

Centre for Climate Engagement Response

OHCHR Call for Input: Report on how climate change can have an impact on the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl

March 2024

I. Introduction

In response to the OHCHR's December 2023 call for input, this contribution considers how climate change has an impact on the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by women, and how working to ensure equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl contributes to the climate change agenda. This looks to inform the OHCHR's forthcoming report on the subject, pursuant to Human Rights Council Resolution 54/19.

This response is a collaborative effort between the Centre for Climate Engagement based at Hughes Hall at the University of Cambridge and a student from the University of Cambridge Faculty of Law, with review support provided by the Global Pact Coalition.

II. The education-gender-climate change nexus

Climate change, gender, and education are deeply interconnected. This interconnection has far-reaching implications for sustainable development and social equity. This section will first outline the gender disparities in education and the gendered impacts of climate change. From this, it will discuss the education-gender-climate nexus and its implications.

Gender disparities in education

In most low- and middle-income countries, there is still significant gender disparity in access to education, with girls and women often having less access to formal education than boys and men.[1] Comparative national surveys including Demographic and Health Surveys, Living Standards Surveys, and World Bank data in African countries, such as Ghana, Zimbabwe and Kenya, show that female illiteracy rates remain high compared to those of men.[2] Entrenched attitudes of discrimination continue to keep women out of the education system and perpetuate the gender gap.[3] Within research on the gender disparity impact of education and girls,[4] there is growing evidence that where girls' education has improved, there are more economic opportunities and greater decision-making power within households and wider communities.[5]

Gendered impacts of climate change

Climate change affects men and women differently because of existing gender roles, responsibilities, and access to resources.[6] The gender inequality index illustrates that higher gender inequality leads to increased climate vulnerability.[7] Importantly, it is not biological factors that make women more vulnerable but underlying systems of power and marginalization.[8] Climate change amplifies gender inequalities and power imbalances thus impacting the health, wellbeing, and safety of women and girls, as shown in data mapping tools.[9]

In many communities, women are responsible for tasks such as fetching water and collecting firewood.[10] Thus, they may face increased burdens as resources become scarce due to climate change. Women are also often disproportionately affected by extreme weather events and environmental degradation, particularly in regions where they rely heavily on natural resources for their livelihoods.[11]

There is also growing evidence of gender-based violence due to climate change, including examples of young teenage girls being forced into marriage due to climate-induced food insecurity, young girls being taken out of school to engage in sex work in the immediate aftermath of extreme weather events, and vulnerable women being beaten by their husbands as temperatures rise under changing climate conditions.[12]

Climate-Gender-Education Nexus

As the above sections describe, there is an interconnection between the inequalities in gender and education that inevitably leads to a disproportionate impact of climate change. The 'Gender, Climate and Security' report by UNEP, UN Women, UN DPPA and UNDP highlights that "lack of access to rights like education, reliance on natural resources for their livelihoods and the fact that women's jobs often pay less than men's — increase girls' and women's exposure to climate-related risk and impact their ability to adapt, prevent or recover from it." [13]

Furthermore, the very systems and structures which have caused the degradation of the natural environment are dependent on and reinforced by gender norms and values that discriminate against women. Ecofeminist critiques highlight this issue, showcasing that although female land defenders have played a major role in planetary protection, decision-making predominantly remains with the chiefly male elite.[14] This is reflected in modern society's classification of gendered roles of masculinity that promote overconsumption, exploitation, and violence.[15] This poses a major challenge for addressing climate change, since transformation requires new societal norms that promote long-term thinking, collective decision-making, caregiving, and education.

It is important to recognize that gender intersects with other factors such as race, class, and ethnicity, thus compounding vulnerability.[16] This means that women from marginalized communities often face additional barriers to education and are disproportionately affected by climate change.[17] Addressing these intersecting inequalities requires holistic approaches that consider the specific experiences and needs of different groups. Policies and programmes to address gender inequalities in education and climate change must be integrated and intersectional.[18]

III. The Right to Education: Availability, Accessibility, Acceptability, Adaptability

Research shows that by 2025, climate change will be a significant factor in preventing at least 12.5 million girls from completing their education each year.[19] In understanding the barriers girls face in realizing their equal enjoyment of the right to education, it is important to understand how this impacts upon the four elements of the right itself.

Availability and Accessibility

A central tenet of the right to education is the availability of adequate infrastructure to meet the needs of all learners. Climate change poses direct threats to schooling infrastructure,

with the increased frequency and severity of natural disasters increasing the likelihood of schools and places for learning being destroyed. Evidence such as the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, which destroyed over 90% of the schools in the central municipality of Concepcion, [20] shows that as a result of disaster, likely thousands of children missed at minimum three months of school, with a number of learners never returning to school. Similar evidence of damaged schools due to weather-related disasters in southern Africa shows that following cyclones in 2019, the education sector's recovery cost an estimated 122 million USD—a figure that far outstretches what is feasible for LMICs.[21]

A 2019 study of the pre- and post-Cyclone Idai school enrolment patterns in Chimanimani, Zimbabwe showed, at its highest, an enrolment loss of 61% within 2 months post-cyclone. The study noted that 'over-exposure to sexual activities during displacement and in temporary shelter'[22] was a primary reason for a large number of girls not returning to school, highlighting the disproportionate challenges girls face in accessing, and settling within, education infrastructure in times of climate disaster. Girls living in conflict and crisis areas are 90% more likely to be out of school,[23] and the threat of school-related, gender-based violence is often prohibitive, with globally over 60 million girls experiencing sexual assault on their journey to school every year.[24]

Existing educational inequalities are exacerbated by climate change, particularly for most vulnerable groups.[25] Existing vulnerabilities to climate displacement have a definite impact on individuals' equitable access to education, as often those who are climate-displaced face administrative challenges and language barriers, as well as trauma and discrimination.[26] Accounting for the UN's estimation that a significant proportion of the global climate-displaced population is female,[27] the impact of displacement on girls' education must not be underrepresented. In recognizing climate displacement as a risk multiplier and aggravator, it is critical to appreciate the intersecting vulnerabilities that compound girls' higher exposure to displacement and how these intersect with their educational opportunities.

