



MITIGATING PROTECTION RISKS FOR YOUNG WOMEN IN SOUTHERN AFRICA: POLICY RESPONSES TO DROUGHT- INDUCED CRISES

BACKGROUND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Southern Africa is experiencing devastating effects of El Niño-induced droughts, prolonged by climate change. This policy brief explores the ripple effect of droughts on young women in Southern Africa. It highlights the fact that droughts, like any other crises, lead to increased and intersecting vulnerabilities of young women and girls.

Droughts deepen the inequalities and injustices faced by young women and girls. They lead to food insecurity; increase the burden of unpaid care and domestic work for girls and young women as they face health and nutrition issues not only for themselves but for their families too; educational disruptions; heightened violence against women and girls (VAWG) including forced, early and child marriages; migration, and reduced access to public services.

Drawing from lessons and experiences of young women in Southern Africa and beyond, the brief suggests policy and practice improvements to enact change and prevent the violation of young women's rights during such crises.

The recent 2023-2024 El Niño induced agricultural and hydrological drought has significantly impacted the region, with Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique and Malawi experiencing the most devastating effects.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) estimated that 56.8 million people were food insecure in the region¹. This figure is expected to significantly increase for the 2024/25 season. The droughts have led to devastating impacts for affected populations, especially those most vulnerable, like women and girls.

On May 20, 2024, the Chairperson of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) launched the SADC Regional Humanitarian Appeal, seeking at least US\$5.5 billion to support over 61 million people affected by the droughts. UN OCHA has highlighted this as the worst drought the region has seen in 100 years and estimated the same number of affected people². In Zimbabwe alone, the estimated number of people at risk of acute hunger is 7.6 million³.

This brief uses a literature review of recent evidence and in-depth, qualitative interviews with 7 young women in 3 Southern African countries (Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia) to explore the effects of droughts on the lives of young women and suggest important policy changes to improve these young women's lives.

The Impact of Drought on Protection Risks for Young Women: "(...) all the efforts that we have been putting into keeping girls in school are falling down the drain" Mary, 19 (fictional name) from Zambia

The work to repair and prevent loss and damage related to climate induced crises tends to prioritize macro-economic dimensions. For example, most Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) focus on loss and damage at the macro-economic levels. When social losses to do with health and loss of life are mentioned, it is mostly through a quantitative, macro-economic perspective with a limited or no scope of the qualitative effects at the micro-level where young women and girls who are worst affected by the droughts are located.

These effects and risks such as burden of unpaid care and domestic work, educational disruptions and heightened violence against women and girls are overlooked by immediate relief policy, leading to devastating consequences. This result in young women being trapped in cycles of poverty and exploitation, severely limiting their ability to lead secure and autonomous lives.



BARRIERS TO RECOVERY FROM DROUGHTS

1. FINANCIAL EXCLUSION

Drought-induced economic hardship is a primary factor that heightens protection risks for young women. The loss of crops and livestock during drought periods often plunges families into deeper poverty. The economic desperation that follows drought can trap young women in cycles of poverty and exploitation, severely limiting their ability to lead secure and autonomous lives⁵.

Women and girls are often excluded from ownership and control of land, property, capital, training, and decision-making power. Without land and property titles for collateral, women struggle to obtain loans and credit essential for recovery from drought impacts. Additionally, the lack of financial resources and technology limits their ability to adopt sustainable land management practices, which are vital for mitigating further climate damage and improving crop yields⁶. Part Five (Articles 16, 17, 18 and 19) on Productive Resources and Employment of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2016) provides a comprehensive framework for financial inclusion of young women and women including compensation of unpaid care and domestic work for girls and women but countries are yet to fulfil this obligation.

Barely Holding On

“We have left everything in God’s hands to intervene” Emily (not real name), 19 Siamuluwa Village, Zambia

Nyaradzo, 24 (Zimbabwe)

I am Nyaradzo, I live in a marginalized area. I am a young woman and a single mother. When it comes to the drought it’s challenging to us as young women, we are suffering, we are not getting food relief anywhere.

There was no rain, and all our crops failed, so to get money to sustain ourselves we can’t because we do not have jobs, if we try to do gold and chrome panning the police arrests you. The social welfare has a selected list of people, mostly the elderly and leaving out the young people in the area and they only came once yet people are hungry.

Young people cannot get drought relief, and we are not getting any help from the government. If the government could provide economic opportunities for young people and young women or even life skills on what they can do to survive it would help. Government must know that the communities are experiencing difficulties with climate change and must look at everyone during this disaster. If the situation remains like this how will the young women survive.

