

UN Women

Expert Group Meeting

‘Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes’

11 – 14 October 2021

Impacts of the climate crisis on sexual and reproductive health and rights

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*The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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IPPF

I. BACKGROUND

a. Climate Crisis

For the purposes of this paper, climate change refers to shifts in global and regional climate patterns, particularly from the mid.20th century onwards. The Earth's climate has changed continuously throughout its history due to various causes, however since 1850 human influence is confirmed to have warmed the climate at a rate that is unprecedented in at least the last 2000 years, and human-induced climate change is now affecting weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe.[2] At the moment, there are three main pillars of response to the climate crisis. *Climate change mitigation* addresses the root causes of climate change through efforts to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases or to remove them from the atmosphere. *Climate change adaptation* relates to processes of adjustment to actual or expected impacts of climate change. Adaptation measures seek to lower the risks posed by the effects of climate change.[3] *Climate change resilience* relates to the "capacity of social, economic and environmental systems to cope with a hazardous event or trend or disturbance, responding or reorganizing in ways that maintain their essential function, identity and structure, while also maintaining the capacity for adaptation, learning and transformation".[4] The climate crisis and its impacts are one element of the broader dimension of environmental sustainability. This briefing focuses on the climate crisis specifically, but it is understood that both the climate crisis and sexual and reproductive health and rights also intersect with other areas of environmental sustainability and degradation.

b. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

The Guttmacher-Lancet Commission on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights put forward an integrated definition of sexual and reproductive health and rights.[5], It describes "[s]exual and reproductive health [as] a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social wellbeing in relation to all aspects of sexuality and reproduction, not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity", and further recognizes that "[a]chievement of sexual and reproductive health relies on the realisation of sexual and reproductive rights, which are based on the human rights of all individuals to: have their bodily integrity, privacy, and personal autonomy respected; freely define their own sexuality, including sexual orientation and gender identity and expression; decide whether and when to be sexually active; choose their sexual partners; have safe and pleasurable sexual experiences; decide whether, when, and whom to marry; decide whether, when, and by what means to have a child or children, and how many children to have; have access over their lifetimes to the information, resources, services, and support necessary to achieve all the above, free from discrimination, coercion, exploitation, and violence."

c. Inherent injustices

The climate crisis is underpinned by grave injustice. Those that contributed least to the climate crisis are most severely affected by its impacts while also having most limited access to resources to adapt. There are stark differences in per capita levels of greenhouse gas emissions between countries at different levels of income. As an example, per capita levels of CO2 emissions in North America were 15.5 metric tons in 2016, while they were only 0.8 metric tons in Sub-Saharan Africa and 1.4 metric tons in Pacific island small states.[6] It has also been estimated that over the 1990 to 2015 period, the poorest half of the world's

population was responsible for only seven per cent of cumulative carbon emissions, while the richest 10 per cent were responsible for 52 per cent.[7] The nature and severity of impacts of the climate crisis differ widely across countries and groups of people and are influenced by a range of factors. Impacts of climate change will lead to increasing displacement of people,[8] with the poorest countries and people hit hardest.[9] Within countries and communities, risks from climate change are greater for “[p]eople who are socially, economically, culturally, politically, institutionally or otherwise marginalized”.[10] Inequalities in socio-economic status and marginalization resulting from discrimination on grounds of gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, disability, and other characteristics heighten vulnerability to climate change.[11] Inequalities and marginalization also shape individuals’ ability to adapt to the climate crisis. The climate crisis and its impacts both reflect and exacerbate existing, deep-running inequalities between countries and among communities. It is indicative of how entrenched inequalities stemming from deeply unjust global power relations and societal structures compound to further restrain access to resources and opportunity. Addressing this will require fundamental shifts in distribution of resources, voice, and decision-making power among countries and across societies.

II. INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN THE CLIMATE CRISES AND SHRH

A) Impacts of the climate crisis on SRHR

The climate crisis has devastating impacts on the realization of human rights. It adversely affects enjoyment of a wide range of human rights, including the rights to health, food, water and sanitation, a healthy environment, self-determination, and development.[12] It has major impacts on the advancement of gender equality. Deeply ingrained, systemic discrimination means that women and girls are at a higher risk of experiencing harmful effects of the climate crisis.[13] Where women and girls experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, such as on account of their ethnicity, disability or migrant status, their vulnerability is heightened even more.[14] Many of the adverse impacts women and girls may suffer in the context of the climate crisis relate to their sexual and reproductive health and rights. The climate crisis can affect realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights in a range of ways. At a quite practical level, the climate crisis can impede access to sexual and reproductive health services. Where critical infrastructure, such as clinics and roads, is destroyed in extreme weather events, this can prevent people from accessing health services or make them unavailable.[15] In humanitarian response work, sexual and reproductive health services are often under-funded and under-prioritised.[16] Even where services are available and within reach, women, girls, and marginalized communities may be unable to access them due to existing gender-related and other barriers that are heightened during crisis.[17] Where sexual and reproductive health services are unavailable, maternal morbidity and mortality and other adverse health outcomes increase. Lack of access to clean and safe water, such as in the aftermath of extreme weather events or due to increasing water scarcity as a result of climate change,[18] can also pose a major impediment. Clean water is critical for ensuring provision of safe and quality sexual and reproductive health services, including during pregnancy and childbirth and for the administration of certain contraceptive methods. Lack of adequate sanitation facilities and water points in safe locations also increases the risk of sexual and gender-based violence and affects management of menstrual health.[19] The climate crisis can have a range of harmful impacts on maternal health. Recent research, focused on the United States, found significant associations between air pollution and heat exposure related to climate change and risk to pregnancy outcomes, including preterm birth, low birth weight, and stillbirth.[20] Black women were found to be at a higher risk of adverse outcomes than white women, illustrating how exposure to multiple forms of discrimination exacerbates vulnerability.[21] Maternal

health can further be affected by saline contamination of drinking water as a result of saltwater intrusion from rising sea levels.[22] Increased salt intake can lead to a number of adverse pregnancy and maternal health outcomes, including preterm births and maternal deaths.[23]

The climate crisis can increase the incidence of sexual and gender-based violence. Risks of sexual and gender-based violence are heightened during humanitarian crises and in times of displacement.[24] Both can be expected to increase as a result of more severe and frequent extreme weather events and the slow onset effects of the climate crisis, such as sea level rise. Child, early and forced marriages are also more likely to take place in times of crisis and displacement.[25] The climate crisis may further pose particular risks for the rights and health of people with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions, and sex characteristics. Due to their frequent marginalization, sexual and gender minorities are often more severely affected by disasters associated with natural and other hazards.[26] A neglect of their needs in disaster risk reduction policies and practices can further compound their vulnerability.[27] Continued criminalization of same-sex sexual activity in various jurisdictions presents a major barrier to the needs of sexual and gender minorities being acknowledged and addressed.[28]

B) SRHR in climate change adaptation and resilience

Sexual and reproductive health and rights should be recognized as an important element of climate change adaptation and resilience. Sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical for advancing gender equality, health, and well-being and for overcoming marginalization and thus for strengthening individuals' and communities' resilience and capacity to adapt to the climate crisis. Inequalities and marginalization are key factors in heightening vulnerability to the impacts of climate change.[29] Addressing gender inequality and other forms of marginalization is therefore also crucial to reducing vulnerability and increasing resilience to climate change and an important element of climate change adaptation.[30] Advancement of gender equality further strengthens the capacity of women, girls, and marginalized communities to participate in the development and implementation of measures for climate change adaptation and mitigation, which in turn will increase their fairness, effectiveness, and sustainability.[31] Sexual and reproductive health and rights interventions are not only essential for health and well-being, but are also critical enablers of women's and girls' access to opportunities across social, economic, and political life, where current gender gaps are stark.[32] Unintended pregnancies, complications in pregnancy and childbirth, unsafe abortions, sexual and gender-based violence, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, and reproductive cancers all are major impediments to the health and well-being of women and girls.[33] Addressing these through quality, accessible sexual and reproductive health service provision and advancement of sexual and reproductive rights is critical for promoting the health of women and girls and for enabling their full and equal participation in all aspects of life. Accordingly, sexual and reproductive health and rights should be an important consideration in measures aimed at enhancing resilience to both the slow onset impacts of the climate crisis and its more immediate effects. With extreme weather events increasing in frequency and intensity as a result of climate change, disaster risk reduction is an important component of climate change adaptation,[34] which sexual and reproductive health and rights should form an integral part of. Sexual and reproductive health and rights are critical for reducing vulnerability to the effects of crises.[35] Where rights are upheld before disasters occur, they are less likely to be violated during disasters and after they have taken place.[36] Advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights and, in turn, gender equality requires availability of a broad package of sexual and reproductive health and rights services and information, which should include contraceptive services; maternal and newborn care; safe abortion care; prevention

