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**R ESPONSE TO CALL FOR INPUTS ON WOMEN, GIRLS AND THE RIGHT TO A CLEAN, HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT**

**Geneva, October 2022**

Plan International has developed this submission to inform the forthcoming report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. We have responded to certain questions of the Call for inputs.

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 75 countries around the world, we tackle the root causes of inequality faced by children, especially girls, through our programme and influencing activities.

**Questionnaire**

1. **How are the climate, pollution, and biodiversity crises adversely impacting women and girls? What are the principal barriers facing these rightsholders’ realization of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment, a right that includes: clean air; a safe climate; access to safe water and adequate sanitation; healthy and sustainably produced food; non-toxic environments in which to live, work, study and play; healthy biodiversity and ecosystems; access to environmental and climate information; participation in environmental and climate decision-making processes; access to justice and an affective remedy when the aforementioned rights are violated.**

Women and girls represent 43 percent of the agricultural workforce in lower-income countries, where temperatures are heating up faster, making climate change and agricultural development an urgent gender issue. Climate change threatens agricultural productivity, food security and nutrition, health and the potential to achieve key SDGs for poverty and hunger. The costs of managing climate impacts on reduced crop yields, threatened food systems and increased hunger have been estimated at $1.4 trillion from 2020 to 2040. Climate change exacerbates the burden of work on women and girls in household care due to their gendered role as farmers on degraded lands, food providers with reduced production and caregivers required to travel farther and longer for water and biomass for cooking.

The gendered impacts of displacement are particularly severe for women and girls, who make up over 80 percent of people currently displaced by climate-related events. During times of displacement and migration, women and girls are at particular risk of sexual and gender-based violence as well as child, early and forced marriage and frequently lack access to health services. Children on the move lack access to education and training opportunities, protection mechanisms and the safety of their traditional communities.

Climate shocks and stresses routinely place girls, especially during adolescence, at increased risk of gender-based violence, including sexual assault, resulting in trauma and unplanned pregnancies, human trafficking and harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage. They also cause disruption in access to sexual and reproductive health, family-planning services and maternal and postnatal care. Combined, these factors severely undermine their rights and abilities to build resilience and recover from climate change related loss and damage.

A recent Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Rapid Assessment of the effects of drought on children and women undertaken in Somalia reported that 25 percent of respondents indicated increased prevalence of gender-based violence due to climate change, including sexual assault, domestic violence, FGM (female genital mutilation), sexual harassment and abuse and child, early and forced marriage. Abuses occurred most during population movement, collecting firewood and water and in communal areas such as latrines/showers. Further, 66 percent of respondents indicated there were no child-protection or gender-based violence services.

Child, early and forced marriage often occurs in communities and countries with the least access to resources and income-generating activities. Many of these resources and activities are significantly impacted by climate change, thereby increasing the likelihood of child, early and forced marriage. Interviews conducted by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) with families and civil society organizations in Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe highlighted that climate-related economic effects are a key driver of child marriage. Further, according to the Child Protection and Gender-Based Violence Rapid Assessment in Somaliland, 36 percent of respondents reported an increase in cases of child, early and forced marriage due to the drought. Marrying a child is perceived as a coping strategy in response to the loss of assets and income after crises such as droughts and floods.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In addition, climate change and climate change related disasters pose an unprecedented threat to girls’ education. Climate change impacts increase the size of the barriers to girls’ education that already exist and climate related disasters and extreme weather events prevent girls and adolescent girls from accessing quality and inclusive education. Research by the Malala Fund, for instance, estimated that climate-related events in 2021 would have prevented at least four million girls from completing their education in low- and middle- income countries.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Furthermore, if current trends continue, by 2025 climate change will be a contributing factor in preventing at least 12.5 million girls from completing their education each year. Girls’ lack of access to education compounds their vulnerability as they have limited information about climate change, limited knowledge about what to do in a disaster and limited access to timely and life-saving early warning systems.

