

FUTURES AT RISK

HOW THE UK CAN SUPPORT
EDUCATION FOR GIRLS ON THE
MOVE IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

WORKING PAPER

**FOR EVERY CHILD
IN DANGER**

unicef 
UNITED KINGDOM

INTRODUCTION

Climate change is a child rights crisis, putting the lives, futures, and opportunities of millions of children and young people around the world at risk. Though millions are affected, the impacts are not felt equally by all children. Girls face unique additional barriers to accessing their rights – such as their right to education – in a changing climate, including when they or their families are displaced or forced to migrate.

This working paper explores these impacts, setting out how gendered barriers to education intersect with, and can be exacerbated or compounded by, climate change-related displacement and migration.

The paper presents recommendations for the UK Government on how it can and should address climate change-related displacement and migration in order to fulfil its commitment to support 12 years of quality education for every girl.

UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE-RELATED DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION

Climate change uproots girls in a variety of ways. From short-term displacement to long-term economic migration, how, why, and in what ways children and their families are uprooted by climate change differs with each case. Aiming to account for all these factors and instances, the UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) uses the term **climate change-related displacement and migration**. Other terms used for this topic include environmental migration, human mobility in the context of climate change, displacement and distress migration, and climate refugees,¹ among others.

Within climate change-related displacement and migration four core forms of movement exist: displacement, migration, planned relocation, and immobility.

Displacement is a form of movement that is involuntary and often caused by the threat or effects of a disaster, whether sudden or slow onset. **Sudden-onset disasters** include hurricanes and cyclones, with increasing and intensified tropical storms being linked to climate change and subsequent increased displacement. For instance, the 2014 to 2018 period saw a six-fold increase in storm-related displacement in the Caribbean compared to the 2009 to 2013 period.²

Flooding, droughts, and sea-level rise are among the **slow-onset disasters** that may also lead to displacement. For example, sea levels could rise enough to put land currently home to 140-170 million people at risk by 2050.³

Finally, **environmental degradation** associated with climate change can cause loss of clean water and of arable land,⁴ which could in turn force families to flee if this affects their livelihoods or results in (or exacerbates) food insecurity.⁵ Displacement related to climate change usually occurs within national borders, causing girls and their families to become **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)**.⁶ While displacement can be short-term, this is not always the case, with some families displaced for extended periods, or even permanently.



Fika, 3, reads a book in her home in Tegaldowo village, Central Java, Indonesia. Tegaldowo village has experienced frequent flooding since 2004. Rising sea levels due to climate change and land subsidence were likely to intensify the extent and severity of coastal erosion and tidal floods.

Migration occurs where girls and their families choose to move as a result of, or linked to, the impacts of climate change (though the degree of choice in any climate change-related movement is questionable). This form of movement is often long-term and, as with displacement, usually within national borders or immediately cross-border.

Migration is not causally straightforward, with many aspects of climate change impacting families' livelihoods. When families move as a result of lost income due to climate change, they may be seen as **economic migrants**. In these instances, families may not identify climate change as the direct cause of their move. For instance, one study from South Asia found that families affected by climate change unanimously highlighted the 'uncertainty of income from agriculture due to pests and diseases, reduced water availability, drying of water sources, and the erratic pattern of rainfall' as the reasons behind their move to a new home.⁷ The ability to provide better lives for their families, through increased or diversified income, can also lead individuals to move.

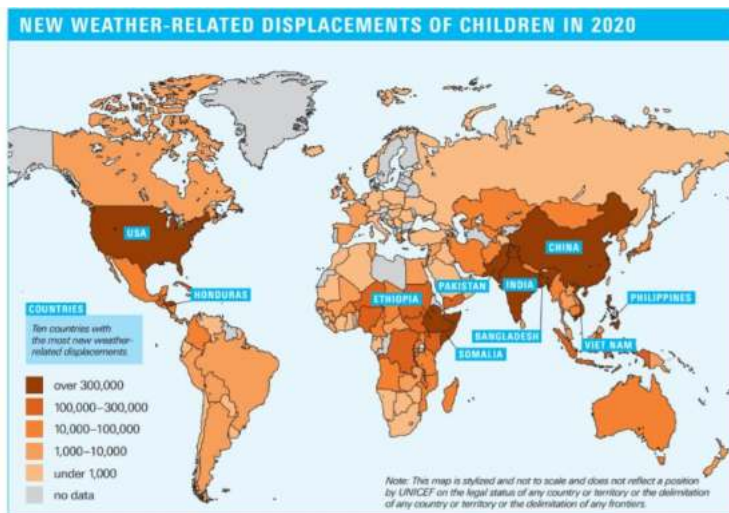
Planned relocation is the process by which individuals, families, or communities are supported to move away from their homes and settle in a new place, permanently or temporarily. Planned relocation occurs within national borders and is a decision of the State.⁸

