



# Building Fairer Futures: Enabling Women's Economic Empowerment in the Face of Climate Change

## Overview

**Climate change presents the global community with an urgent set of challenges.** Extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and intensity, with the impacts of droughts, floods, rising sea levels and extreme temperatures affecting both men and women. **But women and girls are often disproportionately affected, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, due to a combination of poverty, structural gender inequalities and gendered social norms.** These barriers hinder women's access to decent work, diminish their ability to adapt to the challenges posed by climate change and limit their opportunities to reap benefits from a just transition.<sup>1</sup>

**By 2050, as many as 158 million women and girls could be pushed into poverty globally as a direct result of climate change** (UN Women and UNDESA 2023). Climate change is estimated to be a contributing factor in preventing at least 12.5 million girls from completing their education every year (Malala Fund 2021), while droughts and other climate crises increase rates of child marriage and gender-based violence (UN Women and UN Water 2023). An average temperature increase of just 1°C results in an astounding 34 per cent greater loss in income for female-headed households compared to those headed by men (FAO 2024).

This policy brief explores the links between climate change and women's economic empowerment, particularly in the poorest households and rural communities, drawing from two decades of Young Lives longitudinal data and research, including new findings emerging from the most recent round of the quantitative survey (Round 7)<sup>2</sup>. These include the long-term and intergenerational effects of climate shocks on young people's nutritional health, skills development and education outcomes, alongside the persistent gender inequalities that affect women and girls' unpaid care work<sup>3</sup>, job choices and opportunities.

**It concludes with key policy recommendations, stressing the need for targeted action to prevent the climate crisis from deepening gender inequalities and to build a fairer future that enables women's economic empowerment.** Achieving this requires climate plans and financing mechanisms that incorporate a gender perspective. This includes investing in gender-responsive social protection, supporting women and girls' education and skills, and expanding women's access to employment – particularly green jobs.<sup>4</sup> The transition needed to combat climate change is an opportunity to promote gender equality, but progress requires coordinated action to ensure inclusive and equitable outcomes for all.

In 2024, Young Lives launched a new **Research Hub on Climate Change and Environmental Shocks** to generate more detailed evidence about the long-term effects of, for example, increased air pollution and abnormal rainfall and temperatures, particularly on women, girls and vulnerable groups.<sup>5</sup> The Hub will address the current lack of evidence on the gendered impacts of climate change and environmental shocks over time, deepening understanding of the links between climate change and women's economic empowerment.

### Key Findings

- 1. Early childhood exposure to climate shocks such as droughts and floods has a profound impact on children's development**, affecting their nutritional health, physical growth, cognitive skills and learning, with having long-term consequences for education and employment.
- 2. Women and girls, especially those from poor households and rural communities, are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of climate change and environmental shocks** due to persistent gender inequalities. Many of these impacts are being felt across generations.
- 3. Gender inequalities are reinforced and exacerbated in times of crises, with women and girls undertaking extra unpaid care work**, such as additional childcare during school closures and more time collecting firewood and clean water.
- 4. Interrupted education and more unpaid care work during climate shocks may reduce women and girls' time to study**, increasing their risk of dropping out of school, which has a negative impact on their mental health and future economic prospects.
- 5. Structural inequalities risk excluding young women from emerging opportunities in the green economy.** This affects women and girls' skills, job choices and earning expectations, which may disadvantage them in accessing green jobs.
- 6. Gender-responsive social protection**, including prioritising safety nets for adolescent girls and young women, has significant potential to alleviate the disproportionate impacts on women and girls in the face of climate change.

### The Young Lives study

Young Lives has been following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam, from infancy into early adulthood, since 2002. In each country, the study is divided into two age groups: 2,000 young people born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort) and 1,000 born in 1994 (the Older Cohort).

Over the last two decades, the study has built a unique body of longitudinal data, enabling researchers to investigate the impact of climate shocks, poverty and food insecurity on early childhood development, gender inequalities and later-life outcomes, including women's economic empowerment.

### Young Lives findings

#### ***Early childhood exposure to climate shocks such as droughts and floods has a profound impact on children's development, with long-term consequences for education and employment***

Evidence from Young Lives indicates that early exposure to climate shocks, such as droughts and floods, can have profound consequences for the lives of children and young people. These shocks can have a negative impact on their nutritional health, physical growth and learning, with long-term consequences for education and employment (Ford and von Russdorf 2024).

Early exposure to climate shocks can also affect foundational cognitive skills. In Peru, children who encountered climate shocks either in utero or in early childhood exhibited long-term deficits in memory and concentration at age 12. This is most likely due to nutritional deficiencies arising from climate-related food insecurity (Pazos et al. 2024).