Women’s and girls’ health is also endangered in climate change disasters by limiting their access to health care services as well as increasing risks related to sexual and reproductive health. Children experiencing trauma from extreme weather disasters require specific psycho-social support and protection. Moreover, with increasing awareness among youth of the climate crisis, the phenomenon of climate anxiety is justifiably growing.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. **Please identify specific ways in which the rights of particularly marginalized or vulnerable women and/or LGBTI persons are (or should be) recognized and protected to enable the realization of the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment without discrimination based on sex or gender. "Marginalized women" include girls; women and girls in Indigenous local community, Afro-descendant and peasant communities, older women, women and girls with disabilities, LGBTI women and girls, migrant, displaced, and refuge women and girls, unmarried, informally married and widowed women and women and girls living in protracted armed conflict. How can these populations be empowered to increase their impact as agents of positive environmental transformation?**

In Plan International’s latest State of the World’s Girls Report, we focused on political participation and what it means for girls and young women. Through a large-scale survey of almost 29,000 girls and young women aged 15 to 24 from 29 countries spanning all regions, income levels and civic contexts, it emerged clearly that environmental issues are prioritised by around 50 per cent of respondents across all regions. Environmental issues, including pollution and deforestation as well as climate change were the main priority for political action in Europe, the second in Asia Pacific and North America, and the third in Africa and Latin America. In the disaggregation of the data, it appears further that respondents from a low-income country and those from a high-income one placed the environment as their top political priority while girls and young women identifying as LGBTQI+, as having a disability, as being part of a racial, ethnic or religious minority all placed the environment in their top three priorities. This clearly shows how important the environment is for different categories surveyed.

To respond to this political priority for girls and young women, it is essential for power holders to open formal, safe and inclusive spaces for girls and their networks to enable their meaningful contribution to decision-making at all levels.

Furthermore, Governments and the humanitarian community must remove the barriers to  
participation faced by girls in humanitarian settings to ensure systematic and  
meaningful participation of girls in all phases of humanitarian action. Girls face a unique  
set of risks during humanitarian crisis but often their needs fail to be prioritised. As the  
global hunger crisis escalates, governments and the UN have an obligation to include  
girls and young women, including the most marginalised, in their response and ensure their involvement in decisions that affect them.[[4]](#footnote-4)

What is more, in line with the previously mentioned impact on girls’ education, it is essential that a transformative climate curriculum and teacher training programme are co-developed with young people, teachers, school staff and climate experts, throughout all stages of the process including design, delivery and monitoring. Current curricula, need to include climate change education that is evidence-based, contextually relevant, gender responsive and inclusive, and includes indigenous knowledge and rights.[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. **What kinds of socioeconomic, cultural, legal, and/or institutional transformations would be required within your States’ national context to achieve gender parity that most directly impact environmental decision-making processes, benefit-sharing processes, and outcomes?**

Plan International research highlights how impacts related to climate change are mediated as part of a wider range of human and societal dimensions of risk and resilience. This interlinking spectrum suggests that interventions that focus on climate-related risks alone are unlikely to reflect community perceptions or priorities, and may inadvertently lead to actions that contradict other development priorities, or indeed increase potential harm from climate-related risks (maladaptation). As emerging and potentially urgent issues, there remains a danger that climate change and disaster risks are prioritised or treated separately from wider risks to livelihoods, especially given the increasing amounts of resources earmarked for climate change issues globally.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Concretely, greater environmental and social stressors brought on by the climate  
crisis increase girls’ and women’s burdens at home, adding more barriers to their participation  
in income-generating activities and attending school. Without applying intentionally gender-  
transformative approaches to implementing policies and delivering programmes facilitating  
a green transition, there is a risk that girls and women will be further marginalised.

It is thus essential to support young women to access work in the green economy, which requires reducing and redistributing girls’ and women’s disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work.

