

Interlinkages between Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights/Family Planning and Climate Change



The climate crisis profoundly impacts sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR/FP), including family planning, hindering access to essential services and exacerbating existing health challenges. Extreme weather events disrupt healthcare infrastructure, leading to higher rates of unintended pregnancies, maternal mortality, and sexually transmitted infections. These disruptions also increase instances of gender-based violence, making it crucial to address SRHR/FP within the context of climate change.

Realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR/FP) is essential for reducing inequalities and enhancing community resilience to climate change. Integrating SRHR/FP into disaster response plans and educating communities on the links between climate change and SRHR/FP can empower individuals and improve health outcomes. Prioritizing SRHR/FP ensures that marginalized populations receive the care they need, fostering social and economic stability and helping communities adapt to the effects of climate change.

Climate Change Impacts Maternal Health in Multiple Ways

Expectant mothers are among the most vulnerable in any population and are thus more susceptible to the negative impacts of climate change. The rise in general temperatures leads to dehydration, which can be devastating for pregnant women as it can affect fetal growth, release labour-inducing hormones, cause preterm births, and increase the maternal risk of anaemia and eclampsia. Droughts and famines resulting from climate change also have devastating effects as they impact the nutrition of expectant mothers leading to low birth weight, undernutrition, and stunted growth as well as higher risk of neonatal and child mortality. Pregnant women are more vulnerable to diseases that can spike during climate disasters.

For example, flooding can result in stagnant water and changes in temperature, and coupled with changes in humidity and rainfall, can influence the behaviour and survival of the malaria-carrying Anopheles mosquito, with malaria often resulting in a higher risk of miscarriages and infant mortality. The risk for pregnant women is quite high due to their weakened immune system, as well as their disproportionate exposure to risks, as women often spend prolonged periods in closer proximity to standing water, which they use for cooking, cleaning, and other tasks related to food production, sanitation, and hygiene.

Extreme climate conditions can result in destruction of infrastructure, which might force women to give birth under poor conditions, such as on roadsides, in gardens, or at home, increasing maternal, neonatal, and infant mortality and morbidity rates. Climate change also affects fertility and family planning. Air pollution negatively impacts women's fertility where women who live less than 200 meters from a major roadway had an increased risk of self-reported infertility compared with women living 200 meters or more away. Climate-induced economic and financial hardships often result in early marriage and earlier sexual debuts, while hindering access to family planning services, which leads to an increase in unwanted pregnancies and poor maternal health.



Key Barriers to Integration of SRHR/FP in Climate Action

Integrating SRHR/FP into the climate agenda is challenging due to a number of barriers related to financing, coordination, knowledge, and ability, such as:



Lack of Resources



Lack of Administrative Oversight



Siloed Approach



Lack of Awareness and Knowledge



Poverty



Health Professionals Morale



Family Planning Beliefs

Climate Change Influences Risky Behaviour and Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is often a common occurrence during periods of climate disasters. Migration and displacement occurring from these disasters increase the vulnerability of women and raise the prevalence of migration-related sexual abuse and exploitation. Resource scarcity as a result of climate disasters is another key stressor that induces sexual violence. The stress and frustration from the male figures' inability to provide for their families can lead to higher sexual violence against women in their homes, as well as child and forced marriages and sex trafficking. Higher rates of survival and transactional sex is also inevitable, which increases the burden and severity of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. In addition to abuse and violence, risky sexual behaviour also becomes more prevalent. The heightened stress levels from droughts and famines and the decline in psychosocial coping resources impact youth's ability to engage in safe sex practices.

Damaged Infrastructure Means Limited Access to Services

Climate disasters such as floods and earthquakes destroy the health infrastructure as well as the access infrastructure, like roads, which often results in the use of temporary structures and long-distance travel, compromising the quality of services. These climate disasters also lead to surges in the numbers of patients, which overwhelms the system, causes health workers burnout, and depletes medical supplies. This overburdening of the healthcare system further exacerbates sexual and reproductive health issues as they are usually at the bottom of medical priorities compared to serious injuries and immediate life-threatening diseases.



“In fishing communities, people have been reported to share and/or wash condoms after use, and miss appointments to get contraceptives due to limited accessibility.”

