

# GIRLS' RIGHTS IN CLIMATE STRATEGIES





**INCLUIR A LAS NIÑAS  
Y JÓVENES EN LA ACCIÓN  
POR EL CLIMA**

**PLAN** | **GIRLS GET EQUAL**

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# GIRLS' RIGHTS IN CLIMATE STRATEGIES<sup>1</sup>

Climate change is the most significant intergenerational equity issue of our time. Children and future generations are bearing, or will come to bear, the brunt of its impact on a polluted, degraded planet. The social and regional impacts of climate change are not distributed equally or evenly. Instead, inequality – whether economic, social, or gender-based – increases vulnerability. As international policy makers and national governments struggle to combat the climate crisis, the human rights of those most at risk and largely unrepresented, are easily ignored.

The impact of rapid onset disasters and the long, slow erosion of land and livelihoods brought about by climate change exacerbate existing gender inequality, meaning women face greater risks to their lives, health and economic viability than men. Children too are vulnerable and are shown to be at higher risk than adults of illness, injury and the psycho-social trauma associated with climate-related issues, such as wild fires, floods, droughts and storms, water insecurity, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene.<sup>2</sup> Research shows that, when these two vulnerabilities intersect, it is girls and young women, especially those from marginalised communities in the least developed countries, who will suffer the most.<sup>3</sup> The impact on them is compounded by their lack of access to the information and resources which might help them adapt and cope.

## GIRLS AT RISK

- Climate impacts are putting girls, especially during adolescence, at risk of human rights abuses including human trafficking, sexual violence in temporary shelters and disruptions in their access to important health services like family planning or maternal and postnatal care.<sup>4</sup>
- Adolescent girls, particularly in the least developed countries, are also at risk of being pulled out-of-school to help alleviate the extra domestic burdens that are shouldered by women in households facing climate-related shocks and stress.<sup>5</sup> Out-of-school girls need targeted support as they are less likely to be informed about climate change which further increases their vulnerability.
- Girls may also be married off early as families attempt to manage the financial burdens and/or female safety concerns created by environmental hardships and the aftermath of climate-related disasters.<sup>6</sup> This often means the early onset of key life transitions, including early pregnancy, direct girls into a vicious cycle of intergenerational poverty, vulnerability, and marginalisation.

**Marginalised girls from the least developed countries are often the most vulnerable to climate change due to gender, social and intergenerational injustices.**

*Cover photograph: Girl affected by El Nino-induced drought on her way to collect water, Ethiopia ©Plan International / Petterik Wiggers*

*Left: Youth advocate demands the inclusion of girls and young women in climate action, Spain. © Plan International*

# GIRLS' AGENCY

Ignoring girls' *rights* in a changing climate also leads to ignoring their *agency* and *capacity* to contribute to mitigation and adaptation strategies. Girls may be vulnerable to the climate crisis in particular ways but they are also capable and keen to help their communities.

*"I've learned a lot about climate change at school and shared information with my parents, but I still feel like they haven't taken any action."*

**SCHOOL GIRL, GRADE 5, THAILAND**

The face of the international climate crisis protest is after all a 16-year-old girl from Sweden.

*"I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act."*

**GRETA THUNBERG, 16**

While it is the responsibility of governments to urgently reduce emissions and meet the goals of the Paris Agreement, research has also pointed to the role of girls' education as well as their sexual and reproductive health and rights in responding to the climate crisis. When girls and women can freely control their fertility and have children by choice, not chance, this has the positive effect of reducing unplanned pregnancies and slowing population growth. However, when they are denied this right, populations grow, sometimes beyond the capacity of families and communities. Completing a quality education and being able to freely control their sexual and reproductive health empowers girls to contribute to more resilient and adaptable societies and greener economies. Having services that realise girls' rights to education and sexual and reproductive health are therefore a high priority and must be integral in climate change strategies.<sup>7</sup>

When girls from Bangladesh and Ethiopia<sup>8</sup> were asked what would most help them deal with the causes and impacts of climate change, they had three clear priorities:

**01** Greater access to quality education to enhance their knowledge, skills, and capacity to adapt to and reduce the risks of climate change.

**02** Greater protection from gender-based violence in response to the risks exacerbated by disasters and a changing climate, including child labour, child marriage and sexual violence.

