

Climate Crisis and Children: A Study on At-Risk Generation

Dr. Aditi Nath^{1*}¹Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Assam University, Silchar

*Corresponding author: Dr. Aditi Nath

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Abstract: The climate crisis is increasingly acknowledged as a significant threat to the welfare, rights, and development of children, particularly those living in vulnerable, low-income, and flood-affected areas. This research, conducted in Silchar City of Assam, investigates the various impacts of climate-induced flooding on children aged 10 to 16 through qualitative methods. By employing focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and in-depth interviews with children, parents, and educators, the study highlights key themes of vulnerability, including experiences of flooding, disruptions in education, food and water insecurity, poor sanitation, and psychological distress. The results indicate that climate-related events not only hinder vital services such as education and healthcare but also exacerbate emotional trauma and systemic neglect, especially among girls and marginalized families. Institutional responses tend to primarily focus on adults, with minimal consideration of the specific needs of children in disaster preparedness and recovery efforts. The research calls for a rights-based, child-centred climate action approach that includes children's perspectives and ensures equitable access to protection, education, health, and mental health support to tackle the pressing issues confronting this "at-risk generation."

Keywords: Climate change, flood, vulnerability, risk, children.

INTRODUCTION

The climate crisis is broadly acknowledged as one of the most pressing global issues of the 21st century, greatly endangering at-risk populations. Among them, Children experience the risk of changing climate patterns. Children's dependency on adults for protection and survival makes them more vulnerable to harmful climate events like floods, heatwaves, droughts and storms. (UNICEF, 2021; IPCC, 2022). The vulnerability adds more risk in the form of displacement, disruption in education and psychological stress to the children of low-income groups and climate-exposed regions. The UNICEF 2021 report states that approximately every child is exposed to some climate or environmental shock worldwide. For many children, multiple risks threaten their survival and well-being. Nearly one-third of all children encounter four or more stressors, which creates extremely challenging conditions for them to live, play, and develop. Globally, around 1 billion children—almost 50% of all children live in countries classified as being at 'extremely high risk' due to climate change impacts, as reported by the CCRI. By examining global data, academic research, and institutional reports, the paper advocates for immediate climate actions sensitive to children's needs to safeguard what is often referred to as

the at-risk generation. (UNICEF 2021, Children's Climate Risk Index).

Understanding Children's Vulnerability to Climate Risk

The climate crisis is not merely an environmental issue—it also represents a crisis for children's rights. Children are comparatively more susceptible to environmental disturbances than younger adults for various reasons – children are physically vulnerable and less able to withstand and recover from shocks like floods, droughts, extreme weather, and heat waves; children are physiologically susceptible; harmful substances, such as lead and various pollutants, have a more significant impact on them than on adults, even when exposure levels are lower. They are at a heightened risk of dying from diseases that may be exacerbated by climate change, including malaria and dengue. Given that they have their whole lives ahead of them, any setbacks caused by climate and environmental degradation during their early years can result in a lifetime of unrealised potential. Around 820 million children (over a third of all globally) are at significant risk from heat waves. This problem is anticipated to worsen as global temperatures increase and weather patterns grow more erratic. (UNICEF 2021). The year 2020 was noted as one of the warmest years on record.

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Approximately 400 million children (nearly 1 in 6 worldwide) face a considerable risk from cyclones. This threat is expected to escalate as severe cyclones (categories 4 and 5) increase, accompanied by intensifying rainfall and changing cyclone patterns. Around 330 million children (1 in 7 globally) are currently exposed to a significant risk of riverine flooding. The situation is anticipated to deteriorate as glaciers melt and precipitation rises due to increased atmospheric moisture from higher temperatures. (UNICEF 2021). Approximately 240 million children, representing 1 in 10 worldwide, are at risk of coastal flooding. This danger will likely rise as sea levels increase, especially with storm surges. Around 920 million children, or more than one-third of children globally, are experiencing significant water scarcity. This problem is projected to escalate as climate change causes more frequent and intense droughts, heightened water stress and variability, pollution, and increased demand and competition for water, leading to the exhaustion of available resources. An estimated 600 million children are presently at significant risk for vector-borne illnesses such as malaria and dengue. This risk will likely increase as the climate conditions and temperatures become more favourable for mosquitoes and the pathogens that cause these diseases. (UNICEF 2021). Approximately 2 billion children (nearly 90% of children globally) are exposed to air pollution levels above $10\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$. This issue could escalate unless there is a significant decrease in fossil fuel combustion, a key contributor to air pollution. About 815 million children (more than one-third of all children worldwide) face exposure to lead pollution from contaminated air, water, soil, and food. This predicament will likely worsen without improved practices in producing, using, and recycling lead-containing products. (UNICEF 2021, The Children's Climate Risk Index).