Furthermore, as we seek the development of green skills as part of a transition to a green economy, it is essential to note that they are often conflated with science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) skills, due to the predominant view of the climate  
crisis as a technical challenge to be solved using technical skills. However, it is important to recognise that in addition to the specific capacities required for green jobs, generic skills are also needed. This common perception means there is a risk of failing to prepare young people  
to challenge underlying systems of injustice. Indeed, unequal gender norms that bias teachers, parents and young men and women to believe STEM subjects are less suitable for girls than boys can lead to young women not pursuing or accessing opportunities to build these important skills, with implications for future job opportunities. Women currently make up only 32 per cent of the renewable energy workforce and, in contrast to men, their roles in the sector are more likely to be lower-paid, non-technical, administrative and public relations positions.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Moreover, when referenced, children, young people and women are depicted as vulnerable recipients, rather than powerful and indispensable partners in climate policy processes. More inclusive processes need to recognise these groups as political agents, active citizens and implementers of climate resilience. Firstly, there is a strong democratic case for this recognition, given that young people represent the majority of the population in many states: for example in Laos, 60% of the population falls within the category of youth, and in Zimbabwe, 62% of the population is under the age of 25. Secondly, there cannot be effective or sustainable climate resilience without youth leadership. Transformation for a resilient future requires involving them beyond the preliminary policy consultation in the co-creation, implementation and evaluation of policies, action plans, and infrastructure.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. **To what extent do the environmental ministries, nationally determined contributions, and national biodiversity strategies and action plans of your State include gender action plans, gender-responsive budgets or budgets specifically devoted to gender equality? At the global level, what changes to climate and biodiversity finance mechanisms are needed to ensure that these are gender-responsive and equitably inclusive of female beneficiaries?**

Recent Plan International research highlighted how, children and young people - girls, young women and youth with disabilities in particular - are not sufficiently referenced as stakeholders or relevant groups in the climate policy processes of Ethiopia, Fiji, Indonesia, Laos, Mozambique, Myanmar, Solomon Islands, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Neither are other crucial groups such as Indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, or marginalised communities. In Mozambique, words such as adolescents, youth, young people and girls are entirely absent from adaptation policies. While the acknowledgement of vulnerabilities based on gender and the affirmation of gender equality as an objective appear regularly in national climate plans and policies, policies that actively promote gender equality and intersectional climate action are harder to find.

Moreover, denial of SRHR can limit women and girls in all their diversity from fully engaging in climate action. However, in the same study of nine countries, SRHR is not mentioned across national climate change policies, with the exception of Uganda. Furthermore, there is limited recognition in government policies of the underlying structural reasons for the vulnerability of young women. Only in Myanmar do national climate change policies acknowledge that the uneven effects of climate change on women stem from their unequal responsibilities and access to resources.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In a 2019 research on climate strategies and the attention given to girls’ education, specifically, and to inclusive, quality, gender transformative education, more broadly, it was noted that out of 160 Nationally Determined Contributions and thirteen National Adaptation Plans these issues were barely addressed.

• Only one country’s NDC made a reference to girls’ education and two additional countries referred to girls explicitly, a reflection of a larger omission of children/youth and education in climate strategies.

• Only 67 of 160 NDCs (approximately 42%) included a direct reference to children or youth and only eight to intergenerational injustice or future generations.

• Top 20 carbon emitting countries were least focused on education and children.

• Those countries that did attend to issues of intergenerational equity tended to be “young” countries—countries with a large under-15 population—and climate-vulnerable countries.

Overall, findings from this study suggested that the spirit of the Paris Agreement for climate action to attend to issues of fairness, equity, and justice were not translating into country-level climate strategies.[[10]](#footnote-10)

More recently, an analysis of all the nationally determined contributions submitted by countries  
in 2021 found that only four countries referenced transformative green skills in their documents, and marginalised groups such as women and girls were seldom included as agents of change. Although academics and civil society are increasingly pointing to the need for transformative approaches for a green transition, including transformative skill building, to date very few policymakers have applied these approaches in practice.[[11]](#footnote-11)