**03** Greater participation in climate change adaptation decision-making and risk reduction activities.

In order to understand what *is* being done to alleviate the burden of the climate crisis on girls and young women, and to clarify what *could* be done, this analysis of climate strategies focused on two key questions:

**DO CLIMATE STRATEGIES INCLUDE ADEQUATE ATTENTION TO SOCIAL PROTECTION AND THE INCLUSION AND EMPOWERMENT OF VULNERABLE GROUPS?**

**DO CLIMATE STRATEGIES INCLUDE SUFFICIENT ATTENTION TO GIRLS' EDUCATION SPECIFICALLY, AND TO INCLUSIVE, QUALITY, GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION MORE BROADLY?**

*"A generation without education is doomed. We need to be heard and to participate, we need a future. We have a right to education and we want to go to school."*

**BETTY, 17, NORTHERN UGANDA<sup>9</sup>**



Girls plant mangrove seedlings to reduce coastal erosion, Philippines © Plan International

## METHODOLOGY<sup>10</sup>

To answer these questions and find out how much attention was being given to girls and education, we mapped a set of key terms – including women, girls, gender, education, children, youth, skills, future generations and health – in 160 Nationally Determined Contributions and across 13 National Adaptation Plans in English, Spanish, and French.

This analysis will provide a *baseline*, from which we can track progress in national climate policies to combat climate change on the crucial issues of gender equality, girls' education and the empowerment of marginalised groups.

**Nationally Determined Contributions:** Countries' plans that explain how they will meet agreed global targets on emissions and adaptation.

**National Adaptation Plans:** Countries' medium to long-term plans to adapt to the effects of climate change.



Girl at a climate strike, Australia  
© Plan International

## THE FINDINGS SUGGEST COUNTRIES HAVE A LONG WAY TO GO

- While 43% of countries referenced women or gender it was largely in the context of women as a vulnerable group rather than contributors to climate change mitigation or adaptation.
- Only three countries' Nationally Determined Contributions make explicit reference to girls; both in the context of their needs rather than competencies and there is only one clear reference to girls' education.
- Those countries that do attend to issues of future generations tend to be “young” countries – those with a large under-15 population – and climate-vulnerable countries. However, only seven Nationally Determined Contributions reference children/youth as stakeholders who should be included as decision makers or in climate action.
- 68% of Nationally Determined Contributions talk about education but normally in vague terms, including awareness raising, not targeted at young people, or part of a national curriculum to combat the climate crisis.
- No Nationally Determined Contribution formally recognises the contributions that investment in girls' education could make toward their climate strategy.
- Climate strategies overall concentrate on technological fixes, ignoring social concerns and the contributions that people, particularly girls and young women empowered by education and information, might make.

43%

OF CLIMATE STRATEGIES  
MENTION WOMEN OR  
GENDER

42%

MENTION CHILDREN  
OR YOUTH

OUT OF THE 160 NATIONALLY  
DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS  
ANALYSED

ONLY 3  
MENTION GIRLS

ONLY 1  
MENTIONS GIRLS' EDUCATION

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An approach that does not positively incorporate children and young people as stakeholders in their own futures, empowering them to act now in their communities, is not only failing to tackle the climate crisis today but is creating even greater challenges for the future.

From a gender and age perspective, it is quite clear that national climate policies are responding inadequately to the issues faced by those most vulnerable to climate change. Plans revolve around technological fixes while the social implications of the climate crisis are not being considered.

Overall, governments are consistently failing to include young people in general, and girls in particular, in their climate strategies, despite plenty of evidence internationally of their concern and competence.

Combating the climate crisis, as recognised by the 2015 Paris Agreement,<sup>11</sup> must be based on respect for human rights: embracing the principles of equality, between people and across genders, generations and countries. We are at a vital stage of transition. Failing to act now puts the entire survival of the human race at risk and jeopardises the lives and rights of future generations. Climate policies and any green new deal must leave no-one behind.

*"We are doing coastal clean-ups and planting mangrove trees on the beach and will soon be starting work on helping our barangay (local neighbourhood) with solid-waste segregation this summer. We experienced the typhoon in 2013 and now we fear losing our homes as the shore is slowly being eaten away by the sea. If we do not do something, we might be homeless in the future due to coastal erosion."*

**LOUISA, 15, CLIMATE CHANGE ACTIVIST, THE PHILIPPINES**

**THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS ARE BASED ON KEY GAPS IDENTIFIED IN NATIONAL CLIMATE STRATEGIES.**

## **01 INVEST IN GIRLS' EDUCATION AND ENSURE THEY HAVE ACCESS TO THE NECESSARY INFORMATION, TRAINING AND SKILLS THEY WILL NEED NOW AND IN THE FUTURE**

