

# The impact of climate change on women's sexual and reproductive health in communities in Khulna, Bangladesh

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**Climate change directly and indirectly affects women's contraceptive use, fertility intentions, pregnancy outcomes, vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence, economic roles, and sexual health.**

Climate change is now affecting every country on every continent, disrupting national economies and affecting lives — costing people, communities and countries dearly today and even more tomorrow. Bangladesh is among the countries of the world experiencing the most severe impacts of climate change, exacerbating poverty and poor health outcomes for rural coastal populations.

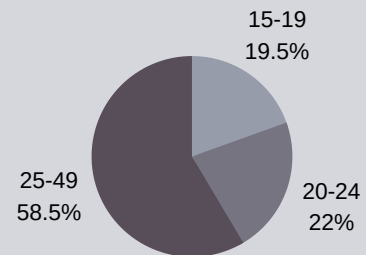
Women and girls disproportionately bear the brunt of climate-related events and environmental stress. Women comprise 20 million of the 26 million people estimated to have been displaced by climate change, and they are more vulnerable to the impact of climate change because they lack power. In effect, climate crises deny women the ability to control their own fertility.

## Our Method

Ipas conducted a phased, qualitative study from 2020 to 2021 using key informant interviews with community leaders and local experts, participatory research activities implemented at community dialogue meetings, and in-depth interviews with women of reproductive age. Our objective was to understand how women's experiences with climate change impact their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) decision-making, behavior, and outcomes in cyclone-prone communities in Bangladesh. The study was located in Chalna Bazar, Bajuya, Lawdube, and Tildanga in Dacope upazila of Khulna division due to these communities' experience with Cyclone Bulbul in November 2019. Ethical approval was provided by the Bangladesh Medical Research Council (Memo # BMRC/NREC/2019-2022/868).

**15 In-depth Interviews  
& 8 Community Dialogue  
Meetings with Married Women**

### Ages of 49 Participants



**19 Key Informants: local  
experts on climate change  
and women's SRHR**



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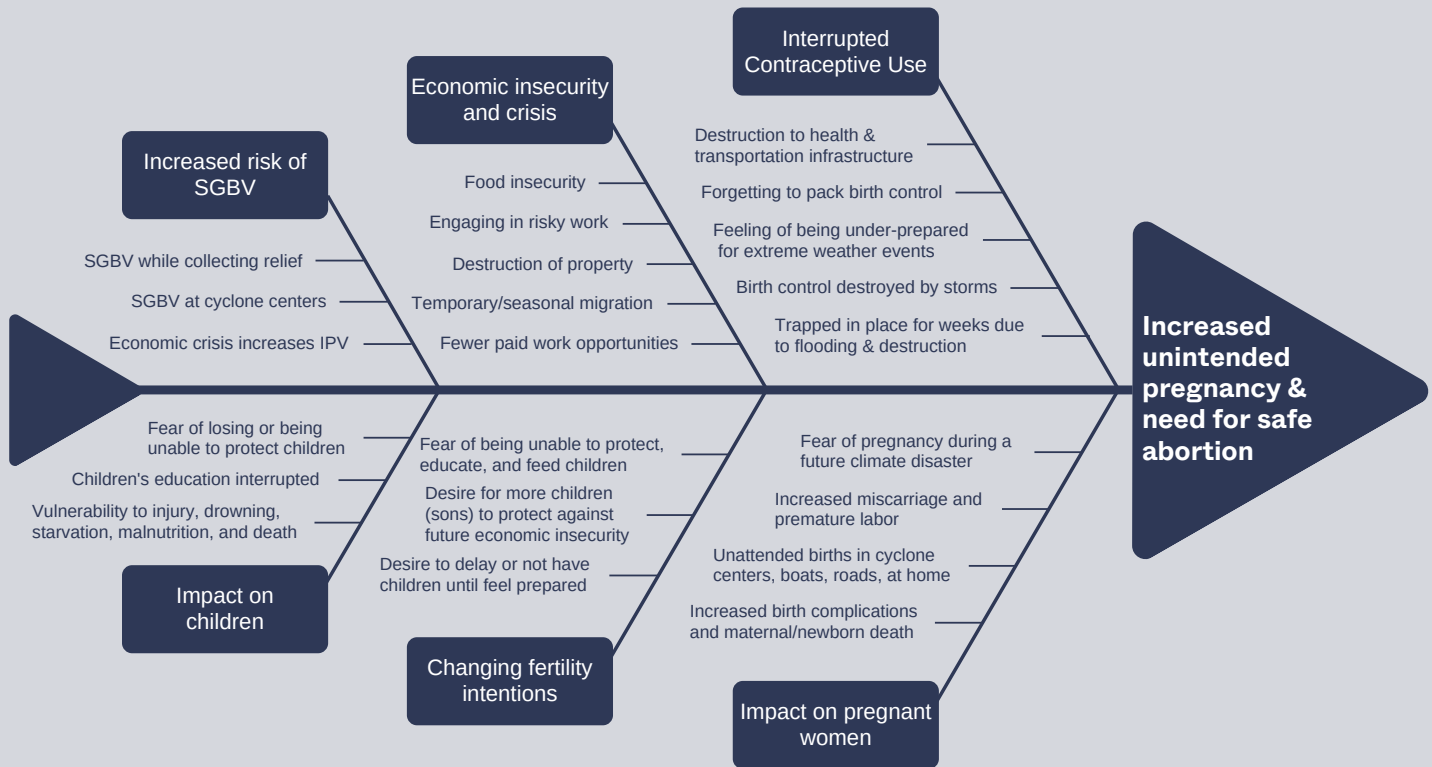
## Key Findings

