

**REAL CHOICES,
REAL LIVES**

CLIMATE CHANGE AND GIRLS' EDUCATION: BARRIERS, GENDER NORMS AND PATHWAYS TO RESILIENCE

Synthesis Report

Figure 1: Real Choices, Real Lives Cohort Study Map

Since 2006, Plan International's Real Choices, Real Lives study has been following a cohort of girls from nine countries: tracking their lives from birth in annual interviews with family members, and - once they reached the age of five - with the girls themselves, using age-specific participatory methodologies. Every year Plan International publishes a summary of the annual interviews and the longitudinal trends explored in the research. This year the analysis and the interviews have centred on climate change, which, according to the RCRL girls and their families, has, over the last decade, presented a growing challenge to their lives and livelihoods. This year's research findings illuminate its particular impact on girls' education and on progress towards gender equality.

- DOMINICAN REPUBLIC
- EL SALVADOR
- BRAZIL
- TOGO
- BENIN
- UGANDA*
- CAMBODIA
- VIETNAM
- PHILLIPINES

**Uganda is one of the nine focal countries for the Real Choices, Real Lives research study. Unfortunately, interviews could not be conducted with the cohort girls in Uganda in 2023 due to delays in ethics approval – their experiences and perspectives are therefore not included in this report.*

The names of the girls and young women in this report have been changed to ensure anonymity. Photos used in this report are not of research participants.



*** This is a synthesis of the report : Climate Change and Girls' Education: Barriers, Gender Norms and Pathways to Resilience. The full technical report, and the accompanying executive summary can be found [here](#).**

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A girl picking rice in the Philippines.
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SUMMARY

The 2023 *Real Choices, Real Lives* report, in the study's seventeenth year, focuses on climate change. What are its direct and indirect impacts on the lives, and in particular the educational opportunities, of the adolescent girls taking part in this longitudinal research?

- Infrastructure is one of the first casualties of climate change: floods and storms close schools, destroy roads and make journeys to school more hazardous. The girls¹ are more likely to drop out of school or have their attendance disrupted.
- Family income also bears the brunt: drought and unseasonal weather mean crops fail and families, often already living close to subsistence level, become poorer.

As a result:

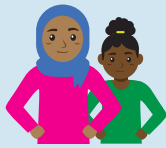
- Girls' education suffers: the girls are pulled out of school as families can no longer afford fees and other associated costs.
- The girls' domestic responsibilities have increased, as parents and carers are forced to take on extra jobs to try and make ends meet. Additionally, the girls often do paid work outside the home so that, even if they do stay in school, their schoolwork suffers as time to study is squeezed out.
- Rates of child and early forced marriage or union (CEFMU) are on the rise, as families may feel forced to adopt to improve their financial situation.
- Mounting poverty means rising crime rates: girls and young women are more vulnerable to violence, often on school routes, which makes families reluctant to send them there.
- Boys' education may suffer too, but in many of the cohort families their education is still seen as more important than girls' – boys stay at school, girls help at home. With the loss of education girls' choices are increasingly limited.



1. All references to 'the girls' throughout this report refer to the Real Choices, Real Lives cohort girls.

Girls' rights to education are being restricted by climate change but so too is their ability to help their communities deal with it.

Schools are the main source of education about climate change.



And when girls are not at school their opportunities for learning are reduced.

This in turn has an impact on the **resilience of their families** and communities struggle to cope with the effect of climate shocks.



Adolescent girls are **active in their communities**: planting trees, recycling, helping to repair roads and raising awareness about climate change.



They are critical of the quality of climate change education that they are receiving – often their teachers are hardly trained and have little knowledge of the subject. **Girls want to learn and do more.**



The girls have three major recommendations to help them with this:



1

Make Schools Safe: by repairing infrastructure damage as quickly as possible and having robust gender-and age-aware disaster planning in place. If the buildings are out of commission schools need to minimise disruption to learning by having continuity plans for lesson delivery.



2

Improve climate change curricula: by embedding gender-transformative climate change education into school curricula and improving the knowledge and teaching skills of the staff who deliver it.



3

Create better conditions for climate change adaptation and education: by providing loss and damage finance to benefit families whose incomes have been affected by climate change so that increased poverty does not threaten girls' education. And by working with schools and local communities to ensure that the voices of adolescent girls are heard in climate change decision-making at all levels, so that their rights are respected and their specific needs are acknowledged and met.

“I think the best solution right now to better prevent crop failures is to have money. Because if there is money, there is more fertiliser, there is more irrigation and there are enough funds to supply the needs at home and at school while waiting for the harvest.”

REYNA (16, PHILIPPINES)²

2. Unless otherwise stated all quotations are from the most recent data collection in 2023.



Schoolgirls in Togo.
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INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Plan International began a unique research study following a group of 142 girls from nine countries across three continents. The aim of the study, *Real Choices, Real Lives*, was to track them from birth to 18 in order to have a better understanding of the reality of their daily lives.

The study documents in detail the experiences of the girls, their individual families, and the environment they live in and helps to put a human face on the available statistics, theories and academic discussions. The study is participatory using innovative age-specific tools to gather

information and using the information gathered from the cohort girls and their families to inform both future research and Plan International’s work with communities. Nearly 18 years later we have a wealth of information, centred on the voices of the girls themselves, describing not only their daily routines and experiences but their opinions, hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

“My life is going to be different from that of my mother because I have studied and reached where my mother did not reach... her life is not good.”

NIMISHA (11, UGANDA, 2017)

2023: A GROWING CHALLENGE

Over the years the RCRL study has focused on education, health, family income, gender roles and on the attitudes and resources within the family and the wider community.

During the last decade the impact of climate change on their lives has been increasingly apparent and of real concern to the girls and their families. This year we asked them specifically about the impact of climate change on girls' education and on their day-to-day lives. The 16 and 17-year-olds, and their parents and carers, reflect on the struggle to stay in school and what climate change means to them.³

The impact of climate change on children - and girls in particular - can be severe and long lasting: it often increases girls' domestic responsibilities to the detriment of their studies, puts them at greater risk of violence as escalating poverty means crime rates soar, and any reduction in family income can make them more vulnerable to being pulled out of school and to early and forced marriage or unions.⁴

Climate change has many potential victims and, as families grapple with difficult choices, one of these is gender equality.

Key Definitions

In this research, climate change is defined as: "a change of climate, which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods."⁵ It can alter rainfall patterns around the globe and increase the frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters. This includes floods, droughts, landslides, wildfires, tropical storms, and extreme temperatures.⁶

Adaptation to climate change refers to long-term changes in social, political, and economic practices and processes, to moderate (or benefit from) the effects of climate change.⁷

Coping strategies are short-term adjustments at the individual and household level such as diversifying avenues of income or utilising available capital, to minimise the effects of sudden climate-induced shocks and stresses.⁸



Adolescent girl from Kara Region in Togo.