A key lesson from is that all decisions at COP and on Nationally Determined Contributions and National Action Plans should consider intergenerational equity, gender equality and children’s and youth’s rights.[[12]](#footnote-12)

1. **Please share any good practices for: i) protecting women’s and girl’s rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment; ii) empowering women and girls to act as positive agents of environmental justice; and iii) encouraging men and boys to act as allies in these endeavors. In addition, please highlight the work of any women or girl environmental defenders? Good practices may occur at the international, regional, national, sub-national or local levels, and may include: the implementation of measures to ensure women’s participation in environmental decision-making processes; efforts to support women environmental defenders; measures to facilitate women’s access to climate or biodiversity finance; gender-responsive legislation, regulations, standards, jurisprudence, plans and policies; and initiatives to increase women’s access to and control over productive resources including land, forest resources, freshwater, credit, loans, and extension services. Examples that treat girls distinctly from adult women would be particularly appreciated.**

As we strive for a just transition to a green economy it is essential to note that without structural change, those who have historically been excluded from or left behind by economic transitions are unlikely to benefit from rising opportunities. Examples are emerging of initiatives that are driving structural change, such as Girl Rising’s Future Rising Fellowship and CAMFED’s Climate-Smart Agriculture Guides Program, which support young women, indigenous people and people of colour in addressing the climate crisis through activist and market-based approaches, respectively. These kinds of opportunity also help build a sense of political agency, self-efficacy and empowerment in individuals.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In Fiji, research suggests that there has been relatively successful engagement and consultation with youth groups in the formulation of climate and development policies. This success is reflected in the policies’ regular and attentive mention of the vulnerabilities and capabilities of marginalised populations, and the need for intersectional implementation. But Fijian youth CSOs have stressed that improvements could be made by up-skilling and capacity-building with young people to equip them to better participate in and navigate often exclusionary and jargon-heavy formal policy spaces.[[14]](#footnote-14)

1. **What are the potential benefits of respecting, protecting and fulfilling women’s and girl’s rights to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment? Examples that treat girls distinctly from adult women would be particularly appreciated.**

Girls’ education is strongly linked with impactful climate action. Countries that have focused on girls’ education have suffered far fewer losses from droughts and floods than countries with lower levels of girls’ education. For every additional year of schooling a girl receives on average, her country’s resilience to climate disasters can be expected to improve by 3.2 points on the ND-GAIN Index, which measures country-level vulnerability to climate change alongside readiness to improve resilience. Indeed, every dollar spent on girls’ rights and education would generate a $2.80 return – equivalent to billions of dollars in additional GDP. Dropping out of school affects their lifetime earnings and the local, national and global economies. Reducing school interruption and educating girls means more working women with the potential to add up to $12 trillion (USD) to global growth.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. Plan International (2022). From the frontlines: Youth call for action to address loss and damage caused by climate change [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Plan International (2022). COP27 Policy and advocacy brief [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plan International (2022). From the frontlines: Youth call for action to address loss and damage caused by climate change [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Plan International (2022). Equal Power Now: Girls, young women and political participation [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Plan International (2021). Reimagining climate education and youth leadership: survey report [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Plan International (2021). Adolescent girls in the climate crisis: Empowering young women through feminist participatory action research in Zambia and Zimbabwe [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Plan International (2022). Young people and green skills: Preparing for a sustainable future [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Plan International (2022). Rising tides: Mapping youth movement for climate resilience in Ethiopia, Fiji, Indonesia, Laos, Mozambique, Myanmar, Solomon Islands, Uganda and Zimbabwe [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kwauk, C., Cooke, J., Hara, E., and Pegram, J. (2019). Girls’ education in climate strategies: Opportunities for improved policy and enhanced action in Nationally Determined Contributions. Brookings Institution. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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14. Plan International (2022). Rising tides: Mapping youth movement for climate resilience in Ethiopia, Fiji, Indonesia, Laos, Mozambique, Myanmar, Solomon Islands, Uganda and Zimbabwe [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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