Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Women and Youth in the Context of Climate Change
Linked Movements Must Work Together to Protect Youth’s Future

Low and middle income countries are most affected by climate change, with women as one of the most vulnerable populations. Women are often responsible for gathering water and fuel, which climate change renders increasingly scarce. Further, there are still 235 million women around the world with an unmet need for contraception. In some regions young women ages 15-19 are twice as likely to lack access to the contraception they want and need as women over twenty. A community’s ability to mitigate or respond to climate change can improve if women are able to access sexual and reproductive health information and services and plan their families.

But access to sexual and reproductive health services, including contraception, can be seriously hampered by harmful effects of climate change - thereby limiting options for women and young people to plan their families and further hampering a community’s ability to mitigate or respond to climate change.

Experts have also found that protecting adolescent SRHR is cost effective. Using recent data on emissions, program effectiveness, and program costs, climate change economists concluded that responding to the unmet need for family planning and supporting girls education are much less costly than low-carbon energy development options, including solar, wind, and nuclear power, second-generation biofuels, and carbon capture and storage. Family planning and girls education programs were found to be cost-competitive with forest conservation and other improvements in forestry and agricultural practices.

Finally, in addition to being cost effective and a human rights imperative, empowering women to time their pregnancies would reduce carbon emissions significantly. This step alone would provide 8 to 15 percent of the reductions needed to avert climate change.

The SRHR and climate change movements must recognize their interconnectedness and join forces to help mitigate climate change and ensure women’s access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

GLOBAL AND ECONOMIC INEQUITIES EXACERBATE THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AROUND THE WORLD

- Twenty percent of the world’s countries (the most affluent) consume 86 percent of natural resources on earth. In fact, the wealthiest countries, including the United States of America, Saudi Arabia, Australia and Canada have the highest per capita carbon emissions in the world.

- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recognizes that less developed regions are most vulnerable to the early and harmful effects of climate change. Even though they comprise only about three percent of the global carbon footprint, the poorest regions of the world may suffer up to 500 times greater loss of healthy life years than the rest of the world. Around 70 percent of the world’s poor rely on agriculture for income and subsistence. Environmental disasters like floods, droughts, water scarcity and deforestation disproportionately impact their livelihoods.

- Economic inequities and poverty lead to the abuse of resources, thus preventing families living in these already ecologically fragile zones from meeting their basic human needs.

- People living in marginalized communities are more exposed to harmful toxins and wastes. They also suffer disproportionately from environmental degradation and associated poor health and low-income consequences.

- Industrial development and various migration patterns have increased the demand for clean water; however industrial wastes and sewage contaminate a large portion of water sources in developing countries.

ADOLESCENT GIRLS AND WOMEN ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED BY THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE, LEADING TO LOSS OF INCOME AND EDUCATION, DISEASE, POOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND VIOLENCE

- Of the 1.5 billion people living in poverty, 70 percent are women. Although women work almost double the amount of hours that men do they often have less access to formal financial systems, less ownership of land and property and less decision-making power than men.

- In low- and middle-income countries, adolescent girls and women account for more than half the agricultural labor force and are responsible for collecting water and fuel. For example, adolescent girls and women are responsible for growing 80 percent of staple crops in Africa.
Responding to the unmet need for family planning is a highly cost-effective means of mitigating climate change.

South-East Asia 90 percent of all rice growers are women.\textsuperscript{14}

- As a result, the greater a woman or girls’ involvement in resource management, the greater their risks are when their environmental stability is threatened. Since women are the main collectors of water, they are the first to be exposed to water-borne diseases which can affect their reproductive health and lead to high infant mortality and birth defects.\textsuperscript{15}

- Access to water and fuel also plays an important role in women’s lives. The longer girls and women have to walk to find water or fuel the less time they can spend in school or on income generating activities.\textsuperscript{5}

- Young girls are one of the first to be affected by economic hardships, since they are likely to be taken out of school in times of hardship and crisis to care for sick relatives or to earn extra income.\textsuperscript{16}

- Adolescent girls without access to education face higher risks of unwanted or unsafe pregnancy, lack of sustainable livelihoods, and lack of opportunities for empowerment.\textsuperscript{17}

- Many women struggle to access education, information, and reproductive health care, all of which undermines their wellbeing as well as that of their families and communities.\textsuperscript{18}

- Research indicates that women who are empowered to manage the timing of their childbearing will be able to invest more resources in their children.\textsuperscript{5}

