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Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Women and Girls in the Context of Climate Mobility in Africa

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When women are displaced, they are at greater risk of violence, including sexual violence.

Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

BACKGROUND

Human-induced climate change is arguably the largest and most pervasive threat to the natural environment and human societies the world has ever faced, and the poorest countries are paying the heaviest price. The adverse impacts of climate change are exacerbating existing inequalities and creating new vulnerabilities among women and girls in Africa. Environmental degradation, including climate change, aggravates pre-existing patterns of discrimination and violence against women and girls. This is because climate change acts as a threat multiplier and its impacts are felt more severely by those already on the margins. For women and girls, human mobility that occurs in the context of climate change is also an indirect cause of different forms of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Violence against women and girls includes any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering, including threats, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty.¹ To date, the impacts of climate change on violence against women and girls have been little discussed. However, there is emerging evidence that climate change is a contributing factor to worsening SGBV, and that this should be a common concern.² According to Reem Alsalem, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and Girls, its Causes and Consequences, 'Violence against women also intersects with sociopolitical and economic phenomena, including armed conflict, displacement and resource scarcity, which results in the feminization of vulnerability'.³

Acknowledging the nexus between climate change and SGBV is particularly important for women and girls in African countries, because while violence against women is a global phenomenon, it disproportionately affects women with multifaceted vulnerabilities, such as those living in poverty, members of indigenous groups, persons with disabilities and those who are displaced or on the move.

ISSUES

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE, HUMAN MOBILITY AND SGBV

Emerging evidence indicates that the adverse impacts of climate change exacerbate all types of gender-based violence, including physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence. In several parts of Africa, the combined impacts of environmental degradation, scarce natural resources and

¹ See UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, UNGA Resolution 48/104 (1993) Art 1.

² Reem Alsalem, 'Violence against women and girls in the context of the climate crisis, including environmental degradation and related disaster risk mitigation and response', Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, UN Doc A/77/136 (2002)

<<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/a77136-violence-against-women-and-girls-context-climate-crisis-including>>.

³ Ibid.

conflicts have increased human mobility and further exposed women and children to SGBV.⁴ For example, in Darfur, low rainfall and recurrent droughts have led to food insecurity and scarcity of natural resources. Women and girls who are forced to walk long distances to collect water are at higher risk of SGBV. In Malawi, young girls are forced into marriage due to shortages of food which are a result of climate change in the country. Women in Uganda experience domestic violence, child marriage, rape, female genital mutilation (FGM), and other harmful practices during droughts and prolonged dry spells. Several countries along the Sahel and West Africa are experiencing the impacts of climate change and the consequent aggravation of existing vulnerabilities. While not all these risks are climate-induced, many of them are, and the challenges of climate change serve to aggravate pre-existing social and geographical vulnerabilities.

The risks of SGBV are especially pronounced for women and girls who move in the context of climate change, due to their separation from support networks and the increased risks of violence during travel. The UN Commission on the Status of Women has acknowledged that climate change, environmental degradation and more frequent and intense disasters caused by natural hazards often result in the loss of homes and livelihoods, and the displacement of women and girls and their families and communities. It has also recognized that, as a result of displacement (including protracted displacement), women and girls face specific challenges, including separation from support networks, homelessness, and increased risk of all forms of violence, including SGBV.⁵

A 2023 report by the Africa Climate Mobility Initiative (ACMI) notes that whether women stay or move, the risk for women worsens with climate disruption.⁶ Forced displacement leaves women and girls disproportionately vulnerable, and that women and girl refugees, returnees, and internally displaced persons, face specific risks, including SGBV and other human rights violations.

Under the right conditions, human mobility can be an effective adaptation strategy in response to climate variability. However, human mobility that occurs in the context of climate change may also be an indirect cause of different forms of SGBV. This calls for policy makers and other stakeholders to begin discussing and addressing this issue at the global, regional, and domestic levels, including within existing intergovernmental mechanisms, and regional policies and strategies.

In 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) included consideration of gender-based violence for the first time in its 6th Assessment Report. The report notes the risk of gender-based violence becoming an even bigger problem if it is not addressed in the context of disasters caused by natural hazards. It highlights structural inequalities, including unequal access to land and livelihood activities, as well as the gendered experiences of violence during and after extreme weather

⁴ See Laura Freeman, 'Environmental Change, Migration, and Conflict in Africa: A Critical Examination of the Interconnections' (2017) 26(4) *Journal of Environment & Development* 351-374.

⁵ UN Commission on the Status of Women, 'Agreed conclusions: 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' (2022) UN Doc E/CN.6/2022/L.7, para 26.

