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# Climate change and human rights: The inextricable link

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**Crises heighten the risk of all forms of modern slavery, and one of the greatest we currently face – the climate crisis – is no exception. In this essay, Vanessa Nakate, Young Leader for the Sustainable Development Goals, and climate activist from Uganda, reminds us that the climate crisis is about more than statistics and targets; it’s about the millions of people around the world who are currently bearing the brunt of the crippling impacts of a warming planet.**

The climate crisis is a human rights crisis. The environmental consequences of climate change — ecological degradation, increasing global temperatures, rising sea levels, and extreme weather events — have devastating impact on communities around the world. Associated effects such as resource scarcity, loss of livelihoods, increases in poverty, and unequal access to health and education, push millions of people into precarious situations, and magnifying drivers of modern slavery.

There is no escaping that rising temperatures are having a disproportionate impact on those who are already the most vulnerable in our world. During times of upheaval and fragility, any protections that women, children, migrants, and the poorest in our society have gained are more likely to be taken away.

With the climate crisis, as so often is the case, women’s suffering is intensified by the structural gender inequalities that dominate their lives. The United Nations estimates that 80 percent of those displaced by climate change are female. Women in Uganda, for example are most likely primary caregivers who are responsible for feeding families and gathering water. They struggle the most when extreme weather hits. Women and girls are then especially vulnerable to sexual violence and being trafficked into sexual exploitation in and from emergency shelters, tents, or camps, that are designed to house and protect displaced communities, fleeing climate related events.

The child bride is another invisible victim of the climate crisis. Extreme weather creates economic suffering and more precarious situations for families. Increasingly, parents are being forced to give away their children for marriage in order to secure some financial stability. In the Horn of Africa, increases in the rate of child marriages in drought-affected areas have been linked to the impacts of the climate crisis, particularly family poverty and interrupted education for girls.

The irony is that these vulnerable groups are usually the least emitting in the world. The average citizen in Australia or Canada emits around 100 times more than the average citizen in Uganda, my country. And within our societies, the poorest contribute almost nothing to greenhouse gas emissions compared to the rich. Vast inequalities in energy access and usage, and carbon emissions, mean that people in the United States produce more emissions in a few days than people in many low-income countries produce in an entire year.

Yet, many people in the Western world still blame overpopulation in countries like mine for our global environmental crises. This is not a population problem, it is a consumption problem.



But it’s also a not an individual problem; it is a political one. People are reliant on systems built and perpetuated by powerful corporate interests. Governments continue to give subsidies to fossil fuels, which poison our air and heat our climate, while fossil fuel companies make billions in profits.

I see my role as being to share the stories of many people I have had the honour to meet. One particular story has stayed with me and gives me motivation to keep going: in September 2022 I travelled to Turkana, Kenya, with UNICEF. I was there to meet children suffering from severe acute malnutrition as a result of years of drought caused by years of failed rainy seasons in the region. Millions of children in the Horn of Africa are suffering. One morning, I met a boy at a hospital in Lodwar, where the worst cases are referred. The boy hadn’t been able to access life-saving medical care in time and that evening, sadly, he passed away.

There are many solutions that we need to fund and implement in the global south and across the world. The non-profit organisation Project Drawdown lists the most effective solutions we can take, ordered by the levels of emissions that would be saved if they were fully implemented. As well as lowering global greenhouse gas emissions and striving for the international targets, solutions in the short and long term should focus on the vulnerabilities to modern slavery and human rights infringements that so many are experiencing as a result of the crisis.

One holistic response that I am particularly passionate about is educating girls in low and middle-income countries. Providing girls and young women with a full education drastically increases their resilience to climate shocks. They are more likely to have a secure income and less likely to rely on subsistence crops that are vulnerable to extreme weather. They know how to respond to floods or droughts when they hit. And they end up having smaller, healthier families. Educating girls not only equips them to lead better lives overall, it will provide a lifeline in our fight against the climate crisis.

As an activist, my role is to highlight the human impacts of the climate crisis. I use my platform — a privilege many on the frontlines of the crisis are not afforded — to demand world leaders to act upon the reality and severity of climate change and to place human rights and justice at the heart of their efforts. In doing this, we must ensure that stories of activists, survivors, and diverse communities are being centred and heard. By prioritising emissions reductions, supporting vulnerable communities, applying a human rights lens to all responses, and working together across the global community, we can create a more just and sustainable future for all.

See page 62 “The costs of the climate crisis” for a wider discussion on this intersection, including recommendations for government action.

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**Stockholm, Sweden,  
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*Environmental activists protest with the Fridays for Future group against inaction by governments to tackle climate change. Modern slavery and climate change are interconnected issues. Increasingly intense weather events are displacing communities and spurring risks of modern slavery; while sectors at high risk of forced labour such as mining, logging, and textile and garment manufacturing, contribute to climate degradation. Photo credit: Jonas Gratzner via Getty Images.*