

Marking International Women's Day 2022

This year we mark International Women's Day against a backdrop of great uncertainty for global security. As we prepared this blog, images of devastation and reports of continued shelling and attacks on civilians across cities and towns in Ukraine filled the news media. At the time of writing, over 1 million people had fled Ukraine to neighbouring countries and the humanitarian situation was deteriorating quickly. While in the blog we focus on the issue of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the context of the climate crisis, we feel it is important to stop for a moment and reflect on the fate of women and girls in conflict zones in a week when Russia continues its invasion of Ukraine; Yemen, Syria and Somalia have all witnessed airstrikes; and conflict and post-conflict continue to ruin lives around the globe.

The theme of this year's International Women's Day (IWD2022) is 'Gender equality for a sustainable tomorrow', recognising the contribution of women and girls around the world, who are leading the charge on climate change adaptation, mitigation, and response, to build a more sustainable future for all. This is apt given the huge amount of evidence and ever-growing examples of extreme weather, drought and wildfires raging across the globe. The catastrophic impacts of climate change, which we are already witnessing, are likely to cause significant social upheaval, and increase the risks of conflicts and future pandemics, such as the one we continue to live through today. [UN Women](#), in writing about IWD2022, points out that 'those who are amongst the most vulnerable and marginalised experience the deepest impacts' of climate change, with women being affected to a greater extent than men.

For those of us working on the theme of gender and sexual and reproductive health and rights, this is nothing new, and certainly doesn't come as a surprise: For many years now, Health Action International has worked with partners across sub-Saharan Africa to strengthen health systems and improve access to essential sexual and reproductive health commodities. Through [evidence-based advocacy](#) we have been successful in, for example, increasing district health budgets in Kenya and funding for magnesium sulphate to treat pre-eclampsia in Uganda. But it is a reminder, at a troubling and perhaps pivotal point in human history, of the need to ensure that the rights of women and girls are protected as a matter of priority.

The gains for women and girls that have been made over the years are put at risk by the devastation climate change is predicted to cause. We have already seen the gender effect of the COVID-19 pandemic; the so-called '[shadow pandemic](#)' of increased gender-based violence. Added to that, a [recent study](#) showed that teenage pregnancies and school dropouts amongst girls in Kenya were also increased by the pandemic and related control measures - just one example in one country. These are some of the clear reasons that we

must redouble our efforts when it comes to securing sexual and reproductive health and rights, and that is exactly what HAI and partners will be doing in the years to come.

Finally, to return to the theme of IWD2022, development, health and the environment are increasingly being framed by the one health model - healthy environment, healthy animals, and healthy humans. But what about healthy societies? Not the physical health of individuals that makes up a population, but a society that is equal, inclusive, free and democratic. This speaks to the role of women in securing a sustainable response to one health. Unless and until societies fulfil the promise of equity, and women are recognised as equal in their contribution to environmental guardianship, we cannot hope to overcome the challenges of the future.