



Climate change and women's, children's and adolescents' health

Background document for COP27

The climate crisis is a health crisis. It is the [single biggest health threat facing humanity](#) and disproportionately affects women, children and adolescents (WCA). Climate change has reversed progress in global health over the past five decades and exacerbated inequalities. Individuals and communities who are already facing inequities and marginalization due to gender, ethnicity and low income are [highly vulnerable to climate change](#), as well as people living in humanitarian and fragile settings prone to drought and other climate change impacts. These vulnerabilities are caused by historical patterns of inequity linked to colonialism, poverty, limited access to basic services and resources, violent conflict, and high levels of climate-sensitive livelihoods.

PMNCH, the world's largest alliance for women's, children's and adolescents' health (WCAH) and well-being, with over 1,300 partner organizations across its 10 constituencies, is advocating for countries to **prioritize gender and youth-sensitive climate policies that enhance the climate resilience of women, children and adolescents, and that meaningfully include them in decision making.**

THE IMPACT OF CLIMATE CHANGE ON WCAH

Climate change is not gender neutral, it is already exacerbating the vulnerability of women and girls across the world.

- Climate change disproportionately affects women and girls due to systemic gender inequalities. Women's and girls' lower socio-economic status diminishes their ability to cope with climate change.
 - Women represent 70% of the world's poor and are highly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. ([OHCHR](#))
 - 80% of people displaced by climate change are women. ([OHCHR, 2022](#))
 - Women and girls are more likely to be killed during climate-induced natural disasters than men as they are often excluded from learning survival skills, such as swimming and climbing. For example, in the 2004 Asian Tsunami, women and girls represented nearly 80% of deaths. ([Plan International, 2016](#))
 - The recent catastrophic floods in Pakistan have affected at least 650,000 pregnant women and girls, with the majority lacking access to healthcare facilities and unable to give birth at home, with almost one million homes destroyed. ([UNFPA, 2022](#))
 - Burning of local biomass for household energy production has a disproportionate impact on women who perform household work and are more likely to suffer from indoor air pollution, leading to respiratory and cardiovascular health impacts. ([UNFPA, 2021](#))
 - During periods of drought or flooding leading to severe food insecurity, women are found to be more likely to be stunted or skipping meals to adapt to the climate shock. In addition, women and girls, often responsible for collecting water and food, must travel longer distances forcing them to skip school and having a higher chance to be exposed to physical and sexual violence. ([GCHA, 2016](#) ; [Sorensen, 2018](#))
 - Pressure on families due to climate-induced poverty also increases the chances of girl child marriage to secure resources. ([UNFPA, 2021](#))

Increases in temperatures, climate-related disasters, and food and water insecurity all directly and indirectly impact maternal, newborn and child health.

- The changing climate affects maternal and newborn health directly via discrete environmental disasters (e.g., wildfire, extreme heat, hurricane, flood and drought) and indirectly through changes in the natural and social environments.



- Climate-related disasters are associated with increased risk of gestational complications, pregnancy loss, restricted fetal growth, low birthweight, preterm birth, selected delivery and newborn complications. ([Ha, 2022](#))
- High temperatures have also been linked to other serious pregnancy outcomes such as premature rupture of membranes, gestational cardiovascular events, gestational hypertension and preeclampsia, birth defects and neonatal mortality. Women responsible for subsistence farming and essential household chores such as fetching water or food are even more at risk as they continue working beyond their heat tolerance limits to avoid losing income. ([Ha, 2022](#))
- Women with prenatal hurricane experience have greater risk of hypertensive disorders of pregnancy, labour and birth complications, C-section and newborn complications. ([Ha, 2022](#))
- The climate crisis is a child rights crisis. There is no single country which provides the conditions to support children to live healthy lives today or provide an environment fit for their future. ([WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission](#))
 - Under current emission reduction pledge scenarios, a person born in 2020 is going to experience a two- to sevenfold increase in weather events during their lifetime compared to people born in the 1960s. ([Thiery et al, 2020](#))
 - Close to 90% of the burden of disease attributable to climate change is borne by children under the age of 5. ([UNICEF, 2021](#))
 - Every year, over half a million children under 5 die from air pollution-related causes. Even more will suffer lasting damage to their developing brains and lungs. ([UNICEF, 2021](#))
 - Pneumonia remains the leading infectious cause of death among children under 5, killing approximately 2,400 children a day. Child deaths caused by pneumonia are strongly linked to undernutrition, lack of safe water and sanitation, indoor air pollution and inadequate access to health care – all challenges that are exacerbated by climate change. ([UNICEF, 2021](#))

Climate-induced extreme weather events impact sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