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- For this report, we interviewed girls and their families from eight of the nine cohort countries. We were unable to include new data collection from the girls in Uganda due to delays in receiving ethics clearance: the previous national ethics approval expired in 2022 and could not be renewed in time. However, we were able to draw on historical data from the girls in Uganda, including times they spoke of the impacts of climate change in the past.
- Plan International (2021) 'Climate Change, Young Women, and Girls'. Available at: https://plan-international.org/uploads/2021/12/climate_change_young_women_girls_plan_and_sei_final.pdf.
- UNFCCC (1992) 'United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change'. Available at: https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/background_publications_htmlpdf/application/pdf/conveng.pdf.
- Plan International (2021) 'Climate Change, Young Women, and Girls'.
- UNFCCC (n.d.) 'Adaptation and Resilience'. Available at: <https://unfccc.int/topics/adaptation-and-resilience/the-big-picture/introduction>.
- Berman, R.J., Quinn, C.H. and Paavola, J. (2015) 'Identifying drivers of household coping strategies to multiple climatic hazards in Western Uganda: Implications for adapting to future climate change', *Climate and Development*, 7:1, pp.71-84.

Plan International and Climate Change

Plan International recognises that the climate crisis is an intergenerational and gender injustice. Our work in communities, in humanitarian crises, and in disaster risk reduction (DRR) focuses on and acknowledges the particular risks to girls and women. Plan International is committed to a rights-based approach for understanding and mitigating girls' experiences of climate change. This approach involves: (1) that girls' rights must be explicitly recognised in national climate strategies; (2) that girls have the right to age and gender accessible climate and disaster information; and (3) that girls' participation in decision-making on climate change is fundamental to age- and gender-responsive policy making to address girls' needs and wellbeing.⁹ Finally, Plan International believes that climate change action provides a significant opportunity to advance gender equality and girls' rights by promoting transformative systemic changes that address both climate and gender injustices.

To this end we work with children and their communities to reduce climate risks, adapt to climate change and strengthen resilience. We support their meaningful participation in decision making and in leading climate action in their communities. Innovative, games-based and experiential learning approaches are used, which we integrate into community and school systems to maximise long-term impact.



Girls at school in Cambodia.

© Plan International

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

While there is a well-established body of research on gender and climate change, we seldom hear the views and experiences of adolescent girls in their own words.

The rare access on which this report is based paints a far more nuanced picture of how climate change is affecting girls and young women. RCRL presents an opportunity to hear from girls, not just about their experiences, but about their ideas for mitigation and adaptation - what might make their lives better?

9. Plan International (2019) 'Climate Change: Focus on Girls and Young Women, Plan International Position Paper'. Available at: <https://plan-international.org/publications/climate-change-focus-on-girls-and-young-women/>.

Young people in the Philippines plant rice as part of a climate-smart agriculture project.

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The research, summarised in this report, explores how climate-induced shocks and stresses have and will have an impact on girls' education and the decisions they are able to make about their lives. With their help, it also aims to understand the extent to which education supports girls' and young women's ability to adapt and how this, in turn, supports climate change adaptation in their families and wider communities. The guiding focus for this research is based on the three pillars of the Comprehensive School Safety framework which emphasises:

- the need for safe schools;
- the need to ensure education continuity in times of crisis;
- the need to promote the knowledge and skills of all community members to ensure risk reduction and resilience.¹⁰

Findings from the interviewees demonstrate that education about climate change is a key factor influencing their confidence in their ability to help their communities adapt and encouraging overall climate resilience.

“It should be taught in school how to adapt to the current situation. For example, during the dry season, there should be technologies that can help people know the appropriate method to not be affected by bad weather.”

REYNA (16, PHILIPPINES)

The research also indicates that listening to adolescent girls, investing in girls' education in general, and teaching them about climate change in particular, may not only improve resilience in their communities, but also help to advance gender equality, climate justice, and girls' leadership.

The findings from this year's research are divided into two sections:

- 1 Explores adolescent girls' real-world experiences of climate change, the impacts on livelihoods and communities, and the impact on girls' and young women's education.
- 2 Analyses the need for risk reduction and resilience education to be embedded in school curricula and looks at the role of education in helping to future-proof communities against some of the impacts of climate change.

During the research the girls were also asked about their recommendations for change: how would they envision a future in which they are able to thrive despite the impacts of climate change? How might they adapt? What international, national, and local strategies would make a difference to their lives and to the prosperity and wellbeing of their communities? This report not only seeks to understand and amplify the views and experiences of the girls as they face the daily impacts of climate change but also to support their vision for a better way forward.

10. GADRRRES (2022) 'Comprehensive School Safety Framework 2022-2030'. Available at: <https://www.gadrrres.net/>.

SETTING THE SCENE

Research on climate change in general and its particular impacts on women and children is vast and ongoing, reflecting the urgency of the global situation. It is a situation that is only going to get worse: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts a further increase in the frequency and intensity of the severe weather already affecting many countries around the world.¹¹ Globally, natural hazards are occurring “almost five times as frequently as 40 years ago.”¹² As global temperatures continue to rise, the increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, is making many people poorer. This loss of income falls heavily on children’s health and wellbeing with both direct and indirect disruption to their education: girls are particularly at risk.¹³ As daily life becomes more and more difficult, especially for those living in agricultural communities in low- and lower-middle income countries, hopes and plans for a better future begin to disintegrate.

Inevitably, these changes are affecting the girls taking part in the RCRL study: for many of them the unpredictability of extreme weather, the overall lack of support, their exclusion from any form of decision-making, and family poverty enhances their vulnerability to the climate crisis. They are not being helped to adapt, to build their own resilience and help their communities but see their opportunities dwindle as their families struggle.

“I want to be a part of solving the above problem, so I should save the environment, reduce plastic, plant trees, and I should not fire the plastic.”

DAVY (16, CAMBODIA)



A young Philippine woman is part of a climate-smart agriculture project.
©Plan International

11. Lawler, J. and Patel, M. (2012) ‘Exploring children’s vulnerability to climate change and their role in advancing climate change adaptation in East Asia and the Pacific’, Environmental Development, 3:1, pp.123-136.
12. UNICEF (2015) ‘Unless we act now: The impact of climate change on children,’ p.54. Available at: https://www.unicef.org/media/50391/file/Unless_we_act_now_The_impact_of_climate_change_on_children-ENG.pdf.
13. Sims, K. (2021) Education, Girls’ Education and Climate Change, K4D Emerging Issues Report 29. Institute of Development Studies, pp.2-4.



Globally, approximately one billion children are extremely susceptible to the impacts of the climate crisis.¹⁴

In 2021 UNICEF introduced a Children's Climate Risk Index (CCRI). It measured the rate of environmental shocks against the levels of child vulnerability, to come up with an analysis of children at risk.¹⁵ Six of the RCRL countries – the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Benin, Togo, and Brazil – are experiencing extremely high levels of environmental shocks and stresses, with the Philippines ranked third globally. Additionally, three of the RCRL countries – Benin, Togo, and Uganda – have extremely high levels of child vulnerability. Unsurprisingly, Benin and Togo are among the countries categorised as having a CCRI severity rating of very high – the highest category possible – and they are joined here by the Philippines.