METHODOLOGY

The study has been conducted in Silchar City of Cachar District, Assam. The city is affected by heavy rainfall, the Barak River overflow, and inadequate drainage infrastructure. These climatic stressors jeopardise the city's inhabitants, but low-income families seem more vulnerable, particularly children living in flood-prone wards. Thus, the study focuses on children from flood-prone Silchar localities. The study adopted a qualitative research design to understand the lived experiences and impacts on their health, education, safety and emotional well-being in the face of climate-related risks. The descriptive and exploratory research design was employed to investigate children's perceptions, challenges and resilience mechanisms related to climate events. The study focused on school-going children aged 10 to 16 years. To conduct the study, participants were selected from three flood-affected localities, including Tarapur, Sonai Road, and Rangirkhari, using purposive sampling techniques. Further, ten students from three localities, i.e. a total of thirty children, were selected randomly to gather

information. The study conducted three Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with children (10 participants per group) to understand their experiences with the flood. Three key informant interviews (KIIs) with teachers, auxiliary nurse midwives, disaster volunteers, and two in-depth interviews with parents to gain insight into child vulnerability and institutional support. The data collected from FGDs and interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. Each session of the FGD continued for 60-70 minutes in a child-friendly setting (schools, homes, and community centres). The local Sylheti dialect was followed during the discussion. The entire debate was grounded on confidentiality, respect and voluntary participation, which was explained at the beginning of the session.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study findings have been presented in three sections. The first Section presents the findings of the FGD, followed by the Key Informants Interview in the second Section, and the findings from the Interviews with the parents in the third Section.

Section 1: Findings of Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

The FGDs facilitated the identification of the following thematic areas, described and interpreted in this section.

1. Flood experience,
2. Academic disruptions,
3. Food access and nutritional insecurity
4. Unsafe Drinking Water and Sanitation Gaps
5. Psychological Impact

Theme I: Flood experience

Description & Interpretation

Children experience a flood as a sudden, scary event leading to water rising at night without warning. Their immediate reactions are fear, confusion, and a desperate search for safety. They were scared, thinking that they would be separated from their parents. All put them in a mental state of fear of losing everything. *A few children voiced, "I saw water entering my home quickly and damaging all our belongings. I did not get time to pack up my books"*. According to the children, floods are not just natural events; they invite traumatic disturbances into daily life with long-term fear and anxiety. Because of their dependency on adults, they lack preparedness, which increases their vulnerability.

Theme II: Academic disruptions

Description & Interpretation

Education is one of the potential instruments for building resilience in children, but the changing climate pattern jeopardises its effectiveness. Floods often disturb road communication and submerge school buildings, leading to the closure of schools and resulting in the absence of regular classes. This eventually compels some children to leave school and engage themselves in earning a living due to economic exigencies, displacement, etc. Many children shared their concerns: *"All my books were washed away due to the flood. I could*

not go to school for almost three weeks after the reopening of the school, as I was asking my friends for books." Disruption in education is an invisible casualty of floods. For children, floods disturb not only the teaching-learning process but also their connection with their friends and their routine lives. It further increases the risk of dropout, especially for girls.

Theme III: Food access and nutritional insecurity Description & Interpretation

The availability and accessibility of food are severely disrupted by the flood. Families often lack the storage of food grains and can't cook due to waterlogging or power outages. They shared that the relief food is supplied late and in insufficient quantities, for which children had to skip their meals or survive on minimal rations. *The children said, "Flood offers us one time meal, that too only with salt sometimes." "My parents share their food with me, and they remain hungry."* Children fall prey to nutritional deficiencies during floods. Moreover, seeing their parents struggling to feed them often adds an unspoken psychological burden.

Theme IV: Unsafe Drinking Water and Sanitation Gaps Description & interpretation

Ensuring clean water during floods becomes scarce, compelling households to consume unsafe water as the flood contaminates drinking water sources like ponds, wells, and municipal taps. Toilets remain unusable, and increased open defecation leads to poor hygiene and illness. Children shared that the *"tap water smelled bad after the flood. My brother had rashes on his body and stomach pain. There were limited toilets in the relief camp compared to the refugees, who were in terrible conditions, so we had to go to another field. We could not maintain proper hygiene during menstruation."* The lack of sanitation and contaminated water increases the children's vulnerability to disease. From a gender perspective, girls are disproportionately affected by a lack of privacy and hygiene. It reflects that emergency WASH services were unavailable in the relief camps, worsening their safety and dignity.