In addition, drought affected me a lot. Farming is my livelihood, that is where I get money, but all crops wilted, tobacco, maize, are my source of income. I am single mother; the kids need to go to school and eat. The little tobacco I managed to sell from last harvest we were given the local currency, and we can’t access it from the bank, and we are suffering from currency volatility. We are suffering.

Joan (fictional name), 29 (Zambia)

My health is at stake due to lack of balanced diet, which helps in boosting our immunities. We sleeping on empty stomachs sometimes due to lack of food. A lot of boreholes have dried out and it makes us walk long distance to find water, water is life. My life has been affected because all my the plans I had for this year have been disturbed. All my savings have been used to buy food. We are selling our livestock in order to buy food.

2. EDUCATIONAL DISRUPTION

The disruption of educational opportunities for girls and young women reduces their future economic prospects and increases their vulnerability to various forms of exploitation. Staying out of school increases the risks of girls and young women to forced, early and child marriages. The SADC Protocol obligates member states to provide Equality in Education (Article 14) and Legal Rights for Girls and Boys (Article 11). However SADC countries remain deeply patriarchal, and families tend to prioritise boys' over girls' education⁷. Without education, young women are less equipped to advocate for their rights and protect themselves from abuse and exploitation.

Mary, 19 (fictional name) from Siamuluwa village in Zambia interviewed for this brief highlighted that:

“In the area where I come from, the drought is significantly impacting young women and girls, who are often married off as a means for their families to secure food resources. In many cases, these girls are also expected to rely on their husbands for food and all basic needs which may also make them vulnerable and prey for gender-based violence. As a girl champion, all the efforts that we have been putting into keeping girls in school are falling down the drain.”

The consequences of a limited access to quality education are far reaching and cut across many aspects of girls' lives. Education is crucial for their protection from forced and child marriages, capacity to earn an income, build their resilience, and strengthen their capacity to participate in decision making⁸.

3. GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

Crises like droughts increase the vulnerability of young women and girls to intersecting forms of violence against women and girls. Scarcity of resources often heighten tensions within households and communities, resulting in a surge in different forms of violence and abuse. People with responsibility to protect girls and young women, can turn out to be perpetrators of their abuse.

The ActionAid report *Women Confronting Loss and Damage in Africa (2022)* notes that women and girls are being put at greater risk of sexual violence due to factors like increased community conflict caused by the impacts of climate change, male migration which often leaves women alone in their homes, and the increased distances they need to travel to fetch water. In contexts that face the additional challenge of conflict, women's safety is at an even greater risk as they embark on these journeys to fetch water and food⁹. The 2020 ActionAid Report during the overlap of Covid 19 and drought in the region also reinforced the points made here¹⁰.

Furthermore, there is an increase in young women engaging in sex for survival. Coupled with other factors of limited personal power due to disrupted educational opportunities, limited knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and reduced services to support them, sex work (including under-age girls) increases girls and young women's risks to diseases and abuse. Out of the 7 young women interviewed for this brief, 3 have cited this factor as a challenge for their communities.



4. HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Diminished food availability leads to widespread malnutrition, which disproportionately affects young women, especially those who are pregnant or breastfeeding. Malnutrition can have long-term health consequences, impairing physical and cognitive development¹¹.

Additionally, the stress and anxiety associated with food insecurity and economic hardship can adversely affect the mental health of young women¹², contributing to a range of psychological issues such as anxiety, stress, trauma, depression and other mental health conditions. This can be worse in women and girls as they have disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work in the household and often bear the burden of caring for the wider household's nutrition and wellbeing.



Early pregnancies also result in health hazards, as young women are more prone to suffering obstetric fistula, since their bodies are not physically fit to carry a pregnancy and give birth. It is worth noting that cases of fistula among young women in Zambia are already a cause for concern, as evidenced by the launch of country's 2022-2026 Obstetric Fistula Strategic Plan, which was developed in collaboration with UNFPA.

Furthermore, droughts significantly affect women's reproductive health, as the lack of access to clean water creates challenges during menstrual cycles for women and girls.

5. MIGRATION AND DISPLACEMENT

Drought-induced migration and displacement further exacerbate protection risks. As families are forced to relocate in search of better living conditions, young women face the breakdown of community structures and support systems that previously offered some level of protection. Displacement often leaves young women more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in unfamiliar and insecure environments.