Climate change affects everybody but, clearly, it does not affect everyone equally. Currently, it is those living in low-and lower-middle-income countries – girls and other marginalised children in particular – whose lives and livelihoods are most damaged. Yet, despite this, children's voices and perspectives are seldom included or considered in the decisions and policymaking which are fundamentally shaping their future. Not only are

their vulnerabilities largely ignored, but this lack of consultation is also a violation of their right, under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to participate in the decision-making that affects their lives.¹⁶

The experiences of the participants bring the impacts of climate change into detailed focus. The cohort girls come from low-and lower-middle income countries and largely from agricultural, fishing and pastoralist communities which are particularly vulnerable to climate change. Families can only thrive if there is a predictable crop supply to feed both them and their animals, reliable weather patterns and adequate water sources: all of which have been affected by increasing drought, unpredictable storms or changing rainfall patterns.¹⁷

For many households, poverty, the lack of access to credit, limited formal education, lack of alternative employment or governments subsidies, and the often-overwhelming nature of the climate shocks they are experiencing, means it is impossible to adapt. For the cohort girls will this lead to lives limited by lack of education, rising violence and all-consuming domestic responsibilities?

14. UNICEF (2021) 'The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children's Climate Risk Index'. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis>.

15. Ibid.

16. UNICEF (2023) 'Falling short: Addressing the Climate Finance Gap for Children'. Available at: www.unicef.org/media/142181/file/Falling-short-Addressing-the-climate-finance-gap-for-children-June-2023.pdf.

17. Muttarak, R. and Lutz, W. (2014) 'Is education a key to reducing vulnerability to natural disasters and hence unavoidable climate change?', *Ecology and Sociology*, 19:1, pp.1-8.

What Does this Mean for Girls and Women?

Vulnerability to climate change is not uniform or static. It is shaped by age, gender, education, income, and geography¹⁸ and is subject to a range of social, economic, and political circumstances.¹⁹ Women and children – and particularly adolescent girls – are among the most vulnerable. They start from a lower base: they are more likely to be living in poverty, have less access to knowledge and education, are more likely to be malnourished and may have greater difficulty accessing water and other natural resources.²⁰ Women and girls constitute the majority of the world's poor and are often dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods.²¹ Girls are also more likely to have lower levels of education and fewer financial resources than boys and men.²² Gender norms mean they are less likely to be involved in political, community, and household decision-making, and often face barriers that hamper their mobility during an emergency.²³

Crises of all sorts tend to provoke an increase in violence: adolescent girls and young women living in climate crises are at greater risk of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV), domestic abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV).²⁴ Numerous studies have highlighted a spike in GBV and sexual assault during and after extreme weather events.²⁵ Women and girls also experience sexual abuse and violence when trying to access relief services.²⁶ Evidence also suggests that for women and girls, climate change can mean displacement, sex trafficking, and sexual exploitation in the form of being forced into selling or exchanging sex to support themselves or their families.²⁷

Additionally, when livelihoods are disrupted and money is in even shorter supply, child marriage is often viewed as a way to improve a family's financial

situation. It reduces the number of people within the household who need to be fed, and, in communities that practice bride price – paid by the groom's family to the bride's family – it can be a source of income, and yet another reason to encourage child marriage.²⁸ Climate shocks also disrupt girls' education which is widely understood to be a protective factor against child marriage.²⁹ In early 2021, the Malala Fund estimated that climate-related events would prevent at least four million girls in low- and lower-middle income countries from completing their education, and if this trend were to continue, by 2025 climate change would contribute to 12.5 million girls each year not completing their education.³⁰

According to the evidence there are two key factors influencing the disproportionate impact of climate change on girls' education:

- **gender norms** which devalue educational attainment for girls, in favour of reproductive and care labour within the home,³¹
- **poverty** which can have the effect of forcing parents facing financial hardship to remove children from school as a negative coping mechanism.³²

This combination of poverty and gender norms informs the decision to take girls out of school, rather than boys: girls are considered to be more useful at home and can take on paid work outside of the home as well. Even if they do not leave school, the additional household responsibilities, often combined with some hours of paid work, means less time and energy to study.³³

Disproportionate household labour, time poverty, and the burden of taking on paid work to supplement family incomes are all key recurring themes in the findings of the RCRL study and are threatening the educational attendance or attainment of many of the girls involved.

18. Mutarak, R. and Lutz, W. (2014) 'Is education a key to reducing vulnerability to natural disasters and hence unavoidable climate change?', *Ecology and Sociology*, 19:1, pp.1-8.

19. Lawler, J. and Patel, M. (2012) 'Exploring children's vulnerability to climate change and their role in advancing climate change adaptation in East Asia and the Pacific'.

20. Plan International (2021) 'Climate Change, Young Women, and Girls'.

21. UN WomenWatch (n.d) 'Factsheet: Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change'. Available at: www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf.

22. Ibid.

23. UNDP (2016) 'Gender and Climate Change'. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskqke326/files/publications/UNDP%20Linkages%20Gender%20and%20CC%20Policy%20Brief%201-WEB.pdf>.

24. van Daalen, K.R. et al (2022) 'Extreme events and gender-based violence: A mixed methods systematic review', *Lancet Planet Health*, 6:6, p.519.

25. Rezwana, N. and Pain, R. (2020) 'Gender-based violence before, during, and after cyclones: Slow violence and layered disasters', *Disasters*, 45:4, p.741.

26. CARE International (2021) 'Evicted by Climate Change: Confronting the gendered-impacts of climate-induced displacement'. Available at: https://wrw.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/CARE-Climate-Migration-Report-v0_4.pdf.

27. Sims, K. (2021) 'Education, Girls' Education and Climate Change', p.3.

28. UNFPA (2021) 'Child Marriage and Environmental Crises: An Evidence Brief'. Available at: <https://esar.unfpa.org/en/publications/child-marriage-and-environmental-crises-evidence-brief>.

29. Girls Not Brides (2022) 'Girls' Education and Child Marriage'. Available at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/girls-education-and-child-marriage/#resource-downloads>.

30. Malala Fund (2021) 'A Greener, Fairer Future: Why leaders need to invest in climate and girls' education'. Available at: <https://malala.org/newsroom/malala-fund-publishes-report-on-climate-change-and-girls-education>.

31. Theirworld (2020) '20 reasons why, in 2020, there are still 260m children out of school'. Available at: <https://theirworld.org/news/20-reasons-why-260m-children-are-out-of-school-in-2020/>.

32. UNGEI (2021) 'Our Call for Gender Transformative Education to Advance Climate Justice'. Available at: <https://www.ungei.org/news/our-call-gender-transformative-education-climate-justice>.

33. Nelson, V. (2011) 'Gender, Generations, Social Protection & Climate Change: A thematic Review', Overseas Development Institute. Available at: <https://odi.org/en/publications/gender-generations-social-protection-climate-change-a-thematic-review>.

