**Ipas’s written evidence to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment report on “Women, Girls and the Right to a Clean, Healthy and Sustainable Environment” to inform the entity’s report on this topic to be presented at the Human Rights Council in March 2023**

October 14, 2022

**Ipas respectfully submits** its inputs to the Special Rapporteur **on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy, and sustainable environment for his upcoming report to be presented at the Human Rights Council.**

Ipas works globally to improve access to abortion and contraception so that everyone can determine their own future. Women and girls are the most affected by climate change and their need for sexual and reproductive health care increases—but in times of disaster, those services are likely to be unavailable. Our work to promote women-led climate justice and reproductive justice is central to the enjoyment of a clean, health and sustainable environment.

Our written evidence focuses on relevant evidence on how the climate and biodiversity crises adversely impacts women and girls and on factors that make women and girls more vulnerable. Additionally, we wish to provide recommendations to lessen the impact of the climate crisis on women and girls to inform the Rapporteurs’ call for input.

The information included in this submission is mainly from Ipas’s [qualitative research](https://www.ipas.org/our-work/climate-justice/climate-change-impacts-womens-sexual-and-reproductive-health/) conducted from 2020 to 2021 guided by the objective to understand how women’s experiences with climate change impact their sexual and reproductive health decision-making, behavior, and outcomes in cyclone-prone communities in Bangladesh and Mozambique.

**Climate and environmental crises impact on women’s sexual and reproductive health**

Climate change disproportionately impacts women and girls by exacerbating existing gender inequalities, disrupting access to SRHR care, and reducing their already limited economic opportunities. Other disproportionately impacted groups include children, the elderly, and people living with disabilities or existing health conditions.

Climate change directly and indirectly affects women's contraceptive use, fertility intentions, pregnancy outcomes, vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), economic roles, and sexual health. The time immediately before, during, and after extreme weather events, such as cyclones, is when we see the most compromised access to care for contraception, pregnancy, and abortion.

Pregnant women are particularly at risk, facing increased risk of miscarriage, early labor, and pregnancy complications that could lead to morbidities and death. Adolescent girls experience increased risk of SGBV, child, early and forced marriage, and early sexual debut and pregnancy.

Women play a leading role in helping their families and communities survive extreme weather events and adapt to climate change, but opportunities for women’s participation in climate action decision-making bodies is insufficient. This is particularly true for leadership positions, and it needs to change. Gender and inclusion-blind climate action risks making these problems even worse.

**Table 1. Taxonomy of SRHR outcomes directly impacted by climate change**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Irregular and difficult menstrual cycles | *Extreme period pain* |
| *Poor menstrual hygiene* |
| Unintended pregnancy | *Early and adolescent pregnancy* |
| *Forgotten, missed, and destroyed birth control pills* |
| Pregnancy complications | *Miscarriage* |
| *Childbirth in cyclone centers, boats, roads, under trees* |
| *Unassisted labor and labor with an untrained assistant* |
| *Early labor and premature birth* |
| Abortion | *Health facility-based abortion* |
| *Self-managed abortion using safe and unsafe methods* |
| *Postabortion complications* |
| Infections, disease, and injury to reproductive organs | *Urinary tract infections* |
| *Vaginal sores* |
| *Vaginal itching, irritation, and discharge* |
| *Wounds in uterus* |
| *Tumors in uterus and uterine cancer (Note: This may include cervical cancers based on the descriptions provided.)* |

**Climate change intensifies economic crisis and family instability**

In Mozambique, participants in the study explained that women tend to be the ones primarily responsible for farming and food production. As a result, they are disproportionately impacted by the devastation to the agricultural sector. The most fertile farmland also tends to be in the highest risk areas for extreme weather, called “risk zones”. Resettlement neighborhoods set up by the government are in “safe zones” not ideal for farming, with few alternative economic opportunities nearby. Resettlement neighborhoods are primarily inhabited by women and children, while men migrate to cities or neighboring countries in search of work. As a result, many women and their children lead an unstable, semi-nomadic lifestyle, frequently migrating between their farmland and resettlement neighborhoods. Children are either brought with their mother, their education interrupted, or they are left behind at the resettlement centers for extended periods of time. Some women have decided to remain permanently on their farms in risk zones to avoid the constant migration.

