

# Defending the Future: Gender, Conflict and Environmental Peace

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The year 2021 marks the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP26) which is set to take place in Glasgow in November. This brief centres women and girls' lived realities of climate change to call for transformative change for a greener, safer and more equal world.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2021 marks the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP26) which is set to take place in Glasgow in November. The COP brings together governments, multilateral agencies, NGOs and activists to accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). As state parties, climate experts and negotiators prepare to meet and agree coordinated action to tackle climate change, the purpose of this policy brief is to outline the gendered impacts of climate change, how this intersects with women and girls' right to peace and to provide recommendations to different actors including NGOs, international NGOs, inter-governmental organisations, states and international institutions which address the lived realities of women at the intersection of climate change, conflict and gender inequality.

At the time of writing, there is a growing recognition of the need for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda to take into account how the climate crisis poses risks to women and girls' peace and security, particularly in conflict and post-conflict contexts.<sup>1</sup> Food security, water insecurity and displacement are issues affecting women and girls due to extreme weather and the climate emergency. The intersection of WPS, climate change, ecological destruction and conflict or post-conflict situations thus raises a myriad of issues.<sup>2</sup> Climate change is seen as a risk multiplier, as part of a complex matrix of peoples' lives in conflict and post-conflict contexts and is inherently gendered.<sup>3</sup> As the recent UN Report on Gender, Climate and Security put it: 'There is therefore an urgent need for better analysis and concrete, immediate actions to address the linkages between climate change and conflict from a gender perspective'.<sup>4</sup>

# Feminist realities

It is essential that policy and practice work towards adopting feminist approaches to gender-sensitive environmental peacebuilding, which help shine a spotlight on systemic inequalities in need of transformation, as demonstrated in these quotes from research participants. The work of these leading activists and stakeholders explains why feminist approaches are important and informs the work that they do.

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*“Feminist realities are the living breathing examples of the feminist world we are creating and this could be: meaningful labour and care for ourselves and enjoying autonomy; and peace is more than the absence of war. At the moment the onus is on us to shed a light on what is possible beyond resisting oppressive systems”.*

**FELOGENE ANUMO**

1. Keina Yoshida, “The Protection of the Environment: A Gendered Analysis,” *Goettingen Journal of International Law* 10, no. 1 (2020): 285-305; Lina Cespedes and Keina Yoshida, “The Nature of Women, Peace and Security: A Colombian Perspective,” *International Affairs* 97, no. 1 (2021): 17-34.
2. Maria Tanyag and Jacqui True, *Gender Responsive Alternatives to Climate Change: A Global Research Report* (Monash Gender Peace & Security, 2019), <https://actionaid.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Monash-GRACC-Report-Global-.pdf>.
3. Elizabeth Seymour Smith, “Climate Change in Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans,” *SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security* No. 2020/7 (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2020), <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/sipriinsight2007.pdf>
4. UN Environment Programme, UN Women, DPPA and UN Development Programme, *Gender Climate and Security: Sustaining Inclusive Peace on the Frontlines of Climate Change* (United Nations Environment Programme, UN Women, UNDP and UNDP/PA/PBSO, 2020), 3.

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*“All our work is underpinned by a feminist approach which means looking at opportunities but also looking at the underlying structures of inequality. Building capacity of women’s groups and women’s leadership – and participation. Ensuring there are adequate resources to allow women to challenge the structural barriers”.*

**VICTOR ODERO**

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*“You need to have contextualised solutions – what works in Northern Kenyan does not work in Eastern Uganda. Cookie cut solutions do not work – [we] need better environmental assessments. Careful understanding of issues and stresses and challenges and opportunities are important – [this] include issues of culture and norms – not one solution for Africa or for the world. Solutions have to be implementable and sustainable”.*

**EVELYN NAMUBIRU-MWAURA**

# Findings

## CLIMATE CHANGE IS A RISK MULTIPLIER FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS' RIGHTS VIOLATIONS



Climate change is a risk multiplier meaning that it 'interacts with and compounds existing risks and pressures in any given context, and can increase the likelihood of insability or violent conflict'.