Education Matters

There is a growing body of research supporting the importance of education in the context of climate action and resilience. In particular, girls' education has been identified as key to reducing vulnerability to the impacts of climate change:³⁴ evidence suggests that countries that have focused on girls' equal access to education have suffered far fewer losses from droughts and floods than those with lower levels of girls' education.³⁵ In 2014, eleven studies carried out in a diverse range of "geographic, socioeconomic, cultural and hazard contexts," concluded that long term resilience to the consequences of climate change can be developed through education: by strengthening skills and knowledge, and the understanding of risk, as well as by indirectly reducing poverty, improving health, and increasing access to information.³⁶ Education can also develop girls' leadership skills, giving them the confidence and opportunity to speak out in their communities, and beyond, to ensure that girls' needs in climate mitigation are being heard and heeded.³⁷

Education is not only key to developing young people's knowledge and skills in terms of adaptation efforts but can also enable them to challenge the political and social attitudes, operating both nationally and globally, that appear to be charting a course towards disaster: fuelling continued climate change and environmental degradation.³⁸ Education supports gender-balanced leadership for climate action and can empower girls to take up leadership roles in climate justice both within their own families and at national levels.

In August 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of Child released a general comment on children's rights and the environment, calling on states to ensure age-appropriate, safe, and accessible mechanisms for children's views to be heard "regularly and at all stages of environmental decision-making processes."³⁹ Where they are heard, children's views do have an impact: child-to-parent intergenerational learning has been identified as the way forward, "inspire[ing] adults towards higher levels of climate concern, and in turn, collective action."⁴⁰ Or, in other words, pressuring their parents and grandparents into doing something.

The experiences, observations and conclusions noted throughout the many and varied studies on the impact of climate change on girls' lives are



A young community leader in Vietnam.
©Plan International

mirrored in first-person detail in the accounts of the RCRL participants.

Overall, current research makes it clear that education is a critical means of addressing climate change: it links to skills development, awareness raising, behaviour change and building children's agency. It is these factors that make up the everyday leadership that is exhibited by RCRL girls: they are demanding opportunities to take part in vital climate adaptations within their communities.

As their interviews testify, the girls are anxious to play their part.

"... take part in awareness-raising events on how to avoid climate change, help plant trees, take part in other community activities that I can do".

LADI (17, TOGO)

34. Plan International (2021) 'Climate Change, Young Women, and Girls'.

35. Plan International (2019) 'Climate Change: Focus on Girls and Young Women. Plan International Position Paper'.

36. Muttarak, R. and Lutz, W. (2014) 'Is education a key to reducing vulnerability to natural disasters and hence unavoidable climate change?'.

37. Sims, K. (2021) 'Education, Girls' Education and Climate Change'.

38. Plan International (2021) 'Climate Change, Young Women, and Girls', p.7.

39. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2023) General Comment No.26 (2023) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FCG%2F26&Lang=en.

40. Lawson, D.F. et al. (2019) 'Children can foster climate change concern among their parents', Nature Climate Change, 9:6.



Youth Peer Educators from the Philippines.
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WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

The adolescent girls taking part in the study live in different countries - their cultures, economies and community and family lives are diverse but climate change affects them all. It may manifest differently, but across three continents its influence on lives and livelihoods has been apparent for some time and, as demonstrated in our previous years' evidence, is increasing. The impact on families, and on girls and women in particular, is immense.

“This year, it is hotter, and rainfall is less. This affects animals (pigs are sick and chickens die). Furthermore, I have not enough money to support my daughter’s education, and rice and water for daily consumption.”

SOTHANY’S MOTHER (CAMBODIA, 2017)

Sothany’s mother is not alone. Similar stories of unseasonal weather, poor harvest yields which are worsening almost every year, reduced household incomes, increased costs of living, and families seeking extra sources of income are common across the RCRL cohort.

From 2011 onwards, it is evident from the data, that overall, communities have been facing unpredictable, intensifying, and more frequent and unusual weather events.⁴¹ The historical evidence, that agricultural families have been struggling for a number of years, demonstrates that these weather events are beyond normal parameters: it is clearly climate change.

41. The data review process was limited to 2011 – 2022, as we were interested in investigating climate change effects that intersect with the girls’ schooling. 2011 was the earliest year some participants in the RCRL cohort would have started school.

01 Girls' Education is Being Disrupted by Climate Change: the impact on learning, lives and livelihoods

Across the cohort study, girls described the impact of climate change on their education. Some are obvious physical barriers thrown up by storms battering school buildings, rain washing away roads and winds making journeys to schools and colleges too hazardous to undertake.

"When it rains a lot, roofs are destroyed in markets and roads are flooded, making it difficult for children to go to school. Electricity poles also fall down."

CATHERINE'S MOTHER (BENIN)

"There are children who sometimes have to cross rivers, when the river is overflowing, that is, they can't cross because of the current..."

STEPHANY (16, EL SALVADOR)

Schools are frequently closed for repairs. Many of the girls in the study also miss school because the threat of flood water spreading disease keeps them at home, or because they are involved in clean-up operations in the aftermath of a storm.

"When the weather forecast announces a storm or flood, the school will notify the students and then send a message to the parents, the school will announce the absence. After the flood, we all go to school and clean up. That is, after each flood, the whole class is assigned to clean up, and then all the students go to school the next day to do it."

KIM (16, VIETNAM)

Many of the girls go to school on motorbikes and have experienced or witnessed accidents during storms and flooding. Some have been injured and these accidents make them and others scared of travelling to school. In Cambodia, intense heat has made it uncomfortable to walk to and from school, with Bopha, Lina and Nakry

all reporting that many people have fainted in the heat. Bopha also says that it affects her ability to focus when she is at school:

"It is so hot, and it makes us sweat. I don't feel I am concentrating on my study because there is no fresh air."

BOPHA (16, CAMBODIA)

Some schools do try and help. Dolores, 17, and Kyla, 16, both from the Philippines, report that although schools close during floods and storms, teachers will send out class assignments to students through their cell phones. In Kyla's case, teachers organise an extra class on a Saturday to make up for lost time. These interventions, however, are rare.

Other impacts on girls' access to education are more subtle: money for education becomes scarcer as harvests fail, homes need repairing and health issues increase. Family incomes are falling, and food prices are increasing, as unpredictable weather patterns make earning a living particularly difficult for the sort of agricultural and fishing communities in which many of the girls live.

"It is hard for people who rely on land... For those who rely on water, it is hard to fish... if they have money, that is no problem as they can buy at the market but if we don't have much money, it is hard for them to find food on their own because it is so hot."

LEAKHENA (16, CAMBODIA)

"As we lost a lot [of crops], sometimes we didn't have enough to sell or for them [family consumption], so we had to buy it."

SUSANA (16, EL SALVADOR)

In some areas drought is pushing up prices and having an impact on the amount of time girls spend on domestic chores. Many families now have to buy their drinking water and Valeria, 17, in El Salvador, comments that they usually go to the river to wash their clothes because the water they collect at home is only used to wash glasses, dishes, cutlery or to bathe.