- Extreme weather events disrupt access to essential SRHR services by damaging or destroying facilities, infrastructure and medical supply chains, putting many women and girls at greater risk due to having to walk longer distances to access services or not being able to access them at all.
 - Reduced access to contraception and safe abortion services increases maternal mortality, as well as sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. ([UNFPA, 2021](#))
 - For example, in Bangladesh, increasing incidences of flooding have led to low stocks of contraceptives at health facilities in rural and remote areas. ([Women Deliver, 2021](#))
 - In the Philippines, Typhoon Haiyan destroyed many health facilities in 2013, which left pregnant women without access to antenatal care for a month, with many women having to walk longer distances to regain access to services. ([Women Deliver, 2021](#))
- Evidence shows that gender-based violence increases following extreme weather events. After two tropical cyclones hit Vanuatu in 2011, Vanuatu reported a 300% increase in new domestic violence cases. ([UN Women, 2014](#))

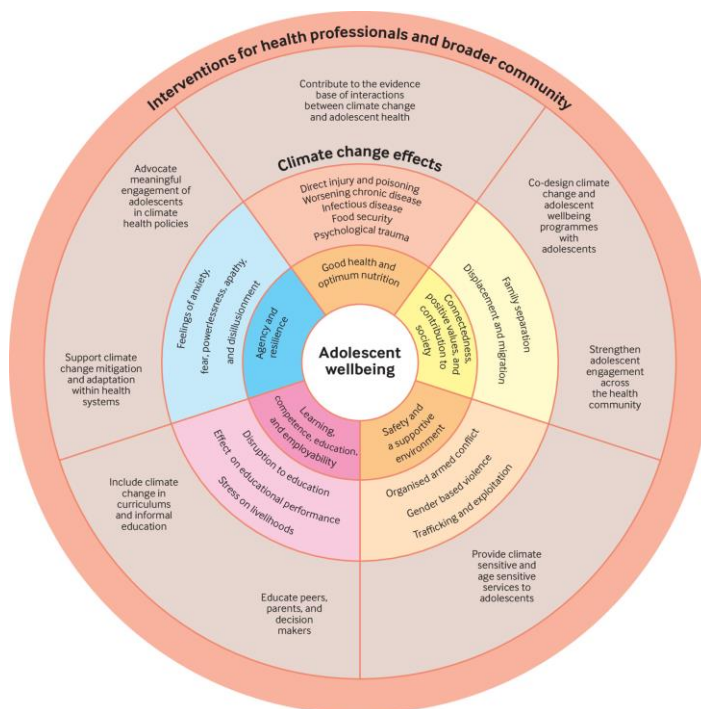
Climate change is a threat multiplier and the greatest hazard for adolescents' and youth's well-being. Young people will inherit the burden of climate change, despite having contributed the least to climate change.

- New evidence from the [BMJ Collection on Adolescent Well-being](#) shows that climate change threatens all five domains of adolescent well-being – good health and optimum nutrition; connectedness, positive values, and contributions to society; safety and supportive environments; learning, education, and employability; and agency and resilience. ([McGushin et al, 2022](#))
- The current generation of young people is the largest ever, with 1.8 billion people aged 10-24 years worldwide, representing nearly 24% of the global population. Almost every young person

in the world is exposed to at least one climate and environmental hazard, shock or stress such as heatwaves, cyclones, air pollution, flooding and water scarcity. ([UNICEF, 2021](#))

- Global undernourishment rates have risen amongst adolescents.
- School closures and destruction of infrastructure during extreme weather events have reduced the access to education.
- Higher pollen levels, longer pollen seasons, worsening air quality and increasing thunderstorms all increase the risk of acute asthma attacks, the most common chronic disease among adolescents. ([McGushin et al, 2022](#))
- Adolescents experience significant increases in rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression following a climate related disaster. These outcomes are major risk factors for suicide, the third leading cause of death in older adolescents aged 15-19. ([McGushin et al, 2022](#))
- In a recent [global survey](#) of 10,000 young people aged 16-25 across 10 countries, almost 60% of young people were extremely worried about climate change. With over 75% stating that because of climate change the future is frightening.
- 1 billion people under 18 years old reside in countries that are at extremely high risks of climate change, such as in already humanitarian and fragile settings, small islands developing states and low-income countries, meaning that their survival is significantly threatened. ([UNICEF, 2021](#))
- Many economic models evaluating the costs of climate change have significantly undervalued the future impacts of climate change and therefore the lives of young people and future generations, who are the most threatened by the impacts of climate change. ([Stern, 2021](#))

Figure: Adolescent wellbeing framework adapted to include related climate change effects and interventions ([McGushin et al, 2022](#))



PUTTING WOMEN, CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS AT THE CENTRE OF CLIMATE RESPONSES

Despite the impact borne by women, children and adolescents, WCAH is not being integrated in climate policies which lack gender- and youth-targeted approaches.