⁶ African Climate Mobility Initiative, 'African Shifts: The Africa Climate Mobility Report: Addressing Climate-Forced Migration & Displacement' (2023) <<https://africa.climate-mobility.org/about>>.

events, including increased child marriage, domestic violence, harassment, sexual violence, and trafficking.⁷

Although there is no dedicated international legal instrument addressing climate change and SGBV against women and girls, there are a number of international legal instruments that implicitly address the relationship between climate change and human rights, and the rights of women affected by environmental degradation and displacement.⁸ For example, Article 4 of the 2003 Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol) calls on states parties to enact and enforce laws to prohibit all forms of violence against women, including unwanted or forced sex, and to identify the causes and consequences of violence against women and take appropriate measures to prevent and eliminate such violence. Article 11 of the Maputo Protocol further obliges states parties to protect asylum seeking women, refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons, against all forms of violence, rape and other forms of sexual exploitation.

However, because the nexus between SGBV and climate change as an issue is only just beginning to gain momentum, there is sparse data and literature as regards the role of climate change as a factor that exacerbates SGBV among women and girls in situations of mobility – whether voluntary or forced, and whether short- or long-term. Increasing awareness of the impact of the climate crisis on women and girls has not yet sufficiently influenced policies and discussions regarding climate mobility at the global, regional or national levels.

This reflects a broader lack of consideration of gender, and particularly SGBV, in the climate change and disaster spheres. For example, according to Alsalem,

In the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, States are invited to collect data on disaster impacts for both men and women disaggregated by hazard, income, sex, age, and disability. However, among the 38 indicators of the Framework, only 2 target indicators, namely on mortality and affected people, are gender-specific. Around 128 countries did not start reporting for these indicators in 2021, and data on the nexus between climate change and violence against women and girls remain scarce and abstract.⁹

MITIGATION AND ADAPTATION STRATEGIES – PROTECTING WOMEN WHETHER THEY MOVE OR STAY

Under the right conditions, human mobility can be an effective adaptation strategy in response to climate variability. However, human mobility that occurs in the context of climate change may also be an indirect cause of different forms of SGBV. This calls for policy makers and other stakeholders to begin discussing and addressing these issues at the global, regional, and domestic levels, including within existing intergovernmental mechanisms, and regional policies and strategies.

Climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies that anticipate and plan for climate mobility are urgently needed to strengthen the resilience of women and girls. The African Union Climate Change

⁷ IPCC: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2022), 1088

⁸ See 1979 *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW).

⁹ Alsalem (n 4).

and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022-2032) is a good starting point.¹⁰ It recognizes that movement or migration is an adaptation strategy and that adaptation actions must consider age and gender in their application. It also highlights the need to include gender dimensions of climate adaptation at all levels. However, it includes no specific reference to SGBV as one of those vulnerabilities that women and girls face.

Regional climate change strategies and action plans provide another opportunity to develop strategies that respond to SGBV risks for women and girls. The Commission on the Status of Women has highlighted the importance of utilizing regional conventions, instruments and initiatives and their follow-up mechanisms in addressing human mobility that occurs in the context of climate change.¹¹ These instruments and initiatives should guide states in how to safely, ethically and effectively protect women that are vulnerable to SGBV in the context of climate mobility.

Existing sub-regional climate change policies and frameworks in Africa generally acknowledge human mobility as a responses to climate change, and recognise gender as a relevant consideration. In addition, several national climate change policies include National Action Plans on Gender and Climate Change. However, none of these explicitly addresses SGBV nor includes strategies to protect women and girls against SGBV during human mobility. For example, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)'s Regional Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan 2023-2030 focuses on empowerment and equality in its consideration of gender, but includes nothing at all on SGBV.¹²

More research is required to better understand the nexus between climate change, human mobility and violence against women and girls in Africa. Currently, national surveys on the drivers of SGBV rarely account for climate change or displacement as a factor. Comprehensive mapping of these factors would help policy makers and other stakeholders to develop and direct funds to appropriate response mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Women and girls who move in the context of climate change require responses tailored to their particular needs and the specific risks they face. In Africa, better responses are required at both regional, sub-regional and national levels. The AU and the relevant regional blocs within Africa should intensify their commitment to gender equality and the prevention of SGBV, and anchor the response to climate change in human rights. To begin this commitment the following recommendations are made:

1. Regional and sub-regional climate change policies and guidelines should integrate SGBV prevention and intervention strategies within the broader framework of climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies.
2. African states should begin to integrate SGBV protection and intervention strategies into their climate change response strategies, including mitigation and adaptation response strategies,

¹⁰ 'African Union Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022-2032)' <<https://au.int/en/documents/20220628/african-union-climate-change-and-resilient-development-strategy-and-action-plan>>.

¹¹ UN Commission on the Status of Women (n 9) para 5.

¹² 'IGAD Regional Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (2023-2030)' <<https://www.icpac.net/publications/igad-regional-climate-change-strategy-and-action-plan-2023-2030/>>.

Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), and Gender and Climate Action Plans.

3. The African Union and other relevant stakeholders should encourage and initiate the collation of disaggregated data that explore the nexus between climate change, human mobility and SGBV.
4. At the national level, data relating to climate change, human mobility and SGBV should fully disaggregate the status of women and how this impacts their experience of SGBV. For example, national surveys relating to SGBV should include displacement (especially internal displacement) status.