



# CLIMATE CHANGE FUELS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS': HUMAN RIGHTS TO CLEAN, HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT.

As the 16 days of activism campaign ends, it remains fundamental to raise awareness about the triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution, biodiversity and ecosystems degradation which threatens women and girls' human rights to clean, healthy and sustainable environment: amplifying structural inequalities. It is, crucially a time to "Unite", renew our commitment and take ambitious actions to end violence against women and girls in all forms.

When the crisis of climate change, pollution, biodiversity and ecosystems degradation hits, women and girls suffer the most. The fight against triple planetary crisis is not only a struggle to keep our planet liveable but can be a direct cause of violence against women and girls. A clean, healthy and sustainable environment is an essential foundation for the realization of all human rights and a development trajectory that leaves no one behind. Some people call it the "new human right", but this is a right that has been ignored for a long time, as interlinkages between environmental and human rights issues have been recognized by experts and advocates for decades. These are also reflected in the just transition's movement.

On 28 July 2022, the United Nations General Assembly recognized that a clean, healthy and sustainable environment is a universal human right, along with the right to water and food (R2HE).

Climate change increases vulnerabilities and exacerbates inequalities, women are disproportionately vulnerable to the impact of climate change based on their roles, rights, and opportunities, which are defined by gender norms and socio-economic status. In the Gambia, like many countries in the region, the impacts of climate change, pollution, biodiversity and ecosystems degradation come in many guises; floods, droughts, massive increase of vector and water borne diseases, rapid desertification and coastal erosion, communities in coastal areas are extremely vulnerable to rising sea levels which impacts on Gambia's largest sectors—tourism and agriculture.

When bad harvests cause lack of food due to climate change, it is the women who reduce their food portions, despite the physical work they do. In the Gambia, women face low nutritional status at household level compared to men even though they are the main producers and processors of food and excessive workload when breastfeeding is a cause of malnutrition among mothers and young children. Some families resort to marrying off their daughters to better cope with food scarcity and poverty (Report on Marriage in Africa by The University of Pretoria, 2018). In families where men leave home to seek a living elsewhere, women and children are left to fend for themselves, which makes them vulnerable to violence and sexual exploitation.

There is pressure on women due to cultural expectations on women as care givers, for example in cases of water shortage due to severe droughts, women and girls are to travel increasingly long distances to locate safe water. School absenteeism among girls is associated to climate change, as girls in particular help their mothers with the household chores. When extreme weather conditions occur, the girls usually leave school to go and look for water or take on the responsibilities that their mother no longer has time for. When women have limited or no access to clean water for hygiene and sanitation purposes, it is hugely detrimental experience to women's lives and to their ability to fully enjoy their rights to menstruate in safety and dignity as women and communities become more vulnerable to communicable diseases. Extreme weather conditions, particularly droughts, flooding, and rising sea levels, have forced many women to migrate affecting their peaceful enjoyment of a safe climate.

Women in The Gambia constitute about 70% of the agricultural workforce (UNFPA Report on Women farming in Kubandar: land disputes, climate crisis and inequality, 24 March 2022), yet they face inadequate access to basic natural resources needed for farming, to environmental and climate information and are not given the opportunity to participate in environmental and climate decision-making processes. The exclusion of women from effectively helping to shape policies, including those which respond to climate and environmental harm, means that those policies are likely to be less responsive to the specific damage being caused to women, less effective in protecting women and may deepen inequalities.

**There is a great injustice at the heart of all of this and women lack access to justice and an effective remedy when the aforementioned rights are violated. It is now difficult for women and girls to smile in the Smiling Coast of Africa. If nothing is done underrepresented women leaving in fragile states will suffer.**

The UN agencies are working closely with the government and citizens of The Gambia in addressing climate change challenges, visioning strategies, and

programmes for governments to determine how to prioritize their response to climate change based on needs, budgets and available resources, building capacities and providing necessary technical and material support as well as help the government respond to climate change-induced emergencies when they happen and mobilizing private sector investment in climate change mitigation efforts, particularly in renewable energy promotion and improvement in agricultural practices. The result is evident in the governments development of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) on three areas: renewable energy, reforestation and waste management with long-term strategies which serves as a roadmap for achieving the NDC targets.

Unfortunately, there is still more to be done to address specifically the effects of climate change on women and girls' human rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

## WE MUST UNITE AND TAKE ACTION!

It is now time to unite, renew our commitment and take ambitious actions to end violence against women and girls in all forms to ensure that women and girls enjoy their human rights.

Fortunately, the just ended COP27 breakthrough agreement is on establishing a fund to compensate vulnerable nations for 'loss and damage' from climate-induced disasters. Poorer countries which contribute least to global emissions must be supported so they can adapt to the growing consequences of a warming world. Countries such as Gambia suffering from the impacts should be provided the needed support to combat climate change effects which exacerbates the risk of violence against women and to meet their mitigation targets. The loss and damage funds will support the implementation of projects that integrate a GBV prevention intervention in communities within broader Green Climate Funds, strengthening capacities among national partners to understand the intersections of gender violence with and climate change, and dismantling harmful gender norms.

We must adopt good practices, countries where environmental protection is enshrined in constitutions have stronger environmental laws, and countries with stronger environmental laws have more quickly reduced their ecological footprints and levels of pollution. In The Gambia, from national, sub-national or local levels, measures should be taken to ensure women's participation in environmental decision-making processes by instituting socioeconomic, cultural, legal, and institutional transformations to achieve gender parity that most directly impact environmental decision-making processes.

Women and communities should be empowered to increase their impact as agents of positive environmental transformation, and always remember to treat girls distinctly from adult women. It is the obligation and responsibility of governments to adopt a gender-responsive approach to protecting and respecting women and girls' rights to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

Instability is sprouting in many parts of West Africa; The Gambia must try to maintain peace and stability by implementing effective climate action which fosters peace and stability and contribute to poverty reduction and enhancing citizens' trust in the government.

GBV-sensitive approaches are necessary, not only to achieve the elimination of violence against women (SDG 5), but also to accelerate the achievement of other SDGs, and ensure projects do no harm. A human rights-based approach to achieving a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is needed to reduce inequalities, increase accountability, and ensure that no one is left behind in the 2030 Agenda. Therefore, for climate actions and sustainable development to achieve their objectives, they must be informed by human rights (The UN Secretary-General's Call to Action for Human Rights).

A clean, healthy and sustainable environment is a matter of justice and a collective responsibility. We must "Unite" in Activism to end violence against women and girls' human rights to clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, food, water and from violence of any sort.

**#WeMustActNow!**

2022, 16 Days of Activism Joint Campaign in The Gambia - UNFPA, UNICEF, ITC & UNDP