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Mainstreaming Climate Change Mitigation as Mass Atrocity Prevention in the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

In the past two decades, new research in both the mass atrocity prevention and climate science fields has emphasized the connection between the effects of climate change and conflict. As we have already seen, when climatic weather events increase in intensity and frequency, so do refugee flows and conflicts over basic food, water, and energy resources. All human beings experience an intrinsic need to feed ourselves and our families, and this need preoccupies vast amounts of psychological and physical energy. The anxiety of this need not being met, either for ourselves or for our loved ones, leaves us open to fear and manipulation. A growing body of research suggests that there are multiple intersections between mass atrocities and the effects of climate change, including social inequality, poverty, poor state infrastructure, and food insecurity. While the scholarship on the adverse effect of conflict, including mass atrocity events, on women and their role in society is well documented, what is often missing from this conversation is the specific pressures climate change places on women and girl children.

Resource scarcity can have broad implications due to the systematic inequalities of how women gain access to and control economic, social, and political resources. Due to gendered societal roles, women are more likely to be responsible for gathering water and firewood, making them vulnerable to sexual assault, kidnapping, and myriad other violations when forced to collect resources, especially in conflict settings. Traveling further to collect these resources diminishes women and girl children's capacity to work or seek education outside the home. In addition to facing direct violence, women often face structural inequalities that create barriers for mitigating the effects of a changing climate. Due to their societal role as caretaker for children and the elderly, women are less likely to be able to migrate to seek physical and financial security. In some cases, women are restricted from owning land or making independent financial decisions, and therefore lack capital for equipment, livestock, or other necessities to utilize the remaining natural resources. Additionally, patriarchal government structures often still excluded women from the formal decision-making process at the national, regional, and local level, despite almost 20 years of progress since United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325.

Scholarship to date has often focused on how women and girl children, especially in the poorest nations, are the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. While these vulnerabilities should be investigated and mitigated, this narrative must shift to acknowledge that women are also at the forefront of the fight against climate change-induced conflicts. Women worldwide are overcoming barriers to create innovative, local solutions to this global problem. Without integrating gender dimensions into current and future analysis, the international security challenge of climate change mitigation risks missing key triggers of future and recurring conflict. This research will focus on the different ways in which women are uniquely affected by climate change and the resulting potential for mass atrocities, while highlighting the women, organizations, and governmental bodies leading the way forward.