Immobility refers to children and families who do not, cannot, or choose not to move in the context of a changing climate. These families are sometimes referred to as **trapped populations**. Women can remain trapped in life-threatening areas prone to climate-induced risks when they do not have the financial means to escape.⁹ It is critical to also recognise the needs of girls in immobile families when considering education policies in the context of climate change, and ensure that their particular needs and vulnerabilities are supported.

All four aspects of climate change-related displacement and migration may also intersect with violence and **conflict**.¹⁰ For example, in 2020, 95% of displacements related to conflict occurred in countries that were vulnerable (or highly vulnerable) to climate change.¹¹ In just one example, 'drought in Somalia drove people to flee from rural to urban areas where they are now at greater risk of eviction and attacks by armed groups.'¹² However, this link remains contentious and hotly debated in the literature.

HOW MANY CHILDREN ARE AFFECTED?

Data on climate change-related displacement and migration is limited, and very little relevant data is age- or gender-disaggregated. However, analysis from UNICEF UK suggests that, of the 30.1 million new weather-related internal displacements that took place in 2021, **9.8 million affected children**. This equates to over 26,000 weather-related child displacements every day.¹³



While predictions are challenging, the World Bank suggests that, across Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, 143 million people could migrate internally because of climate change by 2050.¹⁴

Importantly, the severity of climate change-related displacement and migration depends on the mitigation measures taken by countries, in particular high-income countries, and the support for adaptation made available to affected communities.

Map source: Futures at Risk: Protecting the rights of children on the move in a changing climate, UNICEF UK, 2021.

CLIMATE CHANGE MITIGATION AND ADAPTATION

While high-income countries have contributed most to climate change, it is lower-income countries that are likely to feel the greatest impacts.¹⁵ As such, high-income countries, such as the UK, must urgently reduce carbon emissions, reaching net-zero as soon as possible (and no later than 2050) to limit the impacts of climate change.

Already, the G7 (under the UK's 2021 Presidency) has committed to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.¹⁶ While this is a welcome commitment, it must be met with additional and increasing efforts to support the mitigation of, adaptation to, and support for loss and damage as a result of, climate change. Still, the impact of curbing emissions should not be underestimated; evidence suggests that limiting global warming to between 1.5°C and 2°C could protect over 44 million people from displacement by 2050 in South Asia alone.¹⁷

High-income countries must also act in solidarity with affected countries, particularly as low-income countries may suffer from additional vulnerabilities due to poverty, lack of infrastructure, weak education systems, and agricultural dependencies that make them particularly vulnerable to climate change.¹⁸ This includes providing climate financing for adaptation and loss and damage processes, as well as support for building climate resilient, gender-transformative education systems.

A LEARNING CRISIS FOR GIRLS

Even without climate change-related displacement and migration, **the world is far from realising universal access to education.** Globally, 258 million children and youth,¹⁹ including 132 million girls,²⁰ are out of school. More than half of children living in low- and middle-income countries are unable to read a simple story by the age of 10.²¹ Nearly one third of adolescent girls living in the poorest households around the world have never been to school,²² and only a quarter of all countries have achieved gender parity at upper-secondary level.²³ As such, **climate change-related displacement and migration adds another layer of complexity to the existing learning crisis for girls**, highlighting and exacerbating existing inequalities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only intensified these challenges, with schools closed for a year to 168 million children around the world,²⁴ and 70 million children at risk of not acquiring basic skills in 2021.²⁵ Girls' education was particularly impacted. Rising dropout rates, school closures, and lack of access to the internet and online learning technologies are among the issues restricting girls' access to education.²⁶ Predictions suggest that as many as 20 million secondary school aged girls may never return to school after the pandemic.²⁷

While COVID-19 was a new disruption to education, the impact of disasters and displacement at large on girls' education is already well-documented. Estimates suggest that 39 million girls and young women are without access to quality education as a result of conflict and disasters.²⁸ And secondary school age girls who are refugees are half as likely to get access to education as refugee boys.²⁹ In Kenyan and Ethiopian refugee communities, this figure is as low as four girls for every ten boys enrolled in school at the secondary level, with girls missing out on education due to social conventions, safety, and economic and opportunity costs, among other reasons.³⁰ Yet, **girls' education remains one of the best economic, environmental, and social investments a government can make.**³¹ That is why UNICEF UK strongly welcomes the UK Government's commitment to ensure every girl receives 12 years of quality education.

