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# Climate Change: Impact on Adolescent Girls



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**Technical Cohort  
Advocacy Brief**

This advocacy brief was developed through the Technical Cohort to Advance Adolescent Girls and Young Women's Leadership in Climate Change, with support from Karama, UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office Gender, Communication, ADAP and WASH sections as well as University of Jordan Gender Fellow Haia Shaban.

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# Introduction

Adolescent girls in the Middle East and North Africa face acute challenges from climate change that require specific and gender-sensitive responses.

Climate change is raising temperature in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region at a faster rate than the global average,<sup>1</sup> increasing the frequency and the intensity of extreme weather events like droughts and floods, changing water cycles and causing sea level rise. Key weather-related hazards for children in MENA include heatwaves, floods, epidemics and disease outbreaks, storms, sandstorms, wildfires and droughts.<sup>2</sup>

There are 48.7 million adolescent girls across the MENA region<sup>3</sup> and today, more adolescent girls than ever before live in drought-impacted communities; fearing walks to school during rainy season; and migrating to seek refuge from floods, fires, or water- or food-scarcity. These adolescent girls bear a double burden: restricted not only by their age, but also by gender norms that prevent far too many from becoming educated, healthy, informed, skilled and empowered as fully active citizens.<sup>4</sup>

# UNICEF and Karama recognize that there is no child sensitive climate action without explicitly focusing on girls

**Climate change is not gender neutral**, rather it amplifies already existing gender inequalities with the most marginalized communities experiencing the greatest impacts. For example:

- Girls' household responsibilities and distance to school in increasingly harsh conditions challenges their access to learning. The lack of water and sanitation services may affect girls and adolescent girls' reproductive health, with a potential negative impact on their psychosocial and well-being,
- In some contexts, risks associated with climate change exacerbate possibility of gender-based violence, including child marriage which is reported as a negative coping mechanism due to climate change induced economic insecurity.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, notes that gender-based violence is prevalent where there is both conflict and risk of experiencing extreme weather events, for example in Yemen.<sup>6</sup>
- Climate change may also increase food insecurity thereby contributing to high anemia rates for adolescent girls.

Research has shown that the triple nexus between gender inequality, state fragility and climate vulnerability is particularly prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>7</sup> Since 2011, the region has born witness to a disproportionate concentration of the world's conflict-related violence and displacement, with climate change acting as a "threat multiplier" in this already complex environment. Climate-related loss (or change) of livelihoods is a contributing factor to displacement and migration, which in turn has specific gender barriers. For example, due to gender inequality, adolescent girls have different access to information, resources, livelihood opportunities and security mobility concerns.<sup>8</sup>

In 2022, UNICEF in partnership with Karama and the Wa'ed Network of adolescent girls supported the development of a Technical Cohort to Advance Adolescent Girls and Young Women's Leadership in Climate Change. The Technical Cohort consists of members Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, Yemen, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and UAE, representing over 25 different girl-led community initiatives and organizations. Recognizing the interconnection between gender equality, environmental justice and community resilience, UNICEF and Karama together with the Technical Cohort supports increasing and strengthening partnership with, and support towards, girl-led movements and networks to ensure adolescent girls' leadership and adolescent girls-led solutions in disaster preparedness and climate. This includes elevating indigenous technology and traditional ecological knowledge and practices within the communities that the adolescent girls represent.



THE TECHNICAL COHORT HAS GIVEN YOUNG ACTIVISTS FROM THE MENA REGION THE CHANCE TO CONNECT, LEARN MORE ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE AS AN ISSUE, AND FEMINIST APPROACHES TO ADVOCACY

