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Understanding and addressing gender-based violence as part of the climate emergency

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I. Introduction

Climate change is a global emergency. A threat to our planet's sustainability, the effects of which are now being felt the world over, climate change is also a dire human rights issue, with differentiated adverse impacts - social, cultural, economic, health and livelihood impacts chief among them - in particular on marginalized groups. Inequalities related to gender strongly shape the ability of women, girls and sexual and gender minorities¹ to adapt to climate impacts, benefit from response measures or participate and lead in efforts to mitigate climate change. Rectifying gender inequality is therefore a key priority to combat climate change and ensure a sustainable and just future for all. With gender considerations embedded in Parties' decisions to the United National Framework Agreement on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including the Paris Agreement, and an increasing number of countries including gender substantively in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs),² gender-climate linkages are relatively well known and more or less understood now by a broad swath of decision-makers and actors, including funders. However, while there has been significant progress over the last decade on understanding and addressing gender-climate issues in policies and programmes, a key means by which gender inequality is in fact held intact has remained in the shadows: pervasive gender-based violence (GBV) across sectors and spheres.

Drawing from the experiences of researchers, practitioners, communities, environmental defenders, advocates and decision makers, recent research - including that brought together in a landmark publication from IUCN, *Gender-based violence and environment linkages: The violence of inequality* (Castañeda Camey, et al., 2020) - have sought to increase attention and action to address the complex connections between GBV and climate change. The takeaways stemming from this research are clear: GBV in all its varied and overlapping expressions undermines the rights of women, girls and sexual and gender minorities; it threatens peace and security in communities, countries and ecosystems; and it poses a significant risk to mitigation, adaptation and resilience-building efforts to combat the climate crisis.

Gender-based violence is any harm or potential of harm perpetrated against a person or group on the basis of gender. A violation of human rights, GBV is rooted in discriminatory gender norms, patriarchy and power imbalance and is used as a means of control, subjugation and exploitation across sectors and spheres - including in relation to accessing and controlling natural resources. Examples of GBV include but are not at all limited to: intimate partner and domestic violence; sexual, physical, and psychological abuse; property grabbing and widow disinheritance; child marriage; sexual exploitation (e.g., in exchange for resources such as fish); and cyber-based attacks. GBV influences the ways individuals and communities access, use, control and benefit from natural resources, which in turn threatens individuals' and communities' ability to protect natural resources. Evidence shows these dynamics worsen in the context of environmental stressors and threats, such as climate change (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020).

This paper prepared for CSW 66 summarises some of the findings from recent research on GBV and climate change linkages and notes some current policies and programmes that show entry points for addressing these concerns. With CSW 66 offering a powerful spotlight on critical issues affecting the status of women in all their diversity and on gender equality, this paper urges the CSW community to critically engage with current research, analysis and practice connecting GBV and climate change and to forge new ways of working cross-sectorally, with urgency. As an international leader on advancing the rights of women and girls and shaping standards and policies on gender equality, the CSW community must leverage resources and decision making power to scale-up focus and challenge power imbalances and discriminatory social norms and structures that allow GBV to flourish with impunity - including and in particular in relation to environmental degradation and stressors such as climate change. The voices and experiences of people around the world who know the urgency of these issues firsthand must be listened to, and decision makers across sectors and levels must take significant, transformative action to end GBV, protect human rights and secure a climate-resilient and just future - for the well-being of all.

¹ The term 'gender and sexual minorities' is an imperfect and contested term for those whose gender and/or sexuality are not represented by cisgender and heterosexual identities. It is used here in an attempt to include non-western gender and sexuality constructs that may or may not be represented by terms like transgender, gender nonconforming, non-binary, intersex, lesbian, gay and bisexual, among others.

² IUCN will publish a new gender analysis of revised NDCs at the November 2021 UNFCCC Conference of Parties.

II. Gender-based violence in the context of climate change

Climate change increases the incidence and severity of droughts, heat waves, floods, wildfires, landslides and storms. These events have long-term and acute impacts on communities, degrading natural resources, disrupting food production, damaging infrastructure, breaking down economic systems and social services, and affecting income generation. Experiencing and coping with climate-driven livelihood loss contributes to conditions where the threat of violence is heightened, especially for women and girls (GBV AoR Helpdesk, 2021). GBV risk factors, such as poverty and economic losses, are exacerbated from the impacts of climate change, reinforcing pre-existing power imbalances that disproportionately constrain women's access and contributions to social, environmental and economic spheres (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020).