### **Governments and policy-makers must:**

- a. Support girls to access and stay in education, including through the provision of non-formal education opportunities. The social and economic factors exacerbated by climate change which keep girls out of school must be recognised and addressed.
- b. Work together across ministries<sup>12</sup> to apply an integrated approach to education that equips young people with the full range of knowledge and skills they will need to respond to the impacts of the climate crisis, take a leading role in climate activism, adaptation and mitigation and hold governments to account.
- c. Recognise and support in the provision of inclusive, quality education that is gender-transformative as an essential component of the global response to climate change, especially that can support girls in taking leading roles in the climate justice movement.
- d. Improve access to training so young people, especially girls, can acquire the relevant skills and knowledge to support them in the transition to a green economy. This includes supporting girls to understand and adapt their lives and livelihoods in this time of transition so they are able to spot and take advantage of new opportunities and contribute to a greener economy.

### **The private sector must:**

- a. Create an enabling environment for girls and young women, invest in training them for careers in green jobs, and provide equal employment opportunities.

## 02 ENCOURAGE GIRLS' LEADERSHIP AND INCLUDE THEM IN THE DEVELOPMENT, IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING OF NATIONALLY DETERMINED CONTRIBUTIONS AND NATIONAL ADAPTATION PLANS

### **Governments and policy makers must:**

- a. Include girls' rights in the revision of their Nationally Determined Contributions to address the unique impacts of climate change on girls. This should be done with the active involvement of girls and young women.
- b. Consider girls when revising and implementing the Gender Action Plan.<sup>13</sup>
- c. Provide leadership roles for girls in key decision-making spaces and strengthen mechanisms to ensure the gender-balanced and meaningful participation of young people in climate action. Girls and young women should not only benefit from climate policies and strategies but be active participants in developing them.
- d. Protect girls' climate activism by keeping them safe online and in public forums so they feel empowered to speak out.
- e. Acknowledge that although the climate movement is a significant opportunity for girls to be heard on issues that affect their lives, it is not their responsibility to solve the climate crisis.

### **Civil society organisations and community leaders, including the media must:**

- a. Support and hold governments to account, ensuring gender and generational equity in climate change strategies and ensure that national policies adapt to local circumstances.
- b. Work in partnership with national governments in the strategic process of developing and revising relevant national climate policies, with an emphasis on involving girls and women. They must be ambitious, support the most vulnerable and be aligned with human rights laws and gender policies.

## 03 DELIVER CLIMATE JUSTICE

### **Governments and policy makers must:**

- a. Uphold the principles of climate justice articulated in the 2015 Paris Agreement to ensure the least developed countries and the most marginalised groups do not bear the brunt of the climate crisis. Richer countries, historically responsible for the most climate emissions, must provide economic and social support to help protect and uphold the rights of people in the least developed countries and in particular, marginalised communities.
- b. Recognise that climate justice needs to acknowledge intergenerational injustice in all statements and climate crisis planning. Strenuous efforts to uphold young people's rights, with particular reference to the intersection of gender and the vulnerability to the climate crisis of girls and young women must be made.
- c. Governments must sign the Intergovernmental Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Change to uphold children's rights in a changing climate and recognise the instrumental role they have played in the climate justice movement.

### **Civil society organisations and community leaders, including the media must:**

- a. Call out gender inequality and recognise that climate justice and gender justice are linked. Develop strategies to safeguard girls from the increased risks of early marriage, sexual violence and the loss of educational opportunities.



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No photographs were taken during the course of this research. Girls featured in images in the report are not the same as those that participated in the research.

## About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 This paper is based largely on research from: *Girls' Education in Climate Strategies: Opportunities for Improved Policy and Enhanced Action in Nationally Determined Contributions*. Christina Kwauk, Brookings Institution, Jessica Cooke, Elisa Hara, Plan International, Joni Pegram, UNICEF.
- 2 Perera, 2008; Unicef (2015) *Unless we act now: the impact of climate change on children*
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- 9 Women's Refugee Commission: Accessed from Plan International's *State of the World's Girls, 2013: In Double Jeopardy* P.89
- 10 For a detailed methodology please see *Girls' Education in Climate Strategies: Opportunities for Improved Policy and Enhanced Action in Nationally Determined Contributions*
- 11 Paris Agreement. Available at <https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/2015/cop21/eng/l09r01.pdf>
- 12 Including environment, education, social welfare, employment and economic planning ministries.
- 13 <https://unfccc.int/topics/gender/workstreams/the-gender-action-plan>