

'Natural disasters' increase triggers for violence against women and girls

May 6 2021



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'Natural disasters,' sparked by climate change and other natural hazards, increase the triggers for violence against women and girls by boosting the means, opportunity, and underlying drivers, finds a review of the

available evidence, published in the online journal *BMJ Global Health*.

As these disasters are increasing in frequency, severity, and duration worldwide, this consequence must now be formally recognised in [public health](#), [violence prevention](#), and disaster management strategies, urge the researchers.

Over the past two decades, 7348 disasters precipitated by natural hazards were recorded. This is nearly double the number recorded between 1980 and 1999. And between 2008 and 2017, most (84%) of all recorded disasters were related to [climate issues](#).

The researchers base their conclusions on a systematic review of the available published evidence, looking at the association between disasters from [natural hazards](#) and violence against women and girls.

Of 37 relevant studies, 20 were quantitative, 16 qualitative (interviews;[case studies](#)) and 1 was a mixed-methods design. They assessed exposure to disasters caused by different natural hazard types, including droughts, floods, and hurricanes.

The violence was primarily physical, psychological and sexual. Some studies also looked at murder, controlling or aggressive behaviour, forced early marriage and financial violence.

More than a third (37%) of perpetrators were current or former partners, 15% relatives, 12% strangers, 11% authority figures, 8% friends/neighbours and 16.5% unspecified or other types of perpetrators.

Eight of the 20 quantitative studies found that natural disasters were associated with increased violence against women and girls, and four others found positive associations with particular types of violence.

Five found no association between natural disasters and violence against women and girls, but two commented on exceptionally high rates of this type of violence before the occurrence of a natural disaster.

But the researchers note that violence against women is often under reported, a factor that was evident in the qualitative studies.

The 16 qualitative studies and the one mixed method study all described violence against women and girls in the wake of natural disasters.

Three main possible triggers emerged: an increase in stressors that spark violence, such as trauma, mental health issues, financial insecurity; an increase in enabling environments, such as absence of policing, health and support services, breakdown of family structures and [social isolation](#); and a worsening of existing drivers, such as gender and social inequalities, lack of female representation and inclusion, etc.

The health consequences for women include unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, miscarriages, sexually transmitted infections, poor overall health for mothers and babies, physical injuries, [mental health issues](#), and deaths from murder or suicide, note the researchers.

Although the first known global systematic review of the impact of [natural disasters](#) on women's and girls' risk of violence, the researchers acknowledge the lack of high quality, rigorously designed studies and the shortcomings of exposure and outcome measures used in the included studies.

"More high-quality research with greater geographical scope and use of standardised exposure and outcome measures is critical to generate further knowledge on the magnitude of the issue and mechanisms," they write.

"As populations are increasingly affected by climate-related disasters and [violence against women and girls] can have severe and lasting health impacts, existing knowledge must inform rapid action across policy and practice," they insist.

"At the policy level, greater awareness on disaster related [violence against women and girls], gender-sensitive [disaster relief] policies and inclusion of women in disaster management are critical.

"Further, systems for rapid and effective coordination between disaster management, law enforcement and health authorities must be defined clearly to prevent [this type of [violence](#)] and address its health consequences," they conclude.

More information: Natural hazards, disasters and violence against women and girls: a global mixed-methods systematic review, [DOI: 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-004377](#)

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: 'Natural disasters' increase triggers for violence against women and girls (2021, May 6) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-05-natural-disasters-triggers-violence-women.html>

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