

## VIEWPOINT

# Adolescent Girls, Human Rights and the Expanding Climate Emergency

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## THE EXPANDING CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS

In recent history, the number and scale of natural disasters, one of the major causes of humanitarian emergencies, have increased markedly. From 2000 to 2009, compared with the period from 1980 to 1989, there were 3 times more natural disasters across the globe, with climate-related events accounting for nearly 80% of the increase.<sup>1</sup> Since 2008, natural disasters such as floods, storms, and earthquakes have displaced an average of 26.4 million people per year. Even after adjusting for growth in population, the likelihood of being displaced by a disaster today is 60% higher than it was 40 years ago.<sup>2</sup> In 2013 alone, 97 million people were affected by natural disasters.<sup>3</sup>

Man-made disasters, the other major cause of humanitarian emergencies (by means, for example, of violence and conflict), remain a leading driver of displacement as well. According to the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), mass displacement reached unprecedented levels in 2014: “59.5 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations.”<sup>4</sup> Particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states, a complex mix of overlapping hazards—both armed conflict and natural disasters—plays a role in creating humanitarian crises, one that climate change is expected only to exacerbate.<sup>2</sup>

The University College London—*Lancet* Commission, in its landmark 2009 report, said, “Climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century. Effects of climate change on health will affect most populations in the next decades and put the lives and wellbeing of billions of people at increased risk.”<sup>5</sup> Among the billions of people at increased risk are adolescents (10- to 19-year-olds), who account for 1 in 5 people in the world, or about 1.2 billion. The vast majority—90%—of adolescents live in developing countries (including China), and approximately 510 million of this group are girls.<sup>6</sup> The poorest adolescent girls living in the poorest communities—roughly more than 200 million girls living in households in the bottom 2 wealth quintiles—are at special risk for being deleteriously affected by climate change. Nonetheless, adolescent girls are not currently a specifically targeted, high-risk group in humanitarian relief efforts during emergencies, nor are they specifically engaged as a population whose involvement could advance national adaptation plans to mitigate the effects of climate change.

In 2011, Plan International<sup>1</sup> published a valuable monograph entitled “Weathering the Storm: Adolescent Girls and Climate Change,”<sup>7</sup> that called attention to the particular vulnerability of adolescent girls to the effects of climate change. It was a prescient analysis. In the intervening 4 years, the effect of climate change has become more pronounced, and there is a clearer vision of its consequences. The human rights community has more urgently

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<sup>1</sup>Plan is a nonprofit organization that, since 1937, has been working in 50 developing countries to help children (see <http://plan-international.org/http://plan-international.org/>).

addressed the effect of climate change, especially on socially excluded groups, and practitioners have begun to organize an increasingly accelerated response to the plight of adolescent girls in humanitarian emergencies, both those caused by natural disasters and armed conflicts.<sup>8</sup> The overall reaction to the cataclysm suffered by adolescent girls, however, has been slower than the data warrant.<sup>9</sup>

### THE HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITMENTS: ARTICULATED BUT UNFUNDED AND NOT UPHELD

The human rights of adolescent girls are firmly enshrined in international human rights (IHR) law, notably, in the Convention of the Rights of the Child<sup>10</sup> and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women,<sup>11</sup> with their foundations earlier established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>12</sup>—all affirmed by the vast majority of the world's governments. The breadth of these enumerated rights, which span the range of civil and political rights, as well as social, economic, and cultural rights, recognizes adolescent girls' status as both children and women, and as such, their particular susceptibility to a wide range of human rights abuses due to their youth and their sex. But adolescent girls face enormous challenges in the realization of their rights because the barriers they face are embedded in social systems that are deeply discriminatory and that systematically oppress and exploit them.

Thus, despite the extensive and specific rights enshrined in IHR law, a wide range of social actors—including governments, institutional bodies, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), local communities, and families—still fail to fulfill, protect, and promote the rights of adolescent girls under “baseline” circumstances. And it is the

poorest girls living in the poorest communities who suffer the most. At baseline, they are already living in an “emergency.”<sup>iii</sup> These girls too often experience a perfect storm of abuses and sequelae, including the ravages of “child marriage”<sup>iii15,16</sup>; early first birth and its attendant elevated risk of death<sup>17,18</sup>; single motherhood and its relation to long-term poverty and child mortality<sup>19</sup>; extensive sexual and other forms of gender-based violence<sup>20–24</sup>; disproportionate HIV infection<sup>25–27</sup>; lack of access to secondary and higher education<sup>28,29</sup>; lack of basic reproductive, sexual, and health care services; exclusion from local economies and the benefits of new technologies; and difficulty safely controlling their income.<sup>30,31</sup>

And although the body of IHR law extends the obligations of many social actors (e.g., governments and NGOs), in post-disaster situations, these actors often fail adolescent girls in all stages of humanitarian relief as well.<sup>6</sup> Looming climate-change events and the associated forced displacement of large populations promise further to undermine adolescent girls' realization of their rights.

### ABUSES OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS INTENSIFY IN HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCIES

Although all suffer in humanitarian emergencies, there are important differences in the experience by sex and age. A study of data from 141 countries over the period from 1981 to 2002 found that women and girls have relatively higher mortality rates than men and boys in natural disasters in societies where women have few socioeconomic rights and their economic status compared with men is lower. The bigger the disaster (as approximated by the number of deaths relative to population size), the larger the effect is on the observed gender gap in life expectancy (which includes both the immediate effects of the disaster and its subsequent impacts).<sup>32</sup> For example, 65% of those who died in Aceh Province, Indonesia, in the 2004 tsunami were female.<sup>33</sup> Women were 61% of fatalities caused by Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008.<sup>34</sup> Data from the 1993 Nepal flood reveal a higher mortality rate for girls relative to others; fatality rates were 13.3 per 1000 for girls, 9.4 per 1000 for boys, 6.1 per 1000 for women, and 4.1 per 1000 for men.<sup>35</sup> These excess female deaths have been attributed to the exacerbation of previously existing patterns of discrimination/devaluation that render women and girls more vulnerable than men and boys, including

<sup>ii</sup>The phrase “living in emergencies” was first used by the organizers of the Haitian Adolescent Girls Network, one of the first efforts to explicitly recognize the needs of adolescent girls relatively early in an emergency (4 months after the Haitian earthquake). The effort was mounted when it was observed by many of the organizations that girls did not have a place to safely meet and the disaster dramatically increased their risk for sexual abuse.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>iii</sup>“Child marriage fits most of the criteria for enslavement established by Antislavery International: child brides are forced to work and serve others under the threat of mental or physical punishment; they are dehumanized; they are treated as property; their movements are severely restricted; and, most crushingly, their futures are obliterated.”<sup>14</sup>

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