It is households living in the greatest poverty who find it hardest to adapt – they simply do not have the spare resources to carry them through the toughest times. In Darna’s community in the Philippines, most people are reportedly buried in debt, and living in extreme poverty as crops fail and incomes plummet. Tien describes similar circumstances in Vietnam, and says that, as a result, people are earning less and reducing their spending. Lina in Cambodia agrees:

“People [are] in poverty as they don’t have much money for meal[s], not enough clean water for usage, more expend for daily lives. Furthermore, they have many children.”

LINA (16, CAMBODIA)

As climate change takes its severe toll on livelihoods, young women throughout the study report that their parents are struggling to pay for their school fees or for their travel to and from school. Some report having to seek paid employment outside of school hours to help contribute to their family income. They also report how difficult it is to juggle school and work and feel that their education is suffering.

In Togo, Larba, 17, has taken on a part-time job to pay for her school fees, which her parents can no longer afford due to climate change-related livelihood losses and the rising cost of living. Larba feels as though she doesn’t have enough time to learn outside school hours because at weekends she works in the fields and it’s only when she gets back at night that she can study. Others have been forced to leave school altogether: families can no longer afford fees and other school costs and need their daughters to earn money to help keep the family afloat.

Overall, the gendered impacts of climate change are wide-ranging: they include an increase in unwanted pregnancy, as adolescent girls and women struggle to afford contraceptives, escalating sexual exploitation as some feel forced to sell or exchange sex to support themselves, and an increase in CEFMU. The latter often a coping strategy for families struggling to feed their children.



Adolescent girl selling banana chips in Togo.
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School dropout rates are particularly high in Togo, with Nana-Adja, Nini-Riki and Reine all indicating that poverty and unwanted pregnancy are two of the main reasons girls are leaving school. For example, Nini-Rike claims that poverty affects girls in a unique way as it can sometimes lead them to drop out of school to seek money and/or food from boys and men which Reine describes as “bad behaviour.”

“Sometimes, in order to find food, girls give themselves over to boys, and the taste for adventure leads girls to drop out of school.”

REINE (17, TOGO)

Additionally, increased poverty often leads to more crime. This in turn can have a particular impact on girls’ school attendance. They are vulnerable on the way to school and families are of course reluctant to send them. In Benin, several girls reported the roads to be unsafe due to high crime rates. One girl, Barbara, says she does not attend school unless her brother can accompany her, because the route is so dangerous. In the Philippines, girls report that they feel particularly unsafe travelling to school in the morning when it is dark. Violence on the school route is also reported in Cambodia:

“There is another concerning case with gangsters who want to kidnap students who travel to school along the quiet road.”

LEAKHENA (16, CAMBODIA)

What is the impact of climate change on boys' education?

"I don't think parents will ask their boys to drop school because usually boys can't be like girls, boys can't take care of their family as much as girls."

UYEN (16, VIETNAM)

Boys, too, are dropping out of school but in general the adolescent girls asked about this attributed it to rebellion and personal choice rather than as a direct result of having to contribute to their families suffering under climate change. In El Salvador, Susana thinks that boys and girls drop out of school equally – but for different reasons: girls are more likely to drop out because they become pregnant or must take on household or caring responsibilities, boys are more likely to drop out of school to work or join gangs.⁴²

Many commented that conventional gender attitudes mean that boys would not be expected to take on caring responsibilities – it is just not seen as their role – but they might be asked to drop out of school to work and contribute to the family income in times of stress. However, it should be noted that none of the girls report that boys are contributing money to their households.

The impact of climate change on family income has brought to the fore many of the age-old gendered attitudes to girls' education. Families are often supportive and really want their girls to go to school.

"I would prioritise feeding them. [I wouldn't let it] affect their education, because without the school we are nothing. I don't want to offer [them] the life I had, working in the garden in the sun. I want [them to] to study to have better jobs."

FERNANDA'S MOTHER (BRAZIL)

Many of the girls too are fully aware how crucial education is:

"Girls' education is useful because girls also have the right to learn and find work in the future, and as our parents didn't go to school, we have to go."

ESSOHANA (17, TOGO)

But when poverty escalates it is often girls' education that suffers: girls are more useful at home to deputise for mothers who have moved away for work or are working longer hours, families fear for their safety and keep their daughters at home, or they encourage early marriage to ease the burden on family budgets.

Additionally, girls take on paid work to contribute to the family income and their schoolwork deteriorates. Contraceptives become too expensive and pregnancy rates increase. Girls' dreams of college and careers are taken over by domestic responsibilities.

In many communities, attitudes to girls' education remain ambivalent – often it is not really valued.

"Most parents do not prioritise studies, if a mother has to go run an errand, she stops sending the girl to school... and then the girl loses her love for school."

FGD PARTICIPANT (DOMINICAN REPUBLIC)

42. The areas where the girls live in El Salvador have high levels of gang activity and known to be violent, RCRL interviews are conducted by phone or in external locations to ensure safety of both the participants and the interviewers.

Quynh and Uyen in Vietnam both say boys' education is automatically prioritised and Anti-Yara in Togo also believes that boys' education is valued over girls':

"Here, girls' education is not valued because parents say that a girl at school is useless."

ANTI-YARA (17, TOGO)

A focus group in Togo supports this view: while they value education and do not agree with girls being taken out of school, they acknowledge that this is something that often happens in their community, especially when a family is facing increasing household expenses or care burdens.

The picture, and the emotions involved, is complex. Many girls in the RCRL study have already left school due to financial stress, illness, early marriage, or pregnancy. Despite this, most of the girls' parents and caregivers continue to report valuing girls' education, not least because they recognise it is an economic investment in a better life for the girls and their families.

"Education in the future generates better income for families, and parents should seek to improve their income without affecting their children."

FGD PARTICIPANT (EL SALVADOR)

In the Dominican Republic, a focus group participant comments that it is "irresponsible" for girls to leave school early and says that it is the responsibility of family members to support them and adjust to ensure that girls can continue their studies.

However, worsening financial situations due to crop failures and the rising cost of living appear to be driving families to make difficult decisions. They are forced to sacrifice a more stable financial future in order to survive today. Girls' educational prospects are abandoned as families struggle to find food and fund their daily lives.



02 The Role of Education in Preparing for and Adapting to Climate Change

Another casualty of pulling girls out of school is the loss of their input in tackling climate change. It is at school that they are most likely to learn about climate change – its causes and how to adapt and survive.

Our research indicates that where schools have a strong climate change curriculum, the girls demonstrate more knowledge about climate change, greater confidence in applying adaptation strategies, and provide more detailed recommendations. In countries where climate change education is limited, the girls report having less understanding and confidence about the topic.

It is clearly crucial both to embed quality climate change education into school curricula and to make sure that girls remain in school to benefit from it.

