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Climate change, violence against children and emerging online concerns

Summary of a
segment of research
from the paper,
*Climate change and
violence against
children: Why care?*

Sounding the alarm: Concerns that the internet is being used to facilitate harm to climate-affected children.

Climate change, violence against children and emerging online concerns

Greater vigilance is needed on how the internet is being used to facilitate harm to children in the climate crisis, says psychologist and criminologist Miryam Donzelli. This warning is drawn from her recent research on how the impacts of climate change are driving up violence against children. Here, Miryam summarises findings from her report to sound the alarm on an issue that is in urgent need of further research: how the internet is being used to facilitate harm to climate-affected children.

About this study: note from the author

Results from a previous study conducted by Barnfonden (2021) showed that, while there exists a gap in evidence-based research, climate change increases the risk of violence against children. The report identified that not enough information is being collected to properly assess, measure, and therefore respond to the issue of how climate change affects violence against children.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states the absolute right of children to live in a decent environment with all it entails: enjoying good health, accessing nutritious food, and living in safety (UNCRC, 1989). Climate change poses a threat to the delivery and protection of these rights. This study specifically focuses on children's right to safety and protection.



Miryam Donzelli is a practicing psychologist and criminologist working in Malmö, Sweden. Her research was commissioned by Barnfonden, the Swedish member of the ChildFund Alliance.

When I commenced this study, I was particularly interested to find out how online violence against children might be linked to climate change. I found very little hard evidence. I therefore chose to focus this study on exploring how people working in the child rights and child protection field account for and/or perceive the risks of:

- a) child violence due to climate change, and
- b) how climate change might influence the use of technology to expose children to greater risks.

This paper is collated from a broader study that explores the two concepts in more detail.

Main points from the research

- Respondents recognize that climate change is impacting the lives of children and youth, both offline and online. Violence against children is now well recognized as being linked to climate change when household vulnerabilities are intensified, both by disasters and by slow-onset changes to the environment.
- It is highly likely that online mediums are being used to facilitate child marriage and exploitation during migration, to name just two risks mentioned by research participants. We need more robust evidence to establish the nature and scale of the connection, in order to guide response.
- Children and youth's mental and physical health are being affected by online exposure to messages that can heighten climate anxiety, including frustration over what is seen as government inactivity. Some have experienced cyberbullying and targeted retribution where they have been vocal online on climate and environmental issues. Again, we need to collect evidence on how, specifically, children are being affected.
- We should not wait to strengthen safeguarding and protection mechanisms. We must act – now!
- The online community could learn from collective efficacy theory, adapting how it is applied in 'real life' communities to online environments. This includes a willingness to intervene and the capacity for informal social control. It could also include, for instance, adopting an online variant of 'Community-based Child Protection Mechanisms' (a common approach used across the ChildFund Alliance).

What we mean by violence

The term violence is defined in this study as the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (WHO, 2016). Online violence is technology-facilitated violence, which is the use of computers, mobile phones or other forms of digital communication to access, threaten, and /or harm children. It can result in short and long-term physical sexual or emotional suffering and takes many forms. (WHO, 2021)

Collective Efficacy

Collective Efficacy Theory was used to guide the research. This criminology theory is applied to explore how neighbours (or in the case of the online community, 'virtual neighbours') might play a role in identifying and preventing violence against children. Collective efficacy is a form of informal social control and relies on social cohesion to achieve an intended effect: in this study, the protection of children facing the impacts of climate change and who may be made more vulnerable to associated online risks.

Adapted from definition by "Sampson, 2006a; Sampson Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997 in Cullen 2010)

Methodology

This paper presents findings from 13 qualitative interviews from three Global South continents. Participants all work in the child protection and/or climate change sectors. Semi-structured interviews were held online and recorded for transcription purposes. An inductive approach was applied to creating categories and coding for analysis.

The structure of this paper is as follows:

Before addressing the influence of climate change on violence against children, I first wanted to understand if climate change was being experienced. This allowed me to understand how

climate change was being deciphered. I then sought to discover if participants felt children and youth were being made more vulnerable to violence due to the impact of climate change. This paper collates responses related to the three most cited 'violence' impacts that arose from my interviews: child marriage, mental health and forced migration.

I was then able to tease out the links between these three topics and online safety concerns.