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WHAT CLIMATE CHANGE-RELATED DISPLACEMENT AND MIGRATION CAN MEAN FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

The impacts of climate change are not gender-neutral – a fact already recognised by the UK Government.³² Following displacement in Somalia, for instance, school enrolment for all children increased from 34.5% to 37%, but *decreased* for girls from 45% to 29%.³³ While identifying exact causality is challenging, girls face unique and additional barriers to accessing education, many of which exist outside of climate change or displacement but could be exacerbated by it. These challenges are set out below.

EARLY AND FORCED CHILD MARRIAGE

Girls on the move may face risks of early and forced marriage.³⁴ If families are forced to leave their homes as a result of climate change, they may experience significant financial pressures given the lost income. This can, in turn, cause families to adopt negative coping mechanisms, such as early marriage, to reduce their outgoings and provide their daughter with a safe and stable home.

Early and forced child marriage can also lead to early pregnancy, linked to immediate and long-term health complications.³⁵ For instance, internally displaced women and girls who are pregnant are at risk of missing out on antenatal care, and could experience malnutrition and poor hygiene conditions.³⁶ This is particularly concerning as, in some instances, cases of adolescent and early pregnancy have risen in the aftermath of disasters.³⁷ Both marriage and early pregnancy can, in turn, limit girls' access to education.³⁸

SPOTLIGHT ON: UK AID IN CHAD

Chad is vulnerable to multiple environmental hazards, including heavy rainfall, flooding, and loss of crops,³⁹ which can increase the risks of climate change-related displacement and migration. In 2020, there were over 71,000 cases of weather-related displacements, including more than 38,000 displacements of children.⁴⁰ In the capital city N'Djamena alone, approximately 32,000 cases of displacement were reported in August 2020.⁴¹ Though conflict is still the most significant driver of displacement around the Lake Chad Basin region of the country, subsistence farming communities are increasingly at risk of displacement due to the diminishing lake.⁴²

Displacement adds to a complexity of education challenges in Chad, which see an estimated three million children in need of support for their right to education.⁴³ Up to 77% of girls aged 15 to 24 are unable to read,⁴⁴ and in 2019 over 80% of schools in Chad reported lower learning outcomes.⁴⁵ Early and forced child marriage is also prevalent in Chad, with the median age for first time marriages just 16.1 years of age.⁴⁶

UK Aid supports humanitarian assistance in Chad through the Sahel Humanitarian Emergency Response Programme.⁴⁷ The Business Case for this programme sets out challenges in the Sahel relating to gender-based violence, early and forced child marriage, and female genital mutilation.⁴⁸ It also recognises that 'women farmers have significantly less access to land, information, finance and agricultural inputs', noting that this increases their vulnerability to climate shocks.⁴⁹ While largely focused on malnutrition, the programme also supports livelihoods for families affected by climatic impacts in the region. **Further support in this area, particularly focussed on displaced girls and their families, could build resilience to climatic shocks, and achieve the UK's dual aims of mitigating climate change impacts and realising the right to education for every girl.**

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Girls who are affected by disasters may also be at greater risk of ‘sexual violence, sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking and domestic violence’, among other forms of Gender-Based Violence (GBV).⁵⁰ GBV may be linked to poverty or harmful social norms, among other factors. Girls may also be at greater risk if climate change-related events destroy infrastructure, removing girls’ access to safe spaces or forcing them to walk long distances to access education. Indeed, children separated from their families face greater vulnerabilities to exploitation and abuse.⁵¹ GBV in displacement camps is also a challenge that girls may face, with Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) suggesting that ‘camps in general tend to be particularly hostile environments for women and girls.’⁵² This could, in turn, impact their access to education if they feel unsafe on their journey to, or while at, school. For instance, a consultation with Rohingya refugee children saw one group of children report ‘that parents do not let them go outside the house because of safety concerns’, limiting access to learning centres.⁵³

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RIGHTS

Climate change-related displacement and migration can also affect girls’ **access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) facilities**. For example, girls in displacement may be at risk of unintended pregnancies if they are unable to access reproductive health counselling or afford contraception as a result of their displacement.⁵⁴ As already stated, unintended pregnancies can affect girls’ access to education, particularly where young mothers are unable (legally or culturally) to attend school.