A central theme from the Bangladesh study communities was that women lack opportunities for paid work outside of the home due to prevailing norms around their role as caregivers and leading household work. Climate-induced migration leaves many women to care for their families alone. Women who become heads of household in this way, in addition to unmarried, widowed, or divorced women, are particularly vulnerable to violence and poverty. They described resorting to jobs that put their reproductive health at risk — such as fishing waist-deep in salinized, polluted waters and transactional sex — to feed their children and save for future disasters.

**Increased vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence**

In both countries’ study populations, the climate crisis intensifies gender-based violence by causing destruction to housing and property, food sources, and the job sector. These factors intersect with cultural practices that promote or enable early marriage and sexual activity, such as initiation rites ceremonies in Mozambique, and gender norms that limit women’s reproductive autonomy. Child, early and forced marriage resulting from economic insecurity leads to early sexual debut and adolescent pregnancy, or vice versa. Exploitation and transactional sex are a particular threat to young girls experiencing economic crisis. Women in both countries reported experiencing sexual harassment and abuse while collecting disaster relief after cyclones.

Cyclone centers in Bangladesh, built to provide refuge during extreme weather events, unintentionally create opportunities for sexual harassment and rape due to crowded conditions, poor security, electricity outages, and lack of separate spaces and toilets for men and women. Devastation and interruption to working sectors increases families’ economic instability and stress. Participants directly linked this to increases in intimate partner violence, dowry and in-law abuse, transactional sex, sexual harassment while collecting disaster relief, and child marriage.

**Gender norms and inequalities magnify the impact of climate change by mediating critical decision points for women**

Women’s traditional role as caregivers means that they play a predominant role in preparing their families for evacuation before a storm and the many decisions that go into that prep. Yet, at the same time, they often lack the power to decide if and when to evacuate. In Mozambique, one woman explained that she could not seek emergency healthcare during a cyclone because her husband was not around to grant her permission. In Bangladesh, the practice of purdah – which includes dressing in all-enveloping clothes, to stay out of the sight of men – means that some women are not allowed to go to cyclone centers, where men and women mix in crowded conditions. Traditional clothing also restricts their ability to move freely, hindering their ability to swim and run, increasing drowning and injury risk.

**Fertility intentions are changing**

Participants had differing opinions, within and across countries, about the impact of climate change on their fertility intentions. Due to the increased vulnerability of pregnant women and children to climate change, women fear being pregnant and losing children during climate disasters. Many participants described not wanting to have more children in the wake of disasters as they face difficulties to protect, feed, and care for their children. Others felt the opposite, intentionally bearing more children to protect against becoming childless during a climate disaster. A key informant in Bangladesh explained that having at least one son is important for ensuring parents’ future financial security. In both countries, some participants reported no impact on their reproductive decision-making. Regardless of their opinion on climate change’s role, most women described the need to be prepared for children with similar factors (education, age of mother, finances, having a home), many of these being factors directly impacted by climate change.

**Women have solutions**

Women play a leading role in helping their families and communities survive extreme weather events and adapt to climate change, but opportunities for women’s participation in climate action decision-making bodies is insufficient—especially at the leadership level. Climate action that is not gender inclusive risks making existing problems even worse. **We need to listen to women and girls.**

Participants in the Ipas study brainstormed ways to lessen the impact of climate change on women and girls, focusing in on these five recommendations:

* Increase women’s opportunities for [decent work](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm), so they don’t have to resort to jobs that risk their health and safety, and that in many cases contribute to environmental degradation.
* Consider women’s and girls’ needs when building spaces for shelter and resettlement during and after climate disasters to reduce insecurity, SGBV and to ensure access to the services they need.
* Improve access to health care—particularly sexual and reproductive health care—that is resilient to a changing climate.
* Invest in women’s and girls’ education and reproductive autonomy to give them more power over their own lives and decisions.
* Involve people most affected by climate change—particularly women and youth—to develop and lead climate action efforts that include sexual and reproductive health and rights.

We need to ensure gender transformative and human rights based socioeconomic, cultural, and institutional transformations to achieve women’s and girls’ rights to clean, health and sustainable environment. Solutions must be holistic—including approaches that improve education, build women’s economic security, and amplify voices and ideas of women and young people. And it must be emphasized that coercing women and girls into using contraception or abortion is not an “answer” to mitigating climate change as a way of reducing population growth.

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