The notion of Collective Efficacy Theory was a theory I explored as a means of addressing risks (see box, left). This theory from criminology is a means of controlling crime through neighbourliness, trust and the willingness for collective action. In the three settings mentioned in this paper, collective efficacy could be used to control behaviour that leads to violence against children.

Research participants:

- Participant 1, Climate and human right activist
- Participant 2, Ngo worker
- Participant 3, Ngo worker and researcher
- Participant 4, Researcher
- Participant 5, Researcher
- Participant 6, Child Protection Specialist
- Participant 7, Child Protection Specialist
- Participant 8, Researcher
- Participant 9, Child Protection Specialist

Presentation of findings

How climate change is experienced

The impacts of climate change are being felt. Participants underlined how changes in seasons, temperature and rainfall are impacting the context in which people live, on many different levels.

"It's changed 100 percent because [this location] used to be an agricultural area. It was a tourist [and] artisanal fishing area. And today we don't have any of that". Participant 1

"[Climate change] is literally destroying people's agricultural land". Participant 2

“...People's lifestyles here are pastoralist, they depend on livestock for a living. And in most senses, most of the time, the droughts have been affecting the area for quite a long time. Things have changed [from] before. Some five years ago, or 10 years ago, we did not experience the kind of droughts that we are now experiencing. And this has led even to children dropping out of school as their families move from one region to another.”
Participant 3

People perceive and experience the impact of climate change in different ways.

“Local communities don't understand it as climate change. I mean, they wouldn't call it that because, you know, it seems like a very abstract concept.” Participant 4

Sometimes, instead of seeing the direct link to climate change and their predicament, participants referred to the economic impact of a climatic event – for example, they said they were struggling due to ‘crop failure’.

“The impact of climate change in making people vulnerable ... certainly there was some strong evidence that this is indeed the case, that climate change is acting as ... a stress multiplier or essentially worsening conditions of vulnerability. And this is more so because those who are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change are already frequently most vulnerable to exploitation.” Participant 5

Distances travelled to secure water and food are also increasing as resources dwindle and competition increases. This places children from some minority groups at greater risk, where they are pulled from school to take on food and water collection tasks. Children can also be employed as child labourers to supplement family income. As such, climate change is placing people who are vulnerable into an even more precarious position.

Violence against children

The following three issues were most cited as risk areas related to violence against children in the context of climate change.

1. Climate change and the violence of child marriage

Child marriage, referring to both early marriage and forced marriage, is a form of violence that was underlined often in the interviews. Child marriage can be a reflection of cultural practices, in particular patriarchal practices that still function in some communities.

Due to the impact of climate change, the risk of girls being forced into marriage increases. For example, there is greater risk of kidnapped marriage when girls have to walk long distances to collect water. Another reason is that in some communities when a girl gets married, the family receives a number of cows, money or other items as dowry. In the case of extreme poverty, it means that marriage can be a way to receive much-needed resources and a life raft out of a dire situation. Similarly, and again sometimes connected to cultural aspects such as cast, gender, or not being able to own land, parents may be forced to marry-off their children because they are no longer able to provide food for the family...

“And then it's like when you get married, at least it's one less mouth to feed, almost like that, you know?” Participant 4

“I mean, one of the factors is that many families have had a lot more difficulty getting their livelihood ... so parents haven't been able to work as they used to, and the income to the families has decreased. Therefore, one of the solutions, it seems like, would be to marry off your daughter.”
Participant 6

It was also mentioned that when it comes to child marriage, the age of the children involved is changing. Girls are marrying younger but so, too, are boys. For example, a participant noted that grooms in India are often aged around 18 to 19 years. In Kenya, young girls are marrying older men, with age gaps of up to 20 or 30 years.

“Child marriage is on the increase due to the fact of, of course, parents can't afford to keep all their kids at home and certainly [they are marrying] at an earlier, younger age.” Participant 7

In India, child marriage is sometimes used as a way to ensure girls do not elope. Marriage is also sometimes perceived as a 'safe' option when the parents migrate to seek job opportunities, leaving daughters behind: if the girl already has a husband, there is less risk of sexual abuse from others.

Online issues related to this context

The respondents interviewed could not directly cite incidences they knew of where child marriage was facilitated through online engagement, but noted its potential.