Domestic violence and intimate partner violence

Women and girls are relatively more dependent on natural resources and climate-sensitive work to sustain their livelihoods, and they also often hold primary responsibility for collecting natural resources, like water and firewood, for household use. Natural resource scarcity due to climate change directly impacts their ability to generate income and safely secure resources, and these conditions can increase household tension and violence as a means to maintain control over the reduced resources. For example, one study of gender, climate and security linkages in urban areas of Pakistan found that women were still held to the same standards for water collection even though prolonged droughts affected water availability. This stressed women who did not have adequate resources for daily use, and they recounted experiences of physical abuse from their husbands for failing to secure water (Sawas et al., 2020). A case study from Uganda found that crop failure from extended dry seasons led to loss of income for men, who then took control of and sold crops grown by women for household use. This contributed to household tension, with some men resorting to physical violence to assert control over resources and land (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020).

Domestic and intimate partner violence is also exacerbated in the aftermath of climate-related disasters, such as cyclones, floods, wildfires and landslides. Post-traumatic stress, uncertainty, loss of property and basic provisions and erosion of community ties experienced in communities after disasters can lead to feelings of powerlessness and increase violent behaviors as a negative coping mechanism (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020). A study from UN Women Fiji (2014), for example, found that there was a 300% increase in reported domestic violence cases following two tropical cyclones in Vanuatu in 2011. In the aftermath of climate-related disasters, people experiencing intimate partner violence may face significant barriers to reporting incidents and accessing health and safety services. Limited police presence and improper police conduct, including not taking reports seriously, downplaying violence, shaming victims, taking bribes and even perpetrating violence, foster mistrust for people experiencing violence and discourage reporting (Thurston et al., 2021). In Australia, one study found that police dismissed reports of intimate partner violence after devastating bushfires, encouraging victims to forgive violence and telling them that "things will settle down again" (Parkinson and Zara, 2013).

Verbal, physical and sexual violence in communities

Climate-related disasters, resource scarcity, and population displacement also contributes to increased risk for violence experienced outside of households. For instance, a study of GBV and climate induced water scarcity in Bangladesh shared stories from several women who were subject to violent and unsafe situations in daily water collection, with women recounting instances of stalking, verbal threats and sexual harassment from strange men as they ventured further from home for water resources (Zaman, 2020). Numerous cases note that women experience violence and harassment at higher rates in emergency shelters after disasters due to limited privacy, overcrowded conditions, and a lack of adequate, gender-sensitive sanitation facilities (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020). Women and girls in these precarious situations are also at increased risk for violence outside shelters as they venture out to collect natural resources for daily needs. For example, a study of the violent conflict in Darfur, which is in part fueled by environmental degradation and prolonged drought, found that women and girls travelling outside of refugee camps for water and firewood collection were subject to verbal, physical and sexual violence from local armed groups in the areas around camps (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2005).

Although there are currently fewer studies addressing GBV faced by gender and sexual minorities in the aftermath of disasters, the cases that do exist show they face violence and harassment in communities and limited access to emergency services based on their gender. A study from Fiji shared experiences from gender and sexual minorities who were ostracized by their community and blamed for recent tropical storms (Dwyer and Woolf, 2018). There are other accounts from India, the United States, Pakistan and Nepal of transgender women in particular facing violence and discrimination when trying to access protection and aid after disasters because their gender expression or identification was not seen as 'acceptable' (Knight and Sollom, 2012; Smiley, 2020).

Sexual exploitation and child marriage

Other studies are noting growing concerns around sexual exploitation and child marriage as serious forms of GBV connected with climate induced resource degradation and scarcity. In some cases, male food vendors, farmers and landowners have exploited resource scarcity and demanded sex from women in exchange for food (Gevers et al., 2020). Human traffickers take advantage of uncertainty and insecurity in the aftermath of disasters, preying on vulnerable groups, especially women and children, and targeting them for sexual exploitation (Calma, 2017).

Child marriage is a global concern that affects every stage of a child's life, from limited opportunities for education, to increased health concerns and exposure to sexual violence and abuse. In the context of climate change and resulting resource scarcity, progress on decreasing rates of child marriage is threatened as families struggle to meet basic needs and resort to marrying off young daughters to lighten household financial burdens (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020). The Human Rights Watch (2015) reports that young girls in disaster prone areas are at risk for early and forced marriage as climate change continues to intensify storms, such as in Bangladesh where child marriage has become a survival strategy in some communities. One case in Ethiopia saw an increase in the number of girls sold into early marriage in exchange for livestock to help families cope with the impacts of prolonged droughts (UNOCHA, 2017). While there are no official figures on child marriage prevalence due to climate change, governments and organisations are increasingly recognising this pressing issue; for example, the Government of Malawi (2015) listed child marriage among the risks for women and girls resulting from floods and other disasters in its national post-disaster needs assessment.

