

Friend or foe? The security sector's role in addressing climate-related gender-based violence

Recent reports by the [UN](#) and [IUCN](#) show how climate change and environmental degradation exacerbate gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic violence, forced marriage and sexual exploitation. Yet, there has not been much discussion about how the security and justice sector - including police, militaries, border authorities, and courts handling land disputes - can better come to grips with the climate/environment/security nexus.

To help answer that question, nearly 200 people joined a webinar co-hosted by [DCAF](#), [OSCE/ODIHR](#) and [UN Women](#) on 21 January 2021 with an expert panel including Itzá Castañeda, Adviser to the International Union for Conservation of Nature; Kavita Naidu of the Women and Gender Constituency of the UNFCCC; Ngozi Amu of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel; and Szilvia Csevár, a researcher at the Hague University of Applied Sciences.

Local manifestations of how climate change is increasing GBV

Webinar participants shared how in the Sahel, West Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Asia Pacific regions, climate change is exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities and contributing to the breakdown of traditional agricultural livelihoods. Loss of traditional livelihoods makes it difficult for men and women to perform their traditional social roles. The associated anxieties and frustrations can lead to domestic violence. The related economic insecurity increases girls' vulnerability to early marriage.

Unfortunately, rather than contributing to the prevention of climate-related GBV, in many countries the security sector is part of the problem. In the Asia Pacific and Latin America, violent attacks against female environmental defenders and forced displacement of communities that resist environmental exploitation are at times carried out by the police or the military.

Sexual violence has been employed to drive communities from their traditional lands in order to expand extraction activities.

Resource extraction sites are often heavily militarized, with extractive companies hiring private security companies or subcontracting the police or military.

"It's actually the police and the military that are committing this violence against Indigenous and women environmental defenders across the region."

Holding the security sector to account

Oversight institutions, including complaints bodies, national human rights institutions, ombuds institutions and parliaments, should take action to hold security actors accountable for human rights violations. They should do so in a way that recognizes patterns of GBV, abuse and exploitation associated with environmental, climate and extractive projects. In some places, however, these critical oversight institutions are themselves perceived as “hijacked by corporations”: compromised by state and corporate collusion to profit from resource extraction and the commercialisation of nature. As such, communities suffering abuse of their human rights lack trust in the institutions that should protect them.

Positively engaging the security sector to address climate-related GBV

Beyond addressing climate- and environment-related abuse, webinar participants agreed that the security sector should play a *positive* role in preventing and adapting to climate change. Addressing climate change should be integrated into each security sector institution’s overarching policies, and then operationalized through concrete, enforceable processes at all levels. For example, each security sector institution should undertake a transparent review of its greenhouse gas emissions and commit to decreasing their share, as required by international climate regulations. Security sector institutions should proactively engage with affected communities in climate change adaptation and mitigation planning to address gender-specific climate security risks. One webinar participant suggested working with existing local, civilian-led security committees to orientate them toward early warning and response to climate-related insecurities. Better integration of women in the security sector is needed; for example, to increase the share of female personnel in evacuation shelters.

In both national and local climate-related decision-making processes, there must be space for women to participate effectively and meaningfully. At present, there is little participation of women in spaces where climate policies and laws are being developed despite women bringing critical expertise. There is little consultation with communities directly and disproportionately affected. In the Asia-Pacific, Feminist Participatory Action approaches have proved successful in mobilizing grassroots women to advocate at community, district and national levels, enabling them to influence policymaking.

The security sector cannot address gender/climate/environment problems in isolation either from government or communities. Responses need to be inter-sectoral and connected to national and international policy frameworks, yet at the same time people-centred. As another webinar participant suggested, country commitments under the Paris Agreement are an opportunity for the security sector to contribute to the fight against climate change.

A resonant theme throughout the discussion was the need for a paradigm shift, addressing the root causes of the climate crisis and the violence that flows from it. Activists in the Asia-Pacific and Latin America and the Caribbean argue that it is not enough to aim for climate mitigation and adaptation: women demand economic and social justice. Any discussion about the role of the security sector in



responding to climate-related GBV demands reflecting upon militarism and the complicity of the state in the extractive economy that has sparked the climate crisis.

For more on climate change and gender-based violence watch the [webinar](#).

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