"I was exploring bridal trafficking that takes place among girl children who were sent to other parts of India. Whether for marriage, as young brides, as sex workers, or working as laborers. So especially in the context of inter-border, within the state itself, within the country itself, how that pattern was going on. So over there, I do remember WhatsApp was something which people would, you know, sort of communicate on quite often and send photos, so that was something which was used. But in addition to that, I mean, I've not heard of that actually directly. I mean, I'm not familiar with it. I'm sure there are networks, but I'm not familiar."

Participant 4

"When it comes to child marriage, we know that technology can be part of that, pressuring girls, and for families to make connections with other people and so on. But, when it comes to recruitment and so on, I don't really feel that I have the expertise to dig into that question."

Participant 6

2. Climate change as violence impacting mental health

Another form of violence that children and youth are experiencing in relation to climate change concerns their mental and psychological well-being.

This form of violence can occur on two levels. First, in relation to family dynamics. Families who are under external pressure as a result of climate change can become stretched internally, not only

experiencing loss of physical assets but experiencing a deterioration in their interpersonal relationships. This can lead to psychological or physical violence within the family unit.

All the participants discussed how aggressivity is increasing under the pressure of external stressors, often after natural disasters.

"Due to the fact of poverty and climate change, so families are severely affected, that decreases the mental well-being of the families ... Then they start beating because they are under a lot of stress." Participant 7

"I think the climate change events are impacting people's livelihoods, their capacity to earn a living, they're impacting their families' capacity to put food on the table, to provide a secure environment for their child. This increases pressure on families, tensions, and in many cases, calls for some forms of psychological or physical violence." Participant 8

"When families are more under stress, there is a bigger risk for children to be exposed to physical and humiliating punishment on the whole [...] these are risk factors that we already know, I think we can apply in the climate crisis when it comes to violence to children." Participant 6

"...what I'm saying is that, actually, we are leaving people with no choice, right? These things are too much for individuals and indeed for communities to deal with. You know, we're testing resilience in ways that are actually not okay." Participant 8

Another form of psychological 'violence' children and youth experience is that they are living under a state of constant pressure and anxiety, waiting for the next disaster to occur. It is not only the fear of what damage the next natural disaster might inflict but also the uncertainty of when this disaster might occur, that creates anxiety.

"It becomes an ongoing cycle of trauma. What these children reported to us is that in those times when there are no floods, they are nonetheless very worried that the floods are going to happen, and they live in constant terror that this cycle gets repeated. So again, a form of psychological

violence that if we could take action just to secure their environments, we could help to minimize that trauma.”

Participant 8

Psychological violence experienced by children and youth today also relates to the way they feel concerning the uncertainty of their future and the absence of real answers by governments. While they are more active in asking for change and the implementation of policies and laws – for instance, to mitigate carbon emissions or to invest in climate change adaptation – the answers are not matching their needs. This increases their level of anxiety concerning their future.

“We’ve seen recent surveys with youth show that stress and anxiety are on the rise and that children’s resources of hope are being challenged.” Participant 8

Online issues relating to this context

Respondents identified that not only do we have to better understand how to deal with climate anxiety, we also need to be mindful that when children and youth are involved in activism, they could be at risk of targeted violence.

“What types of risks young people, and maybe more specifically young girls, will be exposed to when they are being more active on the question of climate change online? Because tech and online will be, we can already see, one of the platforms that young people use most when they are being activists, so when they want to activate themselves and participate and discussing certain issues that are important to them. And I think it’s an interesting link there, it’s connected to climate change and violence in the way that young children and young girls will be more exposed and not only to violence. I mean, also connected to raising your voice, taking part, being a part of this discussion, will they be shut down? Will they be back off because they are really exposed to a lot of harassment?” Participant 6

3. Climate change and violence related to forced migration

The interviews revealed how forced migration is affecting children and youth as a result of climate change. Children and youth are sometimes forced to migrate to towns – and sometimes to other countries – to seek work without their usual caregivers. In other cases, they migrate with their families who are looking for new job opportunities or who are following seasonal work. In the case of unaccompanied minors, participants identified that this often relates to the climate impact on specific areas, such as in arid zones or areas suffering from drought or flooding. However, climate change is not mentioned as one of the first reasons for moving, for instance, it can be more easily connected to conflicts or war which have been fueled by climate change.