Despite their awareness of weather patterns in their own communities and of the impact of increasing volatility on their families' livelihoods many of the girls had little in-depth knowledge about climate change and some had not heard of the term at all. Even in El Salvador, where the government introduced the National Environmental Policy more than a decade ago - a policy which included provisions for the promotion of climate change knowledge within the national education curriculum - many of the cohort girls confessed to not really knowing about climate change.⁴³ Eight of the 12 girls interviewed in El Salvador were still in school which suggests that the quality of climate change education provided is inadequate.

43. Nachmany, M. et al. (2015) 'Climate Change Legislation in Dominican Republic: An excerpt from the 2015 Global Climate Legislation Study'. Grantham Research Institute. Available at: https://www.ise.ac.uk/GranthamInstitute/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/DOMINICAN_REPUBLIC.pdf.

Across the study there are differing levels of knowledge. All of the RCRL girls in the Philippines had heard of climate change, and most have a good understanding of its causes and impacts. Jasmine explains how pollution has damaged the ozone layer and how this leads to extreme heat:

“because ... rubber and plastic are burned... The environment and the ozone layer will be destroyed...”

JASMINE (17, PHILIPPINES)

Kim, in Vietnam, is also confident in her understanding of climate change:

“Climate change means environmental changes, erratic weather, earthquakes, and natural disasters in general. I have heard this word for the last half year. There are many things that affect the climate.”

KIM (16, VIETNAM)

Many of the girls are using the skills that they learned in school – such as recycling, planting trees, joining youth collective action groups, and spreading awareness. These activities demonstrate that girls are exercising leadership and using their initiative in their everyday lives because they are keen to do what they can to combat climate change.

“I like to recycle the old car tires as well as reuse my water bottle for several times. I sometimes plant the trees at school with my friends too. I usually take the left-over water from dish washing and washing up to water our crop. I save money to pay for my English class every month too. I save energy everyday by limiting the time of using electricity and I always tell my family and friends to take care themselves during the weather change too.”

DAVY (16, CAMBODIA)



A girl in El Salvador takes part in a workshop.

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“As a daughter of a farmer, and also a young farmer myself, I know how it is when the product is at a loss because I had to miss my classes, and sometimes I cannot eat because the product is damaged due to bad weather. It is important for my fellow young people to know this so they can learn to appreciate what they have and use the resources in the right way and also appreciate nature”.

REYNA (16, PHILIPPINES)

Reyna has learned about climate change in school and at home; in her family there is a lot of discussion about the impact of climate change and what they can do about it to protect both their individual income and the planet more widely. This level of engagement may be because the Philippines has arguably the most comprehensive climate change education among RCRL countries. The Department of Education has played an active role in advancing climate literacy and action in the country, developing resources and curricula, and advancing teacher training.⁴⁴ Reyna has benefited from this but is keen to learn more and thinks the school should do more:

“I learned something about how to protect nature to address climate change in the country such as planting trees and other methods to help prevent floods. But that is not enough... It should be taught in school how to adapt to the current situation. For example, during the dry season, there should be technologies that can help people know the appropriate method to not be affected by bad weather.”

REYNA (16, PHILIPPINES)

44. Republic of the Philippines, Department of Education (2023). ‘The Need for Climate Change Education’. Available at: <https://www.deped.gov.ph/climate-change-education/cce-in-the-philippines/>.

Kannitha, 16, from Cambodia and Rosamie, 16, from the Philippines have also learned about climate change in school but both suggest that it would be more effective if students were involved in the development of the climate change curriculum. Concerns about the content of school curricula, and the competency of those teaching it, is raised across the cohort countries and not only by the girls themselves.

“I would really like for our educators to have some training in each neighbourhood in my municipality about the reality of climate change... the professional schools do not have updated information, from the school management to the teachers.”

FGD PARTICIPANT, COMMUNITY LEADER (BRAZIL)

The common refrain from the girls interviewed, as Annabelle, 17, from Benin, put it, is **“it’s not enough.”** Most girls express a wish to learn more about adapting to climate change. In the Philippines, Christine, 17, wishes to learn how to prepare for and mitigate the effects of the dry seasons, and in El Salvador, Stephany, 17, would like to be taught more about natural hazards.

In the Dominican Republic, Dariana, 17, rates her climate change education at school a five out of ten, as she does not know how to respond in the event of a drought or flood as this has not been taught in school.

Also in the Dominican Republic, Rebeca, 17, says that her school does not have earthquake drills, but she thinks that these and hurricane drills should be conducted to ensure students know how to respond.

A number of girls in Cambodia also expressed their dissatisfaction with the level of climate change education they receive at school. Kannitha, 16, feels she needs to learn more and others echo her sense of not really being prepared for extreme weather events:

“I don’t think I am prepared enough for the extreme changes weather as I lack knowledge about this issue.”

LEAKHENA (16, CAMBODIA)

This reflects the broader picture of climate change education in Cambodia where education is not seen by the government as integral to climate change mitigation, and much of the climate change curriculum is delivered by institutions such as INGOs and the UN rather than mainstreamed through the national education system.



A girl in Brazil who has started her own business.

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CONCLUSION

This report provides rare access to the daily lives and experiences of girls, their families and communities, as they struggle with the impact of climate change, with what appears to be little outside support.

The research demonstrates clearly that the information acquired at school is crucially important. It enables adolescent girls both to understand climate change and to be active in adapting to and mitigating its effects. If they are able to stay at school, they will put their knowledge to good use in the service of their communities.

“For me, I like everything I learned in school about how to prevent and mitigate the effects of climate change such as tree planting, garbage collection, conducting earthquake drills, and other studies on climate change and its effects. I can continue to share these with my family, siblings, relatives, and friends to avoid [climate change’s] severe effects, especially on children.”

DOLORES (17, PHILIPPINES)

It is clear from the research that many of the girls in the study are taking on additional responsibility as families respond to the impact of climate change on their lives and livelihoods. In many cases parents struggle to keep their daughters in school and the daughters in turn struggle with juggling studying, domestic chores and often paid jobs outside the home as well.

Many parents, despite the pressure they are under, remain keen to prioritise education:

“I don’t want her education to be affected because she hasn’t paid [fees]... I hope our harvest will be good so that we can provide all of Reyna’s needs, especially when she gets into college.”

REYNA’S FATHER, PHILIPPINES

Reyna’s education has in fact already paid off: she helps her family with budgeting and is actively involved in the family’s decision-making. However, they are walking a tightrope and, as with many families, some financial support from governments would make all the difference. The money would pay dividends: keeping girls in school will not only help secure a more stable financial future for individuals and their families but will contribute to a more viable future for the planet itself: “For every additional year of schooling a girl receives on average, her country’s resilience to climate disasters can be expected to improve by 3.2 points on the ND- GAIN Index, which measures country-level vulnerability to climate change alongside readiness to improve resilience.”⁴⁵

Although schools are the primary source of information about climate change girls are also learning from their families and communities where the impact on livelihoods makes both talking about it and trying to do something about it a key priority. Radio, television, and social media also play a part in spreading knowledge and inspiring discussion and action.

