing poverty, improving health, and increasing access to information[[12]](#footnote-13). Education can also develop girls’ leadership skills, giving them the confidence and opportunity to speak out in their communities, and beyond, to ensure that girls’ needs in climate mitigation are being heard and heeded[[13]](#footnote-14). Education is not only key to developing young people’s knowledge and skills in terms of adaptation efforts but can also enable them to challenge the political and social attitudes, operating both nationally and globally, that appear to be charting a course towards disaster: fuelling continued climate change and environmental degradation[[14]](#footnote-15). Education supports gender-balanced leadership for climate action and can empower girls to take up leadership roles in climate justice both within their own families and at national levels. In August 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of Child released a general comment on children’s rights and the environment, calling on states to ensure age-appropriate, safe, and accessible mechanisms for children’s views to be heard “regularly and at all stages of environmental decision-making processes”[[15]](#footnote-16). Where they are heard, children’s views do have an impact: child-to-parent intergenerational learning has been identified as the way forward, “inspire[ing] adults towards higher levels of climate concern, and in turn, collective action.”[[16]](#footnote-17) Or, in other words, pressuring their parents and grandparents into doing something.

While the gendered impacts of climate change are increasingly acknowledged and the evidence-base is growing, gaps remain in understanding how climate change affects girls’ education journeys and the role of education in girls’ (and their families’) adaptation to climate change. In terms of **barriers and how they affect the basic elements of the right to education,** we can highlight the following**:**

* **Availability,** understood as an adequate infrastructure to meet the needs of girls. A common physical barrier described by girls in the RCRL study was school closures due to extreme weather events – which have become more serious in the last few years – and the subsequent destruction of school infrastructure. Schools are frequently closed for repairs. Many of the girls in the study also miss school because the threat of flood water spreading disease keeps them at home, or because they are involved in clean-up operations in the aftermath of a storm. Disruption to girls’ education also occurs after extreme weather events, while school buildings are repaired and cleaned. In some cases, the girls describe being required to be involved in clean-up efforts, which prevents them from studying independently while schools are closed.
* **Accessibility**, including physical accessibility, affordability, and access without discrimination. In the RCRL study, girls described the impact of climate change on their education in many ways. Some are obvious physical barriers thrown up by storms battering school buildings, rain washing away roads and winds making journeys to schools and colleges too hazardous to undertake. As climate change takes its severe toll on livelihoods, young women throughout the study report that their parents are struggling to pay for their school fees or for their travel to and from school. Some report having to seek paid employment outside of school hours to help contribute to their family income. They also report how difficult it is to juggle school and work and feel that their education is suffering. Additionally, increased poverty often leads to more crime[[17]](#footnote-18). This in turn can have a particular impact on girls’ school attendance. They are vulnerable on the way to school and families are reluctant to send them, thus furthering the divide between boys’ and girls’ attendance to school.
* **Acceptability**, including quality of education. Although more subtle and less easily observed, extreme temperatures, heat and drought are also presenting a barrier to girls’ education: intense heat is causing schools to close and making travel to school uncomfortable and dangerous, extreme heat is also affecting concentration, and this in turn can have an impact on girls’ education, even when girls are able to physically attend classes. Moreover, climate change has some secondary impacts which are less directly observable and occur as part of a multiple-stage process that can take weeks, months or even years to manifest. Examples of these include worsening harvests, poor fishing yields and water shortages, all of which cause deteriorating livelihoods over time. Over time, these secondary impacts can lead to tertiary impacts, such as food scarcity, which in turn, drive up market prices and put further pressure on already struggling households. This deepening deprivation has a direct link to girls’ access to, and completion of, education in two main ways: 1) families are unable to afford the cost of school fees and travel to school, and 2) girls are required to take on paid work and/or additional chores and care responsibilities in order to contribute to the household income. Both factors cause disruption to girls’ education, causing them either to drop out of school or split their time between school and other responsibilities. These impacts are also coupled with gendered barriers to girls’ education, including early marriage, pregnancy, gender-based violence and care responsibilities – suggesting that climate change is exacerbating existing inequalities that restrict girls’ educational opportunities. See adaptability below.
* **Adaptability**, adapted to the needs of students and of societies. Climate change exacerbates existing social and economic inequalities. Poorer households are less able to adapt to climate change and are less able to recover following shocks or stresses. With the impact of climate change on livelihoods and costs of living, the poorest households are at risk of deepening deprivation, which has a negative impact on girls’ education. Many girls report that their parents are struggling to pay for their school fees or for their travel to and from school. Some girls report having to seek paid employment outside of school hours to help contribute to their family income – however, they report that it is difficult to juggle school and work and feel that their education suffers. Other girls have been forced to leave school altogether because of an inability to afford school fees, a need to engage in full time paid work or a combination of both reasons. Moreover, deepening deprivation leads to increased rates of crime and violence, which affects girls’ safety on their journeys to school, CEFMU increases as a negative coping mechanism, and financial pressures limit access to contraceptive, leading to adolescent pregnancy.