Violence against women environmental human rights defenders (WEHRDs)

The climate crisis is intensifying the violence facing environmental defenders as competition over scarce resources increases along with the rapid, unsustainable exploitation of land and natural resources. Global Witness (2021) recently reported 2020 as the deadliest year on record for defenders protecting climate stressed forests, water and natural resources, with 227 defenders murdered - an average of more than four defenders murdered per week. More than one in 10 of the environmental defenders killed in 2020 were women, and despite only making up 5% of the world's population, more than 30% of victims were Indigenous people (Global Witness, 2021). Women and Indigenous environmental human rights defenders face compounding threats of violence in their advocacy due to reinforcing discrimination associated with sexism and racism (Castañeda Camey et al., 2020).

WEHRDs face threats and acts of violence rooted in misogyny and gender inequality by those trying to silence, control and intimidate them (Barcia, 2017). Perpetrators weaponise and exploit societal gender roles and expectations to undermine the authority and credibility of WEHRDs; for example, some women defenders are labelled 'bad mothers' and face threats of having their children taken away from them (Hurtes, 2018). In many societies, forms of GBV are seen as a private matter or even normalised as a way of punishing femininity, meaning that the threats and acts perpetrated against women defenders are not considered violence to begin with or that they were "asking for it" by challenging gender norms (Tran, 2021). These gendered acts of violence and harassment against WEHRDs alienate them within their communities and severely restrict their ability to access services, resources and justice against the violence they face.

Climate change, fragility and gender-based violence

Violent conflict threatens human rights, security, peace and safety of people (Boyer et al., 2020). Evidence from

conflict areas show the severe impact of violence on the safety and rights of women, girls and marginalised groups, and these situations often exacerbate or exploit GBV risks. For instance, sexual violence and systemic rape of women, girls, men and boys is commonly used as a war tactic to control, punish, humiliate, or intimidate communities (Wirtz et al., 2014). In post-conflict situations, trauma of war and conflict can give rise to incidence of GBV in households and communities from men trying to “reclaim their masculinity” (Puechguirbal, 2012). Climate change is often considered a ‘threat multiplier’ in conflict areas as populations are more vulnerable to negative impacts, state capacity and weak institutions are challenged to cope with numerous problems, and disasters further destabilise state-society relations and fuel social unrest (Rüttinger, 2017). Increasingly, environmental degradation and exploitation and climate change are contributing to the breakout of violent conflict, and it is estimated that 40% of all intra-state conflicts in the past 40 years have been directly or indirectly linked to natural resources (APWLD, 2015; UNEP and IISD, 2009). In conflict areas also plagued by environmental degradation or natural disasters, women and girls face increased risks of experiencing sexual, physical and verbal violence in households and communities due to compounding livelihood and resource stress.

More research is coming out explicitly exploring the critical links between the issues of gender inequality and GBV, violent conflict and climate change, with emphasis on the importance of addressing these linkages in integrated rights-based peace, security and climate resilience strategies (Boyer et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2021; Vithanage, 2021). For example, a recent report from IUCN and USAID (Boyer et al., 2020) developed an indicator framework and analysis to assess the prevalence and interactions of gender inequality, state fragility, and climate vulnerability across 122 countries. The framework incorporated several indicators on GBV experiences and risks, including laws against GBV, child marriage prevalence and access to drinking water. The results from the study suggested that these issues are interlinked and that solutions can be approached in an integrated way to improve effectiveness (Boyer et al., 2020).

Violent conflict, GBV and climate change shape the daily lives of millions of people around the world. With increased civil unrest, resource scarcity and livelihood stress, it is increasingly important to understand how these issues relate with and reinforce one another. Working and investing across sectors -- e.g., with and toward gender equality and women’s empowerment, climate change adaptation and mitigation, and humanitarian aid and peacebuilding goals - - must be a key and urgent strategy to safeguard the rights, lives and livelihoods of communities the world over.