Education and information, whatever its source, is key to the girls’ adaptation efforts at the individual level and a crucial component of their climate resilience.

In all the RCRL countries, there is a sense that girls’ abilities to help combat the impacts of climate change are being dismissed and their knowledge and skills are not being properly developed. Despite their anxiety that the world, as Gabriela, 16, from El Salvador, put it, is “running out of nature,” they feel that it is not yet too late to rescue the planet and repair some of the destruction: every little helps. Girls in Togo and Benin, for example, cite the importance of repairing damaged roads and are keen to do their bit:

“Yes, I will take steps to deal with it by improving the roads at the time of the drought and where they are degraded, we will put sand and stones in the holes. We will also make paths for the run-off water.”

CATHERINE (16, BENIN)

45. Kwauk, C. and Braga, A. (2017) ‘Three platforms for girls’ education in climate strategy’, The Brookings Institute. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/platforms-for-girls-education-in-climate-strategies.pdf>

Some of the RCRL girls are taking part in collective action to address climate change. Mony, 16, says that she formed an environmental team at her school in Cambodia to clean up classrooms after floods. In Vietnam, Yen participates in her schools' climate change mitigation activities, and encourages students to plant trees around the school and to clean up rubbish.

"I participate in environmental protection activities; I think environmental pollution affects the weather quite a lot."

YEN (17, VIETNAM)

Many of the girls work hard at implementing practical individual strategies like saving water, recycling, repairing roads, planting trees, and spreading awareness but as they learn more, they become increasingly aware that:

"My actions alone can't solve [climate change]."

JULIANA (16, BRAZIL)

"It Is Not Enough"

We come back to the comment that "it is not enough." Nothing anyone can do on an individual level will ever be enough.

Many of the girls express dissatisfaction with the quality of their climate change education, believing that it does not go far enough in helping them to address climate change in their households and communities and globally. This is particularly evident among girls who have the strongest understanding of climate change as a concept. Girls in the Philippines are very aware of what they do not know, demonstrating that even in countries with relatively strong climate education the level of education is still not enough to equip girls with the knowledge – and the confidence – to enable them to adapt and remain resilient. And to campaign to bring about the structural change they know is needed. Everywhere climate change education needs to be properly integrated into school curricula, and girls themselves must have the opportunity to contribute to and participate in curriculum design to ensure that it meets their needs. It must reflect the environmental and political realities of the situation and equip girls to play an active part in climate action at every level.

Reyna, 16, from the Philippines, has a relatively strong awareness of climate change and its local



A girl speaks at her graduation ceremony in Brazil.

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and wider impacts. She would like to pursue meaningful climate action beyond her home, but this is proving difficult. There is little political will from her community to support her: "to be the voice of the poor, fight for their needs, and to reach those in charge in the government." All of which Reyna can see is essential if there is to be progress.

Understanding that the issue of climate change is not only a local one, means that many of the girls have recommendations for systemic change which go beyond the individual and ask action of their schools, wider communities and governments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below have been developed directly from the research findings – including the ideas, opinions, and recommendations from the RCRL girls themselves, their families, and members of their wider communities. Their input, as is evident from this research, will help governments, policymakers and community leaders improve society's resilience to climate change, notably by enhancing the quality of education in schools, particularly the climate change curricula, and girls' participation in it.

CALLS TO ACTION



01 Make schools safe

Ministries of Education, Environment, Finance and Meteorology should collaborate at all levels to:

- **Prioritise investments** that strengthen the resilience of **school infrastructure and routes to school** to withstand extreme weather events, including the construction and maintenance of climate-resilient roads that are less susceptible to flooding and damage.
- **Invest in education continuity** plans to ensure that, if weather events disrupt access to schools, learning can continue in other ways. This may include distance learning, or the use of alternative sites. Anticipatory Action approaches should be included in education policies, plans and actions at all levels.
- **Fund and implement inclusive, gender-responsive** anticipatory action in education. Take anticipatory action ahead of a crisis to reduce the impact of forecasted shocks and stresses on children's access to education, particularly that of girls, and ensure departments of education and schools have access to timely hydrometeorological data, predictive analysis and vulnerability data to inform and fund schools to take anticipatory action that has been **pre-agreed by at-risk communities**.
- **Invest in services that contribute to children's equal access** to schooling: including free school meal programmes, financial support for tuition and school supplies, child-safe transportation to schools, sexual and reproductive health, and mental health services.

“the government should] send tractors to repair the roads, make gutters for the rainwater to pass through so that there is no more flooding.”

ALICE (16, BENIN)

- **Develop, resource, implement and monitor** gender-responsive **school safety policies and plans**, in line with the Comprehensive School Safety Framework. This includes developing school disaster risk reduction (DRR) plans, informed by a gender-and age-responsive risk assessment that recognises and accounts for children and girls' specific vulnerabilities and adaptation capacities. As a guiding principle, **children should be actively engaged in co-developing DRR and adaptation plans to ensure they meet their specific needs and have the opportunity to engage in the implementation and monitoring of those plans**. They should be recognised as rights-holders and active participants in decision-making.



02 Improve climate change curriculum

Ministries of Education, together with Ministries of Environment, should:

- **Mandate climate change education** that is evidence-based, contextually relevant, gender-transformative and inclusive, age-responsive, and includes Indigenous knowledge and rights.
- **Take a gender-transformative approach** to curriculum reform that can change norms and attitudes and build the skills necessary to shift the way children are taught to think about the world around them. A holistic approach to climate change curriculum reform should equip learners with an understanding of the intersecting social injustices that shape different vulnerabilities and adaptation capacities.
- **Invest in teacher training** on climate change by mandating and funding comprehensive climate change modules in training courses. This must include providing teachers with access to up-to-date reliable data and facts and running ongoing professional development programmes to support their effective delivery of a transformative climate change curriculum.

“They should not only focus on tree planting activities, but on other strategies such as mitigation, preparedness, and others so that they have sufficient knowledge.”

REYNA'S FATHER (PHILIPPINES)

Schools should:

- **Promote action-oriented learning** which supports children and girls to develop collective action in climate change adaptation skills and pro-environmental behaviours, including tree-planting initiatives, growing vegetable gardens, writing letters to government, community organising, campaigning and recycling drives.
- **Ensure the meaningful participation** of children, including girls in all their diversity, in the development of action-oriented learning plans to ensure these address their specific and contextual needs.
- **Support the development of girls' climate change leadership skills** by providing opportunities (such as school clubs) for girls to exercise and practice their leadership capabilities in relation to climate change adaptation.
- **Educate girls on climate change decision-making processes** at all levels - local, national, regional, and global - and on how they can meaningfully engage in these processes.

“The school should form the student group to join the discussion.”

KANNITHA (16, CAMBODIA)



A young girl in Brazil says her way of thinking has changed after taking place in a Generation project.