and treatment of HIV and AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections; comprehensive sexuality education; prevention, detection, and counselling for sexual and gender-based violence; prevention, detection, and treatment of infertility and cervical cancer; and counselling and care for sexual health and well-being.[37] Advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights also requires interventions beyond the health sector to address the structural barriers – embedded in social norms, laws, and policies – that prevent individuals from realizing their sexual and reproductive health and rights.[38] It further requires placing particular focus on the needs of marginalized groups, including through addressing the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that prevent them from realizing their rights. Recognizing the potential for multiple gains in health outcomes, climate change adaptation and resilience measures should seek to integrate a broad range of sexual and reproductive health and rights interventions, rather than focus only on some aspects of it, such as contraceptive services.

C) Contraception as a strategy for Climate Change Mitigation

Different stakeholders have pointed to contraception as an important intervention for climate change mitigation. Project Drawdown, for example, includes family planning alongside girls' education among the top 10 of its climate solutions.[39] The argument is that contraception will reduce fertility, which will lower population growth, which in turn will lead to decreased levels of greenhouse gas emissions. The predominant focus of such narratives – explicitly or implied – is women and girls in lower income countries, where rates of fertility are comparatively high.[40][41] Rhetoric and actions suggesting curbs on the fertility of women and girls as a solution for social and environmental ills have a long and dangerous history and still manifest today. Policies and practices driven by a desire to stem population growth have led to countless human rights violations.[42] The International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 marked an important shift away from earlier population-focused objectives to a broader sexual and reproductive health and rights agenda, grounded in individual human rights.[43] The urgency of the climate crisis must not serve as justification for harmful and coercive population control narratives, policies, and practices. Mitigation of climate change requires addressing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, particularly in high-income countries, where per capita levels of greenhouse gas emissions far exceed those in lower income groups.[44][45] Promotion of contraception as a solution for climate change instrumentalizes women's and girls' bodies, may lead to violations of their sexual and reproductive rights and bodily autonomy and places emphasis and responsibility for tackling the climate crisis on those least responsible for contributing to it but most severely affected by its impacts. It is a deeply unjust and harmful distraction from countries' responsibilities to address the structural drivers of the climate crisis.

III. Recommendations on the topic of the climate crisis and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

1. A Strengthen evidence base on the interlinkages between SRHR and the climate crisis

There is a need for a stronger evidence base on the interlinkages between sexual and reproductive health and rights and the climate crisis. More and better evidence is needed on how the climate crisis – and responses to it – may negatively affect the realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights, as well as on how sexual and reproductive health and rights may positively contribute to a strengthening of the adaptive capacity and resilience of individuals and communities to the effects of the climate crisis. In both areas, more attention should be paid to all elements of sexual and reproductive health and rights rather than just specific aspects of it, such as contraception.

2. SRHR as critical to climate change adaptation and resilience

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are crucial for advancing gender equality, health, and well-being and for overcoming marginalization. They therefore play a critical role in strengthening individuals' and communities' resilience and capacity to adapt to the effects of the climate crisis. Individuals and communities need to be supported to adapt to the impacts of the climate crisis through sexual and reproductive health service delivery in settings affected by the climate crisis, including through humanitarian action and service delivery points at community level and in remote locations, so as to ensure that marginalized and under-served groups are not left behind.

