

Weathering the Storm: Girls and Climate Change

children in
a changing
climate



Climate change poses the greatest risk to the most vulnerable members of society. For this reason, children pay a high price for climate change, often bearing the brunt of increases in hunger, disease, population displacements and resource conflicts. And recent research by Plan International in Bangladesh and Ethiopia¹ shows that girls are worse affected than boys.

- GIRLS are taken out of school, rather than boys, during extreme weather events, so that they can contribute to household income and help with domestic responsibilities. Many then do not return to complete their education.
- GIRLS report that they are often forced into taking work as domestic workers or agricultural labourers when their families are hit by crisis.
- GIRLS have to spend more time fetching water or firewood during drought periods due to increased scarcity of these resources.
- GIRLS report that they face a noticeable increase in early or forced marriages after floods and droughts, due to their families' inability to support daughters financially during these crisis periods.
- GIRLS suffer more sexual violence and harassment during and after disasters, often because they are separated from their families.



“During drought periods, we sell firewood. It takes an hour to collect the firewood and then another two hours to walk to Lalibela. And we go at 4.00am, even 3.00 am. And if we don’t manage to sell the firewood in the morning, we will have to stay in the market all day and it stops me from going to school.” Melkam, schoolgirl, 14 years, Lalibela, Ethiopia

“After cyclones, families think their condition is worse and send their daughters to get married. Almost 50 per cent of girls drop out of education because of early marriage. In remote villages, it is probably more 70 to 75 per cent.” Rejvi and Jhumu, Barguna, Bangladesh

“The cyclones are creating another dimension – migration – which creates its own problems such as trafficking. After Cyclones Sidr and Aila, there was a lot more trafficking due to economic problems. It’s a crisis period after cyclones.” South Asia Partnership, a local NGO, Barguna, Bangladesh

Girls and risk reduction

Women’s, youth and children’s groups are gaining recognition as important stakeholders in the climate change debate and more specifically, in programmes led by civil society on adaptation to climate change. But girls are almost always considered either ‘women’ or ‘children’ and their particular experiences are rarely acknowledged.

This means that girls voices are seldom heard, and they are excluded from taking part in risk reduction policies, planning and decision-making, and sharing information and resources. They are even excluded from activities which reduce a person’s risk: lifesaving skills such as swimming or tree climbing. In this way, they are less prepared for the impacts of climate change.

¹ Plan UK International conducted research in 2010 in the drought prone regions of Ethiopia and flood and cyclone prone regions of Bangladesh with girls aged 13 to 18 years, to record what girls felt about climate change. The report will be published in May 2011

Why are girls particularly significant?

Girls are not only excluded from the mechanisms of risk reduction. Their valuable contribution to the debate on climate change adaptation is also lost.

Evidence is widespread that investing in girls contributes significantly towards achieving better development results. Better-educated girls can access alternative more resilient livelihood opportunities and help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Not only do girls then have improved incomes for themselves and their children, but they can also more likely to enjoy an improved status, independence and increased decision-making within their households.



Photo: G.M.B. Akash/Panos Pictures

This pattern could also be seen in relation to adaptation to climate change. Investing in girls will help ensure that climate change adaptation activities help those most at risk from the impact of climate change and will also have the added benefit of addressing some of the root causes of vulnerability.

Girls facing climate change impacts are especially at risk and rely on adults for protection and support; but they are neither passive bystanders nor helpless victims. They have the potential to play an equal part with boys in the debate on adaptation to climate change. And both girls and boys should also be heard in discussions on intergenerational justice, security and development.

“I am interested in science and I want to be a maths or physics teacher. I want to be self-sufficient and live without fear and superstition. I don’t want to be a victim of early marriage or other problems.” Mahmuda, 16, Barguna, Bangladesh

Why should children be specifically involved in the debate on climate change?

Plan International’s child-centred disaster risk reduction work has seen that girls and boys show greater capacity than their parents to communicate risk information amongst their peers, neighbours and their community. Well educated and informed girls and boys in vulnerable communities are often better at raising awareness and taking action for adaptation than their parents. They also have a clearer appreciation of long term risks than their elders, who are usually more focused on short and medium term risks.

“We want our voice to be heard and we also want to hear recommendations on how to better our lives. Climate change is a top priority in the area, there has been a lot of deforestation and all the community are concerned about it.” Tigist, 16, Lasta District, Ethiopia

Plan has witnessed the disproportionately large impacts climate change has on children, specifically girls. It has also become aware of the contribution that children can and should be making to decision-making and action on adaptation to climate change. After all, they are the ones who have most at stake in the future.

Plan International recommends that governments:

1. Invest adaptation funds in education

- Help girls understand the hazards and risks they face, and ways to manage them. Education for both girls and boys on adaptation to climate change will insure a new generation of adults with greater adaptive capacity.
- Focus on equal completion of quality education for girls and boys that challenges gender stereotypes and promotes girls’ rights and gender equality.

2. Support girls to take an active role in the climate change debate.

- Girls, as well as boys, should be encouraged to take part in planning programmes and policies designed to reduce the impacts of climate change. Alongside boys, they should feel confident in offering astute, unbiased observations to their peers and policy makers both about the situation they are in and how it could be improved, and confident that these are acted upon.
- They should feel equally confident with boys that their views on climate change reach a wide audience and should be supported in planning, monitoring and implementation activities with adults, at local and national level.