III. Recommendations for the CSW community

CSW can meet the urgency of GBV-climate crises by leveraging its position to advance global attention on understanding and addressing these interlinked issues. The 66th session’s theme on climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction comes at an opportune time to critically engage with the growing body of literature and research that emphasises the importance of GBV and climate change linkages. To protect and promote the rights in particular of the millions of diverse women and girls whose daily realities and futures are shaped both by GBV and climate change, CSW 66 can elevate urgent attention; steer resources; inspire and enable new research and practical guidance; engage cross-sector actors, including academia, private sector and donors; and listen to and act on the stories of survivors to drive a transformative norm-change agenda toward a climate-resilient and violence-free world. Far from exhaustive, a few key recommendations to consider include:

Recall and reinforce importance of existing international policy instruments across sectors, and ensure their uptake

The global and impending threats of climate change and GBV on human rights, peace, security and climate resiliency necessitate integrated and coordinated action between decision makers across different sectors. Within the UN system, the CSW can help ensure that efforts on gender and climate change are not siloed or detached from the realities of GBV risks, nor the evidence-based strategies for preventing and responding to violence. Part of this effort is reemphasising and reaffirming attention to existing international instruments that make these connections, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the Beijing Platform for Action, but also the gender mandates now clear under the major multilateral environmental agreements, each of which also have Gender Action Plans. Member States and all stakeholders can strengthen knowledge-sharing, capacity-building and action to actively address the linkages and cross-cutting importance of GBV, gender equality and climate change, including through programming, research, monitoring frameworks and data collection and communication, and other means for implementing efforts

toward meeting interlinked global goals. Women's direct engagement and leadership in these policy making and planning spheres is also fundamental.

CEDAW General Recommendation No. 37 is an example of an important mechanism for driving national action and accountability on GBV-climate issues. This general recommendation (specifically Section VI, Subsection A) represents the first time a UN human rights treaty body addressed the linkages between GBV and climate change, helping to establish climate change as a human rights and women's rights issue (Yoshida and Cespedes, 2019). It provides several recommendations for Member State actions to address gender inequality and GBV in the context of climate-related disasters and emphasises the urgency of addressing gender inequality and GBV in climate change mitigation (CEDAW, 2018). As such, elevating awareness on and means for implementation of this Recommendation in climate-focused decision-making, programming and practice is an important opportunity.

Support strategic cross-sector partnerships at scale between the CSW community, gender equality decision makers and climate change-focused policies and programmes

While policies and commitments are only part of concrete efforts to critically engage with and address these issues, they do play an important role in guiding and securing funding, driving strategic interventions and setting global standards. Major environmental donors, including the Green Climate Fund (GCF) (GCF, 2021) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF) (GEF, 2019), have developed policies to address GBV, prevention of violence and harassment, and safeguards in their funding portfolios. These policy efforts indicate the increased recognition toward cross-sectoral action and donor attention to these issues, which will need to be reflected in efforts to secure funding and ensure outcomes from funded activities are sustainable. Implementing organisations, networks, and partners likewise need sustained capacity to understand, implement, monitor and bear accountability for these relevant mandates. Cultivating and sustaining cooperation between women's ministries/machineries, women's and gender equality-focused civil society, and climate policymakers and programmers are also fundamental.

The **Gender-based Violence and Environment Linkages Center (GBV-ENV Center)**,³ hosted by IUCN - a member Union - in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is spearheading efforts among and for conservation organisations to increase global awareness on GBV-environment issues while closing related knowledge and capacity gaps - mobilising learning and forging collaborative action towards ending GBV and securing environmental sustainability, together. In addition to knowledge, policy and capacity building, the Center also increasingly identifies emerging and promising practices in programmes and projects, toward informing more rights-based, gender-responsive, and GBV-preventative climate programming.

Finally, urgent action is needed to protect the rights and lives of all environmental human rights defenders, whose activities to protect their territories and biodiversity are escalating only in response to the increasing destruction they face. The CSW community might look to elevating, replicating and means for gender-responsive implementation of emerging regional frameworks such as the Escazú Agreement in Latin America and the Caribbean, the first-ever binding agreement that aims to protect the environment as well as human rights, in particular by ensuring access to justice when rights have been infringed (UN ECLAC, 2018). Members of IUCN have also just recently adopted Resolution 039 on protecting defenders, in particular calling for cross-sector and multi-stakeholder action - including with women's organisations - to scale up response and prevention of violence (IUCN, 2021). The call to highlight and protect the role of environmental defenders in global conservation was also echoed at IUCN's World Conservation Congress by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, further underscoring the growing global efforts to support these issues (UN OHCHR, 2021).

³ The GBV-ENV Center is accessible here: <https://genderandenvironment.org/agent-gbv-env/>

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