3. A focus on Human Rights and Gender Equality

Responses to the climate crisis must be grounded in a human rights-based approach and seek to alleviate rather than reinforce existing inequalities. The principle of gender equality, elimination of harmful gender norms as well as gender and other inequalities exacerbated by the climate crisis should be key considerations in climate processes and should be mainstreamed across all efforts to address the climate crisis. The promotion of contraception as a strategy for climate change mitigation raises concerns both from a gender equality and a human rights perspective.

4. Partnerships and space for civil society

Effective and responsive climate action requires the meaningful participation of civil society working with communities affected by the climate crisis, including women's and youth groups as well as groups working with and representative of marginalized populations, in the development and implementation of policies on climate change mitigation, adaptation, and resilience at all levels, ranging from international to national and local processes. Civil society plays a critical role in mobilizing support for ambitious action on the climate crisis and partnerships should be built among organizations and stakeholders from the climate and environmental space with feminists, young people, indigenous people, human rights and other groups that support a human right-based approach to climate action.

5. Mitigation of climate change and environmental impacts

The climate crisis poses a major threat for sustainable development and the realization of human rights, including sexual and reproductive health and rights. In order to mitigate climate change and reduce its harmful effects, greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced to sustainable levels. Member States, especially high-emission countries must take decisive action to cut their greenhouse gas emissions and high-income countries should further provide suitable levels of funding and other forms of support to low- and middle-income countries to respond and adapt to the climate crisis. All actors, including CSOs, should address and reduce their own carbon footprints and environmental impacts through environmentally sustainable organizational policies and practices.

[1] This briefing has been adapted from IPPF's position paper on the climate crisis and sexual and reproductive health and rights, which is available here: <https://www.ippf.org/resource/ippf-position-paper-climate-crisis-and-sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-rights>.

Please consult the position paper for further details and analysis.

[2] IPCC, 2021: Summary for Policymakers. In: Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Masson-Delmotte, V., P. Zhai, A. Pirani, S. L. Connors, C. Péan, S. Berger, N. Caud, Y. Chen, L. Goldfarb, M. I. Gomis, M. Huang, K. Leitzell, E. Lonnoy, J.B.R. Matthews, T. K. Maycock, T. Waterfield, O. Yelekçi, R. Yu and B. Zhou (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. In Press.

[3] See IPCC (2014) Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. [4] Ibid.

[5] See Starrs, AM, Ezeh, AC, Barker, G et al (2018) Accelerate progress – sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission. The Lancet. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30293-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30293-9)

[6] See World Bank data on CO2 emissions (metric tons per capita). Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC>.

[7] See Oxfam (2020) Confronting carbon inequality – Putting climate justice at the heart of the COVID-19 recovery. Available at:

<https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/621052/mb-confronting-carbon-inequality-210920-en.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

[8] See IPCC (2014) Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report.

[9] See Rigaud, KK, de Sherbinin, A, Jones, B, Bergmann, J, Clement, V et al (2018) Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration. Washington, DC: The World Bank. Available at: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29461/WBG_ClimateChange_Final.pdf?sequence=18&isAllowed=y.

[10] See IPCC (2014) Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report.

[11] Ibid; see also IPCC (2014) Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part A: Global and Sectoral Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Field, CB, VR Barros, DJ Dokken, KJ Mach, MD Mastrandrea, TE Bilir, M Chatterjee, KL Ebi, YO Estrada, RC Genova, B Girma, ES Kissel, AN Levy, S MacCracken, PR Mastrandrea, and LL White (eds)]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at:

https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIAR5-PartA_FINAL.pdf.

[12] See United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures (2019) Safe Climate – A Report of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment. A/74/161. Available at: https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/30158/Safe_Climate_Report.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

[13] See United Nations Human Rights Council (2019) Analytical study on gender-responsive climate action for the full and effective enjoyment of the rights of women – Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. A/HRC/41/26. Available at: <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/26>. [14] Ibid. [15] Ibid.