Climate change disproportionately impacts women by reducing their already limited economic opportunities, worsening existing gender inequities and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and interrupting access to SRH services. The time immediately before, during, and after cyclones is when we see the most compromised access to care for contraception, pregnancy, and menstrual regulation. Pregnant women are particularly at risk, facing increased risk of miscarriage, early labor, and pregnancy complications that could lead to morbidities and death. Adolescent girls experience increased risk of SGBV, child marriage, and early pregnancy.

**"The main concern is whether I will survive or die. I don't even remember to take the [birth control] pill then. Suppose, I did intercourse with our husband last night.... The next day the storm is coming. I had intercourse with my husband the day before. However, due to the storm, I did not take the pill. Then an accident can happen.... This is how I might get pregnant."**

*- 24 year-old in-depth interview participant*

# How climate change contributes to unintended pregnancy and abortion



## Climate change intensifies economic crisis and sexual and gender-based violence

Cyclone centers, built to provide refuge during extreme weather events, unintentionally create opportunities for sexual harassment and rape due to crowded conditions, poor security, electricity outages, and lack of separate spaces and toilets for men and women. Devastation and interruption to working sectors increases families' economic instability and stress. Participants directly linked this to increases in intimate partner violence, dowry and in-law abuse, transactional sex, sexual harassment while collecting disaster relief, and child marriage.

## Fertility intentions are changing

**"When any disaster come people do not want to take child at that time. They usually say that 'if we take child now how could we manage it. How could I manage myself in that situation?'"**

- 38 year-old in-depth interview participant

Due to the increased vulnerability of pregnant women and children during extreme weather, women fear being pregnant and losing children during climate disasters. They described not wanting to have more children in the wake of disasters as they face difficulties to protect, feed, and care for their children. Others felt the opposite, intentionally bearing more children to protect against becoming childless during a climate disaster.

## Compounding impacts on women

Women lack opportunities for paid work outside of the home due to prevailing norms around their role as caregivers and leading household work. Climate-induced migration leaves many women to care for their families alone. Women who become heads of household in this way, in addition to unmarried, widowed, or divorced women, are particularly vulnerable to violence and poverty. As a result, women must resort to jobs that put their reproductive health at risk — such as fishing waist-deep in salinized, polluted waters and transactional sex — to feed their children and save for future disasters.

**"We can all sit together and discuss what is best to do. If I don't know how to sew, then I can learn from others.... Learning this and then starting to do this would be beneficial for the family. If everyone works together, then it will be possible to deal with the situation."**

*- 19 year-old in-depth interview participant*

## We need women-led climate justice

Increase women's opportunities for less risky, paid work to increase their resiliency



Improve the woman-friendliness of cyclone centers



Increase SRH health care accessibility, particularly contraception and MRM

Participants identified the above ways to lessen the impact of climate change on women and girls. Women play a leading role in helping their families and communities prepare for and survive extreme weather events, adapt, and increase their resiliency, but their role in coordinated efforts (e.g., by governments and NGOs) is not yet fully realized. This is particularly true for leadership positions, and it needs to change. Gender-blind climate action risks making these problems even worse.

**"In the shelter, if there was a separate arrangement for men and women then there will be less sexual harassment. Women face harassment while going to the washroom. Men touch their bodies.... There should be a separate room for pregnant women, and they should be taken care of."**

*- Community dialogue meeting with girls ages 15-19*

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