“When you look at the situation in the country, you can often see that different kind of climate change or other things to do with the environment do have an impact on the level of conflict or the reasons for children leaving. So, just as an example, when we talk about Afghanistan, usually it’s all the political conflicts that we discuss, but we also know that one of the things that are driving conflict in the countryside is that there’s been a drought for quite a long time and that is making it more difficult in certain regions to make ends meet when it comes to agriculture and things like that. So, it’s often a reason that is underlying, but maybe not quite as often a direct reason that children state. But when it comes to Central America, for example, you can see that the hurricane centre and the storms that have been taking place there have definitely increased poverty and the need for protection for children in various countries there.” Participant 9

Participants also noted that migration is increasing.

“I do also see differences when it comes to migration, because people migrate more now, and they are displaced at a higher level now than they were before. And I think it’s also, in many cases, riskier to be in displacement now than it was

before. I think one of the reasons there are more people in displacement, also internal displacement within countries has a lot to do with the environment and climate.” Participant 9

When a child is forced to move unaccompanied, their exposure to violence can happen in numerous ways. It can be experienced during the journey, at their cost or others' travel companion's costs, through experiences at borders with guards, or when they find someone to travel with who asks for service in exchange for help. For example, girls are often forced to offer sexual services in exchange for protection and often girls and boys need a smuggler to be able to move. Borders are especially a critical point in terms of exposing children to violence.

“I think especially in Europe, it's very clear that one of the key danger points for children are borders because border guards are high risk, they strip people of their belongings, they beat people up, they push them back”. Participant 9

When children and youth witness violence being perpetrated on others, it is a type of violence. Overall, forced migration requires that children move around developing faster skills on “how to do it”, and often they are involved in extremely violent and traumatic situations.

Online issues relating to this context

Technology can be seen as a useful tool when it comes to children on the move. They rely on technology to get new information about the road; they are guided by others who have already made the journey and they use it to keep in touch with their families or networks.

“...social media, we know that a lot of young people will, most people who are refugees, they depend on social media for information. So that's a protective factor when that information is correct [...] if you're a teenager and you have friends who have gone before you, then they can alert you to risks and you can get knowledge about where not to walk.” Participant 9

At the same time, it can be a risk if the information provided is not correct.

Three of the participants spoke about how social media can be used to facilitate trafficking, in the form of sexual trafficking, trafficking for labour, or for marriage, using local languages to communicate on such matters. As mentioned earlier, there is little information on this. Recommendations from the UN Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons in July 2022 noted that: “As the world has continued to transform digitally, so have traffickers who have kept pace by developing sophisticated systems and using technology to commit criminal activities, at every stage of the process, from recruiting, exploiting and controlling victims to transferring the profits of their criminal activities. Rapid technological change presents opportunities for traffickers to adapt their modus operandi, taking advantage of digital platforms to target their victims.” (UN, 2022).

Perpetrators operate in an environment of secrecy, and so it is not surprising there is not a lot of information on this issue. This highlights that more targeted research is needed.

Conclusion

This research has identified that a paradigm shift is occurring in how we act online, in parallel to the impacts of climate change. These two shifts are leading society to consider how to



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collectively respond to child protection on- and offline in an uncertain, changing world.

The research notes that:

1. Evidence of the link between technology and climate change exists in some areas. For instance, studies on migration and the use of technologies mention that technology can be a safe tool in relation to children on the move who rely on social media to gain information about routes and contacts. However, it could also increase their risk of being exploited.
2. People understand that there is a link to violence against children, but there is little evidence of this. The consequence of this is that no one involved in this survey could name any direct work on this issue.
3. This paper makes a strong call to researchers, government and development practitioners to focus more on the link between climate change, violence against children, and the use of the internet. There is a need to gather evidence and, from this, propose solutions to keep children safe in a changing climate.

The WHO offers excellent guidance: [What can be done to prevent online violence against children? \(who.int\)](#), but we urge that climate change becomes an explicit consideration in future iterations of WHO recommendations (and those of other influential bodies and actors).

Recommendations from the researcher

A crisis should be a moment that requires decisions and actions to be taken in order to change circumstances for a better outcome. The climate crisis is no different. It is utopist to imagine a world without crimes, inequalities and injustices, but it not utopist to be aware of these inequalities and push for changes that are real for communities.

Just as we establish systems for child protection in physical environments, we can shift virtual communities to be more communally-minded to protect children from the increasing risks of online violence.

Online and technology usage has shifted our lives dramatically in the past decade, and the extent to which these channels are used for good and bad needs to be recognized. The cycle of vulnerability has been highlighted in all interviews in this paper: vulnerable communities and contexts and vulnerable youth/children are more exposed to and affected by the impacts of climate change.

