
Climate Change and Gendered Violence: The Economic and Social Vulnerability of Women

Climate change impacts societies in complex ways, with its effects extending beyond environmental degradation to influence social and economic dynamics. While much research has explored the Malthusian notion that climate-induced resource scarcity fosters broad insecurity, less attention has been paid to how climate change indirectly exacerbates gendered economic and social violence against women. This indirect violence arises through structural inequalities that disadvantage women in both social and economic spheres, ultimately reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion. Exploring these connections is essential to understanding the depth of climate change impacts and creating gender-sensitive policies. This article argues that climate change heightens both direct and indirect forms of violence against women, manifesting in structural inequalities and deepening their socio-economic vulnerability.

Climate Change and Broader Conceptualizations of Violence

Traditional scholarship on the climate-conflict nexus often narrows its focus to overt violent conflicts, typically measured by fatalities or the frequency of violent events¹. However, Johan Galtung's theory of violence introduces a broader framework, including "structural violence," or harm that arises from social structures perpetuating inequality². In this context, women experience economic and social violence in ways that are indirect yet profound. As climate change escalates resource scarcity, it not only contributes to direct physical violence in conflict-prone areas but also undermines the social and economic power of women, exacerbating their vulnerability. For women, this structural violence includes exclusion from financial decision-making, limited access to resources, and discriminatory inheritance and property laws, all of which are exacerbated by climate-induced stresses³.

Climate change-induced stressors contribute to systemic inequality that leaves women disproportionately exposed to economic violence. Economic violence,

¹ Von Uexkull, N., & Öberg, M. (2018). Climate, conflict, and coping capacity: The impact of climate variability on organized violence. *Journal of Peace Research*, 55(4), 511-523.

² Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167-191.

³ Fawole, O. I. (2008). Economic violence to women and girls: Is it receiving the necessary attention? *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 9(3), 167-177.

as defined by Fawole (2008), involves denying individuals access to resources, financial opportunities, and decision-making power. This form of violence often manifests in gendered ways: limited access to credit, restricted property rights, and exclusion from formal employment or business opportunities. Such structural exclusions are particularly pronounced in developing economies where informal work is common, as women in informal sectors face financial exploitation from customers and authorities alike⁴. This gendered economic violence intertwines with social vulnerabilities, making it difficult for women to gain independence or secure economic stability, especially in climate-sensitive regions.

Structural Violence, Economic Exclusion, and Social Grievances

The relationship between resource dependence and conflict is well-documented. Collier and Hoeffler's (2002)⁵ "greed and grievance" model suggests that natural resources correlate with higher rates of conflict, especially when local populations rely heavily on these resources for livelihood. While their study does not specifically address gender, the findings are relevant for understanding women's grievances in resource-dependent communities. Women, as primary caregivers and resource managers, bear a heightened burden when climate stressors, such as drought or food shortages, increase the scarcity of essential resources. In these contexts, the structural exclusion from economic opportunities and resource management amplifies women's grievances, increasing the likelihood of women's participation in resistance activities. Melander (2005)⁶ highlights that women can and do develop grievances when faced with social and economic inequities, which climate change often exacerbates.

However, not all women experience this structural violence equally. Jordan (2019)⁷ and Panday (2019)⁸ argue that the impact of climate change on women varies depending on socio-economic and demographic factors such as marital status, economic position, and access to remittances. Women with access to economic resources or supportive family structures may have better coping mechanisms, whereas those without these supports experience more severe deprivations. This variability challenges the notion that all women are equally affected, highlighting the importance of considering individual socio-economic contexts when assessing climate impacts.

⁴ Chen, M. A. (2005). Rethinking the informal economy: Linkages with the formal economy and the formal regulatory environment. *UNU-WIDER*.

⁵ Collier, P., & Hoeffler, A. (2002). Greed and grievance in civil war. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56(4), 563-595.

⁶ Melander, E. (2005). Gender equality and intrastate armed conflict. *International Studies Quarterly*, 49(4), 695-714.

⁷ Jordan, C. (2019). Vulnerability of women in the face of climate change. *Climate and Development*, 11(3), 162-171.

⁸ Panday, K. (2019). Gendered implications of climate change in South Asia. *Sustainable Development Journal*, 27(4), 523-532.

Gendered Vulnerabilities and the Impact of Male Out-Migration

In many climate-affected regions, male out-migration is a common response to environmental and economic stressors, as men leave to seek income in urban areas or other regions less affected by climate change⁹. While this migration could potentially empower women by giving them greater household autonomy, the reality is often more complex. With men absent, women bear increased responsibility for household and community maintenance, assuming roles that extend beyond traditional caregiving to encompass economic decision-making and resource management. This shift increases their workload without necessarily enhancing their socio-political influence or economic independence¹⁰.

Moreover, women's limited access to political power and exclusion from formal decision-making processes make it difficult for them to advocate for adaptive measures that address climate challenges effectively. Arora-Jonsson (2011) critiques the simplistic portrayal of women as passive victims or morally virtuous actors in climate discourse, arguing that such representations obscure the complex power asymmetries that influence women's vulnerability to climate change. These asymmetries are reinforced even in situations where women participate in community decision-making, as shown by Grillos' research on environmental decision-making. When communities lack adaptive capacity, women's inclusion in decision-making does not necessarily translate into reduced vulnerability¹¹.