From this analysis, we can observe that climate change has a direct impact on the girls’ access to, and completion of, quality and undisrupted education. This includes through destruction of school infrastructure and obstacles on their journeys to school. The longer girls remain out of school, the less likely they are to return to school and the more likely they are to fall victim to harmful practices and exploitation, including CEFMU, GBV and early and unintended pregnancy[[18]](#footnote-19). Disrupted education is worsened in cases where schools have poor or no climate planning or risk reduction strategies. This highlights the need for safer learning environments for girls, and for education sectors to develop disaster risk reduction plans and education continuity strategies to limit disruption to learning in the face of hazards and stresses. Where schools have a strong climate change curriculum, girls demonstrate stronger knowledge about climate change, greater confidence in applying adaptation strategies and provide more detailed recommendations for duty-bearers to respond to climate change. Some **concrete measures taken to respond to the barriers faced by girls** indicated above are

* **Coping measures**, characterised by their temporary nature. They tend to be implemented at the individual or household level[[19]](#footnote-20). Critically, these responses are employed in response to a climate shock or stress that is already occurring or is imminent. In other words, these are reactive measures taken to support the individual or household to return to their previous state before the event, rather than preventing damage or loss from occurring in the first place.
* **Adaptative strategies** - designed to proactively reduce vulnerabilities to climate shocks[[20]](#footnote-21). Although most effective when addressed by public policy – which allows for systems-level change – the adaptation strategies described by the girls and their families demonstrate that inadequate public policy response is causing this burden to shift to individuals, households and communities. As the girls describe, these adaptations require a good understanding of climate change impacts, financial literacy (and, ideally, security), a household composition that allows for multiple wage earners, employability, and the capacity for communities to work together to implement neighbourhood-wide responses.
* **Proactive adaptive measures**: these include income diversification strategies, agricultural diversification, and environmental protections. These following actions show girls being leaders in their household unit by making purposeful decisions or taking on responsibilities, based on the climate knowledge they have gained. However, and once again, these can only be taken where girls leadership and agency are guaranteed, and their education about climate change and resilience is strong.

Another casualty of pulling girls out of school is the loss of their input in tackling climate change. It is at school that they are most likely to learn about climate change – its causes and how to adapt and survive. Many of the girls are using the skills that they learned in school – such as recycling, planting trees, joining youth collective action groups, and spreading awareness. These activities demonstrate that girls are exercising leadership and using their initiative in their everyday lives and supporting the community because they are keen to do what they can to combat climate change. These disruptions to girls’ education demonstrate the need for safe learning environments and school preparedness to ensure shock-resilient infrastructure and continuity of learning in the face of climate shocks and stresses.