# How does climate change impact girls in the Middle East and North Africa?

## Water Scarcity and Impact on Girls' Education and Health

Though there has been an increase in adolescent girls' access to secondary education across the region, **critical challenges remain for girls who drop out of school** and transition from learning to earning.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the region, the most common out-of-school children at both primary and secondary levels are rural females with out-of-school secondary education levels for adolescent girls in rural areas ranging from around 30 per cent in Sudan to 40 per cent in Yemen to as high as around 60 per cent in Iraq.<sup>10</sup> In periods of crisis, including crises brought about by climate change, such as more-frequent and more-severe droughts and floods, girls' drop out from school more often than boys **due to the gendered expectation** that they should help with domestic household responsibilities or look after their siblings. These expectations exacerbate existing barriers to education for girls.<sup>11</sup> In Yemen and Sudan, water **scarcity has increased the travel distance for adolescent girls to fetch potable water**, which in turn forces girls in rural areas to **drop out of school**.<sup>12</sup> With increased climate risk and families' risk of economic hardship, expectations increase for adolescent boys to drop out of school to support household income.<sup>13</sup> Other research has noted **reductions in educational attainment, lower academic performance, and higher absenteeism among girls who have experienced climate shocks**.<sup>14 15</sup>

Decline in clean water due to water scarcity also makes adolescent girls' **menstrual and other hygiene management** more difficult, with implications for

the sexual and reproductive health, well-being, and educational opportunities. In MENA, 31 per cent of the schools in the region lack access to water and soap for handwashing, and 15 per cent lack access to basic sanitation services.<sup>16</sup> Without adequate access to water, there is an increase in the possibility for reproductive health infections during menstruation. In rural and desert communities in MENA, women and girls do have innovative climate mitigation measures based on indigenous technology, knowledge and skills related to water supply management.<sup>17</sup>

## Heatwaves and Droughts and Impact on Girls' Health, Nutrition, and Livelihoods

**Drought** can act as a risk multiplier, destabilizing populations, increasing unwanted migration, cutting rural incomes and amplifying inequalities in access to water and food.<sup>18</sup> Heatwaves, drought and water scarcity have an impact on **agriculture and livelihoods**, especially impacting communities in MENA where the **largest percentage of female formal labour-force participation** (26.9 per cent) is in the agriculture sector, including fishery and forestry. Rural children, including girls, who work in agriculture experience higher exposure to sandflies, pesticides and chemical fertiliser, negatively impacting their health.<sup>19</sup> Regarding food shortage, studies in Yemen have shown that women and girls are more likely to go **hungry when households become food insecure**.<sup>20</sup> Girls are especially vulnerable to malnutrition during adolescence, with an **increased risk of iron deficiency anemia** due to growth spurts and menstruation. Adolescent girls in Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen have high rates of anemia, at 43, 55, 68 per cent respectively.

**Heatwaves** have become more frequent and intense in MENA.<sup>21</sup> Infants, young children, adolescents and adults respond differently to heat exposure due to their physical differences, including metabolic and morphological differences, with infants and young children typically being more susceptible to the health risks of high temperature and humidity.<sup>22</sup> Studies have shown that there are **specific gender dimensions to heatwaves**, with women and girls being both **more susceptible to physical sickness from heat**, at the same time as gender roles increase their unpaid labour and responsibility to care for sick family members.<sup>23</sup> This can lead to increasing the risk of adolescent girls' school dropout as well as further limiting young women's access to the labour market. Adolescent girls and young women in the agriculture sector, or who are responsible for performing water, sanitation and hygiene-related tasks experience particular impact during extreme temperatures due to **spending longer hours outside**. During heatwaves, there is also increased health-related risk for **pregnant and lactating adolescent girls and young women**.<sup>24</sup> Studies have also shown that **females are at more risk of dying in heatwaves both due to biological and social factors**.<sup>25</sup>

## Climate Change Policies and Girls' Empowerment

Across the globe, only **2 per cent of the national climate change strategies specifically mention girls**.<sup>26</sup> In MENA, only Tunisia specifically mentions GBV in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs). While girls and young women are active in community mobilization and engagement around climate adaptation and mitigation, they report **barriers to engaging policy makers and securing space in policy platforms** around climate change.<sup>27 28</sup> In the Middle East and North Africa, **only 6 per cent of girls and young women** report that their governments consult with them for the design of climate policies.<sup>29</sup>

Without investment in education opportunities and skills necessary for employment in 21st century jobs, girls will remain at the margins of **policy and employment in green jobs**. Policy change for sustainable agriculture can address the fact that MENA has the lowest level of women's landownership in the world, with **only 4 per cent of women and young women holding land titles**.<sup>30</sup> In order to reverse the current imbalance in Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) where **girls are twice as likely to be excluded than boys**,<sup>31</sup> specific opportunities to bridge the digital divide, to enter technical fields and engage in innovation should be afforded equally.



