

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

- Around the world, **environmental degradation** and **increased competition over scarce resources** are exacerbating gender-based violence.
- Gender-based violence is used to **assert control over natural resources** and to **diminish the efforts of those working towards a safe and healthy environment**.
- Addressing gender-based violence and promoting gender equality are **fundamental for environmental work that meaningfully contributes to the UN Sustainable Development Goals**.
- Governments and environmental organisations need to better understand the links between gender-based violence and the environment, **advance greater legal protections** and **take gender-specific risks into account in their policies and interventions**.

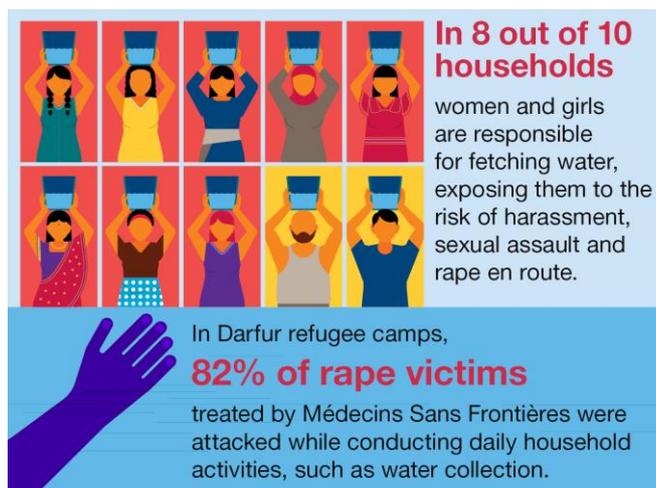
What is the issue?

Evidence shows that **there are direct links between environmental pressures and gender-based violence**, and that the degradation of nature, competition over increasingly scarce resources and environmental crime can all exacerbate violence.

Occurring in all societies, gender-based violence is used to keep gender inequalities intact, to the detriment of livelihoods, human rights, conservation and sustainable development. Expressions of gender-based violence affect an estimated one in three women and girls, but are also experienced by people of all sex and gender identities. They can include sexual assault, domestic violence, verbal abuse, harassment, stalking, child marriage, economic deprivation, survival sex (exploitation in exchange for access to subsistence resources) and forced prostitution

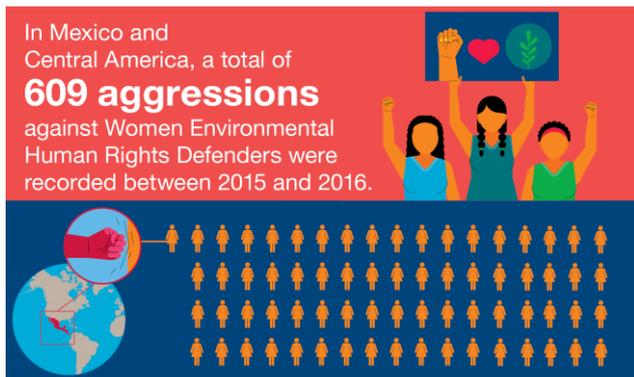
Environmental degradation is a driver of gender-based violence. Resource scarcity, conflicts and displacement caused by environmental degradation deepen existing inequalities. In such cases, gender-based violence is often used as a means of reinforcing privileges and control over resources. Climate change worsens these effects. During prolonged drought, for example, child marriage is used by families as a strategy to cope with scarcity of food and income. In the aftermath of environmental disasters, intimate partner violence rates can rise – as they did e.g. in Vanuatu following two tropical cyclones ([UN Women Fiji, 2014](#)), in Zimbabwe after cyclone Idai ([Chatiza, 2019](#)), or in Bangladesh following cyclone Roanu ([Rezwana and Pain, 2020](#)). Overcrowded and unsafe conditions in disaster shelters and climate refugee camps can also expose women, girls and gender minorities to violence, while medical and legal services are overwhelmed, making it harder to get help.

Environmental crime increases gender-based violence. Weak rule of law enables conditions in which violence flourishes, as documented in numerous case studies of sex trafficking, sexual abuse and child labour in illegal mining, fishing and logging operations around the world. For example, in Peru, illegal mining operations traffic girls as young as 12 years old ([GI-TOC, 2016](#)). In illegal fishing operations in South Asia, men and boys are subjected to sexual abuse and slave labour ([IOM et al., 2016](#)). In parts of Africa, the illegal logging and charcoal trade leads to extensive human rights abuses, including sexual exploitation ([Dranginis, 2016](#)).



Infographic by Estudio Relativo for IUCN, data from [WHO \(2017\)](#) and [MSF \(2005\)](#).

Environmental activists are increasingly victims of gender-based violence. Well-known movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America illustrate the importance of women's roles in protecting ecosystems worldwide. But as women's and girls' involvement in activism and political demonstrations in defence of the environment increases, so too do incidents of gender-based violence against environmental defenders as a tactic to intimidate and silence them, and this violence affects the ability of women and girls to equally and safely participate in these movements.



Infographic by Estudio Relativo for IUCN, data from Osorio (2016).

Why is this important?

Gender-based violence is a violation of human rights. Gender-based violence harms individuals and imposes direct and indirect costs on families, communities, economies, global public health and development. Individuals can suffer long-term effects as a result of gender-based violence, from the spread of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS to psychological harm.

Gender-based violence also prevents victims and survivors from exercising their economic and political rights and limits their access to education and work opportunities. Social stigma against victims can likewise create barriers to justice, reinforcing a culture of impunity.

Gender-based violence is a barrier to conservation and sustainable development goals. Gender-based violence discourages women's participation in protecting and sustainably managing natural resources. For example, a project in Nepal found that sexual exploitation was used to intimidate women and prevent them from engaging in ecosystem restoration activities ([IUCN, 2020](#)).

This is a lost opportunity, as evidence from around the world reaffirms that gender equality and women's empowerment are key to meeting conservation and Sustainable Development Goals.

What can be done?

Addressing gender-based violence is a fundamental part of achieving a healthy, sustainable future for all.

Advance better legal protections. While most countries' legal codes address gender-based violence, its pervasive links with environmental issues and related socio-economic inequalities are rarely recognised and reflected in policy and legal frameworks. Policy makers must close these gaps and ensure that effective gender-responsive environmental laws, policies, strategies and accountability mechanisms are in place; and that gender strategies and laws in turn take environmental factors such as land rights, climate change and control of natural resources into account.

Address gender-based violence in environmental work. Environmental organisations have an important role to play in ending gender-based violence. Polices, standards and safeguards should include gender-based violence feedback and grievance mechanisms. Throughout project cycles, gender analyses should be conducted to identify gender-based violence and develop preventative and responsive measures, such as working directly with men to reduce potential tension and violence.

Funders should require gender analyses and action that takes gender-based violence into account to ensure that these approaches are widely adopted.

Draw from existing expertise. Governments and environmental organisations should partner with humanitarian and health organisations that have knowledge and expertise on gender-based violence to develop environmental policies and projects that help prevent violence and enable women to safely engage in environmental work and activism.

Invest in knowledge and solutions. While we know that gender-based violence is exacerbated by environmental degradation and environmental crime, many gaps in our understanding remain. Public and private environment and gender-focused funders should prioritise research that enables evidence-based action, investing in promising practices that can be developed, replicated and scaled up.

Where can I get more information?

- IUCN (2020): [Gender-based Violence and Environment Linkages: The Violence of Inequality](#)
- [GBV-Environment Center](#)
- Contact: GBV-ENV@iucn.org
- Twitter: [IUCN_Gender](#)