Theme V: Psychological Impact Description & interpretation

Flood devastates all resources available in society, and when it happens in front of children, it badly affects their mental health. Fear of the recurrence of floods, sadness over the demise of family members, loss of pets, and a continuous feeling of insecurity were common among the children. Some reported nightmares and fear of floods, even after the flood. A few children expressed a feeling: *"I am afraid of any sound now, especially thunder, which makes me cry. Thunder reminds me of the terrified flood night."* The psychological effect of a flood lasts a long time on children and demands proper emotional support with

trauma counselling. The absence of this may aggravate the psychological issues further.

Section 2: Findings of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

The study conducted KIIs with

- I. School teachers,
- II. Auxiliary Nurse Midwife
- III. District Disaster Management Officer

I. KII with a Government School teacher was conducted on educational impact, gender-wise participation in class after the flood, and the support system available to deal with the post-flood situation. The interview highlighted that, after every major flood, many children lose interest in going back to school. The attendance of students in classes drops by 50 to 60%. Among them, the percentage of girl children is high. Girls are either asked to engage in domestic work or care for other family members. The teachers use their mechanisms to reach out to those children after the flood. However, there is no structured remedial system in the post-flood situation.

It is understood from the interview that a long-term learning gap occurs due to the flood, which is becoming a bane to their intellectual growth and development. The school does not have disaster management plans.

II. KII with Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) was conducted to gain insight into children's health concerns and access to health centres/ hospitals and medical camps. The interview indicated that children suffer from diarrhoea, fungal infections, and skin rashes during the flood. Many health sub-centres remain underwater during floods; therefore, sometimes accessing and availing the services of the sub-centre by the parents for their children becomes challenging. Parents wait for water to recede; meanwhile, they use home remedies. Medical camps do not always have paediatric supplies, which limits their services.

The interview reflects that the health infrastructure is fragile during climate events. The specific needs of the children are not adequately addressed in the relief health camps.

III. KII with the District Disaster Management Officer was conducted to understand the preparedness plans, outreach challenges, and future needs. The interview presented the focus of DDMA on evacuation, embankments, and rescue coordination, but they have limited child-specific planning. According to the officials, panchayats and school authorities are trustworthy networks for disseminating early warning messages, but sometimes, they do not reach children directly. They expect to include children in mock drills, IEC campaigns, and the formation of school disaster clubs in the future.

It is observed that disaster institutions and limited integration of children into preparedness frameworks acknowledge a gap.

Section 3: In-depth Interviews with Parents (Mother)

The in-depth interviews with parents were conducted to understand their views on survival during a flood, loss of education, health, water, emotional well-being, shelter and displacement, children's mental health, relief and aid, and exclusion from planning.

The narrative highlights that their kitchen gets flooded during floods, so they can't cook. Sometimes, they feed their children only rice soaked in salt water. She often skips her meals to keep her children full. She added that the flood washed away her daughter's books, so she started crying. Later, the child lost interest in going back to school. As a mother, she is scared that her daughter will drop out. Regarding health and water, she expressed that they cannot access clean water, and almost every time after a flood, her son suffers from fever and rashes, which demand consultation with the doctors, but it becomes impossible during floods due to waterlogging. The mother expressed that the child cries at night when it rains. Out of fear, the child holds her tight and says, "will the water come again?" During the flood, they moved to the school building, which is crowded and unsafe for their daughters due to privacy issues. They expressed that the aid supplied to them is not enough for everyone. According to them, only rice, candles, and biscuits are given; no one asks what a child requires. No specific plans are discussed in community meetings for children's safety and security when they suffer the most.

A dual burden is borne by the parents, managing physical needs and emotional health while adjusting to poverty, displacement, and resource scarcity. Low-income parents often feel helpless and excluded from the mainstream. They recognise the sufferings of their children well, but they lack access to systems that offer relief and support.

DISCUSSION

The climate crisis represents an environmental challenge and a serious danger to children's survival, growth, and rights, especially in susceptible areas like Silchar. The research indicates that floods affect every facet of children's lives, causing trauma, displacing families, interrupting education, increasing food and water scarcity, and exposing them to illnesses without

sufficient healthcare or emotional support. Girls encounter additional difficulties due to inadequate sanitation and a higher risk of dropping out of school. Despite these significant effects, responses from institutions tend to focus on adults, with minimal planning specifically for children in disaster management, relief, and recovery initiatives. Interviews with parents revealed feelings of powerlessness as they struggled to fulfil their children's physical and emotional needs in times of crisis. While disaster officials recognized these deficiencies, the absence of effective child involvement in preparedness and recovery efforts continues to leave children at risk. The findings strongly support a child-focused climate response that incorporates children's perspectives, guarantees access to safe education, health, and sanitation, and attends to their psychological needs. Adopting a rights-based, child-centred approach is not just a moral obligation but also vital for fostering long-term community resilience in the face of a worsening climate crisis. Without such inclusive strategies, the climate crisis will persist in jeopardizing what UNICEF calls the "at-risk generation."

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