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03 Create enabling environments for climate change adaptation and education

Governments should:

- **Review and update** core institutional **policies, strategies, adaptation plans and guidance notes** to include education access, resilience, and continuity.
- **Develop or update education sector plans** that are participatory, gender- and child-responsive and prioritise resilience and climate change adaptation.
- **Increase funding** for the implementation and monitoring of education policies that address climate change, including the development, delivery, and evaluation of climate change curriculum.
- **Advance climate-resilient development, by strengthening participation of youth-led organisations** as key actors to ensure Nationally Determined Contributions and National Adaptation Plans include climate education.
- **Create an enabling environment for children and young people's engagement** in climate change decision-making at all levels, giving them a real opportunity to participate in and influence decision-making.
- **Provide loss and damage finance**, made available by high-income countries, to enable immediate relief for students following a sudden onset event or disaster as well as build long-term resilience for children, including those affected by slow onset events. Loss and damage finance should include provision for rebuilding school infrastructure destroyed by extreme weather events to ensure it is sufficiently robust to withstand climate-induced damage.
- **Allocate loss and damage financing for child-critical social services**, including education.
- **Ensure** that loss and damage response is informed by **existing inequalities and disaggregated data**, including by age, gender, and disability status, in order to capture the specific impact of the climate crisis on different groups of children. Ensure loss and damage data related to education, for example lost school days, is disaggregated by gender, age, and disability.

- **Ensure child and girls' rights** are guiding principles of loss and damage funding.
- **Increase social protections** by investing in alternative livelihoods and closing the adaptation gap by providing funding for losses and damages. Climate finance should be delivered in the form of grants. Funding for loss and damage should be decentralised and tailored to meet children's context-specific climate vulnerabilities.

"Everyone has the right to good housing, without worrying about floods, things like that, and what prevents it are government actions. Because everyone has the right to decent housing. I'm concerned because the government does nothing."

BIANCA (17, BRAZIL)

"[The government] have distributed some fertilisers but I don't know if that was enough. There is corruption in the government. Those who govern from the top to the bottom have corruption. So, they should always check the policy to see if it goes to the poor. Sometimes, they say, the rich farmers here received aid from the government, then the farmers who don't have land don't get any help from the government. They are the ones in need. So, I hope the government will fix it so they can also take action on climate change".

ROSAMIE (16, PHILIPPINES)

Community leaders should:

- **Promote a commitment** to social norms change on how girls' education, participation and leadership is valued, both broadly, and specifically relating to climate change adaptation.
- **Develop gender-responsive community adaptation plans** that provide a fund for community-level financial support for households facing climate change-related livelihood losses.
- **Develop gender- and age-responsive disaster response plans** that consider intersecting social inequalities that contribute to community members' different levels of vulnerabilities and ability to respond to a climate shock.
- **Promote climate change awareness** and behaviour change in relation to community collective, pro-environmental actions, such as planting trees, recycling, and other household/ community level actions.

"Community members should be reforestation, raising awareness and doing community work."

ESSOHANA (17, TOGO)



A girl in Togo imagines a world where everyone is free to be themselves".

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METHODOLOGY

Key methods of the study include in-depth interviews with girls and their parents/ caregivers, supported by participatory activities, using age-specific tools. The evidence gathered is used to inform further research and is fed into Plan International's work with communities.

Data collection for RCRL takes place annually, carried out by Plan International country office teams in the countries where the girls live. Each round of data collection has consisted of semi-structured interviewing with a primary caregiver, and since 2012, when the girls were 5 or 6 years old, with the girls themselves. In 2023 primary data collection was undertaken across eight of the nine RCRL countries and involved 78 households.⁴⁶

The following four approaches were taken: **in depth case studies, 'light touch' interviews, contextual data collection, and interviewers' observations.**

01 In-depth case studies with two or three selected girls in each country consisting of:

- **Girl interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with each girl exploring her experiences of climate change, the impacts of climate change on her education, girls' involvement in decision-making and climate adaptation strategies, and girls' sources of information about climate change.
- **Caregiver and head of household interviews:** These interviews provide context to the climate events experienced by the girls, and how the households and communities were affected. Additionally, these interviews collect data on the household as a whole, including decision-making responsibilities, division of labour in the home, coping and adaptation strategies. These interviews are also useful in understanding the extent to which livelihoods have been impacted by climate change.
- **Household Inventory:**⁴⁷ This tool captures a 'snapshot' of the girls' households. These have been collected in some format since 2018, allowing for comparison and analysis of changes over time.

02 Light touch interviews with all girls:

For the girls not identified as case studies, a shorter semi-structured interview was conducted around specific dimensions of climate change impacts and education.

03 Contextual data collection activities consisting of:

- **Key Informant Interviews:** Short interviews with Plan International Country Office staff to capture contextual information about how climate change has impacted communities where research activities were being conducted.
- **Focus group discussions (FGD):** Held with community members in the communities where the case study girls are located. The FGDs captured community-level detail on climate-related events and how these have impacted the wider community. This provides the context for understanding the girls' households' experiences.

04 Observation:

Observational notes from the interviewers form part of the data. This includes their notes on girls' tone, body language, and non-verbal communications. These are utilised very sparingly as the observations are subjective. When used they are clearly acknowledged.

46. We were unable to include new data collection from RCRL girls in Uganda due to delays in receiving ethics clearance: the previous national ethics approval expired in 2022 and could not be renewed in time

47. Household Inventories include questions on household composition, financial income, expenditure, changes in health, changes in food security, school attendance of all children in the household.

Conceptual Framework

In this research, we use the Global Alliance for Disaster Risk Reduction & Resilience in the Education Sector’s (GADRRRES) Comprehensive School Safety Framework 2022-2030⁴⁸ as the foundation of our understanding about how to address the impacts of climate change on girls’ education. This framework outlines three core pillars needed for disaster risk reduction and resilience-building that supports children’s access to safe, continuous, and quality education. These are:

- 1 The need for safer learning facilities that ensure learners and educators are protected from death, injury, or harm in schools.
- 2 The need for a comprehensive plan to ensure education continuity and limit disruption to learning in the face of shocks, stresses, hazards, and threats of all kinds.
- 3 The need to promote the knowledge and skills of learners and duty-bearers to contribute to risk reduction, resilience building, and sustainable development.⁴⁹

Ethics

All research activities were undertaken in line with Plan International’s ethics and safeguarding policies and procedures. Ethics approval was granted by the UK-based Overseas Development Agency (ODI): in Brazil and Uganda, countries where local ethics approval was required, it was sought and granted in Brazil. Principles of confidentiality, anonymity, beneficence, justice and informed consent guided not only this year’s data collection, but all previous years of the study. Real Choices, Real Lives works to centre the voices of girls to ensure that all programmes and interventions intended to support girls to claim their rights and agency are informed by the views and experiences of girls themselves.⁵⁰



48. GADRRRES (2022) 'Comprehensive School Safety Framework 2022-2030'.

49. Ibid.

50. For more detailed methodology please see the full Technical Report for this study, available at <https://plan-international.org/publications/real-choices-real-lives/>



Girls feeling empowered in the Dominican Republic.

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Cover photograph: Yoselin, in Central America, is a youth leader in her community. ©Plan International

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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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