A lack of sanitary facilities can also affect displaced or migrating girls’ access to education.⁵⁵ For instance, if a school or learning centre in a displacement camp does not have hygienic, single-sex bathrooms, girls may feel unable to access school during their menstrual cycle. Schools may also not deliver comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), meaning girls are missing out on education that is vital to their sexual and reproductive health rights.

A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO SEXUAL HEALTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Supporting girls’ sexual and reproductive health is fundamental, and such protection is associated with effectively safeguarding their right to education. However, some research has suggested that girls’ education is critical to cutting greenhouse gas emissions due to its negative impact on population growth. However, **this argument is problematic because it suggests that girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries, who are among the least responsible for carbon emissions, bear a responsibility for climate change mitigation**. The promotion, protection, and fulfilment of girls’ SRH rights must be prioritised, but not at the expense of suggesting girls are responsible for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. **There is an urgent need to shift the narrative from SRH and education as a tool for climate mitigation towards a rights-based approach to education for climate justice.**

GENDERED EXPECTATIONS OF CARE, UNPAID, AND PAID WORK

Families affected by climate change-related displacement and migration may also experience poverty, which could mean they **remove girls (and boys) from school in order to save on school fees or support the family through additional income**. Indeed, when families are displaced or migrate, girls are often the first to be pulled out of school to support mothers in the household.⁵⁶ The removal of girls from school to support family labour can also occur following a disaster,⁵⁷ with evidence from droughts illustrating that this can lead girls to spend less time in school.⁵⁸ In South Asia, for instance, interviews revealed that families ‘tend to rely more on the young girls burdening them with too much work at a very tender age.’⁵⁹

MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

Girls who experience climate change-related displacement and migration may also face **psychological trauma**, even just as a result of awareness of relocation.⁶⁰ The trauma and stress caused can have further negative effects on girls' psychological and physical health. This, in turn, can impact education; for example, some temporarily relocated students exhibited anti-social behaviour while working through traumatic experiences relating to the 2017 hurricanes in the Caribbean.⁶¹

Conversely, **education plays a key role in supporting children's mental health**. For instance, after Hurricane Katrina in the southern United States, a study found that schools could play 'a pivotal role by providing a stable and therapeutic environment for displaced children.'⁶² Hence, education services can be – and should become – critical spaces to provide informed and inclusive mental health support to mitigate trauma and stress faced by girls on the move.

THE POWER OF GIRLS' EDUCATION

Girls' education is a vital tool in tackling climate change. Educating girls' increases community resilience,⁶³ supports adaptation capacity,⁶⁴ and enables girls to engage in the new green economy and contribute to green solutions.⁶⁵ Girls' education can also promote sustainable values and practices and support girls to take action for climate justice, ensuring their voices are heard in critical climate discussions. Indeed, girls are already at the forefront of climate activism, with young women such as Vanessa Nakate and Malala Yousufzai, among others, highlighting the importance of climate justice.

Girls' education is also important for countries' economic, democratic, and healthy growth. Girls' education reduces maternal deaths and can lead to an increase in childhood vaccinations. The earnings from education for girls could also see economies grow by up to \$30 trillion.⁶⁶ As such, **the UK Government's commitment to support 12 years of quality education for every girl is welcome and critical to achieving a more green, just, and prosperous world.**

SPOTLIGHT ON: UK AID IN INDIA

India is home to the second highest number of disaster-related IDPs globally, with approximately 3.9 million new cases of disaster-related displacements in 2020.⁶⁷ This includes over 1.2 million displacements of children. The reasons behind these disasters vary by region, with different areas facing severe monsoon seasons,⁶⁸ floods,⁶⁹ cyclones,⁷⁰ or droughts.⁷¹ In this context, internal migration is common to adapt to livelihood insecurity, and to pursue labour in other regions.⁷²

When families migrate or are displaced, girls' access to school can be affected. For instance, lower school attendance and dropouts among girls with families who migrate are common during floods or droughts.⁷³ Girls may also experience gendered expectations of unpaid work, such as being responsible for caring for siblings or gathering water, with the latter evidenced in Odisha.⁷⁴ Girls and their families may also experience exploitation when migrating internally for work, with girls and women working in open fields at increased risk of sexual violence and exploitation.⁷⁵