Call to Action

A clear gap in integrating SRHR/FP into climate change policies persists in Uganda. Action should be taken to further integrate quality SRHR/FP care and services and support vulnerable communities through policy, programs, and access.



Recommendations for Policy Makers

- Create more targeted stakeholder engagement about the linkage between SRHR/FP and climate action to raise the awareness level across key players.
- Conduct issue-based research to inform the key strategies and policies such as the Health National Adaptation Plan (H-NAP) and the National Gender Action Plan.
- Establish forums at the national and local levels for information exchange and dialogue among key actors and stakeholders involved in responding to issues related to population dynamics, development, agriculture, environment, natural resources management, and climate action to raise more awareness and foster collaboration among these stakeholders.

Recommendations for Programs

- Map and document the best practices with respect to the interconnection between family planning, gender, health, and climate action to improve and scale-up relevant initiatives.
- Increase fund allocation and access to financial resources to facilitate implementation of the responsive actions to address integrated climate action approach.

- Pursue structured engagements with religious and cultural leaders to foster a positive mindset change for beliefs and cultural views that hinder family planning, environment, natural resources management, and climate action efforts.
- Implement targeted awareness campaigns for households, particularly those most vulnerable to climate change impacts.

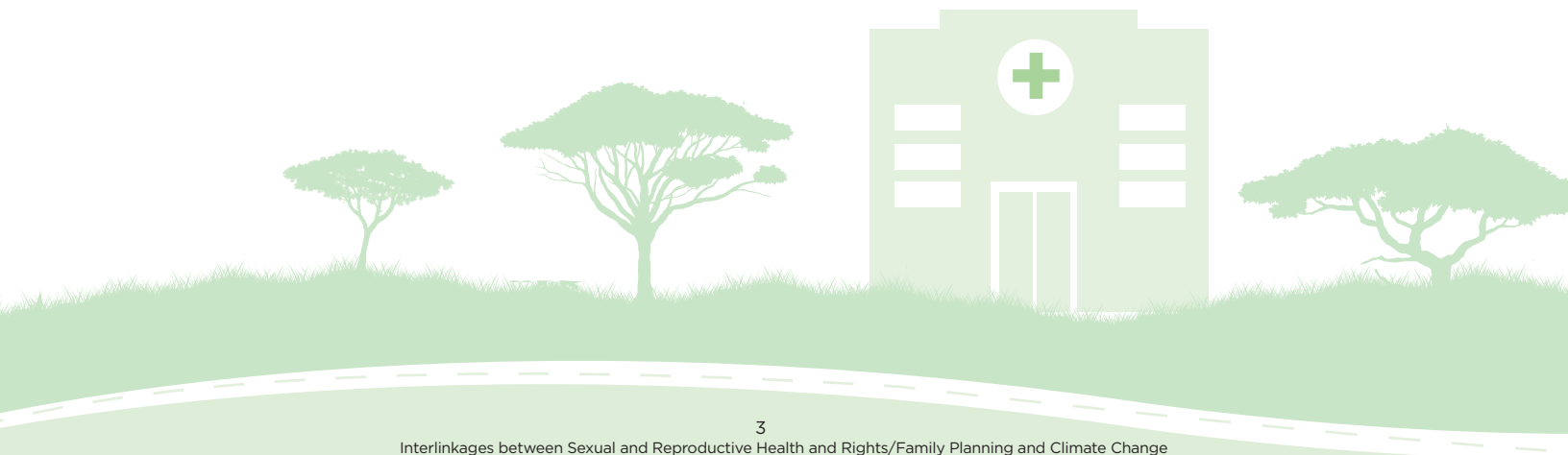
Recommendations for Health Systems

- Design and construct climate smart infrastructure, e.g., roads and health centres that are adapted to the current and projected climate conditions to advance climate change resilience for the health infrastructure, environment, and the community.
- Provide responsive support and facilitation for community-based institutions and structures (e.g., Village Health Teams) to conduct effective service delivery to complement the government structures.



The full research report is available at:

<https://regenerateafrica.org/2024/02/15/final-study-report-scaling-up-srhr-fp-for-climate-adaptation-and-resilience-in-uganda/>



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