[16] See Barot, S (2017) In a State of Crisis: Meeting the Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of Women in Humanitarian Situations. Guttmacher Policy Review 2017; 20. Available at: https://www.guttmacher.org/sites/default/files/article_files/gpr2002417_1.pdf.

[17] See Lafrenière, J, Sweetman, C, and Thylin, T. Introduction: gender, humanitarian action and crisis response, Gender & Development 2019; 27, 2, pp. 187–201. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2019.1634332>.

[18] See IPCC (2014) Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report.

[19] See International Women's Health Coalition, Marie Stopes International, IPPF et al (2019) A shared agenda – Exploring links between water, sanitation, hygiene, and sexual and reproductive health and rights in sustainable development. Available at: <https://www.ippf.org/sites/default/files/2019-09/A%20Shared%20Agenda.pdf>.

[20] See Bekkar, B, Pacheco, S, Basu, R et al (2020) Association of Air Pollution and Heat Exposure With Preterm Birth, Low Birth Weight, and Stillbirth in the US – A Systematic Review. JAMA Netw Open 2020; 3, 6: e208243. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1001%2Fjamanetworkopen.2020.8243>.

[21] Ibid. See also Flavelle, C (2020) Climate Change Tied to Pregnancy Risks, Affecting Black Mothers Most. New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/climate/climate-change-pregnancy-study.html>.

[22] See Khan, AE, Ireson, A, Kovats, S et al. Drinking Water Salinity and Maternal Health in Coastal Bangladesh: Implications of Climate Change. Environ Health Perspect 2011; 119, pp. 1328–1332. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1289/ehp.1002804>. [23] Ibid.

[24] See UNFPA (2015) The State of World Population 2015: Shelter from the storm – A transformative agenda for women and girls in a crisis-prone world. Available at:

https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/State_of_World_Population_2015_EN.pdf.

[25] Ibid.

[26] See Gaillard, JC, Gorman-Murray, A and Fordham, M. Sexual and gender minorities in disaster. *Gender, Place & Culture* 2017; 24, 1, pp. 18–26. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2016.1263438>. [27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] See IPCC (2014) Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report [30] Ibid.

[31] See UNFCCC Conference of the Parties (2019) Gender and climate change – Enhanced Lima work programme on gender and its gender action plan. FCCC/CP/2019/L.3. Available at: https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/cp2019_L03E.pdf. See

further United Nations Human Rights Council (2019) Analytical study on gender-responsive climate action for the full and effective enjoyment of the rights of women – Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

[32] See IPPF (2015) Sexual and reproductive health and rights – the key to gender equality and women’s empowerment. Available at: https://www.ippf.org/sites/default/files/2020_gender_equality_report_web.pdf

[33] See Starrs et al (2018) Accelerate progress – sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission

[34] See IPCC (2014) Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report

[35] See UNFPA (2015) The State of World Population 2015: Shelter from the storm – A transformative agenda for women and girls in a crisis-prone world.

[36] See Arrow (2017) Sexual and reproductive health and rights: key to building disaster resilience. Available at: <https://arrow.org.my/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Regional-Brief-on-SRHR-Key-to-Building-Disaster-Resilience-Web-version.pdf>.

[37] See Starrs et al (2018) Accelerate progress – sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission [38] Ibid.

[39] See Project Drawdown (2020) The Drawdown Review 2020 – Climate Solutions for a New Decade. Available at: <https://drawdown.org/drawdown-review>; see also Project Drawdown website, Solutions, Health and Education:

<https://www.drawdown.org/solutions/health-and-education>.

[40] Projections for future population growth vary.

[41] See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019). World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights. Available at:

https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019_Highlights.pdf. See further Vollset, SE et al (2020) Fertility, mortality, migration, and population scenarios for 195 countries and territories from 2017 to 2100: a forecasting analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study. *The Lancet* 2020; 396, 10258, pp. 1285–1306.

Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30677-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30677-2).

[42] See Pizzarossa, LB (2018) Here to Stay: The Evolution of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in International Human Rights Law. [43] Ibid.