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# What needs to change?



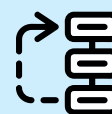
## Protect girls by adapting the social services they rely on

- Increase climate adaptation finance for social services and **ensure girls, adolescent girls, and young women's access to vital social services** in health, nutrition, and education, by recognizing gendered considerations and barriers noted in this Brief.
- Prevent **gender-based violence, including child marriage, in the context of climate change by increasing services for timely and confidential response.** The Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls highlighted the relationship between climate change and increased gender-based violence, and calls for robust gender approaches to monitor and evaluate climate mitigation, adaptation, and disaster risk reduction policies.<sup>32</sup>
- Set up measure to implement the **CRC General Comment 26 guidance** related to the right of all children to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as well as gender responsive education, environmental complaints mechanism and adaptation measures.
- Ensure **girls gain skills for 21st century green jobs** and climate platforms through adequate education including climate resilient education integrating indigenous and cultural knowledge, within the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). This includes ensuring that any developed or adapted climate/environment/DRR curricula is gender-responsive with a specific gender module.



## Prepare girls by improving their capacities and ensuring their voices are heard

- Ensure girls, adolescent girls and young women's agency in climate change advocacy by amplifying their voices and opportunity to inform climate change policies in order to **frame a gender equal just transition**, including the NDC and NAP. COP28 and COY offers an opportunity for intentional participation by girls, adolescent girls and young women in climate decision making, for example through defining the [Glasgow Work Programme on Action for Climate Empowerment \(ACE\)](#).
- Enable adolescent girls' and young women's **leadership and active role** to design community-based adaptation and mitigation responses, for example by aligning in intergenerational dialogue with women's organizations, adapting indigenous technology and supporting peer-to-peer awareness raising and active engagement.
- Girls, adolescent girls and young women and their locally-led organizations should be **recognized as active participants in decision-making on loss and damage**, including as agents and rights holders in decision-making processes on loss and damage.



## Prioritize girls in climate funding, policies and resource allocation

- Accelerate the **Global Goal of Adaptation** by promoting and **scale-up female-led and gender responsive adaptation strategies, vital traditional knowledge and indigenous technologies** and investing in strategies on sound water usage and fisheries management, traditional composting/recycling practices as well female land stewardship for reforestation and agriculture via planting native seeds.
- Ensure the **Global Stocktake (GST) address the unique and heightened vulnerabilities of girls**, adolescent girls and young women to climate change impacts and amplify the perspectives and solutions from girls-led organizations.
- Address intergenerational inequity via the **development of the Loss and Damage facilities** to unlock greater funds to protect marginalized and vulnerable girls, adolescent girls, and young women in MENA, in all their diversity, by addressing gendered unequal access to resources and decision-making.
- National climate change policies, including NAPs and NDC's, should promote **gender-responsive energy approaches to facilitate a Just Transition**, including integrate women and girls' experiences, expertise, decision making and meaningful participation for local governance.
- Expand and replicate **girl-developed platforms and networks**, such as the Wa'ed network, through programmes and policies to support **community-based climate change strategies** as well that tap young women and girl-led innovations via creating opportunities for young women to engage in private sector initiatives to address climate change, and a just energy transition, including in leadership positions.



# Human Interest Stories

Despite the challenges discussed above, girls and young women in the MENA region continue to display dedication and determination to become active citizens, to have their rights protected and respected, and for their perspectives to be included in policy discussions - in particular in climate policy. On their own initiative, girls and young women across the region are becoming organized around climate activism, keen to promote the need for action to mitigate and adapt to the impact of climate change among their peers and policymakers alike.

## Mona



Mona is a climate change activist based in Jordan South Valley who focuses on community engagement to show the connection between gender equality and environmental justice. She is a part of UNICEF's Girl's Leadership Program and uses her leadership skills to empower young people to take-action against climate change. Mona's activism mainly involves awareness-raising initiatives and encouraging young people, especially young females, to become leaders in social change and environmental justice with a focus on gender equality. In Jordan Valley, Mona has noticed an increase in land degradation and water scarcity due to human activities and climate change.