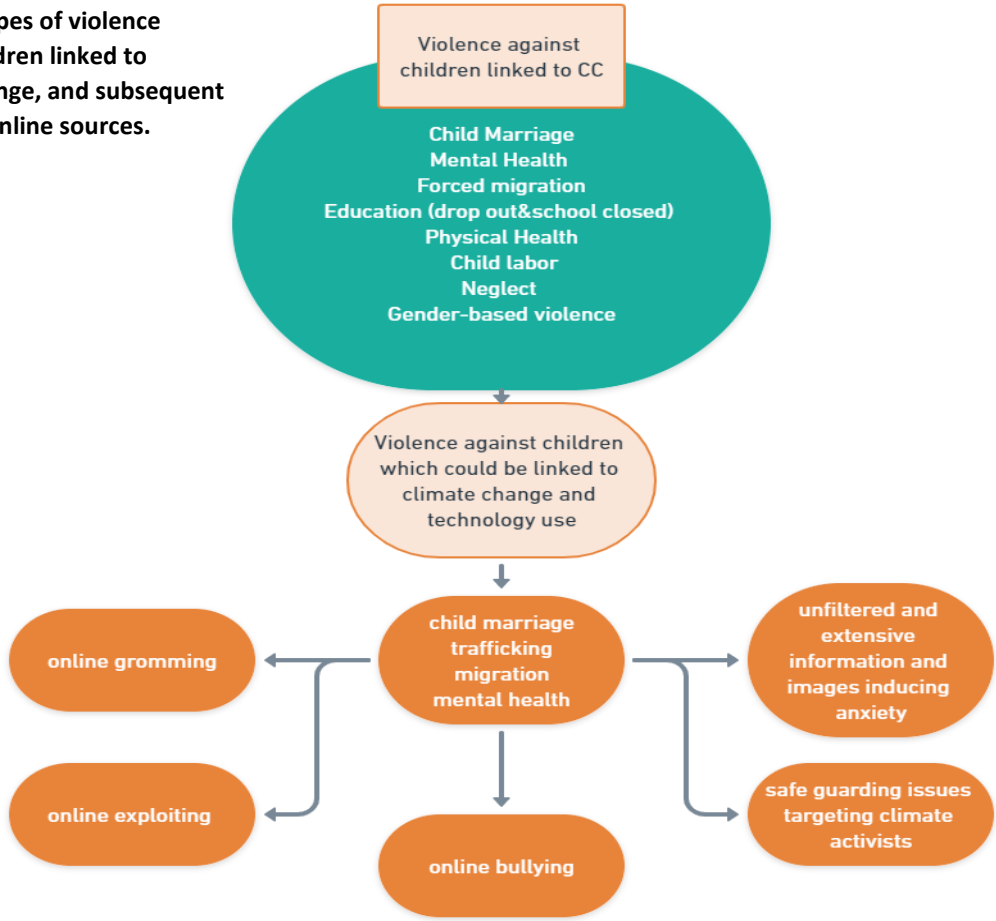
When speaking about violence in connection to climate change, the complexities of the cause cannot typically be singled down to one source. For example, child marriage has been connected to low income and school dropout. Similarly, forced migration and child labor are strongly connected (Bharadwaj et al, 2021). Now, a new element is at play: technology. Based on the interviews, we understand that, in climate-affected communities, there is the perception that technology does play a role in increasing the risks leading to violence against children. However, formal evidence is limited.

In envisaging solutions, Collective Efficacy Theory can be one way of addressing the social implications of on- and offline violence against children linked to climate change. This theory could draw upon the ‘social glue’ of people and communities affected by climate change, but also the collective force and agency present in online communities.

Collective efficacy can be a safer and more sustainable response to actions taken alone by individuals, and especially where these actions are placed solely on the shoulders of children/youth.

A strong recommendation of this paper is for more rigor in collecting evidence on the link between climate change and violence against children, facilitated online. But it is important we don’t sit back and wait for this evidence. Solutions must be sought to protect children. Collective efficacy is one strategy worthy of exploration.

Figure 1: Types of violence against children linked to climate change, and subsequent risks from online sources.



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If you have information to support the findings of this paper, we would be interested to hear from you. For further information or to read the full body of Miryam's research, please contact info@barnfonden.se, attention Keeva Duffey.

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