#### ***Climate shocks also have significant intergenerational impacts, with specific implications for adolescent girls, pregnant women and young mothers***

Young Lives evidence indicates that the negative effects of climate shocks on nutrition, growth, skills and learning can extend across generations. For example, in Ethiopia, children born to mothers exposed to the 1983–85 famine were, on average, shorter and had fewer years of schooling than

1 ILO defines a just transition as 'greening the economy in a way that is fair and inclusive of everyone concerned, including women, creating decent work opportunities and leaving no one behind' (ILO 2022).

2 Preliminary findings from the 2023–24 Young Lives survey (Round 7) are available in factsheets on work and family lives in Ethiopia, India and Peru (Tanima 2025a; Tanima 2025b; Campos and Lopez 2025). On this occasion, no data collection took place in Vietnam due to a change in government procedures on the international transfer of personal data.

3 Unpaid care work refers to 'all unpaid services provided by individuals within a household or community for the benefit of its members, including care of persons and domestic work' (UN Women 2022). This includes care of children, elderly people, ill people and people with disabilities.

4 ILO defines green jobs as 'decent jobs that contribute to preserve or restore the environment, be they in traditional sectors such as manufacturing and construction, or in new, emerging green sectors such as renewable energy and energy efficiency' (Castillo 2023).

5 For more information on the Research Hub see: <https://www.younglives.org.uk/ResearchHub>.



their peers (Tafere 2016). Similarly, in India, children whose mothers were exposed to droughts, flooding or cyclones during pregnancy exhibited weaker vocabulary skills by age 5, with longer-term effects on basic maths and social and emotional skills (such as self-esteem and self-efficacy) up to the age of 15 (Chang, Favara and Novella 2022). In Peru, children born to mothers exposed *in utero* to droughts have lower height-for-age (persisting into adulthood) and lower early-life weight-for-age (McQuade 2025).

Analysis across all four study countries even indicates that rainfall shocks and malnutrition experienced by adolescent girls *before they became pregnant* can have a negative impact on their future children's height, a disadvantage that persists into adolescence (Georgiadis et al. 2021).

### ***Existing gender inequalities and social norms are reinforced and exacerbated during times of crisis, including climate crises***

While climate shocks affect both men and women, the combination of poverty and gender inequalities intensifies the challenges faced by vulnerable girls and young women. This is because existing social, cultural and economic disadvantages are often exacerbated during crises. In all four study countries, families tend to reinforce traditional gender roles in times of stress, with girls and young women taking on the majority of the increased household and childcare responsibilities, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic (Favara et al. 2022).

As global climate projections indicate more frequent extreme weather shocks, these inequalities are likely to escalate. Low-income households are particularly vulnerable to climate-induced food shortages, increasing the risk of both hunger and school drop-out, particularly for girls.



“My body weight has greatly declined due to lack of sufficient food [after last year's drought] ... we used to go to school without eating anything. We could not follow lessons properly due to hunger, and this contributed to the dropout of my sister and myself.”

**Shashitu, 15-year-old girl in rural Ethiopia** (Chuta 2014)<sup>6</sup>

Girls are also less likely than boys to return to school once they have left. In Peru, among those who dropped out of school by age 19, the probability of going back and completing secondary education by age 29 is considerably lower for young women than young men (Rojas et al. 2024). This is a major barrier to women's economic empowerment, especially as dropping out of school has been shown by Young Lives to be an important risk factor for early marriage. In India, staying in school until the age of 15 reduces the likelihood of marriage before the legal age by 32 per cent (Singh and Espinoza 2016). Similarly, in Peru, dropping out of school can be linked to teenage pregnancy (Favara, Lavado and Sánchez 2020).

Evidence from Young Lives also shows that rainfall shocks in adolescence can lead to an increase in the probability of teenage marriage (by age 18) in areas where bride price payments are common (Vietnam), but reduce the probability in areas where dowry practices are more prevalent (India) (Trinh and Zhang 2021). This is significant as, in Ethiopia, India and Peru, young women who marry or have a child at an early age have the lowest education outcomes (Woodman Deza 2025a, 2025b; Cueto and Espinoza 2025). In addition, while most young men in India who were married by age 22 were in paid employment, young married women were largely working on their family farms or in other self-employed activities, mostly without pay (Singh and Mukherjee 2022).