She is determined to raise awareness for more sustainable and just land stewardship and has inspired adolescent girls to challenge societal norms by planting crops adapted to climate change. Mona is interested in exploring the gender dimensions of climate change impacts and its disproportionate effects on women and girls. She is committed to promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls to have a greater role in decision-making and resource management. Mona has created a play and a song to raise awareness about the impacts of climate change and the importance of adapting community practices to gender-responsive sustainable strategies. Her efforts have inspired others to take-action and make a positive change in the world.

## Ayshka



Ayshka is a gender-justice climate activist based in the United Arab Emirates who believes that climate justice means acknowledging that the climate crisis is a planetary and people issue. Ayshka argues that climate change does not exist in a vacuum, but rather amplifies other socioeconomic ills, such as racism, sexism, ableism and class inequality. She calls for an approach that recognizes that people whose lives are shaped by structural inequality are disproportionately affected by the climate crisis. For Ayshka, as a young woman, the intersections of gender justice and climate justice are important. She urges holistic approaches that centre the rights of women and girls in all their diversity in climate action plans.

As a member of the UNICEF MENA Technical Cohort on Advancing Girls and Young Women's Leadership in Climate Change as well as a UNICEF Youth Advocate in the United Arab Emirates, Ayshka has shared her technical knowledge on the intersections between gender equality and climate change and supported other adolescent girls and young women in her region to analyse national policies through a gender lens.

## Fawzia



Fawzia is a social activist and women's rights advocate in Sudan's Blue Nile region. She recognized the urgent need for action on climate change and its disproportionate impact on girls and women. To address this issue, Fawzia organized regular neighborhood clean-ups, provided essential supplies, and held educational workshops to empower young people, especially girls, to prevent the negative effects of climate change on education.

She also made a conscious effort to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of marginalized women and girls, combatting poverty, domestic violence, and family

separation. Thanks to Fawzia's work, the community became more resilient to the impacts of climate change, and women and girls were empowered to create a more just and equitable society.

## Lujain and Remonda



Lujain & Remonda come from a farming village in Upper Egypt. Their families and community as a whole rely on agriculture. They became interested in the impact of climate change on their community through their membership of a socially-concerned street theatre group.

As part of this, they worked on a campaign to discuss

the importance of composting, recycling agricultural waste, and making organic fertilizers. Their campaign collaborated with 300 farmers, and was recognised in a national competition. Determined to show that their community was not helpless in the face of climate change, their next campaign aims to highlight that they and their peers can have a positive impact through combined efforts.

## Zohra



"Climate change is the reality for us in Sudan. In June last year, heavy rains caused torrents and massive floods in many Sudanese states, affecting the lives of about 161,000 people - most of them girls and women. The disaster led to a lack of food security, and to malnutrition.

"Sudan has not witnessed such floods for decades. They have led to the destruction of more than 15,000 homes but their effects go way beyond the direct devastation visited on the cities, towns and villages, it has a much wider and long lasting impact on our society, and especially on girls. The floods left girls stranded from their education, from health and basic services. Being out of school is putting girls at greater risk of early marriage, and becoming victims of domestic violence at home.

"People who rely on agriculture are being especially affected by the floods. In the Al -Manqal area there are 2,900 acres of agricultural lands that are the chief source of income for the local people. It's seen huge economic damage to the region, with a lack of energy generation from water sources, which leads to power outages for weeks across the country.

"The most affected areas are in Kassala Sennar, North Darfur and South Kordofan and the states of the White Nile. For those regions that have for a long time been affected by conflict, climate change is making the situation ever worse. The floods exacerbated the current pressures in North Darfur and South Kordofan, putting ever more stress on communities that are subject to strain and competition over natural resources in agriculture and pastoralism.

"The number of girls who are unable to go to school due to the complete or partial destruction of their schools in Kassala state - the most affected by the floods - is estimated at about 6,500 girls and boys.

"We need to take action to address immediate risks - like transportation of safe water to reduce the spread of water-borne diseases, and the availability of educational supplies to help girls continue to go to school in the flooded areas.

"We must support those affected, and seek to stop the situation getting any worse. As conflict increases and with such massive displacement, the competition over resources becomes ever worse. We must stop this vicious cycle, which climate change will make ever more serious and dangerous."

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