



The Climate Crisis: Exacerbating Vulnerabilities and the Looming Increase of Exploitation

The climate crisis, and the many ways it will reshape the world, necessitates that governments everywhere sharpen their focus not only on taking action to limit the severity of this crisis but also on mitigating the worst outcomes for vulnerable populations. Political and civil instability and economic uncertainty exacerbate pre-existing human trafficking vulnerabilities. Crisis situations often expose deficiencies in the efforts of governments, international organizations (IOs), and the global community to protect and support vulnerable populations from human trafficking. Climate change-linked events such as wildfires, droughts, flooding, extreme weather conditions, heat waves, environmental degradation, and rapid ice loss have cost hundreds of thousands of lives and billions of dollars in damages. While climate change does not discriminate, displaced populations, vulnerable migrants, Indigenous communities, women and children, and minority populations are more likely to experience its impacts and, consequently, are likely to become even more vulnerable to exploitation. Global and government commitments to combat human trafficking and protect the world's most vulnerable from further exploitation must accelerate given such trends.

Climate Change - A Humanitarian Crisis

Climate change is a threat multiplier. It exacerbates risks and creates numerous insecurities that place more people at risk. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2021 Mid-Year Trends Report estimated that by the first half of 2021, millions of people around the globe were forcibly displaced due to generalized violence, human rights violations, armed conflicts, and increasing threats caused by climate change. As environmental conditions worsen, the percentage of those vulnerable to exploitation will increase. The UN Environment Programme indicates that human trafficking has the potential to increase by 20-30 percent during humanitarian disasters due to lost livelihoods and disrupted families.

Displaced Populations and Refugees

Asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, and refugees are at very high risk of trafficking due to their lack of legal, financial, and food security. Limited access to legal protections such as identity documents and citizenship rights exacerbate displaced populations' vulnerabilities to traffickers. Climate change has the potential to become one of the main drivers of population displacement, internally and across international borders. Extreme weather can cause sudden and long-term damage to homes and communities. Some studies have estimated 150 million people could be displaced due to the climate crisis by 2050. Moreover, people that are forced to leave their homes due to extreme weather events generally do not benefit from legal protections under international refugee law, leaving them particularly vulnerable. Without effective strategies, a uniform understanding of the movement of populations caused by climate change and its implications, and international mechanisms to protect these populations, a rapidly warming planet presents geopolitical risks and threatens the survival of marginalized societies.

Women and Children

Climate variability and extreme weather impact human health and safety, food and water security, and socio-economic conditions globally, but with especially severe effects in Sub-Saharan Africa, Central America and the Caribbean, and Asia, with particularly negative repercussions on women and children. Nongovernmental organization (NGO) studies show that drops in crop productivity or increases in pest, flood, and drought damage have a significant impact on food security and, consequently, the livelihoods of women. The International Labour Organization has reported that economic and food insecurity are directly linked to an increase of both forced child labor and child sex trafficking. Experts are concerned that rising temperatures will exacerbate women's and children's vulnerability to human trafficking. As a result of high youth populations and labor-heavy industries like agriculture, domestic services, and manufacturing, children and youth in climate-vulnerable countries are often forced to work in dangerous, vulnerable, or isolated situations. With limited options for work, women and children become more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and familial trafficking.



In addition, traffickers frequently target girls and exploit the vulnerabilities created by compounded, systemic inequalities, such as a lack of access to education, which are driven by cultural norms that undervalue women and girls. In more rural and low-income countries, social expectations often result in girls being pulled out of school to complete domestic and agricultural chores. With natural disasters, droughts, floods, extreme weather, increased exposure to zoonotic (diseases that can be transmitted naturally from animals to humans) and vector-borne diseases, and air pollution, those expectations only increase for girls, further delaying girls' return to education. The NGO Malala Fund found that four million girls in low and lower-middle income countries will be prevented from completing their education due to climate change and, consequently, will be more vulnerable to exploitation.

Marginalized Populations, including Indigenous Populations

Racial and ethnic minority groups, the LGBTQI+ community, and Indigenous populations are extremely vulnerable to exploitation due to social, legal, and cultural marginalization. Marginalized groups are more likely to endure human rights abuses, racism, discrimination, and trauma and have limited access to job opportunities and community resources, including healthcare. These same groups are more likely to be affected by climate change as it places them in more vulnerable situations. Indigenous communities are often at additional risk due to their symbiotic relationships with the environments in which they live. Extreme weather events that are exacerbated by climate change, such as high temperatures, severe flooding, drought, tornadoes, and high-winds—and their resulting destructive impacts on land and modern infrastructure and, therefore, food and water sources—disrupt local economies and force displacement. Those inhabiting coastal regions and low-income urban communities are more likely to be affected by the damage of severe weather and, consequently, be more vulnerable to exploitation, while limited access to resources increases their vulnerability to traffickers' coercive tactics.

Taking Action: Governments, International Organizations, and Community Activists

Significant legal and governmental action is required to protect and support those impacted by the climate crisis. Lack of action will expose an overwhelming number of people to the risk of trafficking. Climate change and its many repercussions also hinder strides that governments and the global community have undertaken to address and prevent human trafficking. Leaders, activists, governments, NGOs, and IOs are increasing efforts to protect those most vulnerable by mitigating and preparing for climate-related disasters, developing programs for those displaced by climate change, and advocating for rights of those marginalized and most vulnerable to climate change and exploitation. All such efforts should be informed not only by climate experts but also by survivor leaders and other individuals who have experienced displacement or other vulnerabilities as a result of climate change.

EXAMPLES OF PROACTIVE ACTIONS TAKEN TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE AND REDUCE EXPLOITATION INCLUDE:

- ▶ The UN has unveiled six key actions governments can take to prepare for the climate crisis. The actions include accelerating decarbonization, investing in green jobs and sustainable growth, further implementing sustainable solutions, confronting climate risks, and advancing cooperation, as no country can succeed alone. With these actions, governments can mitigate the impact of climate change and better protect those most vulnerable to exploitation.
- ▶ The NGO Refugees International created the Climate Displacement Program. The program plays an important role in advancing, developing, and promoting solutions to ensure that people displaced due to climate-related disasters receive humanitarian assistance and are not subject to human rights abuses.
- ▶ President Biden issued an Executive Order instructing U.S. Federal agencies to develop and work with international multi-stakeholder initiatives on protections for those displaced by climate change that will offer more legal protections and reduce exploitation.