### ***Additional unpaid care work during climate shocks may reduce girls' ability to study and increase the likelihood of dropping out of school***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as with other shocks, it was girls and young women who did most of the extra childcare and household work. In India, Young Lives found that 67 per cent of girls spent more time on childcare during lockdown, compared to only 38 per cent of boys (Ford 2021). Similar results were found for household work, a factor that previous Young Lives research has found to have an impact on school attendance (Singh and Mukerjee 2017). In Ethiopia, 70 per cent of girls spent more time on household work during the pandemic, compared to only 26 per cent of boys.

Without targeted action, the climate crisis is likely to further exacerbate gender inequalities in unpaid care work, just as Young Lives observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, while school closures caused by climate shocks affect both girls and boys, the extra childcare responsibilities that arise when children are out of school inevitably fall on adolescent girls and women. Likewise, climate-related food shortages, and the increased distance and time needed to collect wood and water due to droughts, floods and other climate shocks, will likely fall on adolescent girls and young women, reducing their time to study and increasing the likelihood that they will drop out of school (Favara et al. 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Young Lives protects the anonymity of the children and their families in the study. Shashitu is a pseudonym and the photos used are not of Young Lives study children but of children living in similar circumstances and communities.

## ***Women and girls' mental health could also be affected by climate shocks***

Young Lives has found that the mental health of young women and girls is disproportionately affected by the interruptions in education and increased domestic work that can be caused by shocks. Young women were significantly more vulnerable to anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic in India, Peru and Vietnam, and more vulnerable to depression in Peru and Vietnam (Porter et al. 2021). In India, the latest Young Lives evidence shows that levels of anxiety and depression have decreased among men since the pandemic, but that they have risen among women (Quigua 2025).

In Ethiopia, the closure of schools and universities during the pandemic had an acute impact on young women's mental health and education, particularly among the poorest households, with a clear difference between non-enrolled and enrolled girls and young women. Those who were out of school reported higher levels of mental stress and, by 2021, Young Lives found that more than one-third of 19-year-old women in Ethiopia were still in primary school, while only 15 per cent had advanced to higher education (Ford and Freund 2022b). By 2023, only 15 per cent of 22-year-old women in Ethiopia had been to university, down from 18 per cent in 2016 (Woodman Deza 2025a).

Recent evidence shows that the 2021 drought in Ethiopia increased anxiety and depression among young people, particularly those who grew up in the poorest households and those with low reading ability in childhood (Freund 2023).

The new **Young Lives Research Hub on Climate Change and Environmental Shocks** is working to generate more evidence on the effects of climate shocks and school closures on the mental health and education outcomes of children and young adults, especially for women and girls.

## ***Gender disparities in skills appear in adolescence, with likely effects on women's job opportunities***

Young Lives evidence shows that gender disparities in skills begin to appear in adolescence, although this varies between countries. For example, in India, by the age of 15, girls start to significantly underperform in maths and literacy tests compared to boys. This is also true for maths tests in Ethiopia and Peru, although to a lesser extent, in maths. Conversely, in Vietnam, girls outperform boys in maths and literacy tests at age 15, and in literacy at age 19 (Singh and Krutikova 2017; Rossiter et al. 2018).

When it comes to socio-emotional skills associated with empowerment, by the age of 19, young women across all four study countries exhibit significantly lower self-efficacy than their male peers, a gender gap that persists through to age 22 in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam. This is likely to affect young women's confidence and may discourage them from pursuing education and job opportunities. Alongside this, factors such as the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, risk of early marriage and parenthood, and limited access to affordable childcare, all contribute to persistent gender inequalities in the labour market (Hossain and Jukes 2023).

A gendered digital divide could create additional barriers to girls' education and skills development during and after extreme weather events, when teaching may need to be delivered remotely. In India, Young Lives surveys have found that girls from poor and rural households are particularly disadvantaged, with 89 per cent of rural girls having never used the internet by age 15 (Marshall and Moore 2020).

## ***Crises can exacerbate the gender employment gap***

Young Lives analysis shows that the gender employment gap increased significantly during the pandemic, with additional unpaid care work being the single most important factor in the slower economic recovery for women than men, especially in Peru and Vietnam (Scott et al. 2021). By the age of 22, 59 per cent of economically inactive women in Peru, 57 per cent in India, 49 per cent in Vietnam and 34 per cent in Ethiopia cited childcare and household duties as their main reasons for not looking for paid work. Virtually none of the men of the same age said they were not looking for work for these reasons (Ford, von Russdorf and Ahlborn 2023a).