As such, there are three main sources from which girls learn about climate change: at school, from their community or family, and from the media. The state of girls’ climate education in their formal schooling is foundational to improving climate knowledge and ultimately climate resilience itself. In that regard, some **gaps and challenges in education to empower all girls to contribute to the climate change agenda** include:

* **In school**: For the most part, education on climate change is included in a Life Sciences, Earth Sciences, Social Studies or Geography class. However, the curricula seem to be restricted to causes of climate change and how to take care of the environment. Whereas in some countries curricula targets climate adaptation and mitigation strategies, it seems that the main two challenges lie within the willingness of the State to cite climate change mitigation as a priority area. This leads to the majority of climate change curriculum in those countries being delivered by non-state actors (such as INGOs and the UN), rather than through the national education system. The other challenge lies within the capacities of teachers and instructors in informing students about climate change. Many of the girls in the RCRL study feel that teachers do not have knowledge on climate change, blaming governments and school management for not adequately equipping teachers with the information they need to be effective educators on climate change, the curriculum on climate change being too narrow, or that discussions of climate change are too shallow. Schools have a responsibility to put in place measures to respond to climate shocks, and to have a plan for long-term adjustment to changing climate conditions. Beyond educational programmes, schools should also implement action to prepare for or respond to climate change or to help people affected by its effects.
* **Within the community**: Climate change is affecting girls in their family unit, and parents are relaying their worries about unseasonal weather patterns to the girls. They also learn about climate change from their friends and other members of the community. When community and families’ knowledge about climate change and adaptation strategies is low, girls’ knowledge of the same is often reduced. On the other hand, girls who are confident to actively engage in climate adaptation efforts demonstrate the clear link between girls’ climate knowledge and being everyday leaders in their household and community, by practicing green skills (technical knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to support sustainable and resource-efficient societies) and disaster preparedness. Moreover, communities have a responsibility to ensure access to school and change behaviours and perceptions that discriminate against girls. A stronger capacity sharing and awareness raising campaigns should also be shared within the communities to ensure adaptation and resilience to climate change. Another challenge raised was the government’s lack of knowledge on the lived realities of many communities, suggesting big gaps between policy and practice.
* **Via media**, either social media or traditional sources. Most girls in the study shared that internet is the main source of knowledge on climate change. Access to reliable sources that provide good information and knowledge on climate change and are not targeted by disinformation is therefore crucial for many girls and their communities who lack other sources of information.

**Some concrete measures taken to empower all girls through education to contribute to addressing climate change, , include coping, adaptation and resilience.** The findings in Plan’s studies establish the impact of education in mitigating climate change, whereby girls are using skills learned in school – such as recycling, replanting, spreading awareness - to pursue personal actions. In this way, we can identify how girls are exercising leadership qualities in their everyday lives. Many girls who have difficulty defining climate change are nonetheless able to discuss the changes they experience in their communities around unpredictable weather and failed crops. They can also identify the tertiary impacts of climate change – without explicitly speaking to it - in terms of rising food prices and higher incidents of crime or migration. Climate change education is the missing link to being able to effectively respond to and adapt to climate change impacts in their households. Together, these findings underscore that knowledge is foundational to girls’ climate resilience, and that education is therefore key. In particular, education enables a girl’s adaptation efforts that operate at their individual level.

On a wider level, the girls and their families need financial security to achieve resilience to the direct and indirect impacts of climate change on girls’ education and in their communities. This requires a holistic institutional approach. We see that some schools deliver coping strategies through the dimension of emergency response, but in general, schools need to be able to physically withstand climate impacts, to minimise learning disruption. Equally, girls need stronger support in their knowledge of risk reduction and resilience, through enhanced climate curricula. They are capable knowledge bearers already, shown in their use of their knowledge in pursing climate actions. Household climate resilience is predicative on the girls’ education and agency. These elements are in themselves influenced by the enabling environment of caregivers that allow for girls’ decision-making or paid work, and for households’ livelihoods and expenses to cover the girls’ education (a pathway which would in turn later support the household).