Adaptability and Acceptability

Considering how climate vulnerability can disrupt entire social and generational structures, climate- and gender-aware education needs to be adaptive to the changing needs of students and of societies. Concern Worldwide US explains how "the impact of climate change on parents often carries down to the children." [28] This also extends to teachers and educators, who are met with increasing pressures to adapt their professional practices in line with unpredictable environmental circumstances. Encouragingly, there has been innovation across a range of practical climate interventions that may have cross-generational impact. To exemplify, since 2017, the government of Malawi has worked with UNICEF to construct solar-powered water systems in schools. While designed to future-proof against disasters such as flooding and to reduce carbon emissions, the water systems have also improved hygiene conditions, which has been particularly successful at increasing girls' school attendance, as the improved infrastructure makes it easier to maintain menstrual hygiene.[29] Such outcomes point to the co-benefits of prioritizing the needs of girls in climate adaptation interventions, of which there are many.

The principle of acceptability is inextricable from the full realization of the right to education, as promoted in SDG 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable *quality* education by 2030.[30] Understanding educational quality requires multidimensional consideration across material and immaterial aspects of learning, from learning materials and curricula, to students' sense of value and safety. UNESCO has called for a new social contract for

education, in which sustainable development is ingrained into learning, considering that “for education to be of high quality, it must be transformative.”[31]

VI. Female education’s contributions to the climate agenda

Upholding girls’ right to education may contribute to action against climate change in a multitude of ways, some of which are outlined below.

Economic development

The Global Partnership for Education finds that providing 12 years of schooling to every girl would bring about a reduction in child marriage rates by two-thirds, helping to grow women’s lifetime earnings and thus the global economy by as much as \$30 trillion USD.[32] The impacts of this are significant, considering that increasing a woman’s income by \$10 has the same beneficial impact on her children’s nutrition and health as an income increase to a man of \$110.[33] The generational impacts of improved access to education for girls may influence more positive human rights outcomes for generations to come.

Disaster risk reduction

Girls’ education has been identified as the most important socioeconomic determinant in reducing disaster vulnerability.[34] Comparative analysis by the World Bank finds that countries focused on female education suffered fewer losses from extreme weather events than ‘less-progressive countries with equivalent income and weather conditions.’[35] This is reinforced by research by the Brookings Institute, which suggests that for every additional year of schooling a girl receives on average, it can be expected that her country’s resilience to climate disaster improves by 3.2 points on the ND-GAIN Index.[36] In this, it is critical that climate policy makers view women not as passive victims of climate change, but as powerful agents of change. The systemic causes of vicious cycles of vulnerability for women must not be obscured, but rather addressed head-on in order to identify pathways towards gender-responsive sustainable development.

Effective climate policy

A 2019 study of 91 countries shows that countries with higher proportions of women’s representation in national legislatures have more stringent climate change policies, which result in lower CO₂ emissions.[37] Equipping girls with the educational tools to engage in climate leadership is an important component to enabling effective climate change mitigation and disaster risk reduction.

V. Recommendations for policy and practice

Article 12 of the Paris Agreement recognizes the critical role of education in empowering all members of society to engage in and take climate action – both adaptive and mitigative. Guided by the principles of availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability, the pursuit of advancing equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl should not be divorced from broader procedural and substantive human rights pursuits. Viewing education as a multiplier right, there is room to explore how states’ failure to enable the principles of the right to education is in breach of human rights.

Frameworks for climate-smart education systems, such as the Gender-equal Green Learning Agenda [38], which outline ‘a concrete action agenda to strengthen the resilience

and relevance of education to climate change'[39] are key policy levers to enabling gender-transformative sustainability outcomes. Particular focus on teaching STEM on equal terms with boys is imperative to girls' active participation in protecting the environment and contributing to low carbon economy.[40] As stated in Resolution 54/19, access to technology grants women 'prevention, mitigation and life-saving actions', and should be prioritized in policy and intervention accordingly.[41]

The launch of Building the Climate Resilience of Children and Communities through the Education Sector (BRACE) at COP28 marks a positive development in investment in climate-resilient education systems. The \$70 million USD in financing will begin retrofitting and constructing more climate-adaptive schools in Cambodia, South Sudan and Tonga, in line with the existing international School Safety Framework.[42] Continued mobilization of financing into climate-resilient education systems on the international scale is vital to meeting the ambitious net zero timescales the global community has committed to.[43] Research on adaptation funding for Africa shows that without a gender-responsive lens, financing instruments "can exacerbate current tendencies that discriminate against women" and that this "directly contravenes the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which has been adopted by almost all recipient and contributor countries of international climate finance."[44] As the call for a new social contract for education demands, financiers must realize their capacity to and the benefits of shifting away from gender-blind climate financing, towards systematic integration of gender and its intersectionality with other human rights factors.

VI. Conclusion

In this contribution, we have substantiated the role of girls' education in addressing climate change. We acknowledge that there remains a need for data and empirical evidence to measure progress and inform evidence-based policies and interventions that empower girls as key agents of climate resilience. We welcome OHCHR's report on how climate change impacts on the realization of the equal enjoyment of the right to education by every girl, and support the pursuit of expanding the evidence base of the gender-differentiated impacts of climate change.

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