Young Lives has found that even highly skilled women may remain out of the workforce due to the responsibilities of unpaid care and domestic work. This is particularly true in India but is also an issue in Vietnam (Perez-Alvarez, Porter and Ramachandran 2023).

Unpaid care work is contributing to the 'broken link' between women's progress in education and their economic empowerment (UNDP 2023). Despite being more educated and skilled than ever, only 61 per cent of working-age women are in the labour force compared to 91 per cent of working-age men (UN Women and UNDESA 2023). Young women are also twice as likely as young men to be classed as not in employment, education or training (United Nations 2024).

## ***Structural inequalities risk excluding young women from emerging opportunities in the green economy***

Young women, like young men, need the skills and knowledge required for new jobs related to the climate transition. These skills will vary across different country contexts, but many new green jobs require technical skills and are primarily concentrated in formal, male-dominated sectors that largely exclude women, such as renewable energy and low-carbon transport (Deiningert et al. 2023).

Evidence from Young Lives shows that young women are more likely than young men to be in informal jobs, often in agriculture. For example, the latest Young Lives survey found that, in India, 41 per cent of employed young women are working in the agriculture sector, compared to only 28 per cent of employed young men (Tanima 2025). Most agricultural jobs are informal and do not have written contracts. As a result, women may be less likely to have the access, knowledge, skills, experience and confidence needed to enter the green jobs market.

Gender bias and structural inequalities also affect women and girls' job choices and earning expectations, which may disadvantage them in accessing green jobs. Evidence

from Young Lives in Peru indicates that young women (particularly those from poorer households) are less likely to enrol in universities with the highest graduate incomes, and less likely to study subjects that lead to more highly paid jobs, especially engineering and other science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields where new green jobs are likely to be concentrated (Sánchez, Favara and Porter 2021).

This is a pattern repeated across the world. UNESCO's gender data shows that the share of women among STEM graduates has remained stagnant for ten years (UNESCO 2024). This also has consequences for combating the climate crisis, as evidence suggests that women employees and leaders tend to be more willing and effective when it comes to climate action (Deininger et al. 2023).

***Social protection offers significant potential to support children's development and improve skills and learning in the face of climate shocks, particularly for girls and women***

Crucially, the negative effects of exposure to climate shocks are not inevitable and can be mitigated. Social protection schemes (such as cash transfers or food aid) can have huge benefits for disadvantaged children, including for their long-term growth and nutritional health.

Young Lives research shows that social protection programmes can reverse the negative effects of early poverty and climate shocks on foundational cognitive skills throughout childhood and adolescence (Ford, von Russdorf and Ahlborn 2023b). This can help to alleviate some of the disproportionate impacts on girls and young women.

In Ethiopia, Young Lives found that the negative impact of droughts and floods on children's long-term memory, even when these impacts were experienced by their mother during pregnancy, were less severe for children in households benefiting from the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) (Freund et al. 2024). Other research has shown that women who benefit from the PSNP are able to be more resilient to droughts and floods (Hirvonen et al. 2023).

In Peru, Young Lives found that the JUNTOS (National Program of Direct Support to the Poorest) conditional cash transfer programme was able to reduce the negative effect of rainfall shocks on children's ability to concentrate on a specific task, likely because the programme supported permanent household income and thus resources for learning activities (Pazos et al. 2024). Children who benefited from JUNTOS from the age of 6 performed better than older children, probably because starting school at this age is one of the eligibility criteria for the programme (Scott et al. 2022).

Similarly, Young Lives evidence in India shows that access to social safety nets such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) and the school-level Mid-day Meals Scheme (MDMS) can act as a significant buffer against the negative impacts of exposure to early-life droughts on growth and nutrition (Dasgupta 2017; Singh, Park and Dercon 2014).

Young Lives research highlights that social protection for vulnerable households not only improves children's growth and nutrition but can also reduce climate-induced inequalities in skills development, learning and access to education, thereby mitigating some of the unequal impacts on girls and young women that leave them disadvantaged as they move into the labour market.

## Policy implications

The disproportionate impact of climate change and environmental shocks on women and girls is constraining progress towards meeting UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth. Achieving SDG 13 on climate action and the Paris Agreement climate targets will also only be possible if gender inequalities and structural barriers preventing women from equal participation in the climate transition are dismantled.