- Natural disasters due to climate change disproportionately affect women.
  - Because their autonomy and education are often limited, mortality rates among women are higher during natural disasters than that among men.\textsuperscript{18}
  - Access to obstetric care and distribution of reproductive health commodities such as medication and contraceptives may be seriously hampered after a natural disaster, putting women at risk for unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.\textsuperscript{18}
  - Pre-existing gender inequalities further limit women’s economic recovery after a disaster.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{ENVIRONMENTAL TOXINS THREATEN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH}

- Substantial research on environmental contaminants indicates that chemicals known as endocrine disruptors, common in many widely available everyday products on the market, have serious and irreparable adverse reproductive health effects that may result in difficulty conceiving and maintaining a pregnancy among younger women aged 18-25, recurrent miscarriages, early puberty, abnormal uterus development, and increased risk of breast cancer, among others.\textsuperscript{19}

- Effects particular to reproduction in males include abnormal development of the prostate and urethra, decreased sperm count and quality, sexual dysfunction, and increased risk of prostate cancer.\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{INTERNATIONAL POLICY EFFORTS SEEK TO ADDRESS LINKAGES BETWEEN SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS AND CLIMATE CHANGE}

The International Conference on Population and Development

- The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which took place in Cairo, Egypt asserted that individual and human rights were at the center of population and development concerns. It linked environmental protection to individual decision-making and human rights, including gender equality and the right to reproductive health. The ICPD and its subsequent sessions highlight the importance of meeting the health needs of women, men, adolescents, and children, and that women and young people have the right to family planning and reproductive health services that can impact sustainable development and poverty (and thus potentially respond to climate change).\textsuperscript{20}

- Since the mid-1990s efforts have been made by governments to implement the recommendations of the ICPD Programme of Action, but have been hampered by lack of resources and organizational capacity. Donor nations recognized the importance of family planning programs to broader development goals, and agreed to provide one-third of total funding needed in order to eliminate the unmet need for contraceptives. However, international funding for reproductive health services has
since then declined worldwide and governments failed to live up to their commitments.21

The United Nations Conference on Climate Change (or Conference of Parties, COP)

- The Kyoto Protocol was adopted at the third session of COP in 1997. The protocol is an international agreement linked to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that will prevent dangerous human interference with the climate system. The protocol has set legally binding targets for 37 high-income countries to reduce and limit emission of greenhouse gases. Recognizing that the highly industrialized countries bear the greatest responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions as a result of 150 years of industrial activity, the Kyoto protocol places a greater burden on high income countries to reduce emissions.22 In order to address the urgent need for low income countries to enhance their adaptive capacity to avoid the adverse effects of climate change, the concept of the National Adaption Programmes of Action (NAPAs) was established at the COP 7 in Marrakech, Morocco, in 2001. The NAPAs provide a process through which least-developed countries identify priority activities and seek funds to respond to their most urgent and immediate needs for adaptation to climate change. The NAPAs were created in collaboration with civil society and local groups, recognizing that grassroots communities are the main stakeholders.23

- Between 2004 and April 2009, the first 40 governments submitted their National Adaptation Programmes of Action. In these reports, 37 out of 40 low income countries have reported a concern for “rapid population growth” as a factor that would compound vulnerability to flooding, droughts and decreased crop yields.24

The United Nations Millenium Summit

- The Millenium Developments Goals (MDG’s) are the most broadly supported, comprehensive, and specific goals for alleviating poverty and securing sustainable development by 2015. Agreed upon by 189 nations at the United Nations Millenium Summit in 2000, the MDG’s consist of eight goals, including goals 3, 5, 6, and 7, which address maternal mortality (including universal access to reproductive health); HIV/AIDS; gender equality; and environmental sustainability, respectively.25

CONCLUSION

As the largest generation of young people in history is entering their reproductive age they must be provided with the means to be able to make informed choices regarding their health. Access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services is fundamental to increasing coping capacity and resilience in areas that are vulnerable to climate change. It is equally important to ensure that young people’s human rights, social justice and individual and community well-being are realized. It is crucial for young people to have the ability to make decisions on if, when, and how to form a family and to have access to the tools that will enable them to protect themselves against HIV and stay healthy. If these necessities are paired with opportunities for housing, livelihoods and access to commodities such as clean water, young people stand a chance of being better prepared to meet and to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

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Two hundred fifteen million women around the world face an unmet need for contraception.
REFERENCES