**Conclusion**

* Girls are missing school because of direct impacts of climate change: their schools are damaged by extreme weather events, closed for repairs in the aftermath, or inaccessible due to damaged or obstructed roads and pathways.
* Climate impacts on girls’ access to education are also indirect as livelihoods are lost and deprivation worsens. Family incomes are falling, and food prices are increasing as unpredictable weather patterns make earning a living particularly difficult for the sort of agricultural and fishing communities in which many of the girls most affected by climate change live. As climate change takes its severe toll on livelihoods, parents are struggling to pay for their school fees or for their travel to and from school. Some girls are seeking paid employment outside of school hours to help contribute to their family income, thereby sacrificing their time to study. Girls’ educational prospects are abandoned as families struggle to find food and fund their daily lives.
* Education and information, whatever its source, is key to girls’ climate change adaptation efforts. Where schools have a strong climate change curriculum, the girls demonstrate more knowledge about climate change, greater confidence in applying adaptation strategies.
* Many girls are using the green skills that they learned in school – such as recycling and participating in youth collective action groups – which demonstrate that girls are exercising leadership in their everyday lives because they are keen to do what they can to combat climate change.

**Recommendations**

* Make Schools Safe: by repairing infrastructure damage as quickly as possible and having robust gender-and age-aware disaster planning in place, as to minimise disruption to learning by having continuity plans for lesson delivery.
* Improve climate change curricula: by embedding gender-transformative climate change education into school curricula and improving the knowledge and teaching skills of the staff who deliver it.
* Create better conditions for climate change adaptation and education: by providing financial support for families whose incomes have been affected by climate change so that increased poverty does not threaten girls’ education.
* Ensure that the voices of adolescent girls are heard in climate change decision-making at all levels.

**Annex**

For additional information and specific disaggregated data, please read

* Plan International - RCRL: Climate change and girls’ education: barriers, gender norms, and pathways to resilience – Technical report <https://plan-international.org/uploads/2023/11/Climate-Change-and-Girls-Education_TechReport_Nov2023.pdf>
* Plan International – RCRL: Climate change and girls education: barriers, gender norms, and pathways to resilience. Synthesis report - [Climate-Change-and-Girls-Education\_Synthesis-Report\_Nov2023\_.pdf (plan-international.org)](https://plan-international.org/uploads/2023/11/Climate-Change-and-Girls-Education_Synthesis-Report_Nov2023_.pdf)
* Vital Strategies – air pollution in early childhood [AP factsheet \_ design-Nasrul v6 (vitalstrategies.org)](https://www.vitalstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/A-call-to-action-Air-pollution-in-early-childhood.pdf)
* Vital Strategies – call to action factsheet [AP-ECD Advocacy Brief.pdf (vitalstrategies.org)](https://www.vitalstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/A-call-to-action-Air-pollution-in-early-childhood-Call-to-Action.pdf)
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4. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Plan International (2023) – RCRL report [Climate-Change-and-Girls-Education\_TechReport\_Nov2023.pdf (plan-international.org)](https://plan-international.org/uploads/2023/11/Climate-Change-and-Girls-Education_TechReport_Nov2023.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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10. Plan International (2021) ‘Climate Change, Young Women, and Girls’. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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12. Muttarak, R. and Lutz, W. (2014) ‘Is education a key to reducing vulnerability to natural disasters and hence unavoidable climate change?’. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Sims, K. (2021) ‘Education, Girls’ Education and Climate Change’. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Plan International (2021) ‘Climate Change, Young Women, and Girls’, p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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18. Plan International (2023) ‘Girls’ Education’. Available at: https://plan-international.org/quality-education/girls-education/ [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Berman, R.J. et al. (2015) ‘Identifying drivers of household coping strategies to multiple climatic hazards in Western Uganda: Implications for adapting to future climate change’, p.73 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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