Rather than further exacerbating gender inequalities, the climate transition could offer huge opportunities to shift the dial on women's economic empowerment. But this will not happen automatically. Delivering women's economic empowerment in the face of climate change requires a concentrated effort on the part of all stakeholders, including:

1. **Expanding gender-responsive social protection to address women and girls' climate-related vulnerabilities**, particularly in disaster-prone regions, and with sustained support for acute nutritional deficits. Beyond addressing financial stress and food insecurity, targeted social protection can support girls to stay in school, reduce early marriage and intimate partner violence, and increase women's access to decent jobs.
2. **Prioritising safety nets for adolescent girls and young women, especially for pregnant teenagers and young mothers** who are vulnerable to climate shocks and nutritional deficits. This approach not only safeguards their own health and well-being but also supports their children's long-term development, helping to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and inequality.
3. **Supporting girls and young women to stay in education, particularly during adolescence**, while enhancing their access to higher education and vocational learning to develop the skills and confidence necessary for green jobs. Adaptive measures to make schools more resilient to environmental shocks will reduce prolonged closures that heighten the risk of children dropping out of school, which can have a negative impact on mental health, increase the risk of early marriage for young women and girls and worsen economic outcomes.



## Policy implications

4. **Improving women's employment and entrepreneurship opportunities in green industries**, including creating an enabling environment by shifting unequal power relations and patriarchal norms. This should include eliminating gender discrimination in the labour market and workforce, challenging gender stereotypes about what constitutes 'appropriate' work for women and enforcing policies like maternity and paternity leave, flexible working and childcare provision.
5. **Ensuring that climate finance is gender responsive**. As climate finance is scaled up to meet the New Collective Quantified Goal, it is vital that the Adaptation Fund, Green Climate Fund, Global Environment Facility and individual countries' climate finance mechanisms prioritise gender equality and ensure that women who are affected by climate change can access funding. The agreement reached at COP29 lacked a commitment to gender-responsive climate finance (UN Women 2024), despite clear evidence of its effectiveness (UNFCCC 2023). The Baku to Belém Roadmap to 1.3T<sup>7</sup> should include a clear gender-responsive financing target.
6. **Implementing a new Gender Action Plan that places the voices and needs of women at the heart of the climate transition**. The decision at COP29 to develop an enhanced new Gender Action Plan in 2025 for adoption at COP30 is an opportunity to advance both women's economic empowerment and transformative climate action.
7. **Meeting commitments to achieve gender balance in national delegations at climate COPs and in climate policy and action**. Despite steps adopting a goal in 2012 to promote a gender balance in climate negotiations and bodies, there has been limited progress; only about 35 per cent of delegates at COP29 were women (UN Women 2024). A recent analysis of 24 low- and middle-income countries found that just 6 per cent of the climate actions in their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) and national adaptation plans (NAPs) mention women (FAO 2024). The leadership, participation and lived experiences of women should be amplified in climate negotiations, including ongoing debates on the Global Goal on Adaptation, as well as in NDCs and NAPs.
8. **Collecting gender-disaggregated data that recognises women's diversity** and conducting targeted research to examine how climate shocks can deepen gender inequalities in social, economic and educational outcomes. More research is also needed to better understand the barriers to women's formal employment in emerging green jobs, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Further research by Young Lives will provide important new insights into these issues.

## Continuing to follow Young Lives

Young Lives completed Round 7 of its in-person quantitative survey in 2024. The survey collected comprehensive new data on many aspects of young people's lives as they transition into adulthood and navigate multiple global crises (such as COVID-19, climate change and conflict), including in relation to their physical and mental health, education and skills, time use, work and family formation. This is delivering important new insights into the impact of climate change and environmental shocks on young women's economic empowerment and opportunities.

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7 The 'Baku to Belém Roadmap to 1.3T' refers to the UNFCCC framework launched at COP29 in 2024, to guide international efforts to mobilise \$1.3 trillion per year for climate action in developing countries by 2035. For more information see: <https://unfccc.int/topics/climate-finance/workstreams/baku-to-belem-roadmap-to-13t>

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## Acknowledgements

This policy brief was written by Fiona Curtin, Nikki van der Gaag, Kath Ford and Tanima Tanima. The authors thank Santiago Cueto, Marta Favara, Alula Pankhurst, Alan Sánchez and Renu Singh for their insights, comments and suggestions. Thanks to Adam Houlbrook for copyediting, Garth Stewart for design and Julia Tilford for overseeing the publication process.

We particularly wish to thank the Young Lives participants and their families for generously giving us their time and cooperation.

Special thanks to the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and the Old Dart Foundation for ongoing support, including funding the Young Lives at Work programme and the production of this brief.

The views expressed are those of the authors. They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, the University of Oxford, Young Lives, the UK Government or other funders.

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The Young Lives images are of young people living in circumstances and communities similar to the young people within our study sample.



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