Climate change is a risk multiplier meaning that it 'interacts with and compounds existing risks and pressures in any given context, and can increase the likelihood of insability or violent conflict'.<sup>5</sup> It affects women and girls who are already facing discrimination and disadvantage.<sup>6</sup> Expectations within the household, community and in rural settings, such as responsibilities to obtain firewood for fuel and water, are gendered. Climate change is profoundly affecting women and girls' safety as climate-related changes to the environment means that they have to travel further distances to obtain natural resources for sustenance, which can be dangerous itself. Water insecurity is exacerbated, and food security becomes more difficult to obtain. This adds to the existing disproportionate unpaid care work burden of women and girls and takes up time when they would be able to

5. SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, chap. 12, <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2016/12>; Seymour Smith, "Climate Change in Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans."

6. Maria Tanyag and Jacqui True, "Gender Responsive Alternatives on Climate Change from A Feminist Standpoint," in *Climate Hazards, Disasters, and Gendered Ramifications*, eds. Catarina Kinnvall and Helle Rydstrom (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 29-47; Jessica M. Smith, Lauren Olosky and Jennifer Grosman Fernández, *The Climate-Gender-Conflict Nexus: Amplifying Women's Contributions at the Grassroots* (Georgetown: GIWPS, 2021), <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Climate-Gender-Conflict-Nexus.pdf>.





participate in climate decision making and policy processes. Climate change as a form of slow violence is one of the most pressing threats to the right to life and to ways of living around the world. Hazards and disasters which become more frequent due to climate change exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities and intersecting forms of discrimination.



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Women and girls' participation must be guaranteed in relation to all decision- and policy-making related to environmental protection and climate policy in order to ensure an intersectional and gender-just approach to this issue.

# WOMEN AND GIRLS' RIGHTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE PROGRAMMES ARE DISJOINTED

Despite the clear differential and disproportionate impact that climate and environmental insecurity has on women and girls' lives, climate change programmes and policies, including the nationally determined contributions to climate change, do not include gender.<sup>7</sup> Where women and girls are included in national adaptation plans, this is often without a clear budget line, meaning gender is being included rhetorically but 'void of content'.<sup>8</sup>

There is currently a gap in relation to the intersection of gender, peace and the environment in practice and in policy.<sup>9</sup> This is largely due to the lack of mechanisms to ensure women and girls' participation and leadership in environmental governance, climate policy and peace processes. Equal, or indeed any, participation cannot be taken for granted, nor should women and girls' involvement be confined to issues relating to women's economic justice or gender-based violence. Instead, women and girls' participation must be guaranteed in relation to all decision- and policy-making related to environmental protection and climate policy in order to ensure an intersectional and gender-just approach to this issue. This means ensuring the participation and development of leadership capacities of diverse groups of women and girls and the incorporation of perspectives from all sectors of society.

Despite the practice of environmental peacebuilding recognising that the environment forms part of conflict and that climate insecurity is threatening international peace and security, the WPS agenda and environmental peacebuilding practice are separate. Funders continue to see gender and conflict, and the environment and conflict as single issues rather than interlinked. The system and 'rules of the game' continue to prioritise very specific notions of governance and security, and masculine conceptions of climate prevention without considering how climate change, women and girls' rights and conflict are interlinked.

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7. Nationally determined contributions are non-binding national plans setting on climate actions. They are at the heart of the Paris Agreement and Article 4(2) of the agreement requires each Party to prepare, communicate and maintain nationally determined contributions.

8. Felipe Jaramillo Ruiz and Juan Pablo Vallejo, "The Post-Political Link Between Gender and Climate Change: The Case of the Nationally Determined Contributions Support Programme," *Contexto Internacional* 41, no. 2 (May-Aug 2019): 339.