6. ACCESS TO SERVICES

Access to essential services, such as healthcare and water, is severely compromised during droughts. Strained healthcare systems may limit access to reproductive health services, making it difficult for young women to receive necessary care. Water scarcity impacts hygiene practices and increases the risk of waterborne diseases, disproportionately affecting young women who are typically responsible for fetching water. These challenges compound the health risks and overall vulnerability of young women in drought-affected areas.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

“It’s high time you put the welfare of people in front before thinking of profits”. Precious, Nsanje district, Malawi

Although there are existing policy and practice gaps concerning protection risks for young women during droughts and other climate-related disasters, there are significant opportunities to address these issues more effectively.

We urge the SADC to prioritize the fulfillment of the important commitments to eradicate violence against women and promote gender equality¹³. by prioritizing young women in policy and resources, keeping young women’s rights at the forefront of action and providing them with opportunities for personal growth and to support their own communities. There are a number of specific measures and priorities that can be taken.

Legal and Policy Frameworks and Practice:

- Guarantee the rights of women and girls through gender-sensitive laws and provisions developed in consultation with young women, ensuring implementation and monitoring.

Gender-Based Violence and Women’s Economic Empowerment:

- Enact laws and policies to end all types of violence against women and to recognize, reduce and compensate unpaid care and domestic work for young women and girls.
- To avoid child marriages, trafficking and sex for survival, reduce educational disruptions for girls and young women by budgeting for and funding girls’ and young women’s education in times of crises.
- Promote vocational training and follow up support, develop and fund livelihood programmes, and ensure social protection benefits that include and target young women to improve long term resilience and reduce economic vulnerability that leads to further vulnerability.

Access to Services:

- Ensure young women have access to health, legal, and psychosocial support services that are adequate to their specific needs and particularities, accounting for intersectional factors like age, race, disability, among others.

Community Engagement and Awareness:

- Conduct community awareness campaigns to address gender norms and practices that increase protection risks.
- Support and resource young women led community-based protection programmes to support them to take leadership of their own protection and solutions.



SADC must ensure that member countries domesticate, adhere to, monitor and report on agreed gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) principles and provisions to guarantee protection of young women and girls from crisis

When addressing the impact of droughts, the already scarce resources can be diverted from other important services to address the most immediate needs such as food and water, halting social advances made in GBV prevention and services, with potentially devastating long-term consequences for those most at risk of marginalization.

Moreover, as Nyaradzo (fictional name) highlighted, social protection programmes may overlook young people and leave them invisible and unattended during crises:

"If the situation remains like this how will the young women survive?" (Nyaradzo, Zimbabwe).

In a report by ActionAid on the triple nexus, women in Somaliland emphasized the need to pay attention to the peculiar, qualitative and micro-level changing needs and priorities of women in responding to climate-induced events. Hence centering young women's needs and priorities by SADC is important:

*'The crises and droughts have meant that we have had to shift all our previous programming around protection and women's economic empowerment to responding to the immediate needs of the community such as water trucking, food distribution and resettlement of IDPs. This is sometimes forgotten.'*¹⁴

Precious Kadwala's, 24 (Malawi, Nsanje District) recommendation to policy makers is:

"I have a message to the world leaders: It's high time you put the welfare of people in front before thinking of profits. Re-assess financial priorities and practices to ensure that the welfare of the people is not overshadowed by profit motives. Establish frameworks that align economic goals with the overarching objective of enhancing community well-being. Lastly, develop and support programs that enhance agricultural resilience, such as drought-resistant crops and advanced irrigation systems. This will help to mitigate the impacts of future climatic shocks and build long-term food security."

However, it is very important to note that besides the lack of resources and opportunities, young people, especially young women, are drivers of change and frequently take leadership in enacting change:

"Despite these challenges, I'm passionate about making a difference (...). Traditional gender roles often expect me to focus on household chores instead of my own dreams. But with community support, I stay motivated because I know I can make a positive impact" (Anlle, 24,Zimbabwe, Binga).

ActionAid urges policymakers to prioritize young women in policy and resource allocation. In the face of an unprecedented crisis, it is essential that young women are consulted and included in all phases of policymaking and implementation, from design to monitoring and evaluation.

Reference

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- ⁴ AAUK Loss & Damage report.pdf (actionaid.org.uk)
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- ¹⁴ ActionAid Leading the Way The Nexus through a Feminist Lens.pdf

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