The UK contributes to different efforts to foster climate resilience and adaptive capacity in India.⁷⁶ One project, titled *The Infrastructure for Climate Resilient Growth (ICRG)*, will support '5 million people living in three of India's poorest states – Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Bihar – to increase their incomes and resilience to climate shocks.'⁷⁷ Phase II of the project will have 'a specific focus on empowering women and girls; Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), and other underpowered groups.'⁷⁸ This welcome focus could help to address key challenges girls affected by climate shocks face in accessing education, among other areas, and learning from the project can be used to scale up and improve interventions in India and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE UK GOVERNMENT

Climate change-related displacement and migration is an issue in urgent need of international action and attention. More so than other forms of mobility (such as conflict-related displacement), the impacts of climate change can be prevented, mapped, and addressed well ahead of any impacts.

Furthermore, the impacts of COVID-19 have resulted in a crash course for continuing education through disruption, as the pandemic demonstrated the ‘hard lessons about the excessive and avoidable costs of not planning for and anticipating global crises that know no borders.’⁷⁹ Using knowledge and experience developed through education in other displacement and disruption contexts, policymakers can build stronger, more resilient, and more gender-responsive systems that support girls’ continued access to education.

The UK, as 2021 President of COP26 and a global leader on education, should use this opportunity to highlight the impact of climate change-related displacement and migration, draw attention to its impacts on girls’ education, and call for action. The UK has recognised the impact of the climate crisis on girls’ education, stating in the 2021 Girls’ Education Action Plan ‘Globally, at least 200 million adolescent girls live on the frontlines of the climate crisis and those who are already marginalised through poverty, displacement or disability, are likely to be worst affected.’⁸⁰ In recognition, the Plan indicates the Government’s commitment to ‘Shine a spotlight on the clear and present danger that climate crisis poses for education, and better define the role of girls’ education in the global response’.⁸¹ Leadership in highlighting and addressing climate change, displacement and migration, and the impacts on learning will be critical to achieving the UK Government’s commitment of supporting 12 years of quality education for girls.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

To support girls affected by climate change-related displacement and migration and achieve its manifesto commitment, the UK Government should facilitate cross-sectoral collaboration through:

- The **establishment of a technical facility** on climate change-related displacement and migration and child rights.

This facility should recognise the intersectoral nature of the challenges faced by girls (and all children) uprooted by climate change and address child rights holistically. Bringing together experts from across sectors would enable climate science and migration policy to inform education system strengthening, ensuring that these systems are **future-proof and ready to respond to the shocks we know are coming**. The facility would also support data collection and dissemination and South-South collaboration, while providing an important platform through which to make progress on the UK Government’s adaptation agenda.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to establishing the technical facility, the UK Government can support the rights of girls affected by climate change-related displacement and migration by:

- **Meeting its commitment to achieve net zero emissions by 2050** and encouraging other high-income countries to make a similar pledge at COP26.
- Join the International Data Alliance for Children on the Move and **invest in the collection of gender-disaggregated, climate change-related data** through this platform by COP26.
- Use the UK’s role as a leading international donor to **champion the rights of girls** affected by climate change-related displacement and migration, ensuring they are central in key COP26 outcomes and agreed action, as well as at through platforms such as the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait.

CONCLUSION

The climate crisis is a child rights crisis, with girls experiencing unique and compounding barriers to accessing their right to education in the changing climate. With a learning crisis already experienced by countries around the world, particularly for girls, the impacts of climate change-related displacement and migration will only exacerbate these impacts. This Working Paper sheds light on challenges girls face, exploring how climate and gender factors add another layer of complexity to the existing learning crisis. It sets out in what ways girls are already experiencing challenges when their families and communities are uprooted due to climate change and how the UK, as COP26 President, can and must lead international action to support girls on the move in a changing climate.

As the UK continues its leading role in international decision-making on climate change and efforts to deliver girls' education, it must ensure these two issues come together to drive action for girls affected by climate change-related displacement and migration. Girls around the world are already seeing their **futures at risk** as a result of displacement and climate change. The UK Government must act now to prevent these impacts from holding back even more girls from realising their full potential.

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For more detailed information and evidence on the patterns, approaches, and educational impacts of climate change-related displacement and migration, see UNICEF UK's report [Futures at Risk: Protecting the rights of children on the move in a changing climate.](#)

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