Climate-Induced Economic Violence and Women's Physical Vulnerability

Women's economic vulnerability due to climate change is closely linked to physical vulnerability, particularly in rural, resource-dependent areas where climate change exacerbates poverty and depletes vital resources. In African countries, for instance, women often manage resources such as water, firewood, and land due to traditional gender roles¹². Climate change affects these resources directly, placing women in positions of increased risk and forcing them to invest more time and energy in resource procurement. This increased responsibility often limits their ability to pursue education or engage in income-generating activities, thereby reinforcing cycles of dependency and economic marginalization.

Moreover, women's physical vulnerability in these contexts is compounded by their responsibility for family and household care. Chandra et al. (2017)

⁹ Kaczan, D. J., & Orgill-Meyer, J. (2020). The impact of climate change on migration: A synthesis of recent empirical insights. *Climatic Change*, 160(3), 299-319.

¹⁰ Arora-Jonsson, S. (2011). Virtue and vulnerability: Discourses on women, gender and climate change. *Global Environmental Change*, 21(2), 744-751.

¹¹ Grillos, T. (2017). Women's empowerment and gender parity in environmental decision-making: Experimental evidence from Bolivia. *World Development*, 96, 353-368.

¹² Jaggernath, J. (2014). The impact of climate change on women in Africa. *UNEP*.

illustrate how climate change impacts women's daily routines by increasing the time spent on household chores. For example, droughts and water scarcity result in longer trips to obtain water, while changing weather patterns disrupt access to food and fuel resources. This increased workload exacerbates the gendered burden of care, as women assume greater responsibilities for household survival. While men may experience economic losses, women bear both economic and social costs, as their duties often expand to cover both household and community-level needs¹³.

Economic Empowerment and the Constraints of Structural Power Dynamics

While some scholars argue that male out-migration offers an opportunity for women's economic empowerment, this shift rarely translates into sustained political power or social autonomy. As Arora-Jonsson (2011) points out, the increase in household responsibility may give women temporary control over resources, but this shift seldom dismantles the structural power dynamics that underpin gender inequality. In fact, many women continue to face barriers to land ownership, legal rights, and access to financial resources, limiting the long-term impact of economic autonomy gained during periods of male absence. This underscores the need to examine gender relations within broader socio-political contexts to understand the persistent inequalities that climate change magnifies.

Furthermore, structural power asymmetries continue to affect women's participation in community and environmental decision-making. Even when women are included in these processes, communities with low adaptive capacity to climate change challenges cannot address the root causes of vulnerability. Grillos (2017) demonstrates that women's participation in decision-making does not necessarily improve their resilience if the community lacks the resources to implement effective adaptive strategies. Thus, while women's roles may shift, the underlying structural inequities that sustain gendered violence and economic marginalization remain intact.

The Interplay of Climate Change, Gendered Responsibilities, and Economic Violence

Climate change impacts women across multiple roles, from food providers to caregivers and economic actors, intensifying their workload as access to essential resources like food, water, and shelter becomes increasingly constrained¹⁴. For women in resource-dependent economies, structural

¹³ Chandra, A., McNamara, K. E., Dargusch, P., Caspe, A. M., & Dalabajan, D. A. (2017). Gendered vulnerabilities of smallholder farmers to climate change in conflict-prone areas. *Ecology and Society*, 22(1).

¹⁴ Dankelman, I., et al. (2008). *Gender, Climate Change and Human Security: Lessons from Bangladesh, Ghana and Senegal*. Women's Environment and Development Organization.

conditions of vulnerability intersect with climate risks to widen the agricultural resource gap. For instance, high temperatures and rainfall variability reduce agricultural yields, while increasing household duties, such as water collection and food preparation, further constrain women's economic opportunities Chandra et al. (2017).

In many rural areas in Africa and South Asia, where women are primary managers of natural resources due to gendered divisions of labor, the effects of climate change are particularly severe Jaggernath, J. (2014). This dynamic reinforces gendered violence as economic deprivation translates into social subjugation, where women have limited power to improve their circumstances due to systemic exclusions in land ownership, inheritance rights, and financial autonomy. Thus, climate change not only compounds existing gender inequalities but also generates new forms of economic and social violence against women.

Reassessing Women's Vulnerability in Climate Policy

While the discourse on climate change often frames women as "vulnerable" or "virtuous" actors, this characterization fails to capture the structural inequalities that drive their vulnerability. As Arora-Jonsson (2011) argues, the feminization of poverty, which is now extending to the feminization of climate impacts, does little to improve women's social or economic positions. This narrative masks the role of power asymmetries in shaping gendered experiences of climate change, diverting attention from the need to address these structural issues. Addressing climate change's impact on women requires acknowledging and challenging these underlying inequalities, not merely increasing women's representation in decision-making processes without providing resources for genuine empowerment.

Consequently, gender-sensitive climate adaptation policies should go beyond increasing women's participation in community projects. Policies must also address fundamental socio-economic inequalities by supporting women's access to land rights, financial resources, and education. These structural changes can mitigate the indirect violence women face due to climate change, helping to dismantle the socio-economic barriers that perpetuate their vulnerability.

Conclusion

In sum, climate change magnifies both direct and indirect forms of violence against women, reinforcing cycles of economic deprivation and social marginalization. While male out-migration in climate-affected regions temporarily shifts household responsibilities to women, this does not translate

into long-term empowerment due to the enduring structural inequalities that define gendered power dynamics. Climate-induced economic violence exacerbates women's physical and social vulnerabilities, particularly in resource-dependent communities. As the impacts of climate change continue to unfold, understanding and addressing the intersection of gender and environmental stressors becomes essential. Creating gender-sensitive policies that tackle structural inequalities and provide women with economic and social empowerment is crucial for mitigating the compounded effects of climate change on women's lives.

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