- Current climate policies still lack concrete gender-sensitive measures.



- UNFPA analyses show that out of 50 climate plans or [Nationally Determined Contributions \(NDCs\)](#), only six made direct references to SRHR. The most cited area of SRHR was maternal health, with gender-based violence referenced in only one NDC. ([UNFPA, 2021](#))
- Many aspects of SRHR are superficially referenced in climate policies, including gender equality and participation. Few countries have more substantive and concrete gender components in their NDCs and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs). ([NAP Global Network and Women Deliver, 2021](#))
- National climate and environmental policies and plans inclusive of adolescents and young people are extremely limited, and the social sectors that concern them most are often overlooked in decision-making. ([UNICEF, 2021](#))
 - Only 34% of 103 countries with new or revised NDCs, are youth sensitive.
 - Fewer than 19% of the NDCs consider children and young people as rights-holders. This means only 1 in 5 include references to child rights or intergenerational justice and equity in a meaningful way, for example, as part of its vision, a crosscutting approach, element or pillar on which the NDC is built.
 - Only 27% of disaster risk reduction commitments are youth sensitive.

At COP27, countries should prioritize women's, children's and adolescents' health and well-being by integrating gender-sensitive and youth-targeted interventions in climate responses.

- No matter how much countries reduce their emissions, and even if we reach the target of 1.5°C, the consequences of climate change on the health and well-being of the most vulnerable, especially women and the youngest generations will be profound. Adaptation policies must therefore be developed to build their resilience.
- At COP27, it is critical that governments and other stakeholders prioritize the needs of women, children, and adolescents by committing to:
 - Recognize women, children and young people as rights holders and prioritize their needs in climate policies, including NDCs and NAPs;
 - Increase investments in climate change and other sectors that address the social and environmental determinants of health and reduce WCA's vulnerability to climate-related health risks. This includes developing gender- and youth-sensitive commitments and investments in multiple sectors such as education, health, water, sanitation, food security and nutrition, energy, social protection, disaster risk reduction and information systems;
 - Adopt intersectional approaches that recognize multiple forms of discrimination to WCA, including in relation to gender and sexuality, to ensure just adaptations and resilient communities;
 - Conduct vulnerability and adaptation assessments at the population level, specifically for women, newborns, children and adolescents;
 - Define targets to building climate resilient health systems and infrastructure, including integrated monitoring systems with targeted public health messaging;
 - Ensure universal access to primary healthcare and strengthen mental health support for WCA;
 - Recognize, support and meaningfully engage WCA and health professionals, who are key actors in the climate movement, including in monitoring, reviewing the progress and deciding on appropriate remedy and action with regards to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities.



JOIN THE 1.8 BILLION CAMPAIGN IN THE LEAD UP TO THE GLOBAL FORUM FOR ADOLESCENTS

Young people are uniting to demand more youth-targeted policies, services and financing, including in the context of climate responses. Meaningful engagement of adolescents and young people is critical, urgent and should be non-negotiable.

- Many countries are lagging in prioritizing tailored national policies and programmes with matching investments targeted to the needs of adolescents and young people, including in the context of climate change.
- Investing in young people's future now will yield a triple benefit: today, into adulthood and for the next generation.
- PMNCH is launching a global campaign, the [1.8 Billion campaign](#) to mobilize political and financial commitments for this important population group.
- The Global Forum for Adolescents is part of this larger global campaign, where partners from more than 130 countries will unite through national events and a two-day virtual mainstage in October 2023.
- All young people and partners are invited to be part of the Forum and campaign to spark long-term action and lasting change for adolescent well-being.
- With less than eight years left to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and progress lagging far behind, countries must develop evidence-based policies, substantive strategies, and costed implementation plans for concrete, funded programmes to improve young people's well-being based on intentional multisectoral action.
- The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its pledge to "leave no one behind" will not be achieved if urgent attention is not paid to the impact of the climate crisis on adolescents' and young people's health and well-being.

Putting women's, children's, and adolescents' health at the centre of climate responses is essential for delivering on the promise of leaving no one behind and must be one of the key goals we work towards as we race against time to achieve the SDGs.

Hashtag: #PartnersForChange #1Point8 #Adolescents2030

To spread the word about the Global Forum for Adolescents download the social media assets here: <https://express.adobe.com/page/Mz1lKqsyiLiww/>

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