9. Tanyag and True, "Gender Responsive Alternatives to Climate Change."

## ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE SHOCKS ARE A PART OF CONFLICT

The environment relates to conflict in multiple and complicated ways. The environment is a direct target in war or indirectly damaged in conflict through bombings or the use of weapons (such as napalm in Vietnam), natural resources can sustain and fuel conflicts and the environment can also be a part of conflict resolution. Climate change is intensifying extreme weather, deforestation, the destruction of biodiversity, and the scarcity of natural entities and resources. Droughts, storms, landslides, flooding and other disasters exacerbated by climate change have been found to lead to small-scale conflicts (riots and protests, localised conflicts) and larger conflicts. These link to migration flows which are also associated with armed conflict.<sup>10</sup> As CEDAW General Recommendation 37 notes “women and girls in conflict situations are particularly exposed to the risks associated with disasters and climate change”.

The effects of climate change also have consequences for women’s safety and peace. Our research found that the prevalence and risk of sexual violence was raised as women had to travel longer distances in search of water and food and that changes in weather affecting crops had led to conflict within communities and households. As one of our participants noted “When we invest our time and resources in farming and we don’t get good yields because of climate change, we are blamed by our spouses of stealing the food and taking it to our parents, yet it is the yields that are poor. This leads to conflicts in homes”.

## LAND RIGHTS AS WOMEN AND GIRLS’ RIGHTS

One key issue that women face in environmental rights is lack of ownership or discrimination when it comes to land rights. As Felogene Anumo of AWID explained, “women and girls are often the custodians of the land, but they do not own the land meaning that women and girls are often left behind from any solutions proposed.” In many countries women and girls do not or cannot own land. This means that they are often left out of consultations. Black, rural and Indigenous women and girls are most affected by colonial histories and remain the most unrepresented in decision-making processes. Women and girls’ inability to own land means that they are excluded in participating in discussions around reparations from the dispossession of lands. This

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10. Todias Ide, Anders Kristensen and Henrikas Bartusevicius, “First Comes the River, Then Comes the Conflict? A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Flood Related Political Unrest,” *Journal of Peace Research* 58, no. 1 (2021): 83-97.



leaves women at risk of becoming victims of a range of rights violations and thwarts their ability to participate in mediation or environmental governance processes. Sometimes land is even considered to be 'empty' by governments and corporate entities even though the land is vital to nomadic communities, pastoralists or for women and girls' collection of biomasses for fuel. Women and girls also face state violence and imprisonment in the process of defending themselves and their land from being forcibly taken away. Women's lack of ownership means that they are often not considered for reparations or compensation. This lack of ownership is then compounded by a lack of access to justice for women and girls.

**In many countries women and girls do not or cannot own land.**

## CORPORATE VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

There is a concerning trend that environmental and land activists and defenders are targeted and killed for attempting to protect land and natural entities.<sup>11</sup> The activities of corporate entities have led to displacement of local populations due to land-grabbing, pollution of rivers and other natural entities, with Indigenous communities disproportionately affected in this regard. Corporate activity, such as mining, creates insecure environments, with reports of an increase in sexual and gender-based violence and trafficking in women and girls. Hala Al Karib explained:

Mining companies in Sudan are using armed militia of tribal men who then assault girls in their communities. Especially with the growing influence of mining companies from different parts of the world, there are very dodgy deals happening. Human rights and women's rights have become commercialised. This has to be challenged so private companies are accountable. There is no genuine support for alternative solutions and the environment by these corporates and mining companies. They are putting their energy into undermining women and environmental organisations.

**Women's rights and environmental rights defenders must be protected by governments and the international community and corporate entities must be held accountable for creating a culture of impunity or placing such activists in danger.**

11. Amy Dwyer, *Women Human Rights Defenders: Left Behind in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, LSE WPS Policy Brief 02/2020 (LSE Centre for Women, Peace & Security, 2020), <https://www.lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/assets/documents/2020/PBS01Dwyer.pdf>.

Land and environmental rights defenders are targeted for attempting to resist corporate power. These individuals face a lot of risk to their physical well-being but also face threats and character assassinations. Women's rights and environmental rights defenders must be protected by governments and the international community and corporate entities must be held accountable for creating a culture of impunity or placing such activists in danger. Those directly targeting defenders must be held accountable.

## CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT- RELATED FORCED MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT

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**PEOPLE WERE FORCIBLY  
DISPLACED DUE TO WEATHER RELATED  
AND NATURAL DISASTERS.**



Climate change and its effects are causing forced migration and displacement. Recent figures have suggested that nearly 25 million people were forcibly displaced due to weather related reasons and disasters. In rural Ethiopia for example, where there is impoverishment due to lack of access to land, women and girls have been pushed to find other ways of living through migration. In other contexts, as Evelyn Namubiri Mwaura has explained, climate change is causing small displacements:

A critical thing to keep in mind is that migration does not need to be a thousand miles, it can be a mile or a few miles: mini movements with people moving to access natural resources. Example of Maasai, pastoralists, because of looking for food for animals and for survival they have had to migrate within Kenya. You also see the movement of animals in very dry seasons walking in the streets in towns, they walk long distances for food, shelter, water. We tend to minimise change of livelihoods and instability that minor movements in the search for sustainable livelihoods causes and the impacts that this has on women and girls.

Whether migration or displacement is due to disasters or violent conflict, this process is experienced differentially for women and girls. Women migrants and refugees are at higher risk of experiencing violence, have reduced (or no) access to support systems and are shut out of decision-making. The disproportionate impact that climate change and environmental conflicts has on women and girls does not end with the forced displacement. Rather, women and girls are continuously subject to the impact of environmental change and gender inequality.

## FEMINIST SOLUTIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING

Governments, donors and organisations should fund and promote feminist solutions to climate change and environmental peacebuilding. This is important not only because gender equality is one of the Sustainable Development Goals but to enable full participation and inclusion of the whole population, in issues that they have expertise in and affect them too. Many bottom-up and community approaches have been developed to ensure equitable and sustainable conditions for women and girls and the environment. The tools include the building of local women and youth networks and movements, tree planting, and knowledge exchange trips to share planting and storage methods and sustainable methods of farming known as 'Women's Resilience Clubs' and Sustainability Schools. It is vital that those who are most impacted from climate change and their lived realities, experiences and associated expertise are taken into account and that cookie cutter solutions are not imposed by international organisations.



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# Policy Recommendations

1

## Ensure women and girls' participation

All actors – NGOs, international NGOs, inter-governmental organisations, states and international institutions – should ensure women and girls participate equally and meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives. Women and adolescent girls should be acknowledged as technical experts in climate change, on the environment, in conflict and peacebuilding and be able to participate in decision-making spaces on climate change and the environment. Where necessary, all actors should support women and adolescent girls' capacity to engage in current technical dialogue; without this, key decisions will not meet the rights, needs and experiences of women and girls. For example, in peace agreements, references to land ownership and access to natural resources should ensure a gender perspective that delivers for women and girls and acknowledges the impact that climate change is having on them.

2

## Undertake participatory gender-conflict-environmental analysis

All actors engaged in peacebuilding and conflict resolution should ensure that all conflict and peacebuilding projects, programmes, policy and research are based on participatory, intersectional gender-conflict-environmental analysis that includes assessments of and responses to: environmental and climate change; structural and root causes of conflict and gender inequality; power, including corporate power; and colonial histories. This requires them to work with women and girls and to engage with the work women and girls are already doing, to assess the gendered impact of climate change and ensure that solutions are developed with – not 'for' – them.

# 3

## Deliver women and girls' human rights

All actors should ensure women and girls' human rights are at the centre of all responses to climate, peace, conflict and gender which: address the diverse rights, needs and experiences of displaced women and girls; acknowledges women and girls' right to land - which goes beyond ownership to the historical and ancestral relationship with the land; supports women and girls' economic empowerment and justice; addresses systematic violations of women and girls' rights, including VAWG; and also ensures reparations for loss and damage. Governments should also implement the recommendations set out in General Recommendation No. 37 (2018) of the CEDAW Committee.<sup>12</sup>

# 4

## Address intersectionality

All actors should ensure work in conflict contexts integrates perspectives on gender and the environment through conflict, security and peacebuilding projects, programmes, policy, peace processes and research, which are intersectional in their design, implementation and evaluation. This should result in an increase in funding for women and girls' rights programmes as well as gender aspects of broader programmes. Such programmes need be designed to ensure they deliver for all women and girls and their intersecting identities, including gender, race, ethnicity, disability, class, age, sexual orientation and gender identity, and social-economic status. They should at least address: VAWG, food security, education, economic rights and justice, climate-related displacement and migration, environmental justice and environmental-conflict management. Such projects, programmes, policies, peace processes and research should have specific gendered indicators to track and measure progress. Such work should also ensure that protection of the environment is considered in the design of all programming to ensure that responses that are meant to address both inequality and the environment do not further exacerbate climate change, environmental degradation and gender inequality.

# 5

## Ensure inclusion

States, inter-governmental bodies and international institutions should recognise and support traditional solutions to environmental management by Indigenous groups and recognise Indigenous rights and their special connection to the land.



# 6

## Support and fund networks and organisations

States, inter-governmental and international institutions should formally acknowledge the threats to women human rights defenders (WHRDs), environmental defenders and women's rights organisations working on peace, the environment and gender equality. They should support networks of WHRDs and organisations, including funding for their self-defined priorities which enables them to work on strategies for addressing the systemic and structural attacks on rights and the environment, as well as responses to climate, gender inequality and peace. Such support should extend to grassroots women's movements to enable women and girls to develop strategies that are based on their experiences and needs.

# 7

## Defend WHRDs and environmental defenders

The international community should support and fund protection mechanisms for WHRDs and environmental defenders which are based on a sound protection strategy, use organisational privilege to take on and redistribute risk and space and include an emergency protection fund. This should acknowledge and support the wellbeing needs of WHRDs and environmental defenders and advocates. Donors should allow funding applications to include budget lines for the wellbeing of organisations operating in hostile environments.

# 8

## Address and challenge corporate power

The international community should acknowledge and reverse the negative impacts of corporate power on women and girls' rights and the environment. Governments and multilateral agencies should ensure that the rights, needs and experiences of those affected by climate insecurity and climate-related conflict is not outweighed by the power of corporations. This includes ensuring that "climate change mitigation and adaptation programmes address the structural barriers faced by women in accessing their rights will increase gender-based inequalities and intersectional forms of discrimination", as outlined in CEDAW General Recommendation 37. It also requires governments to ensure they mandate participatory environmental impact assessments in line with their obligations under international environmental law and that gender equality is taken into account in any climate mitigation or adaptation projects. This requires governments and corporate entities to budget for and implement the gendered aspects of mitigation plans. Governments and agencies that are self-declared as 'feminist' should, at least, address the use of corporate power of organisations headquartered in their countries, particularly in relation to extractive industries.

# 9

## Develop comprehensive National Action Plans linked to climate change and the environment

WPS actors should have a greater focus on the environment and environmental actors should have a greater focus on gender equality. An integrated approach to plans for gender equality and the environment is essential, with a view to developing combined WPS and environmental action plans. Governments should develop, design, implement and monitor National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS that are inclusive of climate-related conflict and insecurity. National Adaptation Plans should be developed with the participation of women and girls' most affected by the climate crisis to ensure they are gendered and meet the rights, needs and experiences of women and girls.

# 10

## Build the capacity of international community

The international community – including governments, donors, multilateral agencies and international non-government organisations (INGOs) – should invest in building their own capacity to implement these recommendations to move towards a more equal world that addresses climate change, conflict and gender inequality. This should ensure that their staff are trained and that their structures strengthen coordination of these agendas to support the delivery of these recommendations and their existing commitments to women and girls' rights, climate change, peace and conflict prevention. In building its own capacity, these actors should recognise the expertise of women's rights organisations, environmental defenders, WHRDs and youth groups, and work with them.

12. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *General Recommendation No. 37 on Gender-related dimensions of disaster risk reduction in the context of climate change*, CEDAW/C/GC/37 (2018), [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1\\_Global/CEDAW\\_C\\_GC\\_37\\_8642\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/CEDAW_C_GC_37_8642_E.pdf)



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**[lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/publications/Defending-the-Future-Gender-Conflict-and-Environmental-Peace](https://lse.ac.uk/women-peace-security/publications/Defending-the-Future-Gender